

Crystal Clear

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Watchdog for Colorado's
Crystal Valley
since 1972.*

Crystal
Valley
Environmental
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Association



Photo by Jacob Schmidt

CVEPA Visits Colorado Stone Quarries

After almost a year of discussion, Colorado Stone Quarries (CSQ) hosted three CVEPA Board members on a tour that highlighted the operations of the Pride of America mine and the progress of their Yule Creek restoration project.

Readers will recall the 2018 unpermitted diversion of approximately 1600 linear feet of Yule Creek by Red Granite in order to create a new road to enable surface mining of Franklin Ridge. The old creek was filled with 97,000 cubic yards of waste rock destroying its ecological functions. Nearly a year later, a 5500 gallon diesel spill from above ground fuel tanks on the ridge ran in close proximity to the new alignment.

After consultation with stream ecologists, the CVEPA Board reluctantly determined that it would not be advisable to return Yule Creek to its historic channel. Disturbing the area would have undermined the efforts to contain the fuel spill. (<https://cvepa.org/yule-creek-marble-quarry>)

CVEPA tirelessly advocated with the Army Corps of Engineers to require restoration of habitat and riparian functions, and recommended that “the quarry contract with a qualified and independent organization...to ensure the ecological functionality is restored to the same quality as undisturbed upstream reference sites within the Raggeds Wilderness.”

CVEPA made that recommendation four years ago, so it was with tremendous curiosity that CVEPA Board Members John Armstrong, Suzy Meredith-Orr and Dale Will accepted CSQ’s invitation for a guided tour of the quarry site.

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Quarry, continued

During a three hour visit on September 4, Katie Todt, Senior Consultant at Lewicki and Associates, Giuseppe Telara, CSQ General Manager, Daniel Penfield, CSQ Safety Manager, and Stefano Mazzucchelli, CSQ Quarry Master, highlighted their work up County Road 3C at Mud Gulch, at the public trail at the quarry entrance, at the realigned Yule Creek, and finally at the massive Lincoln gallery in Portal #4.

Many will recall the vast, peaceful portal that housed the historic Washington Gallery, named after its contributions to famous monuments in our nation's capital, as their first exposure to a marble quarry. Years ago, visitors could hike up a narrow trail to the portal, assisted by a thin rope on one side, to view the towering space. The only thing protecting them from tipping into its cold depths was a flimsy short railing someone had erected across the wide opening. It was more a suggestion of protection than an actual barrier.

Today, that historic relic is no more. Or at least it is now hidden behind a wall of marble blocks and other debris after the Mining Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) ordered it to be closed after a column collapsed rendering it unsafe. It is now used to contain mud and other debris.

Protective efforts have evolved considerably since CSQ's expansion. Visitors are outfitted with hard hats, safety vests, steel toed boots and emergency beacons before entering the quarry. Surprisingly, no masks are needed inside the portals. The air is surprisingly clear and what dust there is is non-toxic.

Eight portals are now cut into the mountain-side and are full of an active din. Portal #4 is home to the Lincoln Gallery, a massive, multi-leveled, underground city with roads, promenades, stairs and balconies. Its wall are angular, perfectly straight, smooth and shiny, a result of the work of sophisticated saws with seven foot blades, called Fantinis. The machinery operates 10 hours a day, four days a week, and it's loud. Around 28 people work at the quarry and the earth movers, diggers, trucks and heavy equipment they operate creates the clamor of a construction site, amplified by 100 as it bounces off the hard surfaces.

Marble dust is sugary, not as fine as powder. A handful is warm after falling off the saw blade. It is practically pure enough to eat. Certainly we do consume it in antacids and toothpaste. Mixed with the water from the saws it creates an unusual mud.

There's a lot of mud at the quarry, and it's all white, a weird sight in this red valley. The saws need water to work, and water is also used in "waterbags." Sealed squares of steel less than an inch thick are slipped into a saw cut and expanded with water to move the blocks apart. The quarry sends the used water through filtering tanks that sit just below the old portal, then reuses it.

The portal, the operation outside of the portal, and the helipad built for emergencies, are massive, fascinating and impressive. Viewing the extensive operation requires one to adjust one's sense of time. The vein is so extensive the quarry that began over one hundred years ago could easily continue to be mined one hundred years into the future. This active operation may someday see our great great grandchildren as visitors.

