San Juan INDEPENDENT
NEWS BEFORE PROFIT

A Winter of Discontent – Behind-the-Scenes Battles at the Ouray Ice Park

By Samantha Tisdel Wright | Ouray


OURAY ICE PARK MAP. CLICK ON IMAGE TO SEE FULL SIZE.

Sunday, March 20, brought the first day of spring, the last day of climbing at the Ouray Ice Park, and a sigh of relief from the folks who are charged with maintaining the miraculous icy engine of Ouray's wintertime economy.

Big picture-wise, it was a successful season. No one fell. No one got hurt. "If you can make it to closing day without an injury, that's something to celebrate," said Ouray Ice Park Inc. board member Lora Slawitschka, who has been around long enough to remember times when that was not the case.

Even so, the 2015-16 season was fraught with behind-the-scenes battles from start to finish. There were dead and dying trees. A freak pipeline blowout. Acid mine drainage and water supply issues. Pissy business owners. Greedy climbers. Increasing pressure to be open despite Mother Nature's failure to cooperate. And a rumor mill hinting at mismanagement that churned nonstop throughout the winter months.

One would think, then, as the season was winding down last month, that the humor among Ice Park insiders would be running as thin as the late-season ice still clinging to the Shithouse Wall.

But no.

A handful of OIPI board members and employees still managed to muster grins as they gathered together on an afternoon in early March at Dick's Chalet, a simple hut perched on the edge of the Uncompahgre Gorge that serves as OIPI headquarters during the winter season.

After spending several hours touring a large group of local business owners and elected officials around the Ice Park in an effort to foster better understanding of what it takes to run the place, they were ready to kick off their crampons, shake out their helmet hair and reflect on the season's ups and downs.

All of them were there because they love the Ice Park: OIPI board president Mike MacLeod – wiry, whip-smart, and a tireless Ice Park ambassador; Jared Coburn, OIPI's second-in-command, who began climbing in the Park as a grad student in the mid-'90s and ended up moving to the area and raising a family here because of it; Ice Park manager Dan Chehayl – a bright and brawny Vermont native with a passion for ice farming and a knack for explaining complicated stuff like the Ice Park's state-of-the-art plumbing system in a way that makes sense; and OIPI administrator and cat-herder extraordinaire Stephanie Griebe, the Ice Park's first and only full-time, year-round employee. In 2014, Griebe happily traded in high heels and business attire for crampons and thermals, and Front Range creature comforts for the dizzying views and rustic decor of Dick's Chalet … where mice had lately been a problem.

As if on cue, a tiny rodent crashed the party, scuttling across a shelf and down the backside of a chair.

"The latest rumor? Mice are taking over the Ice Park," MacLeod quipped without missing a beat. "The Ouray Mice Park!"

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Seemingly nothing has been off-limits – from the structural viability of the concrete anchor pads that OIPI installed along the rim of the Uncompahgre Gorge last fall, to the frequency with which the honey buckets are emptied from the Ice Park's outhouses – with an underlying theme of dissatisfaction concerning the way OIPI is communicating with the public and managing the Park.

Things came to a head at an OIPI board meeting on March 3, where several local business owners took the opportunity to air their disgruntlement. "It was heated," said Slawitschka with characteristic bluntness. "People were pissed, passionate and emotional."

It's all a far cry from the early days at Ouray Ice Park, a quarter century ago. Back then, there was a scrappy sense of cooperation and conspiratorial glee among the people that dreamed up the kooky idea of diverting water from an old city reservoir and a leaky hydroelectric pipeline to form ice falls inside the Uncompahgre Gorge as a way to attract more people to town during the winter season.

"There was a lot of trial and error," recalled Ice Park founding father and former owner of the Victorian Inn, Bill Whitt. "Nobody had done anything like this before. It was a grass roots effort personified."

It was also a pain in the ass.

"We'd run hoses and stuff, and that worked great for half a night, then they'd be frozen solid," Whitt recalled. "So we'd strip the hoses, take them down to the Victorian Inn, put 'em in the hot tub, defrost them, then take them back up and hook them up again."

Miraculously, it worked. The ice started growing. The ice climbers flocked to Ouray. They ate at the Buen Tiempo. They stayed at the Victorian Inn. They bought ice screws and crampons at Ouray Mountain Sports.

Over the years, Whitt and his partner in crime, Gary Wild, fine-tuned their plumbing system, tapping into the City of Ouray's water tank up the hill (with the city's blessing). Wild, an attorney with an engineering background, designed a clever valve system to deliver water more effectively over the lip of the gorge.

That system has continued to evolve and become more and more sophisticated over the years as the park has grown to span about a two-mile stretch of the Uncompahgre Gorge.

"Everyone thought we were mental," Whitt said. "They said it would never make any money and it was the stupidest thing ever. There are still locals that wish we never started it."

But not too many of them.

Today, the world-famous Ouray Ice Park draws about 13,000 visitors each season from across the nation and around the globe, and most Ouray business have grown to depend on those visitors to get them through the winter season.

The stakes are much higher and the pressure much greater and the crowds much larger than in those early days. Ice climbing in Ouray is big business, and the strain is evident on the all-volunteer OIPI board and its handful of paid employees.



A SIGN IN THE SOUTH PARK PORTION OF THE OURAY ICE PARK ALERTED VISITORS OF BEETLE KILL IN THE AREA, AND WARNED THEM AGAINST USING TREES AS ANCHORS. (PHOTO BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT)

BATTLE OF THE BEETLES

The 2015-16 ice farming season got off to an awkward start, due to a number of factors that were beyond Ouray Ice Park Inc.'s control – starting with a beetle epidemic that left thousands of dead white fir trees in the heart of the Ice Park.

The onslaught began several years ago, as drought-stressed white fir trees – the predominant evergreen species in the Upper Uncompahgre River Valley – began succumbing to swarms of ravenous fir engraver beetles.

More and more trees have died each year, scarring the mountainsides with their dead, red corpses. The U.S. Forest Service pegs the current mortality rate at about 50 percent and predicts that when all is said and done, most of the white fir trees growing around Ouray – including those within the Ice Park – will die.

