Climbing 14ers is, without question, a destination-focused pursuit. People passionately argue over whether there are 53, 54 or 58 14ers in Colorado. Most of the people I talk to quickly share how many of the 14ers they have climbed. Checking peaks off “the list” becomes the obsession. Many have climbed all the peaks in summer, a much smaller number in winter. A few begin chipping away at “the grid” — climbing all the 14ers in every season, or, for the truly compulsive, in every month.

Along the way to these many summit destinations, there is the journey. An Volunteer of the Year Hunter notes: “Every peak had unique experiences—the people I was with, the memorable happenings, those tricky situations encountered along the way.”

I have been thinking a lot about destinations and journey lately. The 2018 field season was my 10th with Colorado Fourteeners Initiative. In preparing to write this letter I re-read all my Executive Director letters from past annual reports. There were so many destinations: goals set, goals achieved—sometimes best-ever accomplishments. All were noteworthy destinations.

My time in the field almost never has reaching the summit as a destination. Occasionally the itinerary allows a summit climb. More commonly, a day on the 14ers might involve working with volunteers on a project, scouting a new trail, hiking to several trail counters to download data or interviewing experts for an educational video. The same holds true for the rest of our staff.

I am humbled to have had so many days spent on these peaks that mean so much to so many. Yes, there are destinations still on my list, for the moment. I’m up to 40 peaks, 44 of 53 (58 of 58) for the month. To live the greatest number of good hours is wisdom. —Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Volume Coordinator Hannah Clark describes her future work with the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative: “To finish the moment, to find the journey’s end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom.” —Ralph Waldo Emerson.
As CFI’s trail projects either exhaust available natural rock source or occur in areas devoid of suitable rocks, use of timber structures has taken its place. The Elbert CFI crew developed log ladders—referred to by some as “Lincoln Ladders” due to their resemblance to the iconic Lincoln Logs—to help stabilize soil and gain elevation in the second bypass section. The crew built 166 timber steps, 17 lineal feet of timber ramp and 172 square feet of timber retaining wall. Enough rock was available to build 41 rock steps and 627 square feet of various soil retention walls. The project also cut 3,900 feet of new tread.

CFI’s Adopt-a-Peak crew spent 255 staff days on the peak running 15 volunteer projects.

CFI’s project lineup for 2018 was remarkably similar to that from the two prior years. It was the third season on Mount Columbia and Quandary Peak, as well as the second on Mount Elbert’s East Ridge. Late release funding from the Forest Service added a season-long crew on Mount Evans to tackle needed work there. Funding from the National Forest Foundation’s “Find Your Fourteener” campaign played a major role in the work that occurred on Elbert and Quandary.

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TRAIL CONSTRUCTION

Looking ahead to 2019, CFI will be undertaking projects on Milk Creek, East and South Maroon, and North Maroon on Quandary Peak. Projects will also take place on Mount Elbert’s East Ridge, Mount Columbia, and Mount Evans. Following the success of the “Find Your Fourteener” campaign, CFI plans to increase the number of projects in the Fourteeners in 2019.
PROTECT TRAIL CONSTRUCTION

MOUNT EVANS

A two-person CFI crew worked with youth corps and volunteers on two distinct project sites on the mountain. The bulk of work occurred above Summit Lake more clearly delineating the trail as it ascends over and down the back side of Mount Spalding. Work here involved building stairs, walls and navigational cairns to channel traffic in an area prone to multiple social trails due to bedrock that inhibits construction of secure features. Below, Summit Lake work focused on delineating the trail and building new features in the mudslide debris that obliterated a portion of the existing trail during the severe fall 2013 storms.

MOUNT COLUMBIA

The third season of the Columbia project, CFI's most technical to date, saw the route pushed into steeper, more challenging terrain. Structures had to be more robust to deal with the steepness of the trail grade and the tremendous cross slope, which was almost double that faced in earlier work. Most rocks quarried had to be moved using a gipherost and anchor system to avoid accidentally rolling them down the hillside. The crew cut 680 linear feet of new trail, built an additional 320 linear feet of trail through the talus, constructed 196 rock steps, and built 2,443 cubic feet of various types of walls. More than 9,400 cubic feet of rock and soil were moved an average of 140 feet. Hiking to the project site averaged 50 minutes, double the time required in 2017.

TRAIL CONSTRUCTION

TOP, MIDDLE, BOTTOM LEFT:
CFI and RMYC crew members delineate a route on the Evans mudslide.

A more clearly delineated section of the Evans route as it descends from the summit of Mt. Spalding.

Using the griphoist to raise a large rock up the slope.

