

Outdoor advocates plead need to get more urban kids involved

They say drop in public-lands use doesn't bode well

By Deborah Frazier

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GOLDEN— The future of public lands in Colorado and elsewhere is in the hands of urban kids who don't spend much time outdoors, speakers at a recreation forum here said Thursday.

Outdoor activities, from walks in the park to mountain hiking, are losing out to video games, television and shopping malls, said panelists at the Outdoor Recreation Forum, one of a series being held nationwide.

The result could be a generation with no connection to nature and no commitment to conserving natural resources, said Rick Cable, regional forester for the U.S. Forest Service.

"We have to do something different," said Cable, whose love of the outdoors started with fishing with his grandmother.

Federal studies in many states show the first decline in 20 years in people enjoying national forests. That trend means fewer people who will stand up to fu-

ture proposals to sell off national parks and forests to raise money, activists say. Under the Bush administration, there have been several such initiatives, which outdoor advocates have been able to block.

Robert Moreno, founder of Alpino, a Denver-based snow sports diversity initiative, said the future of public lands belongs to urban and multicultural youth.

But, he noted, 80 percent of the young people who live along the Front Range don't participate in outdoor activities and most of them are minorities under 18.

"The biggest threat to the mountains isn't lynx habitat or mountain pine beetle," he said. "If a kid is raised with no involvement with the mountains, how do you think they will vote on selling the mountains?"

Moreno, who grew up in Los Angeles, learned to ski and served on the ski patrol at Keystone and taught skiing at Copper Mountain before starting Alpino. "In 48 years of skiing, I still don't see much diversity on the slopes," he said. Moreno said he focused on snow sports because "that's what I knew."

With help from the Vail and Aspen ski resorts, Echo Mountain snowboard park and REI, Moreno said he's taken thou-

sands of kids skiing and snowboarding. "When we take a kid to the mountains, it's a profound experience," he said.

The Outdoor Recreation Forum, sponsored by the National Forest Foundation and the American Recreation Coalition, is the first in a series across the country to discuss why fewer people, especially teens, use national forests.

Dwane Matthews, 19, a black student at East High School, said he'd never considered outdoor recreation because all the faces in the ads were white.

"I just figured it was a white thing," said Matthews.

But after he caught his first fish with Scott Gilmore's Environmental Learning for Kids program, that changed.

"Fishing, that's tight," he said.

Jim Bedwell, head of recreation for the U.S. Forest Service, said the agency has enhanced programs for youth, especially multicultural youngsters, but needs to do more.

"Recreation is the best way to reach youth about nature," he said. "Once you get them in the heart with the beauty, you can take them to the next level of understanding about the natural world."

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