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COVID-19's impact on Southern Colorado rafting was rough, but not as bad as expected

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Although last summer's commercial rafting season was characterized as "among the most trying in the industry's history," Arkansas River outfitters fared surprisingly well despite the COVID pandemic which forced a late start.

It's hard to imagine, but for some rafting company owners, COVID concerns did not decimate business last summer. In his 10 years at the helm of Rocky Mountain Outdoor Center, owner Brandon Slate has never been as busy as he was last summer despite the global pandemic.

"Last year (in the spring) phones were not ringing at all and we ended up having the busiest season since I've been running the company," Slate said. "It was crazy."

Andy Neinas, Echo Canyon River Expeditions owner, said he is ready to put the challenging year of 2020 behind him and focus on the upcoming summer season. It was the restaurant portion of his business and the high costs of transporting customers to the river that hurt his bottom line.

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"Rafting is naturally a distance, outdoor activity," Neinas explained. "We were blessed to have the demand of people wanting to go rafting."

According to the Colorado River Outfitters Association's annual report, the late start to the rafting season was compounded by the health regulations which forced rafting companies to run at partial capacities.

"Reduced rafting participation is reflected in the 2020 economic impact on the state's economy," the report reads. "Due to high unemployment, the downturn in travel and reduced discretionary spending, this report reflects the significant impacts our industry

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environment.

Overall number of rafters taking to Colorado waterways totaled 430,175 last summer, a reduction of 112,230 customers or a nearly 21% decline. On the Arkansas River, the impact was not as stark.

There were 182,005 rafting clients boating the Arkansas in 2020, down just 8,241 customers or 4.3% less when compared to 190,246 rafters in 2019.

The statewide economic impact for commercial rafting in 2020 was \$148.7 million, compared to a 2019 impact of \$184.9 million. Although there was a \$26.2 million difference, the numbers were “much more robust than anticipated,” according to the report.

In the Arkansas River Valley, rafting brought \$24.5 million in direct expenditures to rafting companies in 2020, down just \$1.3 million from 2019’s \$25.8 million. All totaled, the economic impact of rafting — when other expenditures such as lodging, restaurant, dining and gasoline sales are figured in — was \$62.9 million to the area in 2020, down \$3.1 million for 2019.

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“As the industry looks ahead, the hope is that COVID-19 will be brought under control and that businesses of all types can reopen before the 2021 season. This should foster an economic recovery and encourage a return to pre-COVID-19 travel patterns,” the report concludes.

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This summer Neinas is rowing out his “Battle of the Bighorn” package which combines physical and mental challenges in a competitive and fun format — all centered around rafting — as a way to entice customers.

For Slate, the training portion of his business is expected to be very busy this summer.

“We do kayak instructor training, stand-up paddle board instructor training, swift water rescue, raft guide training, rock climbing guide training and all that stuff

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