

There's gold in them thar hills

CSU study: Hikers willing to shell out to bag Fourteeners

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By Joanne Kelley, Rocky Mountain News

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Bagging a Colorado Fourteener can be worth far more than bragging rights at the office Monday morning.

The average climber spends more than \$100 a day on a trip to one of the 54 Colorado peaks rising to at least 14,000 feet above sea level, according to Colorado State University researchers.

"A lot of people look at it as a trophy to climb these mountains," said CSU faculty member Catherine Keske, who co-authored the study with CSU colleague John Loomis. "They place a value on it that goes above and beyond normal hiking experiences."

The researchers gathered the spending data after distributing surveys at trailhead parking lots for about a dozen of the loftiest mountains across Colorado.

Even though many of the peaks can be climbed in a day, hikers often camp or spend the night in a nearby motel so they can get an early start and be off the mountain before afternoon storms threaten.

On average, a person spends \$107 in a day and \$179 per trip when hiking a Fourteener. The average group of two spends about \$179 a day, or \$357 on a trip, according to results of the survey.

Most of the money goes toward food and lodging, while the rest covers gasoline, supplies and equipment.

The CSU researchers soon will publish research that puts a price on the missed opportunity for the area surrounding three popular peaks near Fairplay.

The trio - Mount Lincoln, Mount Bross and Mount Democrat - have been closed to climbers for the past few seasons because of liability concerns among the landowners who control access.

Park and Summit counties stand to gain more than \$1 million a year and 25 jobs when the peaks become accessible again to the many hikers who typically try to check off the three peaks in a single day.

That spending could in turn generate an additional \$900,000 and 20 more jobs, the researchers said.

The Colorado Fourteeners Initiative and the Colorado Mountain Club have been in talks with the landowners to reach an agreement on signs aimed at helping keep users on designated trails.

"We're hopeful that by next spring, we'll have these peaks back open," said Clare Bastable, conservation director for the Colorado Mountain Club.

To get the data last fall when the three mountains were closed to visitors, the researchers distributed surveys at nearby Quandary Peak.

The results were based on estimates that at least 10,000 people summit the three peaks in a season. Because many of the local accommodations for hikers are in the relatively pricey resort town of Breckenridge, spending patterns exceed the average.

CSU's Keske said those responding to the survey indicated they would be willing to shell out more money in the pursuit of a 14,000-foot peak.

On average, people said they would pay almost three times as much - \$307 a day - as they already do on their visits.

Keske said she has climbed about half of the state's Fourteeners so far.

"But, I tell you, I haven't had time for climbing since I started the study," Keske said. "I spend all of my time at the trailheads."