



COURTESY SHANE SIGLE/REP

**ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE:** WHITEWATER PARKS MAY BOOST LOCAL ECONOMIES ALONGSIDE ADRENALINE LEVELS.

## Making Waves

Colorado may be famed for its natural wonders, but it also leads the nation in imitating nature when it comes to rivers. The Centennial State is home to the most whitewater parks in the country. And these parks are helping local economies as well as changing the legal landscape when it comes to water rights.

By Eugene Buchanan

It's hard to improve upon Mother Nature in Colorado. But even with 54 Fourteeners and mountains of snowfall, the state is leading the charge in an effort to do just that in the unlikelyst of places: rivers.

In a state where every single river flows out and none come in, including such behemoths as the Colorado, Arkansas, Animas, Rio Grande, Yampa, Gunnison and North and South Plattes, a move is underway to make our waterways even better for paddling. Communities are converting their downtown river corridors into a new wave of whitewater parks that are bringing recreation and new revenue streams to local economies.

"Colorado is the leader of the whitewater park trend, no doubt," says Gary Lacy of Boulder's Recreation Engineering & Planning (REP), which has designed the majority of such parks in the country. "It boils down to the state's unique geography and strong boating community."

The numbers tell the story. Colorado—which hosted the first-ever international whitewater park conference in 2005 in Glenwood Springs, and another last year in Salida—has nearly 30 such parks, more than a third of the country's total. They're located everywhere there's water, gradient and people, from resorts like Vail, Breckenridge and Steamboat Springs to towns like Lyons, Boulder, Pagosa Springs, Salida and Pueblo. The trend's top designers are concentrated in Colorado as well. Joining Lacy's operation in Boulder is H2O Designs, spearheaded by former REP employee and three-time World Cup slalom champion Scott Shipley; the McLaughlin Whitewater Design Group in Denver, which designed Confluence Park on the South Platte

and the 1996 Olympic course on Tennessee's Ocoee River; and Whitewater Parks International, one of whose principals is based in Carbondale and which served as the lead design firm for the 2012 London Olympic course.

Meanwhile, back in the Rockies, the craze is still running as strong as spring runoff. Last year Salida and Buena Vista each put in two new waves, and the Lawson Whitewater Park on Clear Creek opened. Steamboat rebuilt its popular C-hole wave this past November, with plans for more in the future, and a new wave opens in

Gunnison this spring. The Grand County Board of Commissioners recently applied for water rights associated with two new whitewater parks on the Colorado – one in Hot Sulphur Springs and the other below Gore Canyon.

### Gold Rush

One of the most recent additions to the craze is the Glenwood Whitewater Park on the Colorado River in Glenwood Springs, which opened in April 2008 and hosted the National Freestyle Championships. Seven years in the planning, its construction was made possible by an \$888,000 City Council grant. Thanks to a near-record water year, word on the new wave spread quickly, luring even boardsurfers to town. Head there today and you'll see as many people shredding it on surfboards as in kayaks. The last two years it's even hosted the standup paddleboard national river championships.

All this is paying huge dividends for the town. "It balances out the tourist season, eliminating the slower economic periods of the year," says Glenwood spokesperson Vicky Nash. "It's a great asset to the community."

Golden has also seen gold from its whitewater park. The first publicly-funded park in the nation, its first phase was built for \$165,000 by Lacy in 1996, just a stone's throw upstream from the Coors factory. Now it's given the town far more to hang its hat on than just beer. According to Dan Hartman, the city's director of public works, the park brings in 40,000 visitors and between \$2.5 million and \$4 million annually.

Other parks are similarly successful. According to a 2005 report by Stratus Consulting, features like Steamboat's C-hole—which now hosts the annual Paddling Life Invitational, drawing some of the best kayakers in the world—can bring in as much as \$7.2 million annually to the local economy. Salida's park is also a boon. "It impacts all of downtown," says REP's Mike Harvey, also a partner in Salida company Bad Fish, which builds surfboards specifically for one of Salida's waves. "Our annual FIBArk festival used to lose money. Now it makes more than



COURTESY SHANE SIGLE/REP

**BRING THE FAMILY:** DOWNTOWN PARKS LIKE THIS ONE DRAW MORE THAN JUST hardcore paddlers.

\$50,000 per year. And it's all due to the park. It's like South Beach, Rocky Mountain-style."

