

Proposed CFI Statement on Peak Names

“The names of geographic features in the United States are a valuable reflection of the history of our Nation and its changing face.” So reads the opening sentence to the Board of Geographic Names document outlining its principles, policies and procedures. The current controversy over renaming Mount Evans—and a prior effort in 2011 to rename Kit Carson Mountain—illustrates starkly the many questions surrounding which names we use, which traditional names we ignore, who had the power to choose the officially recognized names, and how history looks upon people after whom peaks were named with the passage of time and upon closer scrutiny.

Though Colorado has been inhabited for thousands of years, most peaks bear names generally bestowed upon them by members of the geographical survey parties that explored the area in the 1800s and early 1900s during the country’s period of rapid western expansion. Half of Colorado’s 58 named peaks above 14,000 feet in elevation are named after people. Many were politicians—some local, others national. Some 14ers were named for people who explored them or lived nearby, while others honored prominent people nationally who had never set foot in Colorado. Significantly, not one 14er carries a name traditionally used by the indigenous inhabitants, though all these highpoints would have been named.

Most visitors to the peaks, as well as the public at large, know little about the people after whom many peaks are named, though are inextricably connected to these names through their experiences and memories. Eliminating a peak name and replacing it with another, even when justified, will be confusing to many and controversial to some. CFI appreciates the efforts of the Colorado Geographic Naming Advisory Board for tackling this timely, needed, yet thorny issue.

CFI proposes considering an additive approach to peak naming that might help broaden the public’s understanding and provide opportunities for greater cultural awareness. Dual naming is frequently employed in Australia and New Zealand to recognize indigenous names without dispensing entirely with more commonly used settler names. The high point in New Zealand is referred to as Aoraki/Mount Cook, while the peak behind Hobart, Tasmania is called Kunanyi/Mount Wellington. Such an approach could, for example, give prominence to the traditional name of one of the four sacred mountains of the Navajo Nation through the use of the name Sisnaajini/Blanca Peak. Other peaks could similarly be dual named to provide more historically accurate and inclusive names for these prominent features.

Alternately, if renaming a peak that has a name that is viewed as offensive proves too problematic, naming an adjacent peak to provide historical context might help in increasing awareness and understanding. For example, naming the western sub-summit of Mount Evans after Black Kettle to honor the Southern Cheyenne leader who negotiated for peace before and after the Sand Creek Massacre would provide an important historical counterpoint to Territorial Governor John Evans.

Colorado Fourteeners Initiative is a hands-on trail stewardship, vegetation restoration and hiker education organization. Our principal mission is to protect the rare and fragile alpine tundra ecosystems found on Colorado’s 14,000-foot peaks. Regardless of a mountain’s official name, CFI will continue to protect the natural integrity of these high peaks. CFI’s sustainable trail construction efforts protect rare plants and habitat for animals that are unique in the United States and, in some cases, the world, while allowing hundreds of thousands of hikers to responsibly challenge themselves physically and experience up close these “approachable Everests.”