While individual trees can be sprayed, at considerable expense, to inoculate them against infestation, entomologists say that barring a weeks-long winter deep-freeze (which could kill beetle larvae as they develop in the cambium layer of the tree between the wood and the bark), nothing can be done to stop the onslaught.

Last fall, the City of Ouray and the Colorado State Forest Service landed a $20,000 grant from the feds and hired contractors to conduct extensive "sanitation" logging in an effort to conserve the remaining forest and mitigate obvious safety hazards in some of the hardest hit portions of the Park.

Not only were the dead and dying trees unstable and unsightly; they also posed an urgent public safety concern along the rim of the Uncompahgre Gorge, where Ice Park guests have always used trees as top-rope anchors. Many of those trees are now rotting from the inside out, weakened to the point where wind could easily blow them over.

In order to provide continued access to the approximately 30 percent of the terrain in the Ice Park where infected anchor trees had to be cut down, the Ouray Ice Park undertook a major effort last fall to install a brand new fleet of 38 sturdy concrete anchor pads along the rim of the Uncompahgre Gorge.

The pads were built according to specs developed by OIPI board member Brad McMillan, a certified professional engineer.

OIPI had been planning to do the anchor replacement project in phases over a number of years. But when the federal grant came through to fund sanitation logging in the Park, "We were just like, this is going to be priority number one and we are going to do it all," said MacLeod. "We are just going to get it done. We can't take a chance."

Ice Park Manager Dan Chehayl and his crew abandoned other pre-season tasks and labored feverishly to get all the pads done before winter set in. It was a big job, conducted in the most isolated part of the Park, made more thankless by rumors that swirled through the community.

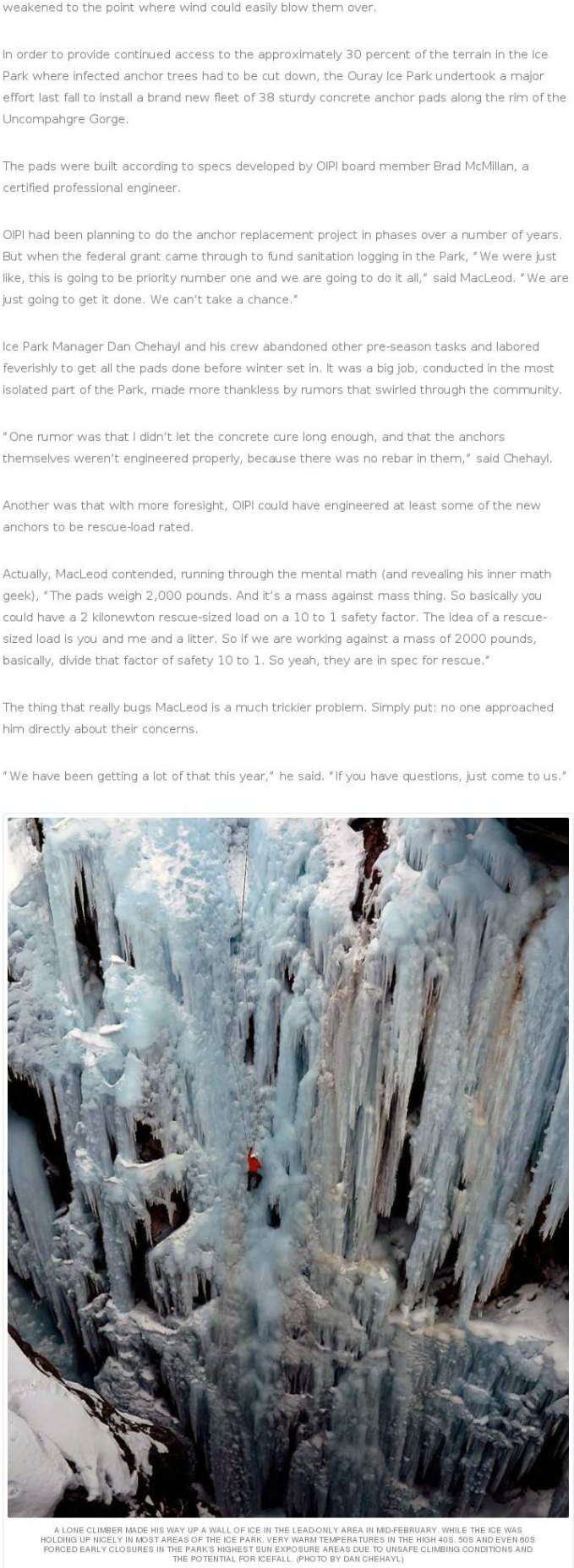
"One rumor was that I didn't let the concrete cure long enough, and that the anchors themselves weren't engineered properly, because there was no rebar in them," said Chehayl.

Another was that with more foresight, OIPI could have engineered at least some of the new anchors to be rescue-load rated.

Actually, MacLeod contended, running through the mental math (and revealing his inner math geek), "The pads weigh 2,000 pounds. And it's a mass against mass thing. So basically you could have a 2 kilonewton rescue-sized load on a 10 to 1 safety factor. The idea of a rescue-sized load is you and me and a litter. So if we are working against a mass of 2000 pounds, basically, divide that factor of safety 10 to 1. So yeah, they are in spec for rescue."

The thing that really bugs MacLeod is a much trickier problem. Simply put: no one approached him directly about their concerns.

"We have been getting a lot of that this year," he said. "If you have questions, just come to us."


A LONE CLIMBER MADE HIS WAY UP A WALL OF ICE IN THE LEADVILLE AREA IN MID-FEBRUARY, WHILE THE ICE WAS HOLDING UP NICELY IN MOST AREAS OF THE ICE PARK. VERY WARM TEMPERATURES IN THE HIGH 40S, 50S AND EVEN 60S FORCED EARLY CLOSURES IN THE PARK'S HIGHEST SUN EXPOSURE AREAS DUE TO UNSAFE CLIMBING CONDITIONS AND THE POTENTIAL FOR ICEFALL. (PHOTO BY DAN CHEHAYL)

HYDRO LICENSE (DIS)AGREEMENT

Meanwhile, another source of angst cast a shadow over the Ice Park in the months leading up to opening day last winter. It had to do with an impasse over an expired license agreement between the City of Ouray and local hydroelectric baron Eric Jacobson.

