

## CHAPTER 2 CONTEXT & CHANGE





*Red Rocks Park*

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Echo Lake Park

***“A Mountain Park for Denver will be the first step, and, perhaps, the greatest step, in the great movement of making our mountains available for the people. We believe the Mountain Park should be more than a picnic place; it should be a summer home for the people of Denver, and indeed for the tourists of the nation.”***

—Warwick Downing, 1911

### 2.A. HISTORY OF THE DENVER MOUNTAIN PARKS

The “City Beautiful” pavilions and malls of the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 held in Chicago influenced how cities would be built across the country for decades and caught the imagination of Robert Speer, who became Denver’s Mayor in 1904. Mayor Speer immediately put vision into action, including the bold idea to extend Denver’s parkways (via Alameda Parkway and Colfax Avenue) right up into the mountains so that Denver residents and tourists alike could experience the beauty and recreation found in the foothills.



Lookout Mountain Park Shelter



Genesee Park

Denver may have been built on the high plains, but Mayor Speer, John Brisben Walker, and other civic leaders saw it as both the “Paris on the Platte” and the “Switzerland of the Rockies.” The Denver Real Estate Exchange, Chamber of Commerce, and Motor Club all formed the Mountain Parks Committee. Their report began *“A Mountain Park for Denver will be the first step, and perhaps, the greatest step, in the great movement of making our mountains available for the people.”*

By 1912, this body, acting on Denver’s behalf, had hired the Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architects of Brookline, MA, to develop a plan. Olmsted Jr., and his assistant, surveyed the mountains by horseback. The 1914 Plan by Olmsted is a thorough but unassuming collection of letters and reports with lists of parcels to purchase and pages of sensible political and funding advice.

Olmsted's 4.5' x 8' linen map, showing more than 41,000 proposed acres, clearly details the scale and vision of this historic municipal project. Denver eventually purchased approximately 8,000 acres in Jefferson County identified in the plan. Lands were selected to protect scenic views, to provide public enjoyment of the mountains, to preserve forests increasingly subject to logging, and to ensure the "freedom of the people for picnic grounds" as more and more mountain acres entered private control.

In May 1912, Denver residents voted to tax themselves, with a one-half mill levy, to support the new park system then far outside the City. A homeowner with a home assessed at \$3,000 would be taxed 50 cents a year. The State of Colorado passed in April 1913 an Act allowing the City to acquire land outside its corporate boundaries for park purposes. It was followed by legislation of the U.S. Congress, passed in August 1914, permitting Denver to acquire USDA Forest Service lands for park use. Negotiations with the Forest Service for acquisition of more than 7,000 acres of lands offered by them at \$1.25 per acre resulted in the addition of 5,800 acres of new parkland over a period of several years.

During the first decade of the Denver Mountain Parks, the mill levy funds were used primarily on acquiring land, building the roads necessary to make the people's new parks accessible, and basic park improvements such as the iconic stone shelters. Better roads were an early priority. Between 1913 and the early 1920s, Denver built or assisted the construction of the Lariat Trail and Lookout Mountain Road and its extension to Bergen Park, as well as the Bear Creek Canyon Road. Close to home, Denver also helped complete roads to Golden and Morrison.

By the 1920s cars had choked the initial circle drive, and additional "loops" were constructed. The road network expanded into Clear Creek County when the Squaw Pass highway from Bergen Park was extended first to Echo Lake, then on to Summit Lake just below the Mt. Evans summit. The road was later improved to Idaho Springs. A 1930s map of the system printed by the Denver Motor Club clocked the shortest day drive at 35 miles although one Circle Drive extended more than 143 miles.

In its first decades, visitors who came by automobile often made a day of the "loops," refilling their radiators with water from the stone well houses built in many of the parks. An exotic spring house, featuring a thatched roof, was built at the curve of one of the Lariat Trail's sharpest hairpin turns. Other visitors took a train up Clear Creek Canyon, disembarked and packed up the Beaver Brook Trail to stay overnight at Chief Hosa Campground, returning the next day.



