

Parks & Recreation

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL RECREATION AND PARK ASSOCIATION

A Sporting Shift

New trends in adult sports require dynamic planning by park and recreation agencies **Page 48**



National Recreation
and Park Association

Moving Pictures



Telling Stories

Park and recreation agencies harness the power of video to market and inform

By William Lebzelter

Clear Creek Canyon, west of Golden, Colorado, is a spectacular place for recreation and sightseeing. Bighorn sheep cleave to steep canyon walls, flecks of gold glisten in miners' pans and all the colors of rainbow trout draw anglers to the water's edge.

However, for all the attractions for recreation in the canyon, the creek shorelines are steep and thickly vegetated in areas, the trail system is limited, and creek crossings are few and far between.

With the goal of providing safer, more enjoyable experiences, Jefferson County (Jeffco) Open Space and Clear Creek County Open Space partnered on a grant application to build a six-mile paved creekside trail. The application process culminated in a presentation to the Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) Advisory Committee, which distributes Conservation Trust Fund/Colorado

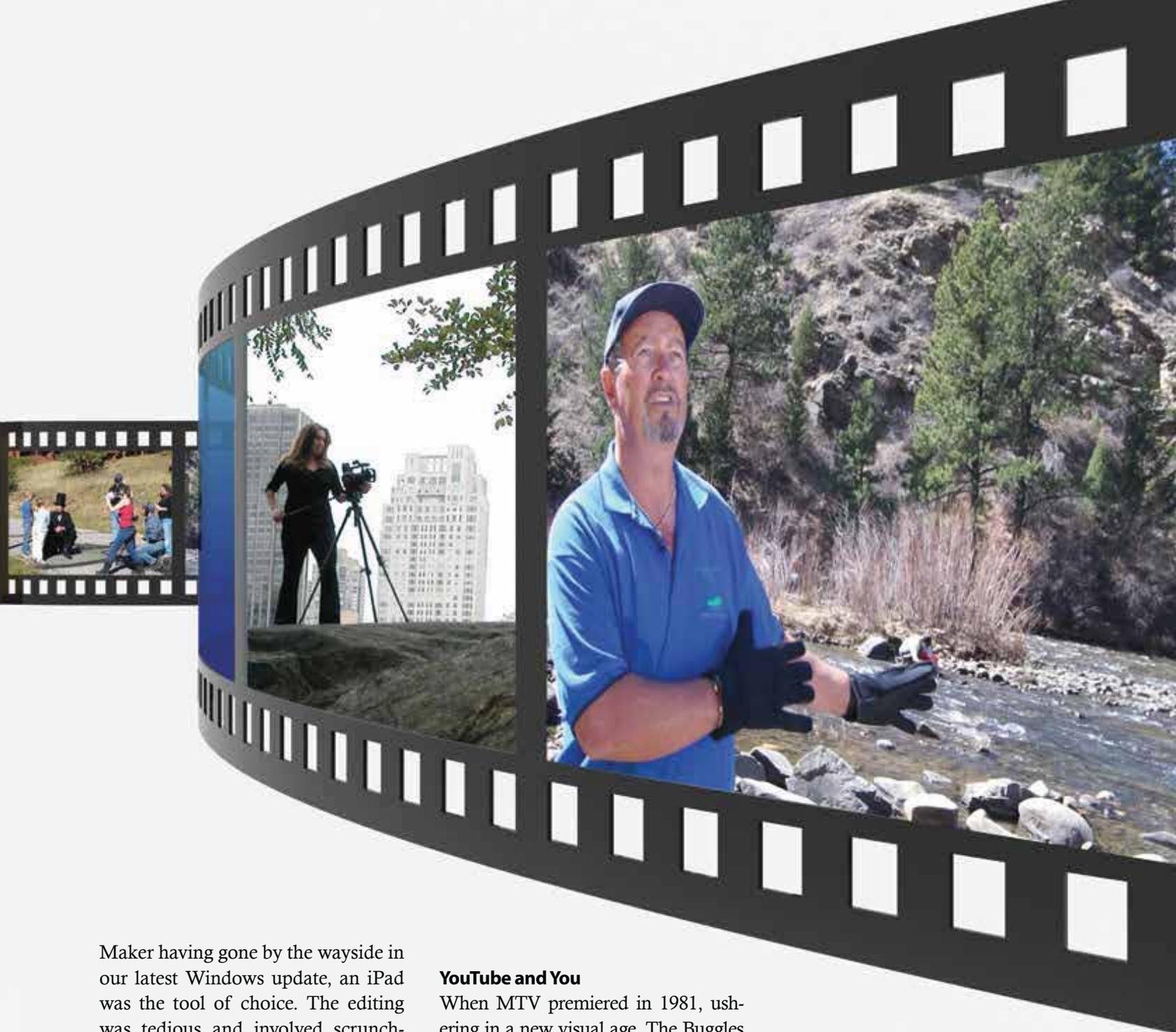
Lottery dollars for projects across the state.