Jacobson owns and operates the Ouray Hydroelectric Plant, a historic hydroelectric facility regulated by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission that runs right through the middle of the Ouray Ice Park.

A restless intellectual with unruly hair and a preference for the kind of work that gives him dirt beneath his fingernails, Jacobson has a bit of a mad scientist air about him, and a reputation for being difficult. But really, he just has a thing for making clean electricity out of water.

For many years, Jacobson made his home at another historic hydro plant near Telluride that teeters atop the 365-foot Bridal Veil Falls like Frankenstein's Castle. He acquired the Ouray Hydroelectric Plant and its assets at auction in 1991 when the utility company that previously owned it went bankrupt.

For a $10 bid, he ended up not only with a century-old 830kW hydro plant hunkered on the banks of the Uncompahgre River in Ouray, but also a historic dam at the southern terminus of what is now the Ouray Ice Park, a 50-acre mining claim called the Roosevelt Placer in the vicinity of the South Park climbing area, plus an assortment of trestles, foot bridges, ladders, catwalks, and a 6,130-foot-long pressure pipeline, or penstock, that delivers water from the dam to the hydroelectric plant in town.

Jacobson's FERC license grants him control and responsibility over the right of way for 50 feet on either side of center line of his penstock, and requires him to have a recreation plan for his hydroelectric facility guaranteeing equal public access to that land.

"In effect, that means that we control recreation in the Ice Park," Jacobson said. "We don't want to control recreation. We have been given that responsibility by FERC."

Jacobson takes that responsibility seriously. And luckily for the Ouray Ice Park, he is among the rare breed of benevolent private property owners sympathetic to climbers and their desire to climb on his property – in spite of the inherent liability. So through a separate license agreement with the City of Ouray, he permits the use of his land in the Ouray Ice Park for recreational purposes.

In return, the City provides Jacobson with liability protection.

Without this legally binding license agreement in place, the Ice Park would be dead in the water. And yet, last summer, much to OIPI's chagrin, the agreement was on the brink of expiring, and Jacobson and the City could not agree on the terms of its renewal.

As Jacobson explains it, the problem originated when the City purchased a key parcel of U.S. Forest Service land within the Ouray Ice Park in 2012. When that transaction took place, "They perceived they owned the Ice Park, like any other piece of property they owned," Jacobson said. "It took some education for them to understand how FERC and regulation enter into the picture."

One particular bone of contention had to do with the guiding concession the City of Ouray had awarded to San Juan Mountain Guides, which Jacobson saw as being in direct conflict with FERC's mandate to provide equal public access to the land.

At the annual stakeholders meetings that FERC requires Jacobson to conduct each year, he got an earful about the tension between San Juan Mountain Guides and independent guides in the area, having to do with the allocation of climber days in the Park.

"The dispute seems to be with the City's concession and how guiding services other than SJMG work, and whether is it a monopoly or booking service," Jacobson said. "It puts me in a very tough position."

For a long time, the City argued that it was not Jacobson's place to try and resolve the conflict. "But under my FERC license I have a huge dog in the fight," Jacobson explained.

The whole problem put OIPI in an awkward spot. There was a lot at stake, because theoretically, if the agreement didn't get signed, the part of the Ice Park that Jacobson owns or otherwise controls (including the Roosevelt Placer in the South Park area plus the entire penstock right-of-way) would not be able to open for the coming season.

"We were not wanting to offend either party," MacLeod said. "We had an obligation to the City to be good managers of the Ice Park but we also have a great relationship with Eric that's built on years of trust. I was terrified that we would end up looking like we are on somebody's side. We don't want to be in that boat. We were kind of on everybody's side. Mostly we were on our side because we wanted to get the Park open."

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In the end, the City broke the stalemate by offering to take over the job of hosting the annual stakeholder meetings, and pledged to come up with a way of resolving the conflict among the guides.

"My relationship with the City got better when they volunteered to figure out this guiding days thing," Jacobson said. "I credit the City greatly for changing their position once they became acquainted with the facts."

Jacobson, in turn, agreed to extend his license agreement with the City just long enough to get the Ice Park through the winter season. The two parties inked the deal on Dec. 7, well after winter had set in and ice farming on Jacobson's property in the South Park area should have gotten underway.

The ice farming season suffered further delays due to weather and water woes.


A CLIMBER LED HIS WAY UP A ROUTE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SCHOOLROOM ON MARCH 8. THE BOTTOM OF THE ROUTE HAD BEEN CHEWED AWAY BY HIGH WATER AFTER A PIPELINE BLOWOUT IN JANUARY FORCED THE FULL VOLUME OF THE UNCOMPAHGRE RIVER TO FLOW THROUGH THE ICE PARK UNTIL REPAIRS WERE COMPLETED IN LATE FEBRUARY. ICE FARMERS MADE MAKE-SHIFT BRIDGES AND LADDERS TO KEEP THE CLIMBS ACCESSIBLE. (PHOTO BY DAN CHEHAYL)

O WATER WHERE ART THOU?

Ice farming requires two fundamental ingredients: long cold nights, and lots of water. Both were in less than optimal supply at the Ouray Ice Park this year.

In the Ice Park's early days, its founders poached water from an abandoned city reservoir and leaky penstock. Now, OIPI taps into the City of Ouray's twin, spring-fed 500,000-gallon municipal water tanks to farm its ice. The Ice Park is allowed to use all of the runoff from the tanks, funneling about 270,000 gallons of water through its gravity-fed plumbing system on a typical winter night.

If the Park needs more water than what the overflow can provide, the ice farmers are allowed to drain up to a couple of feet of water off the top of the tanks themselves, working closely with the City's public works crew to make sure they aren't taking so much that they threaten the city's own water needs.

