

As Colorado's backcountry gets more crowded, fees and permits become a common tool

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Cecily DeAngelo, left, and her father Cliff Runge take the uphill route on Snowmass under Two Creeks Dr. As the snow continues to fall on Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022. For more Snowmass content, read today's Snowmass Sun. (Kelsey Brunner/The Aspen Times)

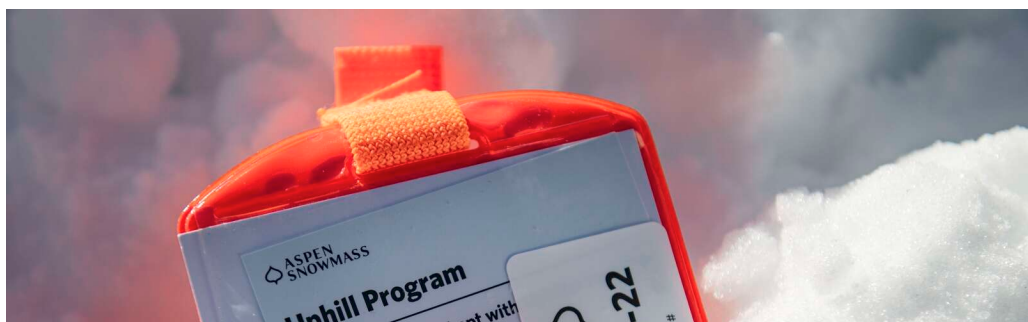
In casual conversation recently, a longtime public servant in the Roaring Fork Valley noted half in jest there is probably only one thing that could curtail the hordes of campers, backpackers, hikers and mountain bikers swarming the Colorado mountains these days.

"Grizzlies!" the person said.

The threat posed by the omnivores roaming the backcountry would make many people think twice before venturing deep into the heart of the White River National Forest, the person reasoned.

Grizzlies aren't returning to the Aspen area anytime soon, so public and private entities are digging into their toolboxes to seek ways to deal with the crowds before environmental conditions and user experiences deteriorate.

The most popular tool to date has been adding new user fees, including:





The new Aspen Snowmass Uphill pass displayed at the base of Aspen Mountain on Tuesday, Nov. 23, 2021. (Kelsey Brunner/The Aspen Times)

* Aspen Skiing Co. required a \$69 uphill pass last ski season for anyone ascending the slopes of its ski areas. \$10 of every sale was promised to Mountain Rescue Aspen. Skico said it will soon make a donation in excess of \$20,000 to MRA, indicating more than 2,000 uphill passes were sold. The pass will return next season.

* Aspen area companies that rent e-bikes will be asked to install radio frequency identification stickers on each bike in their fleet for the summer. The chip on a bike will be scanned when passing through the welcome station on Maroon Creek Road. The rental shops will be charged \$5 each time a bike from their fleet passes through.

* The U.S. Forest Service implemented a reservation system for Conundrum Hot Springs in 2018. The federal agency is contemplating an expanded system that would include reservations and fees for overnight visits in additional areas of the 181,535-acre Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness, but it won't be in place for 2022.



(Aspen Times archive)

* A reservation system was implemented at Hanging Lake in Glenwood Canyon starting in 2021.

* In one of Aspenites' favorite high-desert playgrounds near Fruita, the Bureau of Land Management has implemented a reservation system for campsites in Rabbit Valley. It will implement a fee as well starting next spring.

* Numerous national parks are seeking ways to alleviate crowding at popular times, including mandatory use of shuttles and reserved times for visiting in a private vehicle.

* Summit County started requiring a reservation and fee to park at the trailhead for Quandary Peak, one of Colorado's peaks over 14,000 feet in elevation. The parking is limited so the county started a shuttle that operates from Breckenridge to the trailhead with a nominal fee for local residents and a stiffer price for visitors.

White River National Forest Supervisor Scott Fitzwilliams said his staff has been forced by soaring numbers of visitors to explore ways of pacing use.

"(The goal) is having people enjoy their public lands and maintain the experience they came here for," Fitzwilliams said. "We're not meeting that expectation so now let's look at the tools we have."



People enjoy the Maroon Bells scenic area in Aspen during a rainstorm on Thursday, June 24, 2021. (Kelsey Brunner/The Aspen Times)



The default setting isn't to charge a fee, he said. The Forest Service first looks at adding infrastructure to reasonably handle increased use of areas, as the National Park Service does. The bathrooms and parking lot at Maroon Lake were expanded in the early 2000s, for example, and some trails closest to the entry point were "hardened," though not paved. There is only so much infrastructure that can be added before the nature of the place is altered, Fitzwilliams said.

Permits and reservations are inevitable as more and more people discover and flock to public lands, he said.

The permit system implemented at Conundrum Hot Springs definitely has had a positive impact, according to Shelly Grail, recreation manager for the Aspen-Sopris Ranger District. She told *The Aspen Times* earlier this year that wilderness rangers haven't hauled out nearly as much garbage or buried as much human waste at Conundrum since visits were controlled through the permit system.



