The phrase “Be careful what you wish for” was especially on my mind last year. I was a history major in college and spent five years early in my career working in public health risk communications. Mention of the great 1918 flu pandemic was heard in both circles, and I occasionally wondered what it must have been like living through such a momentous, worldwide event. Now I know.

Managing the COVID-19 pandemic certainly was the biggest story of 2020 for Colorado 14ers Initiative. We had very little time to tweak field season plans when the virus hit in March. Society shut down and myriad government agencies imposed restrictions on travel and work. CFI’s crews are about as socially distant as one can possibly be. Remote basecamps with small crews working independently in the open air was the perfect antidote for a virus transmitted inside and in close quarters. However, it also meant cancelling virtually all volunteer trail projects. The intermixing of crews and volunteers was a risk we could not reasonably take.

The 14ers also turned out to be a much-sought-after refuge for people to get exercise and inspiration during the pandemic. Trailheads were swamped with vehicles sporting license plates from across the country. Record crowds showed up almost everywhere. Early on or there was a fear that people wanting to social distance in the alpine would hike off trail, resulting in massive trampling of fragile alpine tundra ecosystems. Thankfully, that fear never seemed to materialize. And, with tons of people out hiking 14ers, it was the perfect setting for our Peak Stewards and trail crews to set all-time records educating passing hikers.

The other pandemic year revelation was the outpouring of generosity from our individual donors. After three years in the low $500,000 range, individual gifts last year surged to more than $686,000. The number and size of donations was overwhelming—literally. Due to local regulations, I was the only person allowed to work in the Golden office. That meant opening all the mail, depositing every check and signing all donation letters—all with some hand cranked ink. That sensation returned to my signing hand sometime in the spring.

The spirit of resilience and adaptability we try to foster at CFI paid off handsomely last year. Our trail crews produced remarkable work under trying circumstances, which is highlighted in this report. Guidance from a team of health professionals, including Volunteer of the Year Dr. Richard Hoffman, helped us navigate the season without a single positive COVID test. We pulled together and didn’t just survive, we thrived. But, as we look to the years ahead, I absolutely, positively will not wonder what it would be like having to endure a summer-long plague of locust.

Regards,
Lloyd F. Athearn
Executive Director
Building out the network of sustainably designed, durably constructed 14er summit routes is CFI’s highest priority. At the end of the 2020 field season, two new routes were added to the list: Mount Columbia and Mount Elbert (East Ridge). This makes 35 CFI-built routes on 33 peaks transporting hikers through fragile alpine ecosystems with little impact.

If the 2020 season were boiled down to a simple phrase, it would be “same peaks, just higher and harder work.” In addition to the two new routes, intensive reconstruction efforts continued on Grays and Torreys Peaks, as well as the four 14ers near Lake City (Handies, Redcloud, Uncompahgre, and Wetterhorn Peaks). Work was generously supported for a fourth year by the National Forest Foundation’s “Find Your Fourteener” collaborative campaign.

Five seasons of Columbia crews will not miss working most days in the mountain’s cold morning shadow due to its west-facing aspect.

MOUNT COLUMBIA

Seven skilled CFI leaders were hired to oversee a 10-person Rocky Mountain Youth Corps performing work on the route, which pushed through incredibly steep terrain to 12,800 feet. The extreme side slope necessitated larger-than-normal structures to withstand the force of gravity and countless hiker footsteps. The crew completed 0.24 miles of new trail construction, quarried more than 2300 large rocks, built 765 square feet of backwall on the uphill side of the trail and 87 square feet of mono wall on the downhill side of the trail. The crew also built rock structures at four major switchbacks and finished construction of three rock staircases adding 14 cribbed-rock steps.

Despite five seasons featuring some of CFI’s most highly skilled leaders, the Columbia route still requires additional work. The project’s complexity and volume of rocks that had to be moved—carefully and slowly using girphoists and tramlines—exceeded initially planned estimates. CFI hopes to return in the future to extend the route all the way to the connecting ridge at 13,600’. For now other routes are higher priorities.

