

Volunteer counts show increased use of popular rec areas

Friends of Fourmile mapping, surveys show 80% increase in campsites since 2014

BUENA VISTA — Outdoor recreation is one of Chaffee County’s hottest meal tickets but what hiking, biking and off-roading is doing to public lands remains largely unknown.

The U.S. Forest Service and other federal agencies managing Chaffee County’s public lands do not count the number of users on trails and roads, according to Salida District Ranger Jim Pitts.

The agency relies on a subset of trail monitoring and volunteers to help maintain recreational assets, Pitts said.

“We have a significant trail system and a great group of volunteers that assist us in managing those trails,” he said.

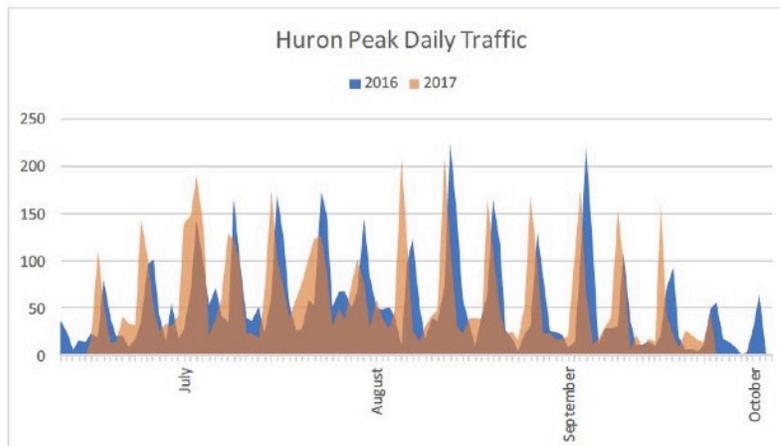
Some of the volunteer groups also try to help count the number of people recreating on Chaffee County’s public lands.

Mapping and informal surveys by Friends of Fourmile, a chapter of the Greater Arkansas River Nature Association, shows an 80 percent increase in the number and size of campsites in the 100,000-acre area.

The research shows 72 new sites, 95 unchanged sites and 87 sites that expanded in size by two to five times from 2004 to 2017.

Volunteers with the group have spent more than 14,000 hours in Fourmile over the past 15 years, said Alan Robinson, the GARNA chapter representative of Friends of Fourmile.

Paper mapping of campsites was converted to topographic software over time, and then to Google Earth last year, he said.