*View of the "Snowy Range" from Genesee Mountain*

Large tour cars regularly went up Lookout Mountain and to other parks carrying visitors who had taken the trolley from Denver. Others hiked up Chimney Gulch from Golden. Visiting the mountain parks was a day's adventure.

In 1918, Denver and Colorado Congressmen lobbied to have the Mount Evans area declared a National Park (as an addition to the Rocky Mountain National Park). Although the effort looked promising initially, the USDA Forest Service balked, preferring to manage the area themselves. That has led to a long-time partnership between Denver Mountain Parks and the United States Forest Service on Mount Evans. A fee to visit Summit Lake, as well as the Mount Evans summit, was initiated in 1997. Proceeds go directly to recreational improvements and enhanced daily operations, including a percentage share to DMP for improvements at Summit Lake Park.

Protection of natural resources and scenic views also drove many decisions including the early efforts to buy Genesee Park in 1912 to prevent large scale logging of the trees. Denver established a game preserve at Genesee Park in 1914, and bison and elk were obtained from Yellowstone National Park to stock the preserve. A second bison herd was established at Daniels Park in the 1930s.

The DMP are known for their striking historic shelters, lodges, and well houses, many of which were designed by local architect Jules Jacques Benoit Benedict. Benedict was known for his rustic style using indigenous materials such as stone and logs. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) built other distinctive structures in the 1930s. These early parks and major roads were added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1990 and 1995.

One of the most popular Denver Mountain Parks is Lookout Mountain Park. Close to 25,000 people joined the funeral procession up the mountain in 1917 when Buffalo Bill Cody was buried there. The extensive personal collection from his life and Wild West Show was exhibited in Pahaska Tepee until a new museum was built in 1979. Close to half a million visitors from around the world trek to the grave site every year.

The Evergreen valley in Dedisse Park was dammed and flooded in 1926, creating Evergreen Lake. Denver built its mountain golf course just south of the lake. In 1928, Denver acquired the famous “Park of the Red Rocks” and began building scenic roads in what is now Denver’s best known mountain park, Red Rocks Park. The following year, the Indian Concession House, now known as the Trading Post, was designed by prominent Denver architect Wilbert R. Rosche in the Pueblo Revival style and built on a ridge in the park.

