2011 ASLA Design Awards

Mud Lake Open Space Restoration
Merit Award
Boulder County Parks and Open Space

Environmental Restoration and Reclamation
PROJECT NAME                      Mud Lake Open Space Restoration
PROJECT LOCATION                  Boulder County, north of Nederland, Colorado

QUICK PROJECT SUMMARY
In 2004, Boulder County Parks & Open Space initiated a public process to transform a recently-acquired, neglected mountain property into a healthy montane open space featuring an outstanding all-season trail system. As part of this effort, a maze of heavily-used mining roads and social trails were transformed into a cohesive, sustainable trail system featuring three miles of natural surface trails. Over 9,500 feet of roads and social trails were restored with the help of over 140 volunteers. Substantial public facilitation and volunteer engagement were critical to the success of this restoration project, which was implemented concurrently with trail construction to garner support from social trail users. Today, all closures have been successfully revegetated, and the trail system is popular with locals and visitors for hiking, biking, horse riding, skiing, and snowshoeing.

PURPOSE OF PROJECT
This project was developed to heal the scars left from a century of mining and unmanaged recreation on a mountain property that still possessed significant aesthetic and natural resources. The dense maze of mining roads and social trails were impairing the health of the property (e.g. habitat fragmentation, loss of vegetation, and soil erosion) and causing visitors to become disoriented. By closing and restoring the roads and trails that did not support recreational objectives, the health of the property and the experience of trail users could be improved. The solution that was developed found synergy in advancing the sometimes-competing goals of habitat preservation and recreational development. As a result, over 9,500 feet of roads and trails were restored, and three miles of natural surface trails were built with broad support from the communities of Nederland and Boulder County.

Restoration tasks included: closing and marking of mine hazards; construction of water structures to reduce erosion; scarification and re-contouring of closed roads and trails; seeding and mulching; transplanting of tree seedlings; placement of downed trees and slash; and fencing and signs to discourage reuse of closures.

ROLE OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT/ENTRANT vs. OTHER PARTICIPANTS
The Landscape Architect was the overall project manager for the planning and execution of all recreational development and restoration activities over a three year period. Specific tasks pertinent to the restoration effort include:
1. GPS mapping of existing roads, trails, and special features;
2. Development of a Road and Trail Closure Plan;
3. Coordination with Plant Ecologists for specific restoration treatments;
4. Phasing of restoration to coordinate with trail construction;
5. Construction observation for all restoration and development activities;
6. Planning, organization, and leadership of volunteer projects (over 140 people); and
7. Planning, organization, and leadership of a Department All-Staff Workday (75 people).
Other participants involved with this restoration project included plant ecologists, a cultural resource specialist, trails technicians, the Colorado Mined Lands Reclamation Bureau (now the Division of Reclamation and Mine Safety), Wildlands Restoration Volunteers, and the Boulder Off-Road Alliance (now known as the Boulder Mountain Bike Alliance). These individuals and organizations performed environmental and cultural resource investigations, provided specific restoration prescriptions of individual road/trail closures, performed mine closures, and executed the restoration activities.

SPECIAL FACTORS

1. The success of this restoration project was dependent on providing a better recreational experience than that offered on the mining roads and social trails proposed to be closed. The Landscape Architect understood that the environmental and recreational objectives were complementary, and collectively advanced both objectives through careful design and coordinated execution. This allowed for the successful closure and restoration of almost two miles of unplanned, damaging social trails while expanding and improving recreational opportunities. Either effort without the other would have been unsuccessful.

2. The Mud Lake property was heavily used for recreation during the years it was owned by an absentee landowner. After the County acquired the property, these users wished to keep the property as it was, with no improvements to accommodate the increased volume of visitors and no closures to meet agency environmental objectives. The Landscape Architect’s public facilitation and consensus-building skills were vital to address neighborhood concerns while meeting the wishes of County residents who purchased the property as open space for public enjoyment.

3. To further build community support for the new trail system and the closure of some popular roads and trails, the County involved many community groups to simultaneously build the trails and complete the restoration work. More than 140 volunteers from Wildlands Restoration Volunteers, Boulder Off-Road Alliance, and other groups joined the Boulder County Youth Corps and County staff to build the three mile trail system and close almost two miles of roads and trails. The Landscape Architect orchestrated the construction and restoration activities to complete the restoration and construction tasks in the most effective manner possible.

SIGNIFICANCE

The Landscape Architect provided the vision and technical skills for meeting the community’s recreational aspirations on the property while achieving the agency’s goals for improving the property’s natural resource values. The Landscape Architect’s diverse skills in public facilitation, trail design, restoration ecology, and project management were required to develop a vision and strategy for implementation that built community support and advanced the agency’s land management objectives.

CONSTRUCTION BUDGET  $51,000 (Estimated, excluding Colorado MLRB mine closures)