This is probably the largest single structure built by CFI, involving 1,137 cubic feet of rock and soil.

Photo by Eli Allan, www.eliswindow.net.
The third and final year of major trail reconstruction work on Quandary saw marked improvement to 1.75 miles of trail that extended from the trailhead up to 13,870 feet. As with Elbert, use of timber material proved station prominent of the peak lacking sufficient rock source. CFI experimented with use of dimensional lumber to compensate when the project encountered the use of available logs. In total 25 dimensional lumber steps, 18 timber checks, and 1154 square feet of timber retaining walls were built. Seemingly endless back walls were built along the angling ridge to prevent tundra slopes from washing down onto the trail. The Quandary project benefited from an volunteer projects run by the Adopt-A-Peak crew.

TRAIL CONSTRUCTION

Delineating and stabilizing a switchback through talus on Quandary. Photo by Liz Brown.
Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado team stabilizes the critical edge of the Redcloud/Sunshine trail, which is particularly subject to collapse due to the steep cross slope. Sometimes it’s all about perspective. Photo by Eli Allan, www.eliswindow.net.

Occasionally volunteer work involves something other than working with rocks and logs. A volunteer prunes willows along the Stewart Creek route to San Luis Peak.

The results of a youth project with the Sanborn Western Camps on the approach to Mount Belford. BEFORE & AFTER:

Volunteer Priscilla Clayton helps position a rock in a retaining wall along the popular Grays and Torreys route.

Bringing on a new volunteer coordinator last year paid dividends for CFI as volunteer trail stewardship had a record year. CFI ran 79 volunteer projects that worked on 22 separate peaks performing more than 15 miles of trail maintenance. The Adopt-a-Peak crew also worked independently on six other peaks.

Through these projects CFI engaged over 900 individual volunteers who put in a combined 2,000 days of trail stewardship. This work generated an in-kind value of $460,562. All three were all-time records for the organization. Total volunteer stewardship was up 10 percent compared to 2017’s prior record.

Recent dramatic growth in volunteer participation—an average of 1,800 days over the past four years compared to 1,000 days in the prior eight years—has generated discussion about the optimal level of volunteer engagement. Work increasingly is needed at very high altitudes and far from trailheads. These are places most volunteers have difficulty reaching. Shuttling the Adopt crew from peak to peak also can lead to crew burnout and a frustration not seeing progress over a summer of hard work. CFI staff and board discussed these issues last fall and plan to tweak the volunteer program a bit in 2019.

TRAIL MAINTENANCE

PROTECT
The Sherman counter found atop some rocks after the cairn had been knocked over.

2017 Colorado 14er Hiker Use Days Estimate.

Hikers make their way up Quandary’s East Slopes, one of the most popular 14er routes in the state.

Lack of early season snowpack due to the drought allowed CFI to get out the trail counters earlier than normal. Two new thermal counters were acquired and placed on Pikes Peak—one each on the Bear Trail and the Devil’s Playground route. CFI also obtained permission from the Blancha Ranch to place a counter high on Mount Lindsey, a third new monitoring location. Staff continued to refine counter placements to lessen the possibility of tampering and to increase the accuracy of data collected. In August CFI released the hiking use report for 2017, which estimated 334,000 hiker days, a 7 percent increase in hiking use from 2016, and a statewide economics impact of roughly $90 million.

SUSTAINABLE TRAILS

CFI’s efforts to document on-the-ground conditions of 14er trails and the level of hiking use they are seeing expanded in 2018. The second season of comprehensive trail assessment wrapped up in late September. Over the course of the year CFI deployed two more trail counters, bringing to 22 the number of monitoring sites statewide.

Sustainable Trails Coordinator Tom Cronin hiked almost 200 miles as he completed two by foot GPS-based inventories of all 34 current routes. Nine were baseline trail inventories, while eight were secondary inventories on routes previously assessed. These inventories generated 4,218 new data points, which will feed into assessment data from 2017 and add a second round of data collection from now through the winter. Over the winter Tom will crunch the data to provide a new “14er Report Card” that reports on the condition of all 56 major summit routes, as well as how trail conditions have changed on the re-inventoried routes.

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Experts believe that plants in the alpine zones are between 10 and 1,000 times slower to regenerate than plants located a few hundred feet lower in the subalpine forests. That means social trails trampled into the alpine tundra will take years, possibly decades, to repair if not helped by CFI’s restoration efforts.