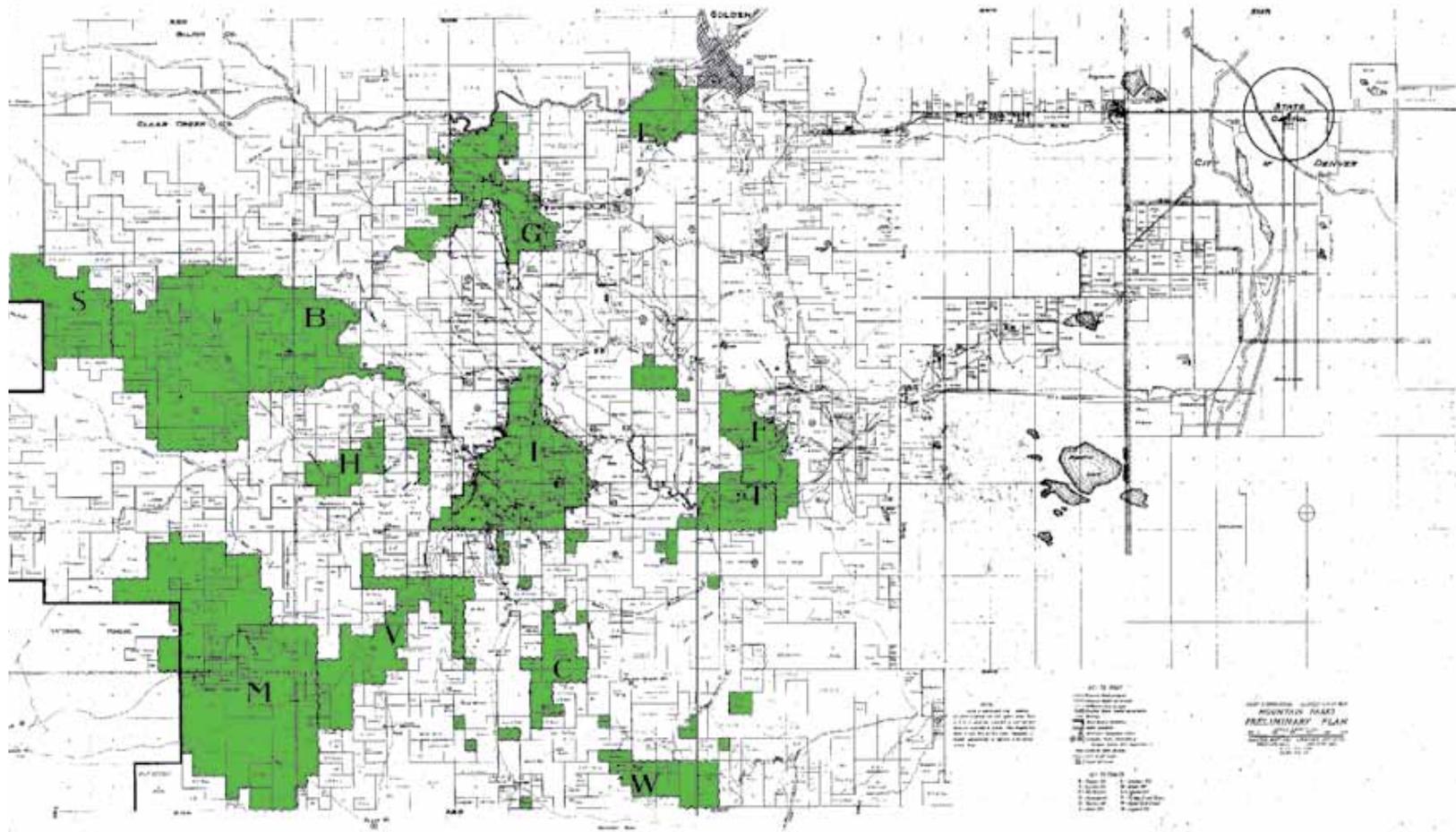
By 1928, Denver had acquired more than 12,500 acres of parkland in three counties, and the industrious acquisition phase was over. The early years of the Depression brought a slower pace to the Mountain Parks, as policy makers and citizens focused on matters of employment and survival. Even then, plans were in the works for a



*Red Rocks Trading Post, or “Pueblo,” built in 1931*

grand amphitheatre at Red Rocks Park, made possible by the advent of New Deal work programs: the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).

In 1935, three CCC camps were established in the Mountain Parks, and in 1936, work began on the long-awaited Amphitheatre. Between 1936 and 1941, men from camps at Morrison and Genesee, many of whom were veterans, worked on the Amphitheatre as well as on road and parking improvements in Red Rocks and other Mountain Parks. They also built stone and log picnic shelters at Genesee and Dedisse Parks, as well as toilets, picnic tables, trails, and bridges.



The 41,000 acres identified by Olmsted for acquisition are in green.

Mountain Parks  
Preliminary Plan  
Olmsted Brothers  
1914

*The 1914 Olmsted Plan*



*Family Picnic in Bear Creek Canyon*

The CCC also accomplished many erosion control and reforestation projects for the Mountain Parks.

In the late 1930s, O'Fallon Park in Bear Creek Canyon was donated, Daniels Park was expanded, and Newton Park and Winter Park (Grand County) were acquired.