The system has worked well in the past but the days of abundant water for ice farming may be coming to an end.

"It was very apparent this year, early on, that the water was maybe cut close to in half of what we have had in past years," Chehayl said. "There was less flow coming into the city water tanks. And so less runoff leaving the water tanks."

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This had the effect of dramatically curtailing OIPI's ice farming efforts. Chehayl and his crew were forced to alternate watering the south and north ends of the park instead of watering the whole park each night, resulting in fewer climbs and less than ideal conditions in some parts of the park.

Not only did there seem to be less runoff, but the City also started monitoring its water systems much more closely than was done in the past, with the help of a new software system that tracks how much water is flowing into the tanks and how much is being used at any given time.

This new awareness seems to have had the effect of curtailing how much water the Ice Park could drain from the tanks.

"I think we have a new norm, and the new norm is less water, is my gut feeling," said OIPI board member Slawitschka, who has made it her priority to try to understand the scope and cause of the ice park's water woes this year.

But Ouray Public Works Director Dennis Erickson contends that there is as much municipal water as ever.

"We need to squash the rumors that the spring isn't producing," he said. "In the past three years it's been pretty consistent. What has changed is usage in town. More people using water in town means there is less overflow and we are doing better water monitoring to keep the tanks at an adequate level for fire safety."

Whatever the cause, the net effect is less water for ice farming, and OIPI and the City will be working together in the coming months to find ways to solve that problem. The City, for its part, plans to install a gauge to measure the flow of water at Weehawken Spring (the City's municipal water source), and compare it with the flow at the water tanks, to determine if there might be some leaks in the system.

And OIPI will be looking for opportunities to upgrade the efficiency of its irrigation system, Chehayl said.


A GROUP OF LOCAL BUSINESS OWNERS AND ELECTED OFFICIALS TOURED THE OURAY ICE PARK IN EARLY MARCH TO GAIN A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF HOW THE PARK WORKS, AND TO OBSERVE THE AFTER-EFFECTS OF JANUARY'S HYDROELECTRIC PENSTOCK BLOWOUT THAT CAUSED THE WATER LEVEL TO RISE A COUPLE OF FEET ABOVE NORMAL IN THE BOTTOM OF THE UNCOMPAHGRE GORGE. (PHOTO BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT)

EL NIÑO'S GIFTS AND CURSES

In spite of the perceived water shortage and other early season woes, MacLeod said, "We would have gotten away with (a decent ice farming season) if we had had good solid cold weather."

Unfortunately, the weather gods were fickle friends to the Ouray Ice Park this year.

On the very day that Chehayl had planned to turn the water on to begin farming ice in late November, El Niño delivered a huge dump of snow, shrouding the cliffs of the Uncompahgre Gorge and delaying the start of ice farming by several days as volunteers mobilized to help sweep the snow off the cliffs.

Then came a dreaded week-long warm-up in early December, just as delicate sheaths of ice were beginning to cling to the canyon walls.

"That killed us," MacLeod said. "We were in great shape and if we could have just stayed normal cold, we probably would have pulled it off and nobody would have known the difference, but then we had a week of 50-plus degree temperatures and it killed all the work these guys had done."

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Luckily, the warmup was followed by a spectacular and enduring cold spell that offered ideal ice farming conditions. "It worked out well; we were able to build fat ice regardless," said Chehayl.

Even so, the anticipated open date in mid-December had to be pushed back due to the warm weather earlier in the month. The ice simply wasn't ready yet. Ice climbers and local business owners became impatient.

"I can assure you that our ice farmers are diligently working to get the Park ready for the season," OIPI Administrator Stephanie Griebe wrote in an email blast on Dec. 15. "As the weather permits, we are hopeful to have an official open date in the near future. I will do my best to keep you informed as the week progresses."

The Ice Park finally opened on Christmas Day – 10 days past its target opening date – with only 30 percent of its terrain open to the public.

"In my opinion it was one of the worst openings ever except for one or two other years in terms of the amount of ice and terrain open that we had," said Ouray Mountain Sports owner Bill Leo, a longtime Ice Park supporter whose main street store functions as an unofficial information bureau for climbers. "Last year it didn't open until after Christmas Day but when we did open, all the terrain was open, and this year that was not so. People were unhappy with the amount of available terrain. It was very crowded in the park. People kept asking 'Are you done yet? Are you done yet? Can we get on the climbs?'"

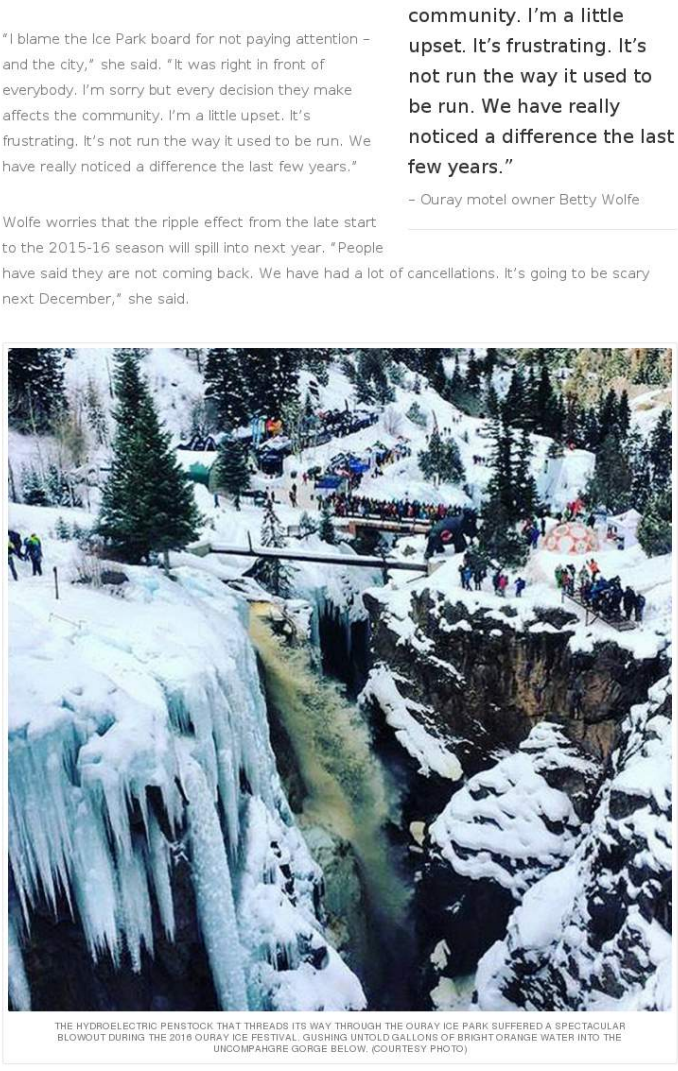
Out-of-town climbers who had traveled to Ouray to enjoy some pre-holiday season climbing at the Ice Park were left in the lurch. Some of them headed out in search of backcountry terrain. Others cancelled their reservations, hurting local lodgers' bottom line.