MAJOR FUNDERS: National Forest Foundation, Telluride Foundation, REI, Chrest Foundation, Meta Alex-Keith Bratten Foundation, Gates Family Foundation.
The USFS packstring hauls some of the 24 metal gabions that were installed on the route.

**PROTECT**

**MOUNT ELBERT**

The new East Ridge route was opened after completion of the third major reroute. This pushed the newly delineated route up to 12,000 feet. A four-member CFI team worked all season on the project, assisted for 12 weeks by a nine-member Rocky Mountain Youth Corps crew. A RMYC teen crew spent eight weeks working on the “Cat’s Claw” restoration.

The combined crews constructed 0.26 miles of new trail. Staff quarried 3,540 rocks that were used to install 145 cribbed rock steps, build 3,976 square feet of various rock retaining walls and fill 24 metal gabions. Importantly, the Forest Service is having CFI use gabion baskets to build retaining walls in areas where there is insufficient large rocks for natural rock structures. When filled, these baskets protect tundra beds from erosion and, in the case of one section on Elbert, create a raised section of trail to hike on.

Members of the Adopt-a-Peak crew, working with the RMYC team, cut an additional 0.24 miles of new tread on the standard Northeast Elbert route. Work included felling 121 trees and performing 1,300 linear feet of corridor clearing. CFI will shift focus to the Northeast route in 2021 to put in three years of intensive reconstruction on this route, the first CFI-built back in 1994.

**MAJOR FUNDERS:** National Forest Foundation, Colorado State Trails, Great Outdoors Colorado, Gates Family Foundation.
The second of three planned seasons of extensive reconstruction work on four open peak Lake City saw progress on a number of trail. Timber structures played a central role. Staff felled 69 trees and stripped 361 logs in the heavily beetle-killed forest. This allowed the two-person CFI Lake City crew, with support from a Southwest Conservation Corps youth corps crew and the Adopt-a-Peak team, to install 207 timber check steps and a timber retaining wall. The combined crew built 212 square feet of rock backwall, closed 1535 square feet of trail braids, and de-rocked 10,140 linear feet of trails. Though all routes saw work, Uncompahgre Peak was a main focus area. American Basin on Handies Peak saw its first surge of activity.


The Adopt crew installs a rock staircase high in Grizzly Gulch.

Before/After. A switchback in American Basin is fortified with a rock step and backwall.

Members of the SCC youth corps crew install timber checks on the shoulder of Uncompahgre.
TRAIL CONSTRUCTION

PROTECT

GRAYS & TORREYS PEAKS

CFI staff fill gabion baskets with rocks to form a retaining wall.

Photo by Kellon Spencer Photography. kellonspencerphotography.com.

GRAYS & TORREYS PEAKS

These two peaks near I-70 are among the most climbed 14ers in the state.

GRAYS & TORREYS PEAKS

In the second season of intensive maintenance and reconstruction, CFI’s two-person crew was bolstered for five weeks by a Rocky Mountain Youth Corps crew and five visits from the Adopt-a-Peak team. Due to the quantity of work needed and the lack of available rock source, a major focus of stabilizing the trail and backwall came through use of metal gabions filled with smaller rocks. CFI’s team hauled 69 gabions up to the area near the Y-junction between the two peaks. Staff devoted 259 hours to quarrying rocks, which filled 64 of the gabions and built 652 square feet of rock backwall. The crew also maintained 2.3 miles of trail, including de-rocking 7,200 linear feet, delivering 4,259 linear feet and clearing 1,000 linear feet of the summit trail. Eight timber steps also were installed.

Significant work remains at extreme altitudes on the route. Some form of heavy lift capability is needed to haul large logs to the upper mountain. CFI staff continue to seek helicopter assistance from the National Guard but the effort has been hampered by support for fighting wildfires across the West.

MAJOR FUNDERS:

National Forest Foundation, Gates Family Foundation, REI, The Summit Foundation.

Some of the eight timber check steps installed.

