

MOUNTAIN OUTLAW

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In an effort to bridge the divide, one outdoorsman brings the wild into politics

■ BY AMANDA EGGERT

LUIS BENITEZ HAS ALWAYS TAKEN THE LONG VIEW. He summited Everest when he was 28 years old, a goal he'd set two decades earlier. But these days, the international mountain guide takes a 30,000-foot view from his desk in Denver: from here he envisions how the outdoor industry can save the world.

Benitez landed in this seat in 2015 when Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper appointed him the state's first director of the Office of Outdoor Recreation. Since then, Benitez has hiked, boated, fished and skied with constituents across the state to learn what they need to make Colorado an international symbol of a healthy, balanced lifestyle.

In addition to growing the West's outdoor recreation economy, Benitez focuses on conservation and stewardship, education and workforce training. He's also helped states like Montana and Wyoming with their fledgling efforts to launch similar offices since he believes a robust outdoor rec industry benefits the entire Intermountain West. (Credit where credit's due: Utah established the nation's first Office of Outdoor Recreation in 2013.)

Left: Luis Benitez at Everest Base Camp in 2003, the year he made his first of six successful summits.

PHOTO BY DIDRIK JOHNCK

The onetime Outward Bound leader embraces a shared best-practice philosophy, but Hickenlooper is quick to point out Colorado won't let him go anytime soon. "You other 10 states getting ready to do offices of outdoor recreation: Keep your paws off Benitez!" Hickenlooper said last October during his address at SHIFT, the annual outdoor recreation and conservation conference in Jackson, Wyoming.

Outdoor recreation is a \$646 billion industry, according to SHIFT Director Christian Beckwith, and the country's third largest recipient of consumer spending. In Colorado alone, the outdoor industry generates \$34 billion in consumer spending along with 313,000 jobs and nearly \$5 billion in tax revenue.


Put another way: The outdoor industry is a force. "For the first time, we're being seen as a constituency that politicians actually need to court and go after," Benitez said.

But guiding the path lacing through recreation and conservation isn't for the faint-hearted. Between 2010 and 2015, Colorado was the third fastest-growing state in the U.S.

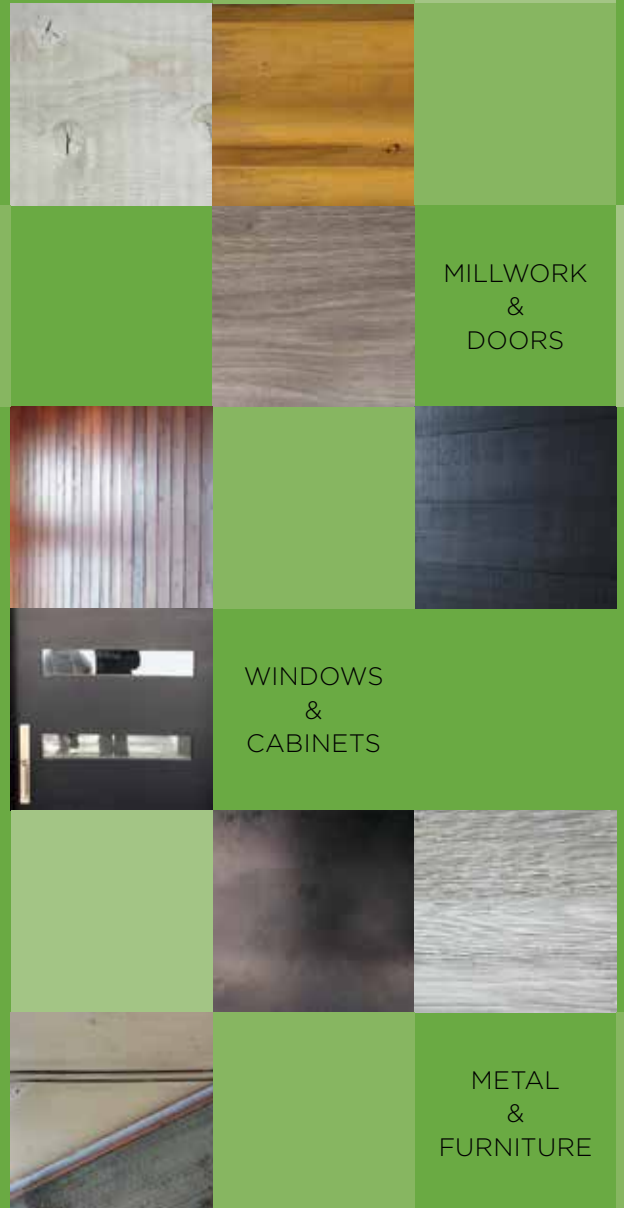
That kind of growth creates friction when it comes to access-versus-conservation. Benitez said emerging technologies like battery-powered, pedal-assisted e-bikes and motorized longboards should be part of the conversation. "If we don't help define that [conservation] ethic for the next generation, they're not going to know why these places are important," he said. "I'm not saying throw the doors open to everything, but we have to stop being so resistant to change."

Benitez still makes time for alpine excursions—he says he's happiest in frigid environs above 10,000 feet where cell phones don't work—just less frequently than years past. He scampers around Colorado's fourteeners when he can and tries to guide one international big-mountain trip a year for nonprofits and foundations he supports to stay sharp.

Apart from that, Benitez uses a high-powered headlamp to cram as much adventuring into the edges of the workday as possible. Some weeks he can only fit in a 4-mile run, but he's OK spending his time on policy.

"This is the expedition now," he said. 

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