On April 13, as part of the Colorado College State of the Rockies Project, a panel of communications experts met to discuss environmental issues and why they may be a lower priority for coverage.

The Pikes Peak Heritage Series, a program of El Pomar Foundation, co-sponsored the event, held at the Penrose House in Colorado Springs.

Drawing on trends from the Colorado College State of the Rockies Project, five panelists looked at the priorities of voters in the seventh annual Conservation in the West poll and direction in the first 100 days of the Trump presidency while discussing “Our Natural Economy: Capitalizing on Colorado’s Unique Place in the Rockies.”

Colorado College Professor Emeritus Walt Hecox founded the State of the Rockies Project in 2003, as a student-faculty program that delves into environmental and natural resource issues in the Rocky Mountain West.

The first Conservation in the West poll was conducted in 2011 with five states and has since expanded to seven: Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, Montana, Arizona and New Mexico.

Questions in the areas of energy development, wildlife protections, national monuments and timely current issues are asked of thousands of voters of Republican, Democrat and Independent status.

The purpose of the annual survey, said Brendan Boepple, associate director of the State of the Rockies Project, is to “separate the rhetoric from the reality.”

And, “Data shows public support for conservation is much stronger than opposition,” he said.

Colorado, in particular, has a large following of users, with nearly three-fourths of this year’s respondents identifying as “conservationists.”
Colorado also stands out in the 2017 results for 95 percent of respondents saying opportunities for outdoor recreation are good or great in the state, and 86 percent describing the quality of life as good or great.

Lori Weigel, a partner with the Colorado office of Public Opinion Strategies, describes the poll her firm conducted in January as “large” and “robust.”

“It looks at voters on a state-by-state level and takes a portion to look at the region,” she said.

She sees a definite disconnect between what Westerners think and want and what’s happening among state and national policymakers, Weigel said.

As per the poll, Westerners use such phrases as “natural beauty, big sky, open lands, clean water and air, recreational activities and mountains” as to why they live and stay here.

“That’s significant because it permeates and colors their responses,” Weigel said. “In a lot of places in this country, the outdoors won’t come up at all.”

This year’s poll shows three in five Westerners are against additional energy production, opposition remains steady for turning public lands over to state government, and nearly three-fourths of respondents believe public lands help the economy.

Ray Rasker, executive director of Headwaters Economics, a nongovernmental organization headquartered in Bozeman, Mont., that studies growth and change in public lands, said most people think of natural resource development and tourism when they think of public lands.

“I’d argue there’s a whole variety of other ways they contribute,” he said.

For example, he said, more than one-third of municipal water comes from U.S. Forest Service lands.

Rasker’s research shows the more protected land, the more growth in counties’ economies. He doesn’t draw a direct correlation between the two, but said the information shows public lands are not bad for communities, as some people think.

Jane Turnis, vice president of communications for Colorado College, said alumni of her school identify Colorado’s mountains as one of the top three things they loved about being at CC.

“Our environment is one of the reasons they choose to come to CC,” she said.
Students can relate to environmental issues because many impact their personal lives, including gas prices, wildfires and drought.

Vince Bzdek, editor in chief of The Gazette, mentioned how The Gazette has started a new, online “arm chair experience” of the outdoors called OutThere Colorado. The website features articles and videos from recreation and attractions around the state.

The outdoors and the Colorado lifestyle do not rank high in studies KOAA-TV has done, in terms of what people care about, said news director Kelly Duffy, who attended the event.

People care more about destinations than activities, said Sophie Goodman, OutThere Colorado’s content marketing manager and another guest. Adding a human element is second to the destination, she said.

“It starts by showing them what's here so they can build an appreciation for preserving it,” she said.

Weigel said surveys show that people don’t necessarily have to spend time on public lands to want to conserve them.

“It’s the idea that there are other values that I don’t have to go physically to this specific place but intuitively know it’s important,” she said.

If people don’t get a sense that things can be solved, they won’t respond to any messaging, Weigel said.

“We’re seeing you can’t lose hope,” she said. “People are starting to respond and be more aware of different conservation issues.”

Rasker noted he’s learned the messenger matters. If he brings a rancher or county commissioner to testify before a Congressional committee, the results are better.

“What an elected official needs to convince their colleagues to pass legislation is a memorable fact and a story,” he said. “Their staff gets the details.”

Legislation such as allowing Colorado residents to use rain barrels to capture runoff for their use was a “golden ticket” for environmental issues, Boepple said.

“Impacting their everyday life is most effective” to getting people to pay attention to environmental matters, he said.