Winter Park Ski Resort, which opened in 1939-1940, was the last major purchase. Parks Manager George Cranmer envisioned a full spectrum of winter recreational venues in the DMP with the acquisition of the informal ski area that existed near the West Portal of the Moffit Tunnel in Grand County. The United States Forest Service granted a JSpecial Use Permit for 6,400 acres by the Portal and the City traded city-owned land in Parshall to acquire 88.9 acres adjacent to the permit area. Working with the Arlberg Club and Colorado Mountain Club, Cranmer garnered enough funds and volunteers to build a tow and clear slopes. Winter Park had trouble competing with other private ski resorts and in 2003 Denver, through the Winter

Park Recreation Association which manages the area for the City, entered into a long-term agreement with Intrawest Corporation until 2078. Intrawest guarantees a portion of the resort's proceeds for the Parks and Recreation capital improvement fund.

Other smaller expansions were made to several existing parks, bringing the total acreage of the Mountain Parks to 14,141 at the present time. In 1941, with the departure of the CCC, Denver took possession of the Amphitheatre and the two surviving CCC camps. The Morrison camp is currently used as the DMP administrative headquarters. It is one of the last remaining intact CCC camps in the country.

With the termination of the mill levy in 1956, funding for the Mountain Parks, now derived from the City's general operating and capital funds, became substantially reduced. When the city division of Theatres and Arenas was formed in the 1950s, the management and revenues from Red Rocks shifted from Parks and Recreation to this new division. Growth of Denver and surrounding suburbs between 1945 and 1965 prompted increasing use of the Mountain Parks. In 1982, the operations budget for the Mountain Park system, already strained, was cut by 50%.

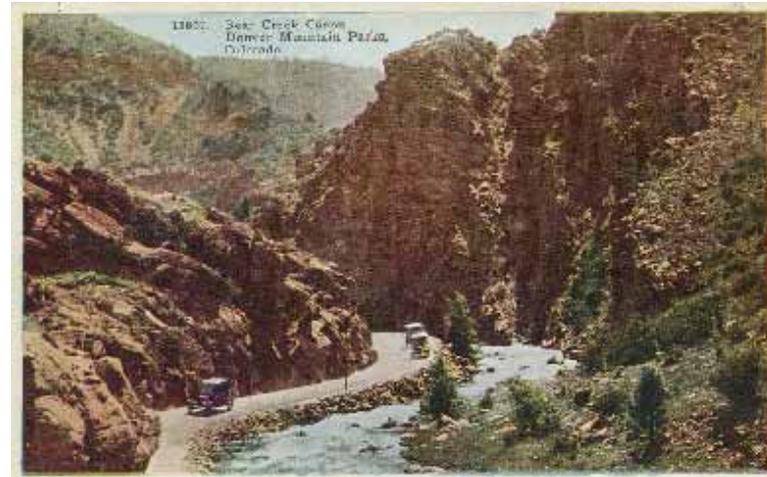
Interstate 70 construction up Mt. Vernon Canyon in essence severed Highway 40, breaking the continuous loop between Lookout Mountain and Genesee Park and splitting Genesee Park itself into two sections. The 1970s saw the passage of ballot issues in Jefferson County that created the dedicated funding and mechanism for that County to eventually acquire, by 2007, 51,000 acres of open space. Many of these parcels were originally identified in the 1914 Olmsted Plan. Douglas County followed suit, acquiring more than 11,000 acres to date, with more acreage under easements.