Harvey is quick to give a nod to Golden for setting the trend. "While boaters here started moving rocks around in the Arkansas back in the '60s, Golden was the first real publicly funded whitewater park in the country, built explicitly for whitewater paddling," he says. "It was the spark that helped spread the trend across the U.S."

### Right of Water

If it got the manmade wave trend rolling, it also did so for water rights. In 2001, Golden won a decision from the Colorado Supreme Court guaranteeing minimum flows for its park, creating a new fork in the state's convoluted water-rights landscape. To do so, it had to prove it could capture, control and divert the water; put it to "beneficial" use; and show the minimum flow necessary for a reasonable recreational experience. The result was precedent setting. The Recreational In-Channel Diversion (RICD) the city received established for the first time that recreation is as beneficial a use of water as agriculture, industry and development. Unlike other rights, this new breed of water right is also non-consumptive, meaning it can still be used to satisfy other downstream rights. Vail, Breckenridge, Pueblo, Gunnison and Steamboat Springs quickly followed suit to secure recreational flows for their parks.

"The Golden decision was the big, big breakthrough for recreational water rights cases," says water attorney Steve Bushong of Denver's Porzak,

Browning and Bushong. "These municipalities are trying to protect their investment, and the parks provide the diversion and control necessary to meet the right's requirements. It's the new West, showing that recreation has come of age."

Grand County's filing seeks to protect 900 cfs in the Colorado at Hot Sulphur Springs and 2,500 cfs below Gore Canyon between April 1 and October 15. As with the others, the rights are contingent on the development of in-channel features that will put the water to beneficial use. "The rights are supported as mitigation of additional depletions from Windy Gap Reservoir and additional storage in the Upper Colorado River basin," says American Whitewater Colorado Stewardship Director Nathan Fey, whose group worked with Grand County to explore RICDs to help protect flows in the Colorado. "We've worked with landowners, outfitters and Grand County staff to identify potential locations of whitewater features and identify the flows necessary to preserve river-based recreation."

### Going Nationwide

The trend is seeping elsewhere. This past year Lacy completed a course on the North Fork Payette River in Idaho, as well as a \$21 million park on the Bow River in Alberta. In the once automotive hotbed of Michigan, no fewer than four new parks are underway, creating an economic engine that relies on water instead of gasoline. In many cases, they also convert outdated and dangerous low-head dams into

recreational amenities that can be enjoyed by the entire community.

They're large and small, from a \$1.5 million park on the Truckee River in downtown Reno, Nev., to the \$37 million, REP-designed National Whitewater Center in Charlotte, N.C., and \$23 million McLaughlin-designed Adventure Sports Center atop Maryland's Wisp ski area. While some are entirely artificial—like the Whitewater Center and Sports Center, which pump water back upstream and include George Jetson-like conveyer belts for kayakers—others rely on natural runoff to enhance downtown river corridors

While the world got its first look at a man-made slalom course at the 1972 Olympics in Augsburg, Germany, Colorado has emerged as the trend's current frontrunner – ever since Denver modified a low-head dam at Confluence Park on the South Platte in 1974. Then Golden cemented the trend in stone. "Golden broke the mold by allocating municipal funds solely for a destination whitewater park," says Lacy. "They approached it as they would a new softball field."

That approach and countless others are putting Colorado on the whitewater park map just like its slopes do so in the world of skiing. And it's only fitting that both rely on two of the state's best recreational traits: gradient and precipitation. "Just like our skiing, Colorado's rivers are great to begin with," says Lacy. "We're just doing what we can to make them that much better and even more appealing to the masses." •

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THE MASTERMIND: BOULDER-BASED GARY LACY HAS BECOME THE LEADER IN WHITEWATER PARK DESIGN.

