



Visitor Use and Perceptions of Longs Peak

Question: How does visitor use of Longs Peak reflect ideas about wilderness in a national park?

Unlike other Front Range fourteeners, the highest mountain in Rocky Mountain National Park cannot be ascended on a road. Longs Peak, named for 19th century explorer Major Stephen Long, has been managed as a wilderness area since 1974, yet it is often crowded with hikers and technical climbers who are encouraged to remain “on trail” to limit their impact on the environment. These conditions raise questions about how the National Park Service defines and manages wilderness areas and experiences.

Project: Determine how hiking and climbing have affected the cultural and natural resources on Longs Peak.

Ruth Alexander, a history professor at Colorado State University, worked with graduate research assistants and park staff to study changes in hiking and climbing practices and attitudes since 1925, including the damage to the mountain’s geological resources from technical climbing, litter, and human-caused soil erosion. They also analyzed the changes in social identity, cultural values, and environmental perceptions of those who have climbed Longs Peak, and its value to park visitors who do not hike its trails.

Results: Longs Peak’s dual role as both a wilderness and a social experience will continue to challenge park managers.

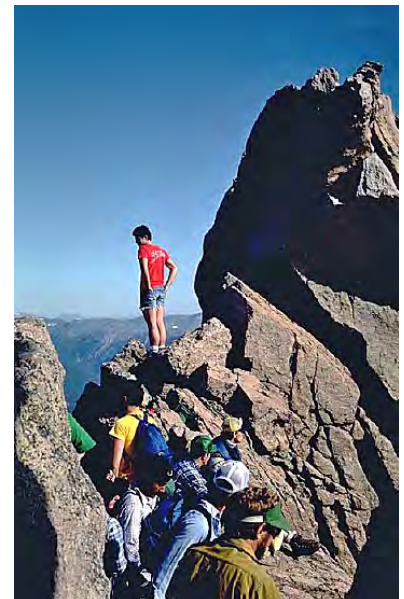
Although it has attracted an increasing number of hikers and technical climbers since Rocky Mountain National Park was established in 1915, they have declined as a percentage of total park visitation. Longs Peak has become one of many attractions and sites that must be managed by park staff. But its official designation as a wilderness area in 2009 (under the Wilderness Act of 1964) created an obligation for Longs Peak to be managed according to different values from the landscape aesthetic that guided the National Park Service’s first 50 years. Rather than a source of visual pleasure and inspiration, wilderness was to be understood and protected in terms of the ecological processes that sustained it.

The priority for visitor management, however, has always been the frontcountry; climbers have been expected to assume responsibility for their own safety and enjoyment on Longs Peak, despite its dangers. Longs Peak is in better environmental condition today than it was in the 1970s—less trash and less off-trail travel—in part because many climbers have adopted Leave No Trace ethics. Many technical climbers began using methods that reduced damage to the rock in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s, park managers established regulations that required “clean climbing” on Longs Peak.

Today Longs Peak offers a wilderness experience in terms of its harsh alpine conditions, but it cannot provide most visitors with the solitude or autonomy that has traditionally been associated with wilderness.



Installing a bolt in 1991 after motorized drills were prohibited.



At the Keyhole, 1982.