Historian Examines Environmental Changes to Colorado High Country
by Janette Ballard

The Colorado high country is a renowned tourist destination with spectacular scenery, ski areas and outdoor activities that attract visitors from around the globe. But before 1945, the region was very little known, very little visited and mostly shunned by vacationers, according to William Philpott, assistant professor in the department of history.

Philpott is a fourth generation Coloradan who grew up on family stories of the Colorado high country, from his grandfather’s boyhood in Cripple Creek in the early 1900s, to his father’s mountain memories of the ‘40s and ‘50s. These stories and his own love of the mountains inspired his new book, *Vacationland: Tourism and Environment in the Colorado High Country*.

*Vacationland* takes a look at post-1945 tourism and recreational consumerism that remade American landscapes, and in the process, reshaped the environmental values of people living, working and vacationing there.

“Before 1945, visitors to the high country had to be willing to drive over narrow, unpaved, winding mountain roads, with steep drop-offs,” said Philpott. “There were not a lot of ‘flatlanders’ who were willing to do that kind of driving. And there was not much incentive to do so.”

“The story I tell in the first half of *Vacationland* is about how the high country became more accessible and more inviting, culminating in the construction of Interstate 70 which put the high country right on the tourists’ main line,” he said.

Besides highway improvements, there were other types of tourist infrastructure including motels, stocked fishing waters, campgrounds, and ski lifts and groomed ski trails, “all of which had the effect of modifying rugged high country landscapes to make them more inviting to large numbers of postwar leisure consumers who were interested in outdoor thrills, but who didn't want too much discomfort or risk,” Philpott added.

People ultimately came not just to vacation in the high country, but to live permanently in or near it. Philpott calls this the “tourist way of life”—choosing where you want to live largely by the same criteria as you would choose where to vacation. This became a major reason for the explosive population growth of Denver and the Front Range after World War II, Philpott said. People wanted to live near the high country “vacationland” so they could go up there on weekends to enjoy the outdoor leisure.

*Vacationland* received the 2014 Spur Award from Western Writers of America for the best book in the category of Western Nonfiction--Contemporary.
Philpott has a PhD in U.S. History from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His teaching and research passions lie in the field of environmental history—the history of people's interaction with the nonhuman world.

“When environmental historians study a place, they ask things like: What drew people to this particular location? How did they go about making their homes and building their communities here? How did they imagine or idealize the environment or the landscape, and how did that shape the ways they used it?”

“These are the kinds of questions at the core of environmental history,” said Philpott. “At its best, I think, the field helps us better understand the lives we live every day, and the places we live in every day. There’s no question that this power to explain the places in Colorado that had intrigued me since childhood was a major reason I was drawn to environmental history.”

Philpott began his teaching career at Illinois State University, but returned to Colorado in 2009 to teach at the University of Denver and to raise his family.

“I love teaching the history of the American West, and since coming to DU, I've loved having the chance to teach the history of Colorado specifically,” he said. “I also love teaching environmental history. I try to teach students, like my mentors taught me, how all sorts of people and places and processes are linked to each other in ways we’re not used to thinking of. And when they suddenly discover those connections—or even better, when they stumble across connections I haven't thought of myself—that is just about the greatest reward for me.”