## 2.B. PARK USERS

To understand today's uses and users in Denver Mountain Parks for this plan, a number of research sources were used. Research done by Colorado State Parks and the recreation industry provides information about recreation trends, economic benefits, and travel that can apply to Denver Mountain Parks. In addition, results from Jefferson County Open Space's regular surveys of the users within their system provide insight and information about Denver residents and the Mountain Parks. Finally, specific market surveys that provided a quantity of information about Denver Parks and their users and non-users included:

- ▶ Denver and Jefferson County Joint In-House Surveys. 2001 "Saturation" interviews/surveys done in 5 Denver Mountain Parks and 4 Jefferson County Open Space Parks;
- ▶ Game Plan Leisure Vision/ETC surveys. 2002. Random print and phone generalizable survey of 1,500 Denver residents about Denver Parks and Recreation for the department's master plan, with specific questions about use, value, and perceptions of the DMP. ( 95% confidence that the results were within 2.7% of what would be found with the general population);
- ▶ DMP Master Plan Marketing Support Surveys. 2006-2007. Individual interviews of 800 DMP users, covering every park in the system over a period of 12 months;
- ▶ DMP Marketing Support Stakeholder Surveys. 2006. In-depth survey of civic leaders
- ▶ DMP BarnhartUSA Focus Groups. 2008. Two focus groups consisting of Denver residents, to test perceptions and awareness of the DMP.

**Uses.** In many ways, the most popular activities have remained constant over time: socializing with friends, solitude, getting away from the city, being close to nature, picnicking, hiking, and fishing. Other sports have grown over time, some with large constituencies like mountain bicycling and others with fewer but devoted fans, such as rock climbing, geo-caching, hang-gliding, or tree-climbing. As the trails and parks get more crowded, conflicts have arisen among user groups. Denver and Jefferson County, in particular, each try to address ways to provide balance and avoid conflicts. With some exceptions, internal DMP trails are for hiking only.



*Bear Creek Canyon*

Although picnics, fishing, and hiking continue to draw most visitors, other improvements accommodate new recreation trends. Parks and Recreation manages an intensive ropes challenge course on the north side of Genesee Park and the Wonderful Outdoor World non-profit takes 100s of urban kids for their first camping experience in Genesee Park. Newton Park attracts large picnics and events, offering active recreation amenities such as ball fields. Additional funding could enable DMP to respond to other recreational requests, such as rock climbing or new connections to multi-use regional trails.

**Users.** The research done over the past ten years shows that the use in DMP, as well as the open space parks of Douglas, Jefferson, and Boulder Counties, is regional. For example, although it varies by park, overall the visitorship in both Jefferson and Denver mountain parks is around 1/3 Denver residents, 1/3 Jefferson County residents, and 1/3 from other Front Range counties, out-of-state, and even from out of the country.<sup>1</sup>



*W.O.W. Outdoor Program for Teens, Genesee Park*

Use by Denver residents is heavy in all front-range open space systems, including their own. Game Plan generalizable surveys showed that almost 70% of Denver residents visited a typical DMP, such as Genesee, O'Fallon, or Bergen, at least once in the past year. Close to 56% indicated that the DMP also were a major contributor to their quality of life. The Game Plan survey showed, in fact, that many Denver residents use and value the Mountain Parks more than in-town recreation centers or pools. Only city parks exceeded Mountain Park's use in percentage and as a major contributor to quality of life.

With some exceptions, the demographics of Denver residents who use the Mountain Parks reflect the overall population of Denver. The Marketing Support surveys indicate a marked difference in two areas; surveys indicate less than 2% of residents surveyed in the Mountain Parks were African-Americans compared with an overall Denver African-American population of 11%. And Mountain Parks visitors represent a greater proportion of Hispanic residents and residents with middle to lower incomes. Recreation research shows, not surprisingly, that residents in higher income brackets have more recreational opportunities available to them and travel farther.

