

REASONS TO INVEST IN QUALITY OF LIFE

A FEW YEARS AGO, I SERVED ON the town council in Eagle, Colorado. We would often discuss our mountain bike trail system and how it connected all of us to such a wonderful place to live. With only one bike shop in town, we always thought this amenity was for “us.” Sure, we had friends who came to ride, but we never really looked at the trail system through the lens of tourism and economic development.

Then one year, we decided to bid for the High School Mountain Biking Championships. Suddenly “Main Street Marketing” became a focus, and we went about ensuring our trail system really was world class for racing, as well as counting hotel beds and restaurant capacity and attempting to understand whether we had all we needed to be successful.

Eagle won the bid, and we were thrilled to have the chance to share our mountain town with the world. So many people came that we had to open up camping in our town park. The lines for food trucks went around the block at times, forcing us to host impromptu BBQs to cover the overload. The teams rode the trails,

parents cheered, and, year after year, the experience got better and better.

Then the magic started to happen. We would see families who came for the races return to ride on the weekends. Visitors told us that they never realized why the town was so special until the races, and now they wanted to visit all the time.

This led to even deeper conversations about the outdoor recreation industry in our town. If mountain biking brought people here, could our river corridor do the same? With the emergence of whitewater parks across the state and the country, we began looking at the Eagle River as another opportunity to engage the outdoor community. Combine that with the trail that the owner of the local microbrewery wanted to put in from the river to his deck, and you had a total town interest in what was possible!

In my current role as director for Colorado’s Outdoor Recreation Industry Office, I often get a chance to visit with towns across the state that are all asking similar questions: “We have all of these resources that we love — is it a good idea to use them to market ourselves to tourists and

potential transplants?” It is a complex question, one that has many towns facing heated debates about access and impact.

As with most economies, there are always competing interests. For instance, mountain biking and the motorized community traditionally do not get along very well. But synergy is possible! For example, after having the championships in Eagle for a few years, the town began to expect the revenue the race brought. However, a succession of incidents occurred. We started to get a lot of rain, rendering a lot of the trails too soggy to ride. Then a fence line broke and a herd of cows came down valley and trampled the wet trails into an unusable condition. We literally had no idea what to do. There was no way to repair the trail system in time.

Enter the motorized community. The local OHV club offered to ride the trails back into a useable condition. There were no arguments about who had access or why they could not ride those trails all the time; they leaned in to help because they had kids who raced, and they understood the economic impact to Eagle.

That spirit of collaboration is where I believe the outdoor industry is heading. For the first time ever, due to the passage of the Rec Act, the outdoor industry jobs and revenue will be counted toward the national GDP. The hypothesis is that it could be bigger than the auto and pharmaceutical industries combined. If this is the case, I believe that the focus on what we do and how we do it within our rural communities will continue to grow.

It is abundantly clear that people move to Colorado because of the lifestyle it offers. We have this unique opportunity to rise as a shining example of how to get the best out of every aspect of living in rural communities. If communities continue to be thoughtful about how they are connected by bike path, choose carefully the inclusion of open space,

and select the modalities of outdoor recreation that they really feel that they can both celebrate and protect, then they have a clear opportunity toward economic development, as well as a robust quality of life.

Colorado has many examples of towns that have found that path. Salida has not only focused on its vibrant arts and Main Street, but also its whitewater park and trails system. Buena Vista, a place once seen as a town in which to stop for gas as you headed to the hot springs, now boasts a distillery, energetic restaurants, surrounding mountain biking, moto riding, rock climbing, fly fishing, and a housing development surrounding a world-class whitewater park, which is redefining new urbanism. And Ouray, where in the heart of winter businesses were once closed for

the season, now hosts an international ice climbing festival, drawing climbers and industry partners from around the world.

In 1912, Theodore Roosevelt extolled "the value of natural beauty as a national asset, and of the effectiveness of outdoor life and recreation in the production of good citizenship." As we look toward the future of Colorado, I am confident that the things that bring us together to both celebrate and define what we have and who we are will be focused in the outdoor recreation industry space. My greatest hope is that as residents of Colorado, we can share best practices amongst ourselves to ensure that our natural resources, which help define our quality of life, are protected as national treasures for generations to come.



Photo courtesy of the Town of Eagle.