Indeed, the City of Ouray's most recent Lodging Occupancy Tax collection summary shows a downward tick in occupancy rates last December for the first time since 2010 – after four years of steady growth. Ouray motel owner Betty Wolfe correlates this decline with the Ice Park's late opening, and blames it more on mismanagement than a water shortage or weather warm-ups.

> "I blame the Ice Park board for not paying attention – and the city. It was right in front of everybody. I'm sorry but every decision they make affects the community. I'm a little upset. It's frustrating. It's not run the way it used to be run. We have really noticed a difference the last few years."
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Wolfe worries that the ripple effect from the late start to the 2015-16 season will spill into next year. "People have said they are not coming back. We have had a lot of cancellations. It's going to be scary next December," she said.


THE HYDROELECTRIC PENSTOCK THAT THREADS ITS WAY THROUGH THE OURAY ICE PARK SUFFERED A SPECTACULAR BLOWOUT DURING THE 2016 OURAY ICE FESTIVAL, GUSHING UNTOLD GALLONS OF BRIGHT ORANGE WATER INTO THE UNCOMPAHGRE GORGE BELOW. (COURTESY PHOTO)

THE BLOWOUT

There aren't many people around anymore who remember the Ouray Ice Park's origins – how old-school ice climbers used to poach ice falls that formed, in part, as a result of the leaky old hydroelectric penstock tracing the rim of the Uncompahgre Gorge.

These days, with those leaks long-since shored up, the hydro plant's infrastructure is not much more than a curiosity to most Ice Park guests.

But the inter-connectedness of the Ice Park and the hydro plant got a Technicolor spotlight during the busiest day of the 2015-16 season, at the height of the 21st annual Ouray Ice Festival.

Large crowds of spectators had gathered in the Park on Saturday, Jan. 16, to watch some of the world's best climbers compete on an artificial tower overhanging the Uncompahgre Gorge, in the highly anticipated Elite Mixed Climbing Comp.

Gear manufacturers had set up their traditional Outdoor Gear Expo nearby, a colorful tent village where ice climbing enthusiasts from across the country could sample the newest tools and gear. Down inside the gorge, hundreds more festival-goers were taking interactive clinics with sponsored athletes.

The fest was in full swing, and thanks to months of careful planning on the part of OIPI, things were going super smoothly…. Too smoothly, as it turns out.

In the mid-afternoon, just upstream from where the competition was taking place, something happened that had never been seen before. Bright orange water started gushing out of an exposed portion of the hydroelectric penstock that overhangs the Uncompahgre Gorge.

Remarkably, nobody was injured in the blowout. Although the park was crawling with people, just one climber happened to be directly beneath the ruptured pipeline, and he was able to quickly scramble out of harm's way.

"He got wet, but it wasn't like he was going to get blasted off the climb," MacLeod said.

As the climber topped out, the spray of water soon grew into a torrent, and people watched on with bemused horror. "It was shocking for sure," Chehayl said. "Some people's reactions bordered on apocalyptic."

As the level of the river rose, OIPI board members worked to evacuate ice climbers who were stranded in the bottom of the gorge, while Chehayl tried to reach Jacobson and his plant manager to get the combination number for the penstock's water intake valve at the hydro dam a mile up the gorge. No luck.

Minutes ticked by and water continued to spew from the pipeline. Chehayl and his crew shifted to Plan B, racing into town to buy some bolt-cutters, then snowmobiling out to the hydro dam to cut the water off.

When they got there, Chehayl tried one last time to reach Jacobson and finally got him on the line. He was in Nucla, but calmly conveyed the combo to the valve and gave Chehayl permission to shut off the water.

Disaster had been averted. But the fact that the blowout happened in the most visible part of the Ice Park, on its busiest day of the year, in one of the very few spots where people climb directly beneath the penstock, seemed almost beyond the realm of plausible coincidence.

"It just proves that the gods have a sense of humor," Jacobson said.

The image of orange water spewing out of the busted penstock down into the gorge was reminiscent of another blowout still fresh in the public psyche – the one that was accidentally triggered by the EPA at the Gold King Mine near Silverton last summer, sending millions of gallons of bright orange water down the Animas River.

For people that don't have a firm grasp on the layout of the land around Ouray, it has been easy to conflate the two events. "I get that question all the time, because of the color of our water – 'Is that the runoff from that mine?' It's going on still," Chehayl said. "I'm like, 'No, our water is always that color. You ought to see the three-eyed fish I have at home.'"

The hydro plant stayed shut down for several weeks after the Ice Fest while Jacobson and his crew labored to replace the ruptured pipeline, and repaired another segment further upstream that had collapsed due to a vacuum effect when the blowout happened.

During the shutdown, water that would normally have been diverted through the penstock was allowed to take its natural course. For the first time in the Ice Park's history, climbers experienced the full flow of the Uncompahgre River in the bottom of the gorge. It was not a pretty picture. The rust-colored river ate away at the bottom of the farmed ice falls, and Chehayl and his crew scrambled to build makeshift bridges and ladders to keep the gorge accessible to Ice Park guests.

