

NCAR



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NCAR Involved with Boulder Community

Boulder, Colorado -- The National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) has been in Boulder for 20 years, and its High Altitude Observatory division for 40 years. NCAR is internationally respected for its contributions to the understanding of the atmosphere and the sun. Scientists from around the world flock to the "cliff dwelling" on Table Mesa and spend a few hours to a year or more with NCAR's professional staff or use its unique facilities.

To Boulder and surrounding communities, NCAR is a neighbor rather than an isolated, esoteric, scientific monastery. It is open to the public -- no appointments, no clearances, no visas -- every day of the year. About 50,000 visitors annually take the long, looping trek up the mesa by car, bus, motorbike, pedal bike, roller ski, jogging shoe, hiking boot, and barefoot. Even the local mule deer peek at the staff through the big ground-floor windows.

NCAR has been closely involved in community affairs since the citizens of Boulder voted in 1961 to make a "Blue Line" exception and supply the site with water. Although the "Blue Line" law was devised to protect Boulder's mountain backdrop from development, the citizens decided they could trust NCAR to construct a building that would harmonize with the magnificent Flatirons. Thus I.M. Pei, who since has become recognized as one of the great architects of our time, designed the famous gem on the mesa top.

As agreed to in negotiations with Boulder, NCAR is responsible for maintaining its 400 acres (actually owned by the National Science Foundation) as a nature preserve adjoining the city's mountain parks and greenbelt lands. A marked nature trail, beginning just north of the laboratory building, provides an introduction to the ecology of the region and connects with Boulder's extensive Mesa Trail. It is always freely accessible.

Everybody is welcome to the laboratory itself (see box for hours) for self-guided tours of the exhibit areas where NCAR's research is described. These include an historic coronascope which made several balloon-borne photographic flights above 100,000-foot altitudes, beautiful photographs of

rare meteorological phenomena, a digital readout of Boulder winds, the world's most powerful computer, and other displays, not the least of which is what has been described by architects as "the first post-modernist building."

NCAR's relationships with the community involve considerably more than accessibility and stewardship of the land. On the second floor of the building there is a small gallery set up to display the works of local artists, chosen in a twice-yearly judging process. They are informed by public notice of the time and place of the judging, where a jury of NCAR and community people select artists for the next six monthly showings. Works displayed in the gallery have ranged from traditional Chinese brush paintings, to contemporary acrylics, to quilts, photographs, and batiks.

Why would artists want to show their works on a wall of a scientific laboratory? Partly because they are guaranteed an audience of some 500 staff people and several thousand visitors every month. When their works sell, unlike most galleries, NCAR does not take a commission.

Three or four times a year, NCAR invites local groups to perform in its informal lobby setting. Last month, preceding an awards ceremony and staff holiday party, the Boulder High School Madrigal group, under direction of Fred Stouffer, sang old English madrigals and rounds and traditional Christmas songs. During the previous year, other performances included jazz by the Spike Robinson Quartet and the Charles Eaken Trio (in support of the Colorado Music Festival), Brent Mason and Company (Boulder's contemporary ballet), the University of Colorado Graduate String Quartet, and the Centennial Brass.

NCAR has a small research group working on the societal effects of the Denver brown cloud along the Front Range. The group is developing an "interactive computer model" that combines information on the sources and components of air pollution, its distribution patterns, and decision-making processes necessary to deal with it. The model can be used for decision-making and education. It can quickly evaluate options -- say, a bus fleet versus carpooling -- and display the results of choices in graphic form. When fully developed the model may be used by Front Range communities in determining alternatives in such matters as health effects of air pollution, visibility degradation, air quality standards, and impact of energy use on air pollution.

Since 1961, a Citizen's Advisory Committee has helped NCAR identify possible problems and has served as a sounding board for community issues. As Walter Orr Roberts, NCAR's first director, said: "Our original purpose [for

the Citizen's Advisory Community] included advising NCAR regarding the best manner of carrying out its pledges to the people of Boulder and the State, to preserve the natural areas of the Mesa Trail for recreation and for preservation of its unique plant life and other features of natural beauty.

"And, in fact, we've extended the purposes to include the best stewardship possible for the whole site that is consistent with meeting the needs of our scientific mission. We've consulted on signs, routes for power lines, burying of utilities, etc." The "etc." includes such problems as dogs attacking deer on the property, new construction, road signs, fences, fire prevention, nighttime traffic, and picnic facilities.

Though NCAR's research is global in scope -- including the possible effects of carbon dioxide on our world's climate, examining monsoons in order to understand and predict them, and detailing the processes which form acid rain -- its roots are in the Boulder community.

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B O X

The NCAR building is open to visitors for self-guided tours 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays and 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. weekends and holidays.

From September through May, guided tours are available to school groups by reservation at 10 a.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, and at 1 p.m. Wednesdays. Telephone 494-5151, ext. 262.

From June through August, the public is invited to sign up for guided tours every weekday at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

And the mesa site and marked Mesa Nature Trail are always open to hikers, who are welcome to leave their cars in the parking lot while they enjoy the mountain parklands.

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