CSQ was a gracious host to CVEPA. They were kind and accommodating, answered all questions and were happy to share the details of their industry. Giuseppe's and Stephano's passion for the work and their delight in the quality of the marble was infectious. They care about what they do and it was clear they want to do it the right way.

Under Telara's leadership, CSQ has undertaken efforts to regain the public's trust.

After the massive slide in 2021, the Army Corps of Engineers required restoration work at Mud Gulch, about half a mile below the quarry site, as compensatory mitigation for the realignment of Yule Creek. CSQ widened the slide area west of the road, lined it with marble blocks and replaced the culvert to help restore the area and hopefully lessen the impact of future natural occurrences.

CSQ built a trail at the quarry entrance in early 2021 as part of their permit agreement with Gunnison County that allowed them to expand their operations area from 11 acres to 124 acres. The 1/3 of a mile trail is rough and there are no plans to open it. It does not provide a view of

the quarry operations, but does provide great a vista of the valley to the north. The trail ends near the site of the old miners' village where about 60 cabins perched precariously a century ago, and where some of the miners braved the winter to live there year-round.

All of the tour was interesting, but the emotional center of the day was the opportunity to view Yule Creek.

The gash that had been filled with rubble has been cleared and widened. The fill is largely gone. Steel toed mud boots are not the best for slippery marble surfaces, but the view from a steam-side slab showed clear water flowing down stepped bedrock and marble blocks placed at the appropriate height for trout to move upstream. Immature willows dot the

bank, close enough to touch within two years of their planting. Local plant material was used which seems to be ensuring the willows' vigor. Logs are scattered downstream, and lichen is beginning to appear on the east bank.

CVEPA's biggest concern is a large scar left by explorations on the hillside above the east side of Yule Creek. While this activity was apparently within their permitted uses, the hillside above the creek was scraped of its topsoil and it appears that continuous sluffing may continue above. CVEPA advised CSQ of some innovative restoration work done on similar topography by the Independence Pass Foundation. Hopefully, conversation about this will continue.

With Colorado Division of Reclamation Mining & Safety, CSQ widened the new streambed to mimic the width of the natural creek upstream. The creek bed is clearly new, but the work is encouraging. CSQ states that no further disturbance will occur and that Yule Creek will not again be touched.

CSQ is entrusted with the important task of allowing the ecosystem to restore itself and allow Yule Creek to return to the undisturbed waterway it used to be. CVEPA was grateful for the opportunity to view this work and hopes the visit is the start of a new era of cooperation between the quarry and CVEPA.



CVEPA board members and CSQ representatives view the current state of the Yule Creek restoration on September 4, 2024. Photo courtesy of Giuseppe Telara.

President's Letter

John Armstrong

Greetings and aren't we in this valley the fortunate ones? During what has been a lovely summer in Western Colorado with ample moisture, mostly moderate heat, and smoke-free skies we have watched the rest of the nation melting as climate change flexes its capabilities.

It seems that "time passes slowly up here in the mountains" as Wild and Scenic Designation efforts move forward. The Coal Basin Methane Project data has been shared by both the proponent Delta Brick & Climate and CSU. Their findings corroborated with each other. A detailed proposal is imminent and CVEPA continues to monitor the project.

Our valley rejoiced to the passage of the Colorado Outdoor Recreation & Economy (CORE) Act. From the Thompson Divide protection to the Mount Emmons Red Lady withdrawals, our legislators teamed with businesses, recreation groups, sportsmen, ranchers and conservationists to protect over 420,000 acres of public land in Western Colorado. Hallelujah and thanks to everyone who worked so hard to achieve this. On July 1, Senator Bennett toured with Interior Secretary Haaland to celebrate with us in Sopris Park!

Colorado Stone Quarries hosted three CVEPA board members on a fascinating and informative tour this September that highlighted their reclamation of the relocated Yule Creek and a stunning and extensive underground tour. Both entities continue to develop a respectful and productive relationship recognizing both common and varied goals.