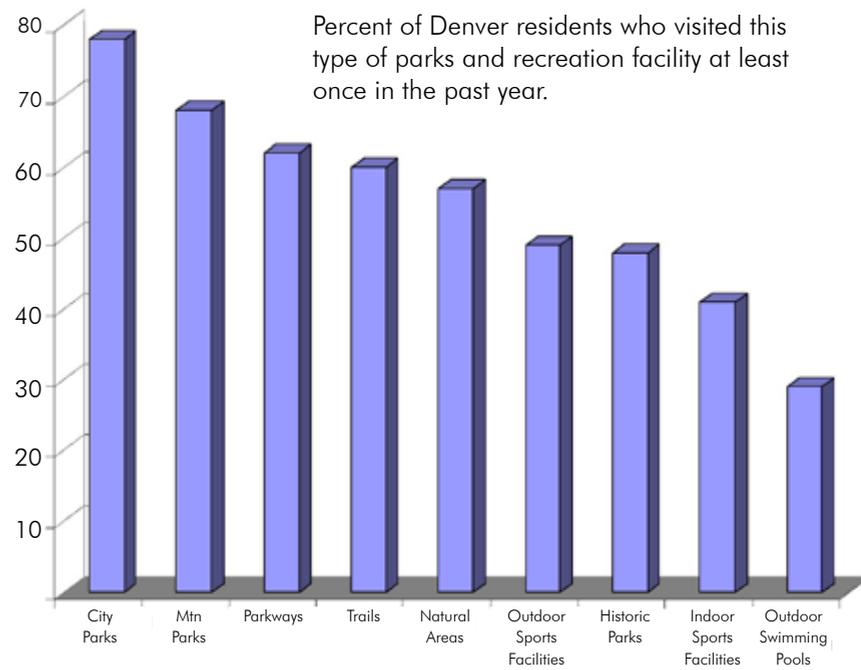
The conversations and research for this Master Plan reinforced three findings. First, activities and people are crowded into some parks while others are less known, quieter, and could handle more use. In 2006, Jefferson County Open Space produced a booklet to encourage visitors to find these "little known jewels" of all the public land providers in the County. Those regional planning efforts in the provision of different types of amenities and in marketing need to be continued.

Second, even if use were more evenly distributed, with the population growth in the Front Range and the leisure time that will be available to the retiring baby boomers, the Front Range and foothills communities may need more public open space in the mountains than currently exists. Existing acquisition and easement programs are vital.

And, finally, things obviously have changed since 1920 when Denver was the only provider of mountain open space and the city had 85% of the Front-Range population. Today, Denver is one provider of many in a regional open space system that serves millions of people.

***"Denver should own and manage the current system of Mountain Parks in perpetuity. City of Denver funding of Denver Mountain Parks is key to their preservation, improvement, beauty, and usefulness."***

—Letter to Mayor Hickenlooper from Inter-Neighborhood Cooperation (INC), 10/20/08.



Source: 2003 Game Plan General Survey of Denver Residents

***“When children have satisfying experiences in the world nearby, they are motivated to explore further; and with each feature of the environment that they come to understand and each challenge that they overcome, they build greater levels of environmental knowledge and personal competence.”***

—Louise Chawla, in *Learning to Love the Natural World Enough to Protect It*, 2006