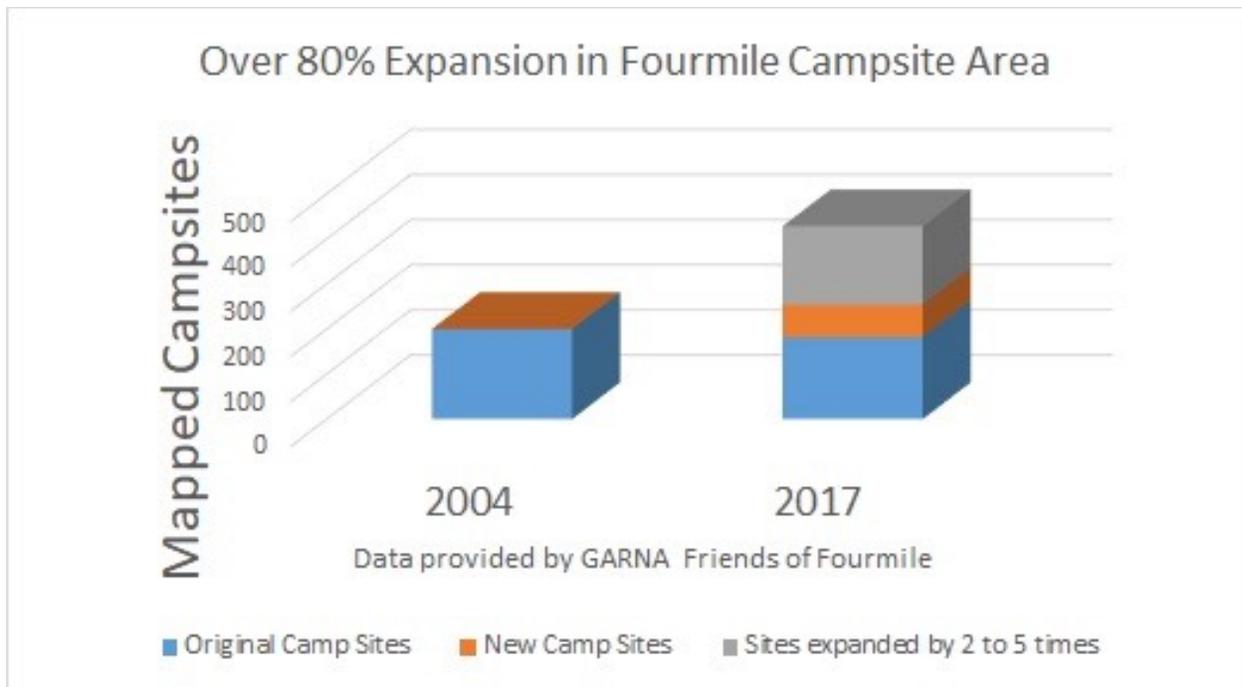


Peak bagging by hikers on Chaffee County’s 14ers is more popular every year, according infrared counters used by the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative to estimate trail use.



Ben Calvert celebrated his 15th birthday on a recent Saturday zipping around Fourmile Recreation Area on an ATV. Parents Mark Calvert, far left, and Rachel Calvert, far right, were visiting Rachel’s father, Buena Vista resident Dale Shoemaker, for a month from Singapore. Popular recreation areas like Fourmile and the county’s Fourteeners are used by more people every year, according to volunteer group counts.

In addition to mapping, the group’s time in the area includes patrolling, maintenance and visitor education done in association with land managing agencies, and an annual Memorial Day weekend “windshield” count of the number of campers, mountain bikers,



Mapping and informal surveys by Friends of Fourmile show an 80 percent increase in campsites in Fourmile Recreation Area since 2004, including 72 new sites and 87 sites that expanded in size by two to five times.

off-roaders and other users in the area, he said.

“Although the behavior of users has been generally respectful of the regulations and the landscape, the increased use has had unintended and sometimes serious impacts on the environment,” Robinson said.

Especially related to campsites, the group has observed trampled vegetation, mutilated trees, multiplication of fire rings, increased trash and human waste, and disturbed soil due to motorized play around campfires, he said.

Mountain biker Rich Morgan said he rides in Fourmile about three times a week in the season from his home in Buena Vista. He said he has seen the number of riders steadily increase in the last five years.

“Fourmile was undiscovered for so long,” Morgan said. “Now the trails are being developed and people are finding out about it.”

Morgan said he wants Fourmile to remain open and free but is concerned about the

possibility that trash left behind by errant campers and vehicles driving off designated trails could degrade his experience and harm the environment.

“With more people, what will happen in ten years?” he said. “Will it get trashed or still be pretty pristine and beautiful?”

Peak bagging by hikers on the county’s 14,000-foot-peaks has also increased, according to the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative, which for the past three years has used infrared counters on trails to estimate use on all of the state’s Fourteeners.

Up to 110,000 hikers bag the county’s tallest peaks every year, according to the statewide advocacy group. On the most popular day in 2017, 230 people summited Mount Huron and 160 summited Mount Shavano — a 9% increase over the previous year.

Outdoor recreation contributes to the local economy and supports one out of every four jobs in the county, according to Colorado

State Demographer Elizabeth Garner. These jobs pay less than average — about \$21,000 per year compared to an average \$38,700, according to Garner’s staff.

The outdoors is a commodity in Chaffee County and high-quality, uncrowded experiences are also prized by citizens, according to a community survey by Envision Chaffee County completed by more than 1,200 citizens last year.

Outdoor recreation was identified as the third-top thing residents value most about living in Chaffee County. It ranked behind “Beauty, mountains and nature” and “Small-town feel,” according to the Community Survey Results and Assessment Report published by Envision in November.

When asked about top priorities for managing public lands and the river, survey respondents chose, “Managing the environmental impacts of recreation” and

“Maintaining the quality of outdoor recreation” among their top-five priorities, according to the report.

“Outdoor recreation is clearly a very important asset for the community and people want to protect their experiences on our public lands,” Envision Team Lead Cindy Williams said.

Williams said a team of volunteers will begin looking at these concerns over the next few months to find ways to manage the impacts of recreation associated with growth in population and tourism.

This story was produced as part of Envision Chaffee County, a community effort to help maintain natural resources, affordability, rural landscapes and sense of community as the county grows and prospers. For more information, visit envisionchaffeecounty.org.