In advance, planner Scot Grossman had prepared a dynamic Google Earth tour of the canyon, from one end to the other, showing the proposed trail alignment. Tom Hoby, director of Jeffco Parks and Open Space, is a strong believer in the power of pictures, moving and still, to inspire and compel. Two weeks before the presentation, Hoby re-

quested that the department's communications team produce a video of representatives from supporting recreation groups testifying to the trail's value.

Our allies answered the call. We arranged for two days of interviews in the canyon with seven subjects. Colleague Bob Eriksson and I took off with our tools — an HD-SLR camera, a tripod, a lapel microphone and a shade to reduce harsh shadows of the Colorado sun on subjects' faces. We applied techniques learned from our video-savvy boss, Thea Rock, such as setting interview subjects off center to create a more interesting view and having them speak slightly off camera.

After enthusiastic interviews came the editing. With Windows Movie-



Maker having gone by the wayside in our latest Windows update, an iPad was the tool of choice. The editing was tedious and involved scrunching interviews down to the crispest soundbites and setting them to a 99-percent downloaded soundtrack. However, the effort was worth it.

The virtual tour of the canyon played first, followed by the testimonial video (<http://bit.ly/1afjhQy>), capped by a montage of canyon images put together by trails specialist and photojournalist Chris Barker — the guts of the project, plus need for the project, plus the glory of the canyon. On top of years of planning and partnership coordination, this formula helped to secure a \$4.6 million grant for both counties.

YouTube and You

When MTV premiered in 1981, ushering in a new visual age, The Buggles sang, “Video Killed the Radio Star.” In the YouTube era, video can carry your cause far.

With encounters between coyotes and citizens ever-increasing throughout the Denver metro area, the time had come for a more efficient, effective way to educate the public about *Canis latrans*. Mary Ann Bonnell, natural resources superintendent for the City of Aurora’s Open Space and Natural Resources Division, fielded approximately 600 calls about how to handle coyotes when she conceived the idea of a video.

“We wanted to say to folks, ‘Here’s what to do when you see a coyote,’” Bonnell says. “When I looked online, a lot [of what] was out there were PSAs that were long and kind of preachy. We wanted to take a lot of common misconceptions and turn them on their ear.”

Enter Tim and Kris O’Shea, Denver area comedians. With grant funding from Adams County and the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District, Bonnell hired the husband and wife team. “It was really cool to engage these improv comedians, because they saw coy-

otes when they walked with their cor-gis and they didn't know what to do," Bonnell says.

A brainstorming session helped to fuel Bonnell's script. The O'Sheas produced the video and played a variety of characters in need of a clue or two about hazing coyotes. All the bumbling *how not to's* make the *how to's* more memorable.

In the YouTube era, video can carry your cause far.