A crew of people relax at Conundrum Hot Springs.
Aspen Times archive

Crowd control

George Newman of Emma moved to the Aspen-area in 1974 and initially made his living outdoors, including as an instructor for Outward Bound and as a river guide.

With Outward Bound, they backpacked what it now known as the Four Pass Loop, a popular 26-mile route that passes through some of the most



spectacular scenery in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness.

"You would not see anyone in the basins," he said. "It was pristine."

The beauty remains but the route is beyond being discovered. Crowding at Snowmass Lake and other highlights on the route has led to problems with trash left behind by campers, inappropriate treatment of human waste and denuded vegetation.

Wilderness rangers packed out 154 pounds of trash, buried 159 piles of human waste and rehabbed 157 illegal fire rings throughout the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness Area last summer, according to their 2021 report.



People enjoy the Maroon Bells scenic area in Aspen during a rainstorm on Thursday, June 24, 2021.

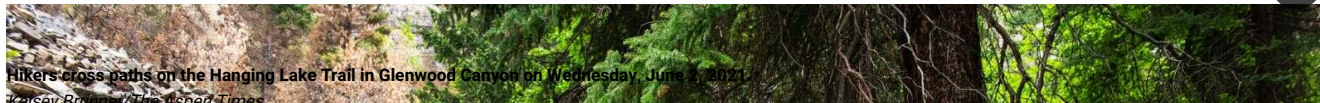
Kelsey Brunner/The Aspen Times

Easy access via shuttle to Maroon Lake, a gateway to the wilderness, has increased use of the wilderness, Newman said, and people now share their experiences with vast audiences who get inspired to visit.

"Social media has been exploiting places," he said.

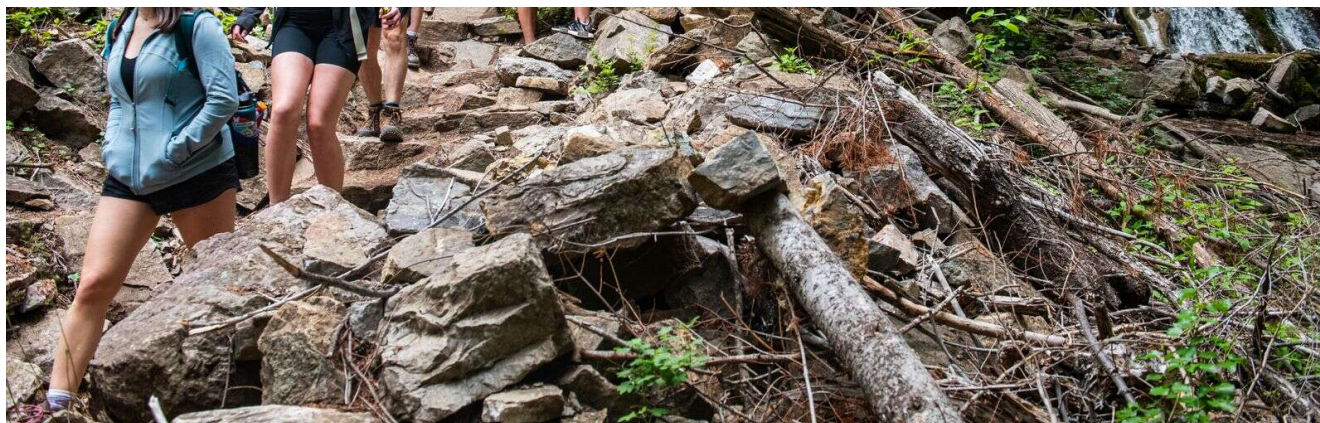
Add the COVID phenomena to the mix. Virtually every outdoor pursuit saw drastic increases in numbers during the summers of 2020 and 2021 as people were drawn to new activities outdoors to avoid exposure to the virus. The U.S. outdoor industry estimates there were 10 million first-time campers during the first two years of the pandemic.

"You have a whole new influx of people," Newman said.



Hikers cross paths on the Hanging Lake Trail in Glenwood Canyon on Wednesday, June 9, 2021.

Kelsey Brunner/The Aspen Times



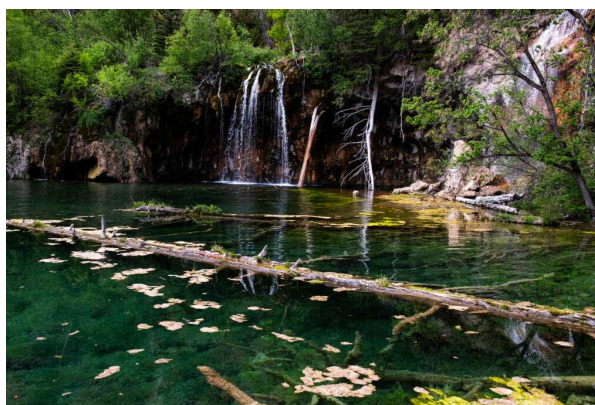
As a former Pitkin County commissioner, he is well versed on the White River National Forest's direction on fees and permits. He understands the need for permits in popular areas. Some of the most popular rivers in the West have required permits for decades as a way to limit numbers and preserve the experience. Newman believes permits are a useful tool.

