

# Opinion: Can the ‘Outdoor Recreational Economy’ save Colorado’s environment?

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Two weeks before the election, Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper stood with a phalanx of “outdoor recreators” and state agency staffers while announcing the results of a new study by the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Department.

The study claimed that the “Outdoor Recreation Economy” — let’s call it “ORE” — had reached \$62 billion a year in Colorado, surpassing most other economic drivers, including the oil and gas industry.

The phalanx of people standing with Hickenlooper included many who work for “conservation organizations,” all of whom seem to think that promoting ORE will help protect Colorado’s environment.

The political argument behind promoting ORE is that if there’s an economy around recreating in the environment, we environmentalists then can tout this economic benefit as a reason to protect the environment.

Rafting, biking, hiking, fishing — they all bring in beaucoup bucks in Colorado, and so therefore policy makers should respond by protecting the places we raft, bike, hike and fish.



Gary Wockner

Behind this argument is a broader political philosophy that is rarely discussed, which coincides with the rise of corporate capitalism in the Democratic Party in Colorado and the U.S. over the past three decades.

This wing of the Democratic Party — which reached a kind of pinnacle during Bill Clinton’s presidency and then again during Barack Obama’s — is often called the “neo-liberals” (new liberals) who support a liberal-progressive social agenda while also promoting a hyper-corporate capitalist agenda, thereby melding Wall Street profits with progressive social change.

Hickenlooper is one of the most devout corporate-capitalist Democrats in the U.S., and he has adeptly pushed this agenda during his eight years as governor of Colorado.

Joined at the pelvis with this neo-liberal movement has been a large-scale push to promote economic models that protect the environment.

This wing of the environmental movement is known as “neo-liberal environmentalists” who broadly believe that the solution to environmental decay and degradation is to create an economy around environmental protection.

With Hickenlooper’s help, neo-liberal environmentalism is flourishing in Colorado — in fact as I write this column, the “Outdoor Industry Association” is having a “Winter Market” in Denver all brought to Colorado by generous financial incentive packages provided by the Hickenlooper administration. Outdoor-recreation jobs-jobs-jobs they say, are the solution to environmental problems-problems-problems.

But is it?

What I’ve mostly seen over the past 32 years in Colorado, and especially during the Hickenlooper administration, is just more-more-more of everything — more jobs, businesses, people and growth. And, more environmental degradation of Colorado’s air, water and landscapes — more crowds, more noise and more negative impacts.

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Everywhere you go in Colorado you just see “more.” Yes, ORE is flourishing, but that’s because more people are doing more, spending more, hiking more, biking more, driving to the mountains more and on and on.

Hickenlooper is on his way out as governor, and Jared Polis is now stepping in, which brings a fresh start to environmental politics in Colorado, one that is desperately needed.

Myriad aspects of neo-liberal environmentalism can be analyzed and discussed to understand whether it’s made a difference in protecting Colorado’s environment, but let me offer this short “litmus test” as we move forward:

First, for ORE to be taken seriously as a solution to protect Colorado’s environment, it needs to *displace and replace* the old extractive economy. Drilling, mining, and logging jobs and their old economy need to be phased out and replaced by ORE jobs and its economy.

If this doesn’t happen — as it did not during Hickenlooper’s regime — we just have more of everything crowding and competing in and for Colorado’s landscapes.

Second, the Outdoor Recreation Economy needs to be dramatically more mindful and mitigating of its own impacts. We’ve all seen trails trampled, wildlife harassed, special places destroyed and rivers completely packed with rafts. Point-blank: ORE can degrade and destroy a wild landscape just as badly as a drilling rig.

Third and finally, one of the big challenges to ORE is how it can protect the environment where there is no economy to protect.

As an example, everyone loves the Yampa River in northwest Colorado as a recreational and whitewater mecca, and so there’s a large network of groups working to protect that river and economy.

But just south of the Yampa in the next drainage is the severely endangered and neglected White River — a massive proposed dam and diversion is being discussed on the White River, and literally no one cares because hardly no one visits or recreates on the White.

Further, this third litmus test is exponentially worse in wildlife management scenarios, where for example, the economy around hunting elk is in the billions of dollars, but the economy around protecting mountain lions is almost non-existent.

Even worse, because mountain lions compete with human hunters for elk, mountain lion populations are “controlled” (killed off) to increase the number of elk and protect the elk-hunting economy.

Stated more generally, the Outdoor Recreation Economy gives environmental rights and political clout where an economy exists, but ignores or even undermines the environment where no economy exists.

In my mind, the White River has just as much right to exist as the Yampa River, and a mountain lion has just as much right to exist as an elk. Nature — in all its glorious forms — has an intrinsic worth regardless of its fleeting economic value to humans.

ORE has so far not saved Colorado’s environment and may be further degrading it. The neo-liberal environmentalists have not yet convinced me of their own intrinsic worth.

*Gary Wockner, Ph.D., is an environmental activist in Colorado. Twitter: @GaryWockner*