CVEPA supports the recently proposed construction of an improved parking area for public land users at the bottom of Daniel's Hill, the gateway to Crystal City and Lead King Basin. ATV/OHV truck and trailer parking is prohibited there. CVEPA remains adamant that the County rescind the exemption for ATV/OHV use on County Road 3 (the Marble Road) in accordance with Colorado State Law.

Late August saw the completion of the river reclamation behind the Marble Airstrip. Gunnison County monitored regulations regarding the scope of work done in the riverbed. All accounts are very favorable.

The Mystic Eagle marble and alabaster mine on the south side of Mount Sopris up Avalanche Creek announced that they will resume underground quarrying of the stone. The mine and owner Robert Congden have a long and contentious history with the U.S. Forest Service and Pitkin County. Find more about CVEPA's involvement here: <https://cvepa.org/alabaster-mine>
Read current articles in local newspapers to learn more AND SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL NEWSPAPERS without which much critical investigative journalism would be lost!

United our voice is heard. Please take this time to renew your CVEPA membership by mail or cvepa.org



Board Changes



After more than 20 years serving on the CVEPA Board of Directors, John Hoffmann has decided to move on to other ventures. We can't thank John enough for his dedication to CVEPA, his tireless work as our treasurer (for seven years!), and his unmatched ability to speak on behalf of protecting this place we love. John advocated for trails in Carbondale, and for the trail from town to the BRB. He was also a big part of the Cow Stomp project up in Coal Basin that used cattle to hoof-in native seed mixtures to stabilize erosion on the steep slopes. John continues his long-term work with the West Elk Byway. He thanks Dorothea Farris and Dale Will for their "incessant poking, prodding and pulling," and believes CVEPA has many successes ahead. We wish you well, John!



We are thrilled to announce that former board member, Bill Jochems, has agreed to join us again. Bill joined CVEPA as a member in 1974, first became a board member in the 80's, chaired it in the 90's, and resigned in 2014. He was instrumental in the fight against the proposed reservoirs (who can forget the "End of the Damn Affair?") and is particularly proud of the work CVEPA did to help clean up Coal Basin after Mid-Continent filed bankruptcy and ceased operations in the 90's. Bill is a long time member of Pitkin County's Healthy Rivers Board. Welcome back, Bill!

Annual Meeting Enjoyed By All

Greg Albrecht

Roughly fifty CVEPA members cozied up in the Inn at Raspberry Ridge in Marble on Sunday, August 25th, for our 52nd annual meeting jubilee. Undeterred by yet another rainy August day and a newly slicked County Road 3, attendees enjoyed the hospitality of cafe operator, Amber McMahon (also Marble Trustee), a rally cry with historical context from an early board member, recognition and appreciation from the Colorado River District, and an update from a Gunnison County commissioner.

The celebratory, tribute paying, and heartwarming tone of the meeting was set from the beginning. As if on cue, 86 year old Karin Lundquist entered the room just after John Armstrong, board president, paid tribute to her fellow founding board members Esther Fogel Neale, Marge Orlosky, Leo Pascal, Lloyd Blue and J.E. DeVilbiss, and introduced the current board. Karin had just pitched her tent at a soggy Bogan Flats campground before heading into town, and truly graced us with her presence. A more elegant display of ushering in the future of the organization with a high regard for its history couldn't have been better planned.

CVEPA honored Bill Jochems as the recipient of the 2024 Founders Award, and Bill provided the room with impassioned story telling of our history and his involvement, alongside others, with the ultimate demise of the proposed Marble Ski Area in 1974. Bill's account of first attending meetings at the Gunnison County seat in order to set the record straight about what was going on over the hill, was enhanced by the presence of current Gunnison County Commissioner, Jonathan Houck at the meeting. Bill also referenced another major CVEPA protection effort that ultimately resulted in the abandonment of long held Placita Dam conditional water rights, and legislation protecting minimum flows in the Crystal. Bill concluded his presentation with a call to action and attention to the prospective Carbondale to Crested Butte bike trail, warning of its profound environmental and aesthetic impacts on the Crystal River Valley.

Zane Kessler, Director of Government Affairs for the Colorado River District, spoke next in his role with the CRD, and also as a citizen of the Crystal River valley (Carbondale). Zane began by acknowledging a previous era in which the River District was not as friendly to the overall objections many have had for the Crystal River. He went on to explain that the District has evolved to be more attentive to appropriate policy for our valley's cherished water source. Zane's credibility is bolstered by his first work in the valley as the Executive Director of the Thompson Divide Coalition. He recognized CVEPA's supportive role and community involvement in the ultimate protection of 250,000 acres in the Thompson Divide, minimally through 2044.

