

Project Summary

Rocky Mountains Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit

Project Title: Visitor Capacities on Longs Peak: a Preliminary Assessment in Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado

Type of Project: Research
Discipline: Social
Funding Agency: National Park Service
Other Partners/Cooperators: Utah State University
Effective Dates: 7/1/2015 - 12/31/2016
Funding Amount: \$28,935

Investigators and Agency Representative:

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Project Abstract: Rocky Mountain National Park (ROMO) is world renown for unique and challenging wilderness experiences. With the recent increases in popularity of outdoor recreation, and the growing population in Colorado, there remains a continued demand for quality outdoor recreation experiences—and these experiences are highly accessible and available in ROMO. Associated with this ever present demand comes the potential for management issues, particularly crowding, visitor safety and potential resource impacts associated with increasing use. In its most basic form, visitor capacity in parks refers to the amount and type of recreation that can be accommodated without unacceptable impacts to natural resources and the quality of the visitor experience (Manning 2007). Understanding the primary dimensions of outdoor recreation—social, ecological and managerial is vital to the development of a visitor capacity/sustainable use strategy. In ROMO, the Longs Peak area represents a quintessential challenge for park capacity management. First, Longs Peak is iconic and is the only 14,000' peak in ROMO. Second, an ascent of Longs Peak via the Keyhole Route is a highly sought after experience, with recent estimates of total annual ascents approaching 10,000 (ROMO 2015). Last, anecdotal information suggests that the majority of these ascents occur during a period of a few weeks during the summer season, when the Keyhole Route is relatively free of snow and ice. This short season is further complicated by the popularity of ROMO as a weekend destination—on some weekends there can be hundreds of people en route to the summit of Longs Peak. Currently, little quantitative information is available on the essential aspects of visitor use such as quantity of use, spatial and temporal distribution, waiting times in high traffic areas, length of trip, etc. Understanding these use characteristics is an important first step to the initiation of a broader study of capacity management on Longs Peak.

This project addresses public purpose by 1) engaging the recipient and community (i.e. ROMO volunteers) in shared environmental stewardship. This purpose of this project is to collect foundational data to inform ROMO management about visitor carrying capacity on Long's Peak; and 2) Utah State University and its researchers gain from the new knowledge created from this project about visitor management in alpine environments and the use of innovative approaches to collect these data.

Outcomes with Completion Dates:

Final Report - September 30, 2016

Keywords: visitor carrying capacity, Longs Peak, Rocky Mountain National Park, Utah State University