The completed section of gabion backwall protecting the tundra slope.

VOC volunteers carry a stripped log to install on the lower Grays Peak trail.

The completed section of gabion backwall protecting the tundra slope.
Summer CLIMB intern Matt Albritton downloads data and clears one of the Mount Elbert trail counters.

For a decade CFI has been tracking 14er trail conditions and hiking use levels to ensure the trail network is able to adapt to changing use impacts. Sustainable Trails efforts evolved in 2020 to accommodate a new counter location and reduced funding.

The number of compact trail counters deployed on 14er routes grew to 23 after the Forest Service let CFI take over tracking hiking use on Mount Bierstadt. The local Ranger District’s trail counter had been stolen early in the 2019 season and not replaced. CFI was able to obtain an unused counter from the Forest Service’s 14er program and found a better, more clandestine monitoring location that has not yet been found.

In mid-summer the 2019 hiking use report was released. This showed an 18 percent drop from 353,000 14er hikers in 2018 to 288,000 hikers in 2019. The heavy, lingering snowpack and avalanche-choked roads in 2019 delayed peak 14er hiking season by roughly a month compared to the drought year of 2018. Hiking use in June was 55 percent lower than the prior year. Late season use rebounded to match or exceed 2018 levels, indicating no diminished interest in 14er climbing.

Sustainable Trails

PROTECT

In mid-summer the 2019 hiking use report was released. This showed an 18 percent drop from 353,000 14er hikers in 2018 to 288,000 hikers in 2019. The heavy, lingering snowpack and avalanche-choked roads in 2019 delayed peak 14er hiking season by roughly a month compared to the drought year of 2018. Hiking use in June was 55 percent lower than the prior year. Late season use rebounded to match or exceed 2018 levels, indicating no diminished interest in 14er climbing.

After a second, two-year round of trail condition inventories concluded in 2019, CFI began to implement a new approach to data collection. With future funding unlikely to support a dedicated position for multiple seasons, staff plan to embed inventory work into existing positions and perform data collection after major trail investments were complete. Tom Cronin spent time late in the season doing a full inventory of the newly completed Mount Columbia and Mount Elbert (East Ridge) routes. This information will be analyzed to see how much the five- and four-year projects respectively improved on-the-ground trail conditions.

CFI’s rigorous efforts to understand use patterns and how they correlate with physical trail conditions continues to generate interest from funders and trail professionals. Executive Director Lloyd Athearn was invited to present information about the Sustainable Trails program to the Colorado State Trails Committee, a major funder of the organization’s work, and to explain how trail use and conditions help drive maintenance and reconstruction priorities.

"What exactly are you doing up in that tree?" asks a passing hiker as Lloyd Athearn downloads data from the Barr Trail counter on Pikes Peak.
Volunteers install check dams on the upper slopes of the Mount Elbert “Cat’s Claw.”

RESTORE
A VITAL PART OF STEWARDSHIP

Most of CFI’s restoration work occurs in surges based on the timing of major trail reconstruction projects. Once a new, more sustainable trail bypass is opened, work begins to close, stabilize and restore the old, user-trampled route. This often results in long, multi-season restoration projects that take years to complete.

Restoring the “Cat’s Claw” on Mount Elbert’s East Ridge began during the 2018 season. Work continued last summer pushing the restoration to the upper trail bypass. The season-long Elbert crew restored 526 square feet of the mud-braked erosion scar, while the adept crew and two volunteer projects completed an additional 294 square feet of restoration. Ten erosion mats and 16 restoration checks were installed to help stabilize the slope, while 1,316 cubic feet of soil was hauled by hand to restore the contours of the slope. Reseeding occurred on 600 square feet to speed up recovery.

Alpine tundra is extremely slow growing. It can take years before significant progress is seen. Last summer staff photographed two large restoration projects conducted years before to see how the area has regrown. As the two before/after photo sequences show, the results are very encouraging.