Our keynote speaker, Gunnison County Commissioner, Jonathan Houck, gave perspective for his respect of the environment by pointing out that Gunnison County is one and half times the size of Delaware yet has a total population of only 17,000 (as of 2022). This was framed as a shared source of gratitude for all of this open space, and with an appreciation for grassroots efforts, like CVEPA's, in

helping to provide oversight in a sparsely populated vast area with multiple governing jurisdictions within and adjacent to it. Nine counties share a border with Gunnison. Two of Jonathan's peers were in attendance, Commissioners Francie Jacober and Kelly McNicholas-Kury from Pitkin County. Commissioner Houck focused much of his talk around the Lead King Loop and the proposed parking area at the base of Daniels Hill. He emphasized his zeal for finding middle ground by listening to and working with multiple perspectives and sometimes opposing viewpoints. The County representative wrapped his presentation with welcoming questions.

President John Armstrong concluded the presentations with an interesting and highly relevant story of his recent, multi day river trip on the Main Fork of the Salmon River. John pointed out the pristine, mostly remote stretch of river also runs along multiple private land in- holdings of lodging properties with airstrips and jet boats for transportation. This stretch of the Main Fork has a Wild and Scenic designation. It was an excellent illustration of the flexibility Wild and Scenic designation can accomplish. John believes our patience for accommodating a vocal minority of private interests is running thin. Wild and Scenic designations for relevant stretches of the Crystal can

be accomplished with attention to local concerns.

Attendees enjoyed BBQ from Slo Groovin once again this year and the rain cleared out in time to be served outside. Constituents were able to take Jonathan up on his offer to field questions. One CVEPA member in particular held his feet to the fire around the issue of allowing the ATV/OHV operations exemption on Highway 3. Our host, and Marble Trustee, Amber McMahon, sat with Commissioner Houck to address the safety and environmental hazard that is the newly resurfaced County Road 3 from 133 to Marble. As

of the writing of this article mitigation of the *unimproved* road is taking place.

The conclusion of speakers also provided some fun opportunities for fellowship, socializing, and fresh pastries offered from the Raspberry Cafe. Members were also able to check out the new guide book, "Get Out There: Crystal River Valley Wildflowers" first published in June. Gregory Staple, a former energy lawyer and entrepreneur, trained naturalist and enthusiastic photographer, took it upon himself to document natural phenomena for years before compiling his research into an educational guide book with hundreds of original photographs.

The meeting was a wonderful representation of the essence of CVEPA, its members and its mission. No environmental issue is too large (Wild and Scenic) or small (county road bungling) for CVEPA and its collaborators to make a difference. The passion of our members was clear as was the palatable camaraderie while sharing a common love for this place and its environment. The good vibes were enhanced all the more under warm, comfy shelter as persistent rain continued nourishing the Crystal River Valley and all of its inhabitants.



Who Was Nick Patsantaros?

John Armstrong

The hundred year old iron railroad bridge at Satank over the Roaring Fork River will be closed for several months to conduct much needed repairs. This necessitates closing and re-routing the popular Rio Grande Trail during high season and funneling all bicycle traffic through bustling downtown Satank. A welcome benefit to this renovation will be painting over of the extensive graffiti which sullies the eastern face of the bridge. The Crystal Valley Environmental Protection Association offered to mitigate the bridge graffiti several years ago. Tagging (spray painting) public buildings, carving into soft desert sandstone and covering signs with insipid stickers all seem an insult.

Is there a point when vandalism becomes artifact? Reflecting back on my high country meanders, I treasure the shepherds' tree carvings the most. Throughout the Boreal forest on Colorado's Western Slope one can still find the artistic and now historic carvings of a bygone era in the stretched out bark of aged aspen trees. These carvings are not the stock blocky initials of teenagers who wandered into the forest on the old jeep trails. The antique engravings, some more than 75 years old, use cursive scroll with creative images to tell a story to an audience they would never meet. There is a plethora of these unique trees in the verdant, shady aspen groves at 9,000 feet elevation. Many a poet has waxed romantic about the watchful "eyes" of the aspen forest. (The oculus being the point where the branch breaks away from the trunk.) These trees also have a silent narrative to share.