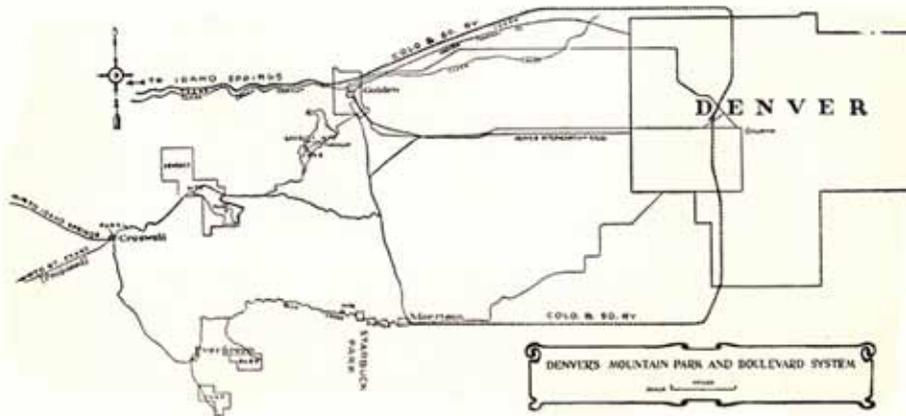


Picnic Shelter at Fillius Park

## 2.C. THE VALUES THAT PROMPTED THE SYSTEM<sup>1</sup>

Why did Denver create the Mountain Park system early in its history and is it valued by residents today? In many ways, the values that Mayor Speer, civic leaders, and Denver businessmen expressed in their campaign for a DMP system remain constant today. A difference may be that their reasoning in 1912 was expressed in the exaggerated prose of the day while today those benefits and values can be measured and quantified. The current Denver Mountain Parks Advisory Group of 50 regional civic leaders echoed the past in summarizing the primary purpose and benefit of the Mountain Parks as one of “health.” By that, they meant:

- ▶ the environmental health of the mountains and their watersheds, wildlife habitat, and forests,
- ▶ the physical, social, and mental health of area residents, and
- ▶ the economic health of Denver itself and the region.



*The Scenic Loop, circa 1914*

### **Environmental Health**

Even before Olmsted completed his Plan for the DMP, Denver leaders learned that a timber company was about to purchase and strip Genesee Mountain of its trees and began efforts to acquire the mountain in 1911-1912. The creation of the DMP followed or paralleled the formation of the U.S.D.A. Forest Service and the National Park Service which, on a federal level, were working to acquire and manage natural resources, scenic beauty, pristine lands, and watersheds. Research has shown that there is a longstanding strong correlation between outdoor recreation participation and environmental attitudes.<sup>2</sup>

As economic scholar John Crompton wrote, protecting water and protecting nature are almost synonymous. More than 1/3 of the world's largest cities get most of their drinking water directly from protected lands and watersheds. Parks and undeveloped land increase infiltration, filter pollutants, and reduce sedimentation. In 1997, New York City invested almost \$1.5 billion to acquire land and easements in hydrologically sensitive areas near its reservoirs. The Denver area is partially dependent upon the South Platte River watershed, including tributaries such as Bear Creek with its source on Mt. Evans.

Recent economic research has questioned the traditional argument that can pit environmental goals and savings against the perceived economic gains of development. More than 98 “cost of community services studies” have shown that for every \$1 million received in revenues from residential development, the costs in perpetuity to serve that community from public taxes were \$1.16 million. Open space preservation can save community long-term expenses.

### **Physical, Social, and Mental Health**

Current research fueling the initiative to get people (especially children) physically active, outdoors, and connected to their natural environment can point to quantifiable benefits and improvements. Getting kids and adults into the DMP or other mountain open spaces is the culmination of getting everyone outdoors and connected to nature first in the city, in your own backyard. Programs such as “Active

Living by Design” are monitoring the success of their efforts to get people moving and outdoors through incentive programs and actual physical improvements to neighborhoods. Denver Public Schools and the Museum of Nature and Science have collaborated for years through their WEB program intended to give every third grader a day in Genesee Park.

The Center for Disease Control has found that improving places to be active can result in a 25% increase in exercise time. And many studies have made the association (from simply looking out a window in a hospital to hiking a trail) between experiencing nature and improved health. Hospital stay times decrease, problematic behaviors of emotionally disturbed individuals decrease, and test scores increase with exposure to the natural world.

### **Economic Health**

Planners and developers have long recognized the important economic benefits of parks and open space. One of the key qualities for a city to attract new business, new residents, and tourists is the city’s attractiveness and physical attributes, especially parks. For Denver, the proximity to the mountains and their recreational opportunities is one of the top reasons for relocation to the metropolitan area. Research of small-business owners who relocated to Colorado within the past five years indicated that “quality of life” was their main reason for location and that “parks” were considered most important. The mountain parks owned by Denver and the adjacent counties are a major contribution to Denver’s image and a draw for relocation. To the nation, Denver is synonymous with mountains.