They weren't the only ones having a hard time. By the time Jacobson got his operation up and running again, it was early March and he had suffered five weeks' worth of lost revenue from the hydro plant, which he said makes about $20,000 a month in the low-flow winter months.

(Video clip courtesy Outside Adventure Media)

WHY IT HAPPENED…

To understand why the blowout happened, you have to understand a thing or two about Jacobson's pipeline and the water that flows through it.

The portion of pipe that blew out dates from the late 1920s, and is stitched together along its bottom with a line of rivets that has degraded over time due to the acidic nature of the Uncompahgre River.

"It wasn't like just randomly blowing out; it was an unzipping of the rivet line along the bottom of the pipe," Jacobson explained. "When one rivet goes, it immediately puts stress on next one, and pretty soon it goes like a zipper along the bottom there."

Jacobson was aware that the pipeline was "pretty raunchy". It was the only span in the entire 6,130-foot system that had not been replaced in the past 30 years – largely because it was so exposed and difficult to access. But he didn't realize it was so close to failing.

Ultimately, Jacobson said he blames the blowout on the acidity of Red Mountain Creek – a caustic, metals-laced tributary to the Uncompahgre River flowing down from Ironton Park, and one of the main reasons the southernmost portion of the river is unable to support aquatic life.

Red Mountain Creek picks up a good bit of its acidity and heavy metal load (as well as its color) from the richly mineralized mountains of its headwaters. But Jacobson alleges that the creek is much more acidic than it should be, due to inadequate remediation of mine discharge oozing from the decommissioned Idarado Mine, once one of the largest, most prosperous mines of the region.

In 1983, five years after the mine shut down, Colorado filed suit against the Idarado Mining Co. for natural resource damages under CERCLA. At that time, Jacobson said, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed to build a $15 million water treatment plant that would have operated in perpetuity in Ironton Park at Idarado's expense.

But ultimately, after years of litigation, Idarado and its parent company Newmont got out from under this burden, instead entering into a consent decree in 1991 in which they agreed, among other things, to conduct reclamation projects in the Red Mountain District to meet certain targets pertaining to river health.

"Those targets haven't been met, and the river is as acidic as it ever was. So I think we need our water treatment plant up in Ironton Park," Jacobson said. "I am very directly affected by that low pH water. It eats my dam up, it eats my pipeline, and I am playing Donkey Kong all the time, trying to cover damages due to this low pH water."

Jacobson has also alleged in a pending complaint to Colorado's water court that Idarado/Newmont is diverting 4.5 CFS of clean, non-acidic water from the Red Mountain side of its vast underground workings to dilute the discharge on the Telluride side, where zinc concentrations in the San Miguel River are a huge concern.

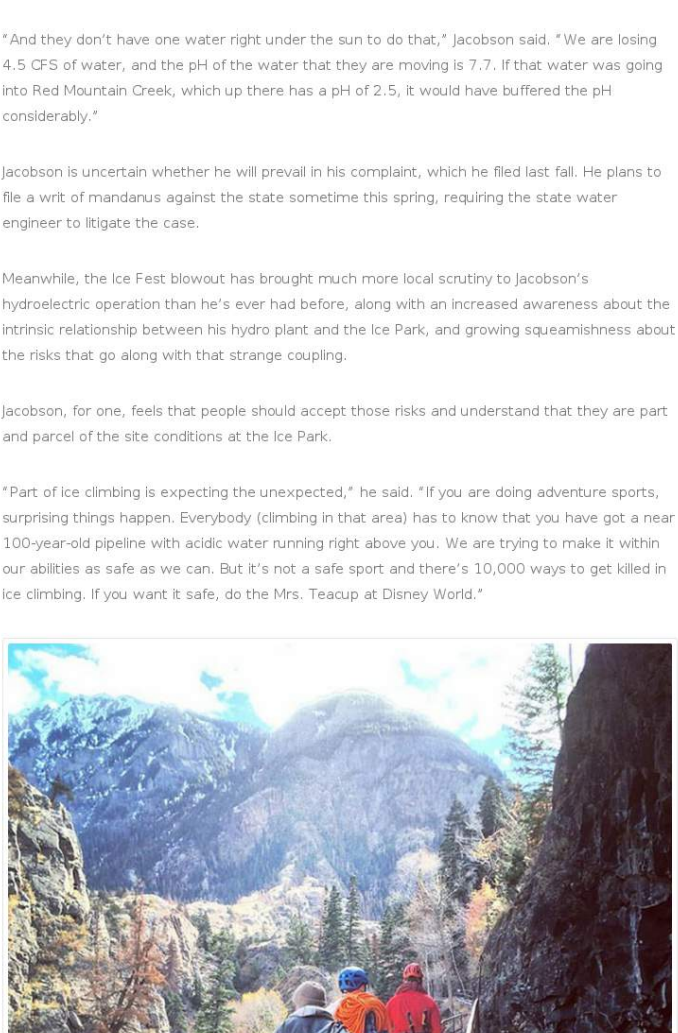
"And they don't have one water right under the sun to do that," Jacobson said. "We are losing 4.5 CFS of water, and the pH of the water that they are moving is 7.7. If that water was going into Red Mountain Creek, which can have a pH of 2.5, it would have buffered the pH considerably."

Jacobson is uncertain whether he will prevail in his complaint, which he filed last fall. He plans to file a writ of mandamus against the state sometime this spring, requiring the state water engineer to litigate the case.

Meanwhile, the Ice Fest blowout has brought much more local scrutiny to Jacobson's hydroelectric operation than he's ever had before, along with an increased awareness about the intrinsic relationship between his hydro plant and the Ice Park, and growing squeamishness about the risks that go along with that strange coupling.

Jacobson, for one, feels that people should accept those risks and understand that they are part and parcel of the site conditions at the Ice Park.

"Part of ice climbing is expecting the unexpected," he said. "If you are doing adventure sports, surprising things happen. Everybody (climbing in that area) has to know that you have got a near 100-year-old pipeline with acidic water running right above you. We are trying to make it within our abilities as safe as we can. But it's not a safe sport and there's 10,000 ways to get killed in ice climbing. If you want it safe, do the Mrs. Teacup at Disney World."