The groves of aspen trees became the novel of the men who guarded the large bands of domestic sheep that grazed United States Forest Service Lands through a brokered grazing system for over 100 years. Under this system a flock of "domestics," numbering in the hundreds or thousands of "ewe/lamb units," roamed the highlands of our national forests from June into September. The animals fattened on the protein rich high country grasses and forbs. These flocks were watched over by men who lived, summer-long, on the high range in distinctive round roofed, custom made wagons that were towed into the mountains each season. Sheep ranchers hired a variety of immigrant workers for this work. Basque shepherds from Spain's Pyrenees Mountains were the most well know and perhaps greatest in number. On our Western Slope, New Mexican men of Spanish descent were most common. Some Mexican and even Greek immigrants were also employed.

One day in August 1973 my neighbor in Marble Valley came by and proposed that we take an evening jeep ride into what I will only refer to as the Crystal River Highlands. My girlfriend and I hopped in the jeep. After climbing a distance, we followed a lightly used track into an intimate and lush valley fed by a small spring. As we started to turn around we noticed the small shepherd's wagon

parked at the edge of the trees, smoke wisping out the chimney. A short, grey bearded man came out and waved us over. He was clearly thrilled to have unexpected company in the wilds of the Crystal Valley. Despite the language barrier he invited us into his tiny abode to share his dinner.

On the petite stove he had a large pot of savory mutton stew and to our amazement he pulled out a loaf of hot bread from the oven! We ate well and enjoyed each other's company, communicating through the international language...food. He said he was from Greece and produced a handful of photographs of his family and hometown for which he clearly longed. The food was delicious and the setting became even more enchanted as orange streaked the evening sky. We never saw each other again but I will savor the magic of that August evening the rest of my life.

I have since found hundreds of shepherd's carvings throughout Western Colorado, always on aspen trees, always in the lush transition zone around 9,000 feet. The Trujillos, Santos, Carillo the list goes on and on. The villages of El Rito, Ojo Caliente, Picuris, El Cajon evoke places distant and perhaps exotic. Many trees have accompanying photographs. The images are bears, horses, flowers, hummingbirds but very often women. Women were not scarce in these high mountains, they were non-existent! The etchings were of voluptuous women and were often ribald renderings.

I was comparing my historical fascination with shepherd's carvings with a friend, a retired teacher from a CRMS. He recounted the spring interim project he directed decades ago when the students compiled a scrapbook and narrative of the shepherd's carvings of the Crystal Valley. He was so pleased with the comprehensive collection of something so special to our local environment. When the compilation reached the headmaster and he saw the "tree pornography" the project was immediately squashed! We both laughed long and hard at the censorship but also lamented that this body of work was lost forever.

My favorite carving of all has been one I found on a high ridge with a panoramic view of the valley. It had a bearded caricature with an odd fez-like hat on. It read Nikos Patsantoras "Greek Boy," dated 1969. There were so few Greeks in our Spanish dominated shepherd culture that I will always wonder if Nikos was our lonesome, gracious host that August night in the Crystal Highlands.

Throughout the years these aspen trees have grown and more than doubled in size. Many of the etchings have stretched out to become unreadable, many trees have fallen down. Dates on the trees go back into the late 1930s! There is still a story being told in these aspen groves. The narrative harkens back to a time much simpler, not without hardship but rich in the romance of bygone era. The trees have a story to tell but you must have the will to listen.



CVEPA Enters the Digital Age

It wasn't so long ago that CVEPA began asking for your email addresses and gee did we think that was sophisticated. Well hold on to your hiking cap because now we're asking you to check us out on social media! We're excited to announce that the Crystal Valley Environmental Protection Agency is expanding our online presence! Connect with us on Facebook [here](#) to stay up-to-date on events, volunteer opportunities, and on our efforts to protect the Crystal Valley. Follow us today and help us spread the word about protecting and preserving the Crystal Valley's natural environment and its scenic resources.

Just click here, or focus your smart phone's camera here to view our Facebook page. Hope you'll "like" us!



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