



**Rocky Mountain National Park
Continental Divide Research Learning Center**

Marketing the Mountains: An Environmental History of Tourism

The Question: How and why has tourism shaped the landscapes of the park?

Tourism is one of the West's great economic engines, and national parks contribute significantly to the tourism industry. While tourism may seem sustainable compared to more invasive economic activities such as mineral extraction and agriculture, it has dramatically altered landscapes. With minimal resource extraction and agriculture in its past, Rocky Mountain National Park can act as an historical "laboratory" to isolate tourism as a cultural factor that shapes landscapes.

The Project: Analyze the impacts of tourism throughout the twentieth century in the park.

Environmental history is the study of the interactions of humans and the environment over time. Jerritt Frank, from the University of Kansas, reviewed documents in archives throughout the country, including books, park files, newspapers, and the Congressional Record. Dr. Frank focused his research on how locals, business owners and the National Park Service transformed the natural world to conform to tourist expectations. Specifically he chose driving, fishing, and wildlife viewing to study because these are "central to the Rocky Mountain National Park tourism experience."

The Results: By meeting the expectations of tourists, the park altered the landscapes it was trying to protect.

Managing for the pleasure of tourists undermined the ecological integrity of park landscapes. Early park promoters used new roads, successful fishing, and abundant elk to promote the park, build a local economy, and increase visitor satisfaction. Not until 1931 did ecological science begin to influence how the park would be preserved for future generations. Since the 1930s park officials have used tourism and science in a "dynamic tension" of management decisions. Today visitors may ride shuttle buses, find some waters closed to fishing, and walk in wetlands injured by elk populations. Dr. Frank warns about blaming park managers for current ecological imbalances. Instead, he invites readers to view these transformative decisions in their historical context: "Only when we begin to understand the complex factors that shaped policy decisions will we be able to apply the lessons of the past to the management challenges of the future."



Since 1932, Rock Cut has been a popular place for motorists to gaze over the Continental Divide. Traffic congestion and damage to tundra plant communities are a result of this popularity.



Fishing is a favorite activity of park visitors. Past practices of stocking non-native fish caused a decline in native greenback cutthroat trout populations.



Reintroduced in the area in 1914, Estes Park locals used elk to attract tourists. But an overpopulation on the park's winter range has damaged plants and contributed to the decline of other wildlife.