Since its debut in April 2013, "How to Haze a Coyote" (<http://bit.ly/1g-6FvR>) has captured more than 5,600 views on YouTube. A research biologist said Bonnell did more for the cause of human-coyote conflict through the eight-minute video than 50 years of research at his agency.

In a New York Minute

In hindsight, Bonnell would have made the video shorter, in keeping with YouTube-habituated attention spans. According to the Pew Research Journalism Project, the most popular YouTube videos average two minutes, one second.

Cara McLeod, marketing communications coordinator for the City of Raleigh, North Carolina's Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources Department, swears by the power of YouTube and short videos. "No more than two minutes," she says. "A minute gets us the most views."

The agency's most-viewed video (<http://bit.ly/1cxfSRm>) runs just

one minute and 15 seconds long. McLeod did it low budget, filming it on a Flip Video camera mounted to a tripod without the use of an external microphone, and also edited it on the camera.

On the title slide, "Marsh Creek Skate Park" is displayed in an edgy font set to a bass riff. A staff member speaks on camera about the park's grand opening, then dynamic footage of young skateboarders navigating the new park's dips and swells plays as he outlines the safety requirements of park use.

Since 2009, the video has generated more than 7,200 views. By show-

ing skateboarders enjoying their new park, the video strikes a chord universal with loyal park visitors. McLeod distills it as, "This park makes a difference in my life."

New York City Parks and Recreation condenses the sentiment to "It's My Park," a beloved, long-running video series. Staff producer Adrian Sas has featured about 400 parks, with plans to capture what people love about more than 1,700 city parks spread across five boroughs.

Around 2005, the New York City-owned broadcast station nyctv needed more content relevant to New Yorkers. "It's My Park" was born, with Sas its director, editor, camera operator and interviewer since the start.

The TV show follows a magazine format, with each episode a collection of five park videos four to five minutes long. In recent years, Sas has crystallized each episode into the "It's My Park Minute" for between TV shows and YouTube.

"We intended them for the viewer with shorter attention spans," she says. "Sometimes they're played in taxicabs. That's really an unsuspecting audience."

Her most memorable experience was filming a moonlight kayaking trip on the East River. While Sas chugged along as a passenger in a rowboat with an outboard motor, she filmed the voyage from Queens to the Brooklyn Bridge. A brightly lit Pepsi-Cola sign adds dramatic effect, reddening the rippling waters and casting the kayakers in silhouette (<http://bit.ly/19s3iyr>).

Viewers draw their own meaning. "Hopefully they say, 'I didn't know I could do that,'" Sas says. "Or when [an episode covers] a park they know about, sometimes they don't know about a program. Or they take even more pride in their park when it's on YouTube or on TV."

Marketing the Park and Recreation Story

Many park and recreation professionals have plenty of compelling stories that illustrate the importance of the work they do in their communities, but they aren't sure of how to best spread the word. Effective storytelling and marketing, however, can help increase participation from your community, encourage better funding from your municipal budget, make your agency more competitive for grant applications and more.

At the 2014 Congress and Exposition in Charlotte, North Carolina, you can attend an education session titled "Marketing the Park and Recreation Story" that will help you learn how to best leverage the work you're already doing for improved returns. William Lebzelter, the author of this article, will join Peter Magnuson, NRPA's director of marketing, and Danielle Taylor, *Park & Recreation Magazine's* senior editor, with other panelists to share strategies and techniques on video marketing, email marketing, branding, editorial coverage and other methods to increase your agency's exposure. Check www.nrpa.org/Congress2014 for updates on a date and time.

How Accessible Is It?

Accessible trails are featured in a City of Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks series starring and edited by Topher Downham, an outreach coordinator for the agency who uses his quadriplegia to highlight recreation opportunities for people with disabilities. The videos are closed-captioned, and some are in Spanish.

As Downham is seen powering his wheelchair, his voiceover conveys the percent of cross-slope and grade, the amount of shade and terrain type, and he anticipates such concerns as how big the lip is to get up on a bridge.

