Are we a “peak above all” as a tourist mecca?

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Our region is defined by Pikes Peak and its associated mountain shoulders, serving as a sentinel for the westward expansion, for over two centuries.

Given that we not alone in being defined by an iconic mountain (or natural features), what are our "competitor regions. How do they use their natural backdrop, landscape, vast public lands in support of quality of life, recreation and tourism?

In a review of five such regions, one stands out as remarkably similar to Pikes Peak in features, development history, and array of ways recreation and tourism are supported. This "twin" is Mount Washington in New Hampshire.

Before looking at this eastern "competitor," though, we should quickly take stock of our own mountain complex and what it provides.

Pikes Peak (elevation 14,114 ft) was first sighted by Americans (members of Zebulon Pike's) in 1806. It is accessed by cog rail (1891), car (1901), foot and bicycle. The summit originally held an Army meteorology observatory (1873-1888) that morphed into the earliest Summit House (1888, then several revisions) -- now scheduled for yet another replacement in 2018. The Summit serves as a terminus for rail and car and hiking access. The mountain above 14,000 feet is managed by the National Park Service as a National Historic Landmark (1961), while much of the mountain is in the Pike National Forest (1892). Some 30 attractions cluster around the peak with trails and public lands supporting intense recreation and tourism. Surrounding communities benefit from high quality of life and tourism/recreation-oriented businesses and jobs.

Mount Washington (elevation 6,288 ft) in New Hampshire is the tallest peak in the Northeastern United States and the most prominent mountain east of the Mississippi River. It is located in the Presidential Range of the White Mountains, within the White Mountain National Forest (1918), with the summit designated as Mount Washington State Park (1964). The first Europeans climbed the peak in 1642 and it was named after George Washington in 1784. It is the site the oldest hiking trail in the U, laid out in 1819. Activity on the summit itself began in the mid-19th century with an effort to create one of nation's first tourist destinations. Its Summit House opened in 1852, a 64-foot-long stone hotel anchored by four heavy chains over its roof against the 200+ mile per hour winds. Other tourist attractions include a coach road (1861)—now the Mount Washington Auto Road—and the Mount Washington Cog Railway (1869), both of which are still in operation. Mount Washington Observatory was built on the summit in 1932 and is a private, non-profit scientific and educational institution that studies weather and climate, conducts research and educational programs and interprets the regional heritage.
The mountain is part of a popular hiking area, with the Appalachian Trail (1923) crossing the summit.

A comparison of Pikes Peak and Mount Washington, identifies the remarkable similarity of historical evolution. Access to each mountain evolved from trails to cog rail and road.

**Why not move beyond our current approach to Pikes Peak tourism and send a delegation from our recreation/tourism sectors to visit Mount Washington?**

Other regions that can illuminate the interaction of natural amenity setting with recreation and tourism include: Hawaii Volcano National Park on the Island of Hawaii; Mount Saint Helens region and Mount Rainer National Park, both in Washington; and Rocky Mountain National Park/Trail Ridge Road in Colorado.

Why not move beyond our current approach to Pikes Peak tourism and send a delegation from our recreation/tourism sectors to visit Mount Washington to look for synergy and shared efficiency among regional amenities as well as new models of regional cooperation?

After all, we periodically send delegations from Colorado Springs to learn from similar cities such as Oklahoma City or Chattanooga, and the same approach can pay dividends in the areas of recreation and tourism. All Aboard!

*Editor’s Note: Walt Hecox is a former Colorado College professor of economics. In the coming months, he’ll continue to explore topics about tourism: the tough reality of competition; tourism tactics in other regions; regional seasonal passes and promotions; and examples of tourism regions partnering with their adjacent public lands and environmental agencies to protect and manage natural amenities.*