In Colorado, outdoor recreation and tourism are billion dollar businesses. Denver has always seen itself as a tourist destination and attracting tourists and retirees today are considered the new clean growth industry in America.

The Denver Metro Convention and Visitor Bureau estimated that tourists spent \$2.6 billion in Denver in 2006. And DMP includes two of the metro area’s “top ten” tourist attractions: Red Rocks Park and Amphitheatre and the Buffalo Bill Grave and Museum on Lookout Mountain. Buffalo Bill’s Grave draws more than half a million visitors a year from around the world. Research shows, too, that visitors to a regional park spend an average of \$65 within 50 miles of the destination for each trip. Spending isn’t limited to the place itself. Commodities like gasoline, food, maps, and equipment are purchased at home.



*Fishing at Echo Lake Park*

DMP also has untapped potential to attract the increasing number of tourists seeking a “heritage” experience by restoring and increasing accessibility to the distinctive historic shelters and sites such as the Buffalo Bill Museum or the Civilian Conservation Corps camp in Morrison. Both local and international visitors are seeking destinations that have physical beauty and character and are authentically connected to the history of a place.

A final important and growing tourist group is the 55 million people with a disability in the United States, who have leisure time and income and seek comparable access and experiences. Greater accessibility in the Mountain Parks, as well as the city parks, is urgent.



*Mayor Speer at Bear Creek*

Simply as an asset and investment for the Denver, the DMP represent more than 14,000 acres of protected land remarkable for its scenery, geology, water, wildlife habitat, and proximity to Denver. Large, significant parcels, such as the open space purchased by the City of Arvada recently sold for \$100,000 per acre.

### **Conclusion**

As Colorado's Front-Range has grown over the decades, the value of the DMP system also has grown. Today, its benefits relate to environmental, personal, and economic health, the triple foundation for sustainability. The DMP continue to serve Denver's broad population, especially those middle and less than middle class households that do not venture deeper into the mountains. Many DMP are crowded with Denver residents on a hot summer day, doing what they have for decades: escaping the heat with friends, picnicking, fishing, hiking, relaxing.

Other dramatic Mountain Parks like Red Rocks or the Mt. Evans lakes are traditional stops for visitors to the region. Many of the Denver goals—connecting kids to nature and getting them outdoors; environmental stewardship; and recreation for all—are shared by other cities and counties in the metropolitan area. The uses, users, and natural resource management today clearly are regional and will require planning, funding, and programmatic collaboration.

In hindsight, the 1912 move to acquire and develop the Denver Mountain Parks primarily for their scenic and recreational qualities may qualify as Denver's earliest and boldest environmental initiative, the first Greenprint Denver strategic step. The social, mental, and physical health gained from recreation is critical, especially in an electronic age.

### **ENDNOTES**

Notes: When Jefferson County Open Space began purchasing land in the 1970s for preservation, they acquired a number of parcels identified in 1914 Olmsted Plan.

<sup>1</sup> The sources used for this section include: John Crompton's *Community Benefits and Repositioning*; Crompton's *Proximate Principle*; The Trust for Public Lands' *The Health Benefits of Parks*, *The Economic Benefits of Land Conservation*; Price Waterhouse Coopers' market assessments for Colorado State Parks, CSU, Longwoods' 2006 Studies for Denver, and the City and County of Denver's GIS services.

<sup>2</sup> The 2006-2007 Marketing Support interviews indicated that the visitor base to Denver Mountain Parks may be expanding even more to people coming from Adams and Arapaho Counties. The population base to fund and manage this regional open space system could be expanded to include the users from across the six-county area.



W.O.W. participants and counselor in program at Genesee Park

*“Evidence suggests that children and adults benefit so much from contact with nature that land conservation can now be viewed as a public health strategy.”*

—Richard Louv and Dr. Howard Frumkin



Visitor to the Pahaska Tepee, Lookout Mountain Park