Downham highlights such features as the lake with wheelchair-accessible pier at Teller Farm (<http://bit.ly/1cCHnJf>). He simulates catching a “big one” on the line before hauling out a lightweight fish made of paper. “We tried to do it in a lighthearted way, because no one wants to watch a serious video for very long,” he says.

The series is rooted in the healing power of nature. “When I broke my neck 18 years ago, I found one of the best things for convalescence was getting out on the trail and realizing that I wasn’t stuck in my house,” he says. “I could still be on the trail, camp, fish.

“A lot of times in the first couple of years, I forced myself to go for a hike. About halfway down the trail, I’d feel better taking everything in — the birds chirping, the water going by, little animals playing in the trees. That was one of the catalysts for me wanting to do this.”

Just as Downham motivates others with disabilities to get out and explore, he encourages other park and recreation agencies to tap the power of video.

“Anybody can learn to do it,” he says. 

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Marketing Speed Session Encourages Video Creativity for Big Payoff

In her role as administrative manager for the Town of Breckenridge, Colorado’s Recreation Department, Jenise Jensen wears many hats — “everything from personnel support to systems and strategies to marketing,” she says. Three years ago, Jensen was tasked with creating a highly effective marketing campaign to promote Black Friday discounts at her facility. That effort was so successful, Jensen was encouraged to share the idea with dozens of NRPA members during the 2013 Congress and Exposition held in Houston, Texas.

Last year, NRPA first introduced speed sessions: quick, lively and innovative 20-minute classes designed to energize and inspire conference attendees. Jensen’s speed session, “Want to Make \$100K Online on Black Friday? Here’s How,” encouraged park professionals to pull out all the stops when it comes to creatively marketing the opportunities offered in their respective locales. She outlined her organization’s campaign — featuring aliens who traverse the universe just to take advantage of Breckenridge Recreation’s Black Friday discounts — which in its first year netted almost \$100,000. She used



costumed actors, developed a cartoon series and leveraged appearances on local television stations to reach as many Breckenridge residents as possible.

Jensen emphasized, “Be creative. There are a lot of things you can do that don’t cost a lot or any money to advertise your promotion: websites, government TV stations, appearances on local morning shows.... There are a lot of ways to advertise without spending money.”

Michelle Nesrsta, recreation manager with the City of Alvin, Texas, took that message to heart in creating a Black Friday promotion for her department. Assisted by a handful of coworkers, Nesrsta came up with a western bandit-style character named Alvin P. Recreation, whose sneaky manipulation of class and sports team registration fees meant big savings for the citizens of Alvin. The team created a YouTube video, printed flyers and promoted the campaign on Facebook. “People loved it,” says Nesrsta. “We got a lot of positive feedback — I think Alvin P. Recreation was definitely the right character for the job.”

Although Nesrsta’s department didn’t see the sort of revenue numbers Jensen enjoyed, she believes simply getting on residents’ radar will do much to boost citizen participation in 2014 classes and programs. “When [our Black Friday promotion] comes out this year, people will know what it’s about and can prepare for it,” she says.

Whether measured in actual dollars or registration numbers, both Jensen and Nesrsta say notable results can be achieved with a bit of creativity, and it doesn’t have to cost a fortune to make a big impact. “Word of mouth is so much stronger and better than [any other promotion] I can do,” says Nesrsta. “If I get just a few people who really enjoy what we’re offering, our classes will double in size because people will talk about it.”

NRPA is happy to announce the return of our Speed Session class experiences at our 2014 Congress and Exposition, held October 14–16 in Charlotte, North Carolina, and we want your input on which sessions to include! Go to www.nrpa.org/Congress2014 to view a list of submitted Speed Session proposals and vote on your favorite. The most popular speed sessions will be included in the 2014 Congress agenda.

— Samantha Bartram, Associate Editor of Parks & Recreation Magazine