ICE FARMERS ELIAS JORDAN, LOGAN TYLER AND XANDER BIANCHI HEADED OUT INTO THE ICE PARK IN EARLY NOVEMBER TO ATTEND TO THE ANNUAL 'CRUISE', COMBING DOWN EACH CLIMBING AREA IN THE PARK WITH LOPPERS TO CUT OUT ALL THE WEEDS AND BUSHES THAT GREW UP DURING THE SUMMER, IN ORDER TO GROW MORE CONSISTENT ICE. WEATHER WARM-UPS IN DECEMBER AND FEBRUARY ADDED TO THE ICE FARMERS' CHALLENGES THIS YEAR, BUT THEY STILL MANAGED TO GROW A SPECTACULAR CROP. (PHOTO BY DAN CHEHAYL)

WATCHING THE WEATHER GET WARMER

Longtime Ouray resident Karen Risch has monitored Ouray's weather for years. She records the temperature every day and every night. She notes if there has been any precipitation, and if so, how much, and what kind. If it snows, she melts some of it to find out how much moisture it contains. And then she sends all that data to the National Weather Service office in Grand Junction.

Risch's observations underscore some of the challenges the ice farmers have been experiencing at the Ouray Ice Park over the past winter season.

The upshot? In spite of the cold and snow that came in December and January, "We are getting warmer overall," she said, "and it looks like we are getting warmer faster at night," which makes it harder to farm ice.

"We are also seeing less precipitation for same amount of snow these last couple of years," Risch added. "More of it is falling as rain." That does not bode well for the Ice Park's long term water supply.

The 2015-16 water year got off to a warm, wet start last October. Daytime temperatures were three degrees higher than average (62.6 degrees compared to a historical average of 59.6) while nighttime lows were 4.6 degrees above average (38.8 degrees compared to a historical average of 34.2).

The entire month of October saw just three tenths of an inch of snow (normal is 5.7 inches), but 2.25 inches of precipitation. In other words, the bulk of the month's precipitation came as rain, because it hardly ever got cold enough to snow.

November and early December were a mixed bag of warmups and whopping amounts of snow, followed by a long and snowy cold spell that lasted from mid-December all the way through Feb. 5. Then came warm, dry conditions that persisted throughout the rest of February and most of March.

Even taking that lengthy snow drought into account, Risch said, Ouray is still well ahead of the curve for snowfall this water year, with 159.5 inches of snow falling from October through February. To put that into context, the normal amount of snowfall in Ouray for an entire water year is 140 inches.

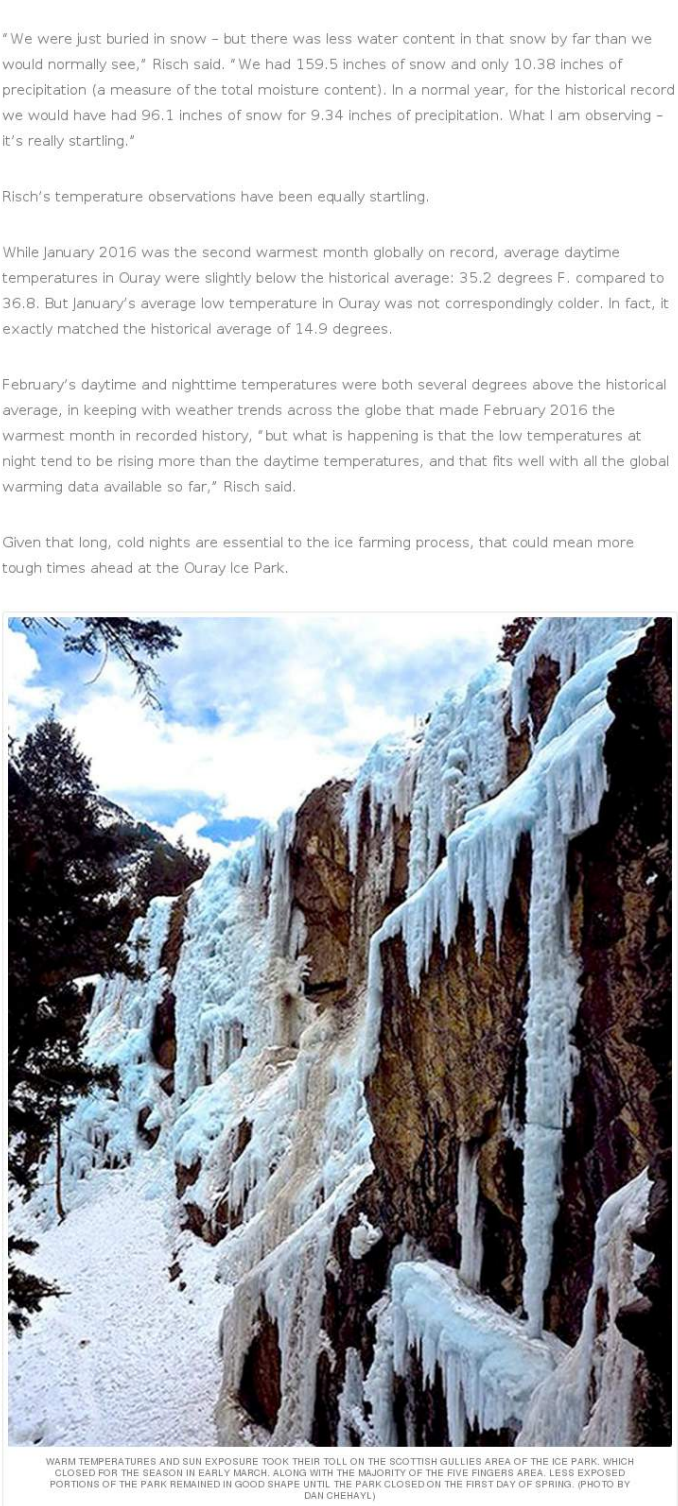
"We were just buried in snow – but there was less water content in that snow by far than we would normally see," Risch said. "We had 159.5 inches of snow and only 10.38 inches of precipitation (a measure of the total moisture content). In a normal year, for the historical record we would have had 96.1 inches of snow for 9.34 inches of precipitation. What I am observing – it's really startling."