RESTORE

Last year, CFI crews and volunteers restored 11,491 square feet of damaged tundra and transplanted 738 vegetation plugs on peaks statewide to assist with the naturalization process. Most of this work occurred on Mount Elbert’s East Ridge route where hikers had trampled many trail braids along the ridge, each a steep erosion gully. Volunteers hauled 275 logs, wooden planks and straw wattles that were installed on Elbert to slow runoff and lessen erosion of thin alpine soils. A weekend project with Wildland Restoration Volunteers resulted in the installation of cedar plank retaining walls to stabilize the slope and begin the process of recontouring the terrain.

Restoration work on other 14ers was much smaller in scale. Restoration usually focuses on closing off a trail braid, installing rocks to deter continued hiking, and transplanting plants known to establish easily.

Youth from the Overland Summers program haul some of the 100 straw wattles installed on Elbert to control erosion.

A social braid to the right of the Uncompahgre trail is closed and restored.

Wildland Restoration Volunteers install cedar plank retaining walls to control erosion on the Elbert “cat’s claw.”

Volunteers use soil to backfill the cedar plank retention walls to fill up the deep erosion scars.

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EDUCATE

The surge in hiker fatalities in 2017, especially in the dangerous Elk Mountains, was the impetus for Colorado Fourteeners Initiative embarking on a mountain safety educational push last year.

With funding from the Colorado Tourism Office and the Aspen Skiing Environment Foundation, CFI conducted 10 video shoots with a broad array of experts in the mountain world, including mountain rescue professionals, climbing guides, a physician and people affected by 14er accidents. The first 10 completed videos were turned around by mid-summer covering needed equipment for climbing tops and the health risks of altitude illness. These videos were viewed 2,813 times. Additional videos will be produced in future years utilizing content shot last summer.

CFI continued to have an educational presence on the tops through crews and volunteer Peak Stewards. Together more than 16,550 people were educated on the peaks about Leave No Trace minimum-impact practices and mountain safety. The Quandary crew alone contacted 6,838 hikers. Volunteer Terry Mattison continued to recruit, train and motivate Peak Stewards to put in time on the peaks and participate in “How to Climb a 14er” clinics at REI stores.

Educational outreach to the general public about the tops got a big boost through the “Bike & Climb Colorado” exhibit in the walkway to the A Concourse skybridge at Denver International Airport. CFI was able to fill four display cases that described the tops, showcased alpine plants and animals, and showcased some of the tools used by CFI crews to work on top trails.
The longer CFI is in the business of preserving and protecting the 14ers, the more certain we are that this is a job that will never be finished. Thus, we are constantly looking to improve the organization to continue working on the 14ers, as well as how we can better help our federal and management partners.

LAKE CITY 14ERS
CFI’s principal agency partner historically has been the Forest Service. However, the Bureau of Land Management oversees three 14ers near Lake City—Handies, Redcloud and Sunshine Peaks. CFI has been building a relationship with the BLM to address these peaks. With funding from the Chrest, Gates Family and National Forest Foundations, a CFI mini crew will begin working with youth corps and volunteers in 2019 to perform what we hope is the first of three seasons of intensive trail reconstruction work on all five peaks.

MANAGING GROWING 14ER USE IMPACTS
More people are climbing the 14ers every year. On a July Saturday close to 1,000 hikers climb the most popular peaks near Denver. Land managers and local governments have become increasingly concerned about resulting impacts, including crowded trailheads, blocked access roads and improper disposal of human waste and trash. Agencies and academics are looking at new ways to manage these concerns, which may include restricting parking, developing trailhead shuttles, capping use and requiring permits. CFI is engaged in several forums and hopes to serve as a source of information and perspective about the condition of the peaks and the workability of potential management approaches.

CFI BASE FACILITY
Discussions continue between CFI and the Forest Service regarding obtaining a long-term lease for the Cabin Cove site, where CFI has maintained its only permanent facility for many seasons. Though the Forest Service allows CFI’s seasonal staff to stay at the facility, use is approved annually. There is nothing preventing the Forest Service from bumping CFI out in favor of another entity at some point in the future. The goal is to sign a long-term lease (ideally 20-30 years) that will allow CFI exclusive use of the facility. In return, CFI will perform needed building maintenance and upgrades in lieu of making annual lease payments.

LOOKING AHEAD
A rainbow over T win Lakes and the Cabin Cove site where CFI has its summer operating base.

A climber descends through a part of Mount Wilson’s North Ridge route with numerous social trail braids and growing erosion. CFI hopes to begin work on Wilson in 2021.
People Who Volunteer for the Year: Hunter Walker

HUNTER WALKER (Denver, Colorado)

Hunt Walker was honored as Colorado Fourteeners Initiative’s 2018 Volunteer of the Year for his many years of engaged leadership on the Board of Directors and his generous support of the organization. Walker was a member of the Board since 2007, during which time he served two years as Chair and Vice-Chair. He has also been actively engaged in fundraising, recruitment of new directors, overseeing the annual audit, and trying to resolve private land holdings on Mounts Shavano and Sherman.

