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## CC grads paddling the length of the Colorado River

Report will focus on the watershed

November 27, 2011 3:50 PM

KRISTINA IODICE

THE GAZETTE

:  
State of the Rockies

The final two events of the Colorado College speaker series start at 7 p.m. in the Colorado College Gates Common Room, Palmer Hall, 1025 N. Cascade Ave.

• Monday, Dec. 5 – “The Colorado River Basin and Climate: Perfect Storm for the 21st Century?” by Stephen Saunders, president of the Rocky Mountain Climate Organization, and Jeff Lukas with the Western Water Assessment, and moderated by Beth Conover, editor of “How the West Was Warmed.”

• Monday, Jan. 30, 2012 – “Unheard Voices of the Colorado River Basin: Bringing Mexico and the Native American Tribes to the Table” by Bidtah Becker with the Water Rights Unit of the Navajo Nation Department of Justice and Osvel Hinojosa, director of the Pronatura Noroeste’s Water and Wetlands Program.

The 2011 Report Card will be presented at the conference April 4-6 at Colorado College,

Two recent Colorado College graduates are spending part of the winter paddling the length of the Colorado River watershed — from high in Wyoming’s Wind River Range down to the delta and the Sea of Cortez in Mexico.

But riding the water, waking up to an inquisitive moose, hiking and hauling the kayaks at times, while recording piles of information of the journey is only one part of Colorado College’s vast State of the Rockies project.

Field researchers Will Stauffer-Norris and Zak Podmore, 2011 CC graduates who worked on the Rockies program while they were students, left on their long journey in late October and it won’t end until January.

“We have a really good opportunity to make people aware of all the issues surrounding the river,” Stauffer-Norris said before leaving. “We’re going to try and show people the whole watershed.”

That’s because this year, State of the Rockies is diving into the Colorado River.

Each year, a small group of undergraduate students manage the project on top of their classes. As in preceding years, this year’s title suggests the varied approaches undertaken by the annual endeavor: “The Colorado River: Agenda for Use, Restoration and Sustainability as if the Next Generation Counts.”

“The basin is more than just the blue stream of the river,” said Walter Hecox, CC professor in the environmental



enlarge

Courtesy Colorado College  
Will Stauffer-Norris, left, and Zak Podmore, right (red helmet), south of Pinedale, Wyo., in southwest Wyoming in late October.

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program and faculty advisor to the annual project.

Hecox helped build State of the Rockies from its start nine years ago.

“It has gone places I hadn’t expected,” he said. “It’s re-establishing our roots in the eight-state Rocky Mountain region.”

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The Colorado River topic was selected last year and starting in the fall, students and others attended State of the Rockies speaker series for the intellectual stimulation, Hecox said. The project culminates at a three day conference in April when the 2012 report card will be presented amid additional speakers and presentations.

“They come ready to learn,” he said, adding that the project covers complicated issues that directly impact those living in Colorado, and other states. “We’ve touched a lot of people in a lot of places.”

It is past time to focus on the river, Hecox said.

“We have a crisis,” he said, claiming that many people don’t understand the fragility of the river and everything connected to it.

The annual project fits perfectly with Colorado College, as it is training the next generation of managers, he said.

Although he advises the group, the project is driven by undergraduates. Five students selected to work as a team tackles a long list of research topics and field trips.

“We try to put together the best group of people we can to best cover the topic,” said program coordinator Brendan Boepple. He will graduate in May, and it’s his second year working on the project.

The students bring backgrounds in physics, environmental policy and science, global health, hydrology and law.

“It gives you an experience you can’t get as an undergraduate anywhere else,” Boepple said, adding that he has become more knowledgeable about the region through his work.

Hecox said a big part of the project is educating people.

“Water is an almost everyday discussion,” he said, and the different states and users of the Colorado River are on a collision course.

“Some would refer to it as a water pipeline and not see its other values,” Boepple said. “The same water you ski on in Vail is supplying cities — Las Vegas, Los Angeles and others — with drinking water.”

Water managers and other officials are aging and leaving the work force, he said, so the next generation will be left to figure out ways to sustainably tap the resource.

Additional perspectives are coming in from along the river. Stauffer-Norris and Podmore send in regular updates via blogs, photos and social media updates.

“The lifeblood of the Southwest dries up in the desert of Mexico,” Stauffer-Norris said, adding that when planning the trip, he wanted to add a personal narrative to the project and not just another report.

He said that sharing a journey along the Colorado River and sharing conversations with people along the way provides a different perspective of the river, and the problems on the horizon.

“It is an iconic symbol of the beauty of the West,” Hecox said. “We better take care of it.”

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