Risch's temperature observations have been equally startling.

While January 2016 was the second warmest month globally on record, average daytime temperatures in Ouray were slightly below the historical average: 35.2 degrees F. compared to 36.8. But January's average low temperature in Ouray was not correspondingly colder. In fact, it exactly matched the historical average of 14.9 degrees.

February's daytime and nighttime temperatures were both several degrees above the historical average, in keeping with weather trends across the globe that made February 2016 the warmest month in recorded history, "but what is happening is that the low temperatures at night tend to be rising more than the daytime temperatures, and that fits well with all the global warming data available so far," Risch said.

Given that long, cold nights are essential to the ice farming process, that could mean more tough times ahead at the Ouray Ice Park.


WARM TEMPERATURES AND SUN EXPOSURE TOOK THEIR TOLL ON THE SCOTTISH GULLIES AREA OF THE ICE PARK, WHICH CLOSED FOR THE SEASON IN EARLY MARCH, ALONG WITH THE MAJORITY OF THE FIVE FINGERS AREA. LESS EXPOSED PORTIONS OF THE PARK REMAINED IN GOOD SHAPE UNTIL THE PARK CLOSED ON THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING. (PHOTO BY DAN CHEHAYL)

IF YOU FARM IT…

It wasn't all bad news at the Ouray Ice Park this year. The 21st Annual Ice Fest got rave reviews. And in spite of the early and late season warmups, the fierce mid-winter cold snap "felt like full-on winter – like nothing we'd seen in a long time," Chehayl said. All that frigid goodness made for some prime ice farming conditions, while conditions lasted.

And in terms of visitation, it was the busiest year OIPI has ever seen. The Ice Park was full to capacity basically every weekend it was open.

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The Saturday of President's Day weekend, for example, saw an estimated 550 people in the park, including climbers and spectators. (There is no way to take an official head-count, since access to the park is free and open to the public.)

In the short term, at least, a crowded Ice Park translates into a more flourishing winter economy in Ouray. But longtime local Ice Park aficionados worry that something precious and ephemeral is getting lost in the process.

"The negative effects of over-crowding have been really profound on the park," MacLeod said. "We love all these people to be here, but we are way over our capacity, probably most of the time. We have got to deal with it, way more aggressively than we have in the past, but still get people to come here."

Ultimately, MacLeod said, "We run into a situation where we lose our positive vibe in the bottom of the canyon. It's insane."

Chehayl can attest to this insanity. As the overcrowding has become more intense over the past few years, he has observed a new phenomenon – people willfully breaking the Ice Park's rules that set climbing hours in the park from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., and that limit each party to hanging just two ropes up at a time, for a three-hour period, before moving on to a new climbing area.

"People don't want to move their ropes because they don't think they are going to find another open spot," Chehayl said. "Nobody else is moving their ropes either. And the minute one person starts not following those rules, the next person does and it kind of cascades."

"People are fighting for routes, and everyone's getting pissy," agreed Ouray motel owner and ice climber Betty Wolfe. "There's not the sharing of routes like there used to be."

The frustration over this state of affairs was evident on the Ouray Ice Park's Facebook page, where one climber commented on New Years Day: "Too many people hanging ropes then walking away from them. One party hung 5 ropes but was only using 2. Very much a way to kill the stoke."

As it's become tougher and tougher to find a place to hang a rope inside the Park, an increasing number of climbers have been resorting to free climbing – a serious safety concern.

And while it might seem fairly innocuous to sneak into the Uncompahgre Gorge at the break of dawn to beat the crowds and stake out a spot to climb, there's a good reason why the Park doesn't open until 7:30 a.m.

"We shut off the water at 7 a.m. and we want it off before people show up," Chehayl explained. "When the ice farmers have to interact with people while they are trying to remember every single valve that they are supposed to open, they could forget something pretty easily."

Even worse, an early morning poacher might mess around with the valves to shut off the water in a place they want to climb, "which could be a disaster for us – hundreds of feet of freeze-up because people think, 'Oh let's turn that off so we can set our rope up here,'" MacLeod said.

Now that the Ice Park is closed for the season, OIPI plans to spend much of the spring and summer grappling with how to solve the overcrowding conundrum.

On days when the park is full to capacity, "Who gets kicked out? Who doesn't get to climb that day? And who gets to decide that?" MacLeod wondered. "It's a great thing to have so many people excited about the sport. And a great thing that people see Ouray as the focal point for the sport. We want that. But we can't turn it into someplace that is not a great experience because it's out of control. Finding that balance will be a topic of discussion for us, I'm sure."

Another upcoming topic of discussion: expanding the Ice Park's terrain so there are more places to for all those visitors to climb. The water situation and overall warming weather trend will make that more difficult.

And there's yet another conundrum: as the Ice Park becomes more crowded and requires more municipal water to make more ice, the City of Ouray is consuming more water, too, from all of those extra people in town that are taking showers and flushing toilets.

It's a Catch 22. Heavy sigh.

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Samantha Tisdel Wright writes and raises two red-headed children in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado, dividing her time between Silverton and Ouray. She has worked as a reporter and editor for a variety of publications throughout the region, and is proud to be a founding member and co-editor of the San Juan Independent.
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Another great and insightful article. Thank you, Samantha.

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Terrific, inclusive story, Samantha. We always learn a lot from you.
Karen & Bob Risch

04/06/2016
Kelvin Kent
REPLY
Excellent reporting. Informative, representative of all sides. Objective and well balanced. Hopefully this last season, with all of its problems (most of which were not the fault of the Ice Park board) can be addressed and communicated so that confidence, and colder weather, will prevail in the future. This is too good of an incredible facility to be over critical with. Ouray needs this to be a success and all of us should be thankful for the thousands of hours that many good people contribute to make it all possible.
Kelvin Kent

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Another great story from Samantha, making a complicated situation easier to understand.

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