Vegetation plugs transplanted in 2011 on the mile-long Mount Yale trail restoration area were solidly established nine years later. Small seedlings also had sprouted, though it will take decades before they are mature plants. On Mount Bierstadt, raised causeways and drainage structures placed in 2014 were doing their job of funneling hikers, while transplanted willows next to the trail were thriving. Despite more than 40,000 annual hikers, the trailside vegetation is better protected today than during the “mud pit” days six years earlier.

Over six years, willows have regrown and the elevated causeway is reducing impacts on the flat, wet, opening mile of the Mount Bierstadt summit trail.

BEFORE: In 2009 hikers had trampled a mile-long, denuded, deeply eroded path down the fall line on Mount Yale. AFTER: Nine years after a season-long restoration project occurred, plants are thriving and the old route is gradually disappearing.
MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH

EDUCATE

During a pandemic in which people were most at risk being in crowded spaces with others, record numbers of people nationwide surged outside to recreate in the fresh air on public lands. Colorado’s 14ers were hit by this wave, with preliminary counts showing record hiking use last summer.

The huge crowds on the 14ers created the perfect opportunity for CFI to scale up its on-mountain hiker education efforts. Volunteer Peak Stewards put in 152 days educating hikers on the 14ers about Leave No Trace practices and mountain safety issues. In the process, Peak Stewards made an all-time record 10,298 hiker education contacts. CFI crews contacted a further 27,045 hikers (also an all-time high) who passed by their project worksites. Combined, these two approaches contributed to an all-time-record 37,343 total hiker contacts last year. This was 92 percent higher than the prior record season.

CFI also used its YouTube channel to reach hikers around the country about mountain safety issues. Eight new videos were released in 2020 that were viewed a combined 14,065 times. Five videos continued the general mountain safety theme that focused on decision-making issues like when to call for a rescue, whether a person calling for a rescue would be charged, and how use of technology and social media have changed hiker behaviors. Additionally, three videos in the “Intro to Class 3” series provided guidance for new climbers looking to make the leap from Class 1-2 trails and easy scrambling into the harder Class 3 scrambling terrain. Videos focused on Mount Sneffels, the Eolus Ridge on Torreys Peak and the Challenger/Kit Carson Peak massif. Total video views for the year were 109,384.

Due to the pandemic, usual in-person education and outreach activities like the REI “How to Climb a 14er” clinics were scrapped. Aside from a talk as part of the Collegiate Peaks Forum that was done in person in Salida’s Riverside Park, most organizational presentations were done via online conferencing. This still helped get out CFI’s message, but in a less personal way.

Peak Steward and Board Member Priscilla Clayton carefully packs out a hiker’s dog poop bag that was not picked up by the Poop Fairy.

Maule, Swinehart, Mollen and Campbell get ready for a day talking to hikers on Mount Bierstadt.
Members of CFI's Board of Directors and Staff on Mount Columbia’s summit in early August after a celebratory climb of the new trail.

Lloyd Athearn, Executive Director

Brian Sargeant, Communications and Development Manager

Stellar Team Organization

2020 Core Staff

2020 Board of Directors

2020 Seasonal Staff

2020 Project Teams

Mount Columbia Crew

Garett Mariano, Crew Leader

Anthony Ondrus, Crew Leader

LAKE CITY UPRC Crew

Zachary Streitfeld, Crew Leader

Thomure Chase, Crew Leader

Adopt-a-peak Maintenance Crew

Wes Chinook, Crew Leader

Trainer Hunt, Crew Member

Chris Vissic, Crew Member

Andrea Zelinski, Crew Member

Paul Timm, Crew Member

Carlie Harrison, Appelson Leadership Intern

Taylor Rainwater, Appelson Leadership Intern

2020 Award Recipients

2020 Volunteer of the Year: Richard Hoffman, MD

2020 core staff

2020 board of directors

2020 seasonal staff

2020 project teams

Jennifer Lowry, Ann Kampf

Last year Colorado Fourteeners Initiative named Richard Hoffman, MD, the organization’s 2020 Volunteer of the Year for his many years of loyal and generous financial support, as well as for offering his epidemiological expertise to guide CFI safely through the COVID-19 pandemic.