## The Man Behind the Whitewater

REP founder Gary Lacy

What kind of person bases his career around designing and building kayaking parks? Someone who lives and breathes his work like Gary Lacy.

Lacy, 55, founded Recreation Engineering & Planning in Boulder in 1983 and has since seen it grow into the leading whitewater park company in the nation, if not world, with offices along Boulder

Creek in Boulder, Colo., and on the Arkansas River in Salida, Colo. From designing the Boulder Creek park in 1990 and Golden's Clear Creek park in 1996, to the \$37 million National Whitewater Center in Charlotte, N.C., and last summer's \$21 million park on Alberta's Bow River, he's had a hand in courses big and small, and has paddled

every single one.

But despite his penchant for parks, his real love is downriver paddling. He's competed in Salida's 26-mile FIBArk downriver race every year since 1974—that's 36 straight times for those counting—winning it six times and placing second 15. He competed in the downriver World Championships in Wales in 1980 and again in France in 1999. He also tackles water's frozen medium, racing Wisconsin's annual 52-km Birkenbeiner event 22 times and nearly every major Nordic race in Colorado. His kids, Mason and Spencer, are no slouches either, racing in the Downriver Junior World Championships in Switzerland.

While he admits to having shortcomings in freestyle events, he's happy to play in the parks he creates and is glad to make room in the eddies for others to enjoy his whitewater wares. "Whitewater park" wasn't even a word when we got started," says Lacy, who's joined in his firm by course designers Mike Harvey and Shane Sigle. "We've been at it a long time and have seen a total transformation in their acceptance across the country. And we're all pretty active paddlers ourselves, which makes the work all that much more enjoyable."

—E.B.

*Want to build a whitewater park in your community? Start a conversation within your town, get elected officials onboard and then contact REP and learn how to make it happen.*

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## Get Wet

Check out these five Front Range paddle parks:

With this year's above-average snowfall, there's no better time to kayak Colorado's latest crop of man-made whitewater wares. Eschew the wilderness for a weekend and hit any of the following to see what the latest boating buzz is all about.

### Clear Creek, Golden

Golden's famous water is now used for more than just beer. A centerpiece and economic catalyst for the city, Golden's Clear Creek Whitewater Park is located on 10th and Maple streets, just south of Lion's Park. Hit one of 13 drops on the 800-foot-long man-made course, all of which was snow you skied during the winter at Loveland.

### Arkansas River, Pueblo

Finished in 2005, the downtown Pueblo course on the Arkansas River was built by the Army Corps of Engineers as a fish passage and to ease navigation around an outdated and dangerous 12-foot-high dam. By no coincidence, it's also a great passage for paddlers, with eight natural boulder holes for messing about in boats.

### South Platte/Confluence Park, Denver

Confluence Park in downtown Denver serves double duty as paddling playground and flood



COURTESY SHANE SIGLE/REP

SPECTATOR SPORT: PADDLE AT COMMUNITY PARKS OR JUST HANG OUT AND WATCH.

control. Originally built in 1974 and refurbished twenty years later, it now includes sidewalks, planters, flood-control and whitewater features. Plus, if you forget your nose plugs (which you'll want for water-quality issues), you can head to REI right next store.

### St. Vrain River, Lyons

The Lyons course was remodeled in 2006, with plenty of rocks to choose from local quarries. Hit the newly improved Black Bear and October holes for a solid sousing, and swing by June 10-12 for the Lyons Outdoor Games, featuring events,

competitions, bands and Dale's Pale Ale.

### Boulder Creek, Boulder

Long a haven for inner-tubers, Boulder Creek became Graceland for kayakers in 1990 with the building of a whitewater park at Eben G. Fine Park. Continue down toward the library and you'll see park-designer Gary Lacy's house on the right. Hit it May 28-30 and enjoy the 24th Annual Boulder Creek Festival between 9th and 14th streets, featuring 12 event areas and more than 500 vendors.

—E.B.



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