



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

# The Skyline of the World: The Design of Trail Ridge Road

**The Question: What does Trail Ridge Road tell us about early 20th century American attitudes toward landscape, scenery, and development?**

Ray Vandersall, of the University of Wyoming, studied the landscape of Trail Ridge Road in both spatial and historical context. “The road occupies a specific place in history, and its origins cannot all be ‘read’ from the landscape itself without reference to other texts. The road has an immediate visual presence and spatiality, but it was also a production in time, a designed experience....The ‘space’ of Trail Ridge Road has both a geography and a history.”

**The Project: An examination of Trail Ridge Road and the records concerning the road from a cultural geography perspective.**

Cultural geography is the study of space and time as it relates to characteristics of cultures, including language, religion, ethnicity, politics, historical development, agricultural methods, and settlement patterns.

Mr. Vandersall studied writings on “landscape” in a variety of disciplines such as cultural geography, landscape architecture, historic preservation, environmental history, and National Park Service history. A review of archival materials such as planning documents, historic photos, drawings, and completion reports, further defined the historical context of Trail Ridge Road. He also traveled along Trail Ridge Road, documenting its spatial characteristics.

**The Results: By the elements of its construction and the perspective it established on the surrounding view, Trail Ridge Road created a unique landscape and contributed to the character of the park itself.**

Certainly Rocky Mountain National Park would exist as a socially meaningful space without Trail Ridge Road. But the construction of the road highlighted the scenic splendors of Rocky Mountain and helped solidify the reputation of the National Park Service as an institution preserving the best of America’s natural heritage. Landscape architects designed the road to lie lightly on the landscape, without the great scars and terrain modifications of other highway projects, and with pleasant accessories like rustic stone walls and scenic pullouts. Furthermore the road democratized the landscape by allowing a generation of newly mobile tourists to visually adopt this naturalized, national landscape. Not only does the road reveal the goals of park administrators, engineers, and landscape architects, balanced with the perceived demands of visitors, but as a specific experience it also contributes to the public imagination of what the role of a national park is and reinforces an idea of nature as a spectacle.



Opened for travel in 1932, Trail Ridge is the highest continuous paved road in the nation.