A longtime mountaineer, Dr. Hoffman has climbed Colorado’s 14ers, but has gone deep on five that the granddad he calls Longs Peak, to Mt. Evans and of North Maroon. Further, if he has summed the Mahavishnu in September (1988), Emmons, Mount Blanc, Monte Rosa, Mount Shasta and the Grand Teton.

Hoffman’s philanthropy shows a similar propensity for breadth and depth on the projects that interest him. He is the extra-galactic donor of donators because of the organization’s 24 years in operation. He has also been exceedingly generous, making in a 5-year $500,000 pledge to support CFI’s Mount Columbia project.

Hoffman’s professional background as an epidemiologist also proved quite helpful as CFI designed protocols to keep staff-safe during the early months of the rapidly unfolding pandemic. Hoffman worked a combined 23 years as a public health epidemiologist, including four years at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 15 years as Colorado’s State Epidemiologist and three years as Chief Medical Officer of the Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment. He spent a further nine years consulting before retiring in 2012.

The COVID-19 pandemic generated extreme financial uncertainty throughout 2020. Spring’s market meltdown combined with the pandemic’s sharp economic contraction raised concerns about potential impacts on fundraising. In April, CFI obtained a $167,600 Payroll Protection Program loan to ensure all core staff could be retained even if fundraising suffered. Thankfully, individual 14er enthusiasts gave at record levels and foundation giving stayed robust, allowing CFI to end the year as one of the most successful ever financially.

**FINANCES**

**ANOTHER RECORD YEAR**

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<th>OPERATING REVENUE $1,575,048</th>
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<td>Total operating revenues were $1,575,048, up $28,526 compared to 2019. This was the second-highest revenue total ever and the third consecutive year with revenues over $1.5 million. Donations from individuals surged to an all-time-high $686,287, an increase of $139,919 (25.6%). Individual donations, which represented 44 percent of total revenues, have been the largest revenue category for four out of the past five years. Foundation grants totaled $571,940, the highest in CFI’s history, and represented 36 percent of all revenues. The National Forest Foundation’s “Find Your Fourteener” campaign was the largest foundation donor. Government grants generated $255,856 in revenues, which was down 27 percent for the year. The pandemic hit corporate donations hardest, resulting in a 68 percent one-year drop to $49,499. Due to scrapping almost all volunteer trail projects, in-kind value from donated volunteer labor was only $17,936. While this in-kind support can help match some grants, accounting rules prevent it from being included in reported revenues.</td>
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<th>OPERATING EXPENSES $1,425,743</th>
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<td>Total operating expenses hit an all-time high of $1,425,743 last year, which was up $24,383 (1.7%) compared to 2019. Programs accounted for $1,128,675 (79%) of total expenditures, with fundraising ($125,170) and administration ($171,898) representing 9 percent and 12 percent of expenses respectively. Trail restoration again led all programmatic categories with $349,523 in spending, while hiker education and outreach (84,106) and Sustainable Trails ($23,957) were both in single percentage digits. Fundraising remained unchanged as a percentage of the total budget, while administration increased to 12 percent due to the administrative burden posed by pandemic regulations.</td>
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<th>NET ASSETS $1,467,130</th>
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<td>CFI continued to grow its long-term assets to provide stability to programmatic funding and reserve funds in the event of unforeseen circumstances. CFI’s general endowment received $50,962 in donations and $4,438 in earnings, ending the year at $102,777. The Kimberly Appelson Memorial Endowed Fund, which helps support two Adopt-a-Peak interns, ended the year at $62,789. The Board-established Mathews Reserve Fund was valued at $137,177 at year end.</td>
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<th>AUDIT</th>
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<td>CFI received a clean, GAAP-based audit from JDS Professional Group for its 2020 financial statements. This marks the 12th consecutive clean audit of CFI’s financial reporting.</td>
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A marmot keeps a watchful eye out on Mount Lindsey.