"A fee is a little more difficult," he said.

His personal view is that fees are appropriate in some cases in the White River National Forest if they are used for the betterment of the forest and not sent to the U.S. Treasury. The funds raised should go to hiring rangers who interact with and educate the public and for maintaining facilities, Newman said.

He isn't concerned that a fee could keep people off their public lands.

"I don't think it's that onerous," Newman said. "The price of gas is more of a barrier to getting to some of these places."



Show Captions

'It's headed to the private sector'

Kitty Benzar has been fighting fees on public lands for decades through her work with the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition. She is resigned that the battle has largely been lost. The problem now goes beyond fees implemented by federal land management agencies, she said.

"It's headed to the private sector. It's as simple as that," she said.

Benzar contends that the powerful outdoor industry is effectively lobbying U.S. Congress to turn over control of federal lands to private entities. She fears it will allow private entities to set prices "at what the market allows" for visiting public lands.

"They're not going to be public anymore. They're going to be corporately managed. It's very dismaying," she said.

The trend has been years in the making. The White River National Forest turned over the management of most of its campgrounds to private concessionaires decades ago. Vista Recreation, doing business as White River Recreation Co., won its initial bid for operating campgrounds such as Difficult east of Aspen and Chapman up the Fryingpan in 2012. Its current contract goes through 2023. The company's website said it operates in over 700 locations in 16 states.

Forest Service campgrounds have largely switched from first come, first served to reservations. And to make a reservation, you have to go through recreation.gov, a website that consulting giant Booz Allen Hamilton helped "reinvent" in conjunction with federal agencies, according to its website.

Recreation.gov provides access to facilities in more than 4,000 federal parks, forests, lakes and cultural destinations. In fiscal year 2021, 4.25 million campers made reservations through the website. Booz Allen Hamilton touts the reservation site as a success for public-private partnership. It's also a lucrative arrangement for the company: A processing fee gets tacked onto transactions.

"Instead of a traditional cost structure, the unique contractual agreement is a transaction-based fee model that let the government and Booz Allen share in risk, reward, results and impact," the consulting firm's website said.



The newly married Mr. and Mrs. Blake and Isabella Bell seal their vows with a kiss in view of the Maroon Bells on the first day of the season for vehicle access on Friday, May 14, 2021.

Kelsey Brunner/The Aspen Times

Campground operator White River Recreation Co. brought some beneficial changes to the Aspen area. It has extended the annual camping season at many campgrounds in the Roaring Fork Valley. The major campgrounds open prior to Memorial Day weekend and remain open beyond Labor Day Weekend, which wasn't always the case.

Proponents contend that handing over campgrounds to a concessionaire allows the Forest Service and other agencies to reduce operating costs while retaining ownership and control of the facilities. Benzar counters that character is lost in the arrangement. Instead of forest rangers mingling with the public and sharing their expertise, the concessionaires employ staff concerned only about collecting campers' money.

She also believes people lose a connection to the land. Countless children of multiple generations have grown up with the feeling that they were responsible for picking up litter and generally leaving public lands in better shape than they found them. That responsibility is at risk when corporations run facilities on public lands and their employees are taking care of property.

"You don't feel you have to pick up litter at Disneyland," Benzar said.

Her preference is that public employees manage public lands.

Benzar takes little comfort in saying, "I told you so" about the direction of public land management. The Western Slope No-Fee Coalition has sounded the alarm for decades that the federal government was headed toward privatization of public lands, at least in operation if not in outright ownership.

"All these rules we've been fighting about for 20 years won't matter," Benzar said. They won't matter, she said, because the private entities will have more flexibility to apply charges and fees.

As evidence of her dire prediction, she points to U.S. Senate Bill 3266, known as the Outdoor Recreation Act, introduced by Sen. Joe Manchin, (D-WV) and Sen. John Barrasso, (R-Wyo.) in November.

On paper, the bill sounds as wholesome as apple pie. It "provides for additional recreational opportunities and facilitates greater access to federal public lands."



Backpackers make their way down Crater Lake Trail in view of the Maroon Bells in Aspen on Monday, Aug. 16, 2021. (Kelsey Brunner/The Aspen Times)



On May 6, six other bills related to outdoor recreation were rolled into the proposed legislation. Benzar has reviewed them all and said there are numerous provisions that benefit outdoor recreation companies. One proposal would allow pilot projects on public lands that she fears would allow private entities to build a parking lot at an outdoor trailhead or attraction and charge for it. The legislation also provides a pathway for a private entity to develop something like a general store at an outdoor attraction.

While the bill's fate is yet to be determined, Benzar's read is it has a good chance to pass because of bipartisan sponsorship and intense lobbying by the outdoor recreation industry.

The proposed legislation is crafty, Benzar warned, because it contains portions that are easy for individuals and user groups to support while potentially overlooking the privatization aspect.

Benzar is concerned people will miss the forest for the trees.



A group of e-bikers stops in the middle of Maroon Creek Road on the way to the Maroon Bells day use area in Aspen on Thursday, July 22, 2021.

Kelsey Brunner/The Aspen Times



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