Hunt’s passion for theopens began in 1970 when he climbed the Lincoln, Democrat and Bross group with his uncle, Dick Walker, a member of the Colorado Mountain Club. Growing up in Colorado Springs, the opens were never far away. In high school he and friends spent weekends exploring the Sawatch Peaks. After moving to Denver to pursue a career as an oil and gas “landman” Walker usually climbed several opens every summer—often with childhood friend Charley LeCompte. He completed the list of 54 peaks with North Maroon Peak in 2007. Of late he’s re-climbing the opens with Charley and his three children, Hillary, Thad and Whit.

When asked about his connection to the peaks, Walker responds, “I have had my favorite times and memories over the years when climbing the peaks with friends and family. I3ated in fundraising, recruitment of new directors, overseeing the annual audit, and trying to resolve private land holdings on Mounts Shavano and Sherman. Walker usually climbed several peaks every summer—often with childhood friend Charley LeCompte. He completed the list of 54 peaks with North Maroon Peak in 2007. Of late he’s re-climbing the peaks with Charley and his three children, Hillary, Thad and Whit. When asked about his connection to the peaks, Walker responds, “I have had my favorite times and memories over the years when climbing the peaks with friends and family. I3ated in fundraising, recruitment of new directors, overseeing the annual audit, and trying to resolve private land holdings on Mounts Shavano and Sherman. Walker usually climbed several peaks every summer—often with childhood friend Charley LeCompte. He completed the list of 54 peaks with North Maroon Peak in 2007. Of late he’s re-climbing the peaks with Charley and his three children, Hillary, Thad and Whit.
Colorado Fourteeners Initiative set a 20th year of record financial performance in 2018. Total revenues increased 27 percent compared to 2017, while total expenses were up 14 percent. This was the third consecutive year in which both revenues and expenses surpassed $1 million. The year-end surplus of $326,350 in 2018 was 133 percent greater than the 2017 surplus.

Net assets for the organization increased by almost 39 percent to an all-time high of $1,172,663. This was the first time in the organization’s 24 years that net assets exceeded $1 million. Included were $387,379 in grants obtained for work in future years, $113,528 in a board-designated reserve fund, $107,773 in property and equipment, $46,014 in land owned on the summit of Mount Shavano, and additional retained cash as a contingency fund.

Operating Revenues
Total operating revenues were an all-time high of $1,618,925. There was a 27 percent increase over 2017’s prior record. Foundation grants surged by 75 percent to $531,377 to lead all categories. Multi-year grants from the Gates Family Foundation, continued strong support from the National Forest Foundation “Find Your Fourteener” campaign and a very generous first-time grant from the Chrest Foundation were major contributors. Individual donations again surpassed $500,000 for the second year in a row, though lagged prior year totals by $1,061. This ended a 10-year stretch of annual increases in individual giving. Local, state and federal government grants increased all year, while corporate donations grew 23 percent. The in-kind value of volunteer labor working on 14er trails and educating hikers totaled $460,562, which was an all-time record. Accounting rules prevent this total from being included in total revenues, though the value can serve as match for several of CFI’s larger grants.

Operating Expenses
Total operating expenses grew by $160,966 (14 percent) to a record-high $1,292,575. This was the third year in which expenses exceeded $1 million, reflecting CFI’s increased investments in 14er projects. Programs represented 81 percent of total expenditures ($1,044,798), while administration represented 10 percent ($127,827) and fundraising 9 percent ($119,950). Breaking out program-related expenditures further, funds devoted to trail construction, trail maintenance and vegetation restoration represented 58 percent of overall expenses, funds devoted to hiker education and outreach represented 6 percent, and funds allocated to the Sustainable Trails Program represented 5 percent. CFI’s administrative and fundraising expense ratio (AFR) was 19.2 percent, up slightly from 2017. CFI’s short field season, when most programmatic activity occurs, is only one-third of the year, while administrative and fundraising activity occurs year-round. This leads to a higher AFR rate for CFI than many other nonprofits that do programmatic work year-round.

CFI received a clean, GAAP-based audit from JDS Professional Group for its 2018 financial statements. This marks the 10th consecutive clean audit for the organization’s financial reporting.
BACK COVER Photo: A ptarmigan blends in almost too well with the rocks near the west ridge of Quandary Peak.

COVER Photo: Mount Yale appears to float on a sea of clouds while tools await another day's work on the Mount Columbia project.

Photo by Eli Allan, www.eliswindow.net