What do mountains mean to millennials? Leaders to find out at Colorado Springs event

By: Seth Boster
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Community leaders will meet with young adults Thursday in Colorado Springs to learn what the outdoors means to the up-and-coming generation.

"Mountains Matter to Millennials" will be the topic of discussion during the event as part of the Pikes Peak Recreation and Tourism Heritage Series, a program started this summer by the El Pomar Foundation. In May, the nonprofit dedicated to community development convened advocates and local leaders over the issue of preserving the region’s trails and open spaces.

At that session, young people formed a small portion of the attendance. The opposite is expected at 5 p.m. Thursday at Penrose House, where about 100 men and women between the ages of 18 and 33 are expected to take part in roundtable discussions.

"I'm really excited about the fact that El Pomar is taking the lead in trying to understand how to connect the next generation to something we all think is pretty important," said Luis Benitez, the head of Colorado's Outdoor Recreation Industry Office who will be the event's keynote speaker.

"What you're really talking about here is the future stewardship of our state and how to grow that ethic."

Results from a survey will be shown Thursday, supporting, indeed, that mountains matter to millennials.

"I was intrigued by anecdotes that said they weren't happy here, that they're leaving," said Walt Hecox, the Heritage Series' senior program adviser who helped conduct the survey.

To the question asked - what is the Pikes Peak region’s greatest strength? - the emphatic answer among millennials regarded its natural surroundings. The age group represented a quarter of the 250 who responded as of last week to the survey. Millennials, along with all age groups, rated accessibility to the outdoors as the No. 1 feature of the region. Young people also ranked that as the region’s greatest challenge, while older respondents identified growth management and infrastructure as more critical.
"It reinforced my idea that the outdoors and the Pikes Peak backdrop are far more important than we appreciate," said Hecox, the recently retired Colorado College economics professor who directed the school’s State of the Rockies Project, which analyzes the environment's role in society.

For too long, Hecox said, the area’s outdoors has been "left to figure itself out." Trail connectivity and additional parking were some wishes of millennials who responded to the survey.

"If they are our future, how do we retain them?" Hecox said. "How do we improve the outdoors?"