ONE of the images many people have of America is of a land of many mountains, vast plains, huge deserts, mighty rivers and thousands of miles of coast.

Movies have brought a lot of America’s outdoors to the big screen. Who isn’t in awe of the grandeur of the Grand Canyon, the heights of the Rockies, the wonder of Yosemite Valley and the might of the Mississippi? Today, through our vast array of National and State Parks, America’s great outdoors are easy to find.

However, once you get there, you need the gear to climb, camp, hike, bike, or canoe. There is one nationwide recreational goods co-operative that is there to assist you in your human powered effort – REI.

REI – Recreational Equipment, Inc – is known to millions of Americans as the place to outfit yourself for life in nature. It is also America’s largest consumer cooperative, founded in 1938.

In 2009 REI had sales of almost $1.5 billion through its 114 stores in 27 states and its website rei.com. The same year, it added five new stores. With over 9,500 staff, REI is America’s largest retail co-op, and the 34th largest by turnover. Since Fortune Magazine began its listing of the Best 100 companies to work for in the US, REI has always been on the list and in 2009, was placed twelfth.

Presently there are 3.5 million active members, who take a strong interest in store-initiated actions. Each year, about 200,000 members work on efforts organised by the local stores to clean up creeks, re-build trails, and lead local conservation efforts. REI gives about $4m a year to non-profit groups to carry out outdoor projects.

One of REI’s strongest marketing features is its consistent payment of an annual dividend of ten per cent on members’ purchases. For the year 2009, REI had profits of almost $30m after paying dividends of $80m.

REI was founded in Seattle by Lloyd and Mary Anderson and 21 other mountain climbers. They were looking for an ice axe and found they were not able to purchase high-quality European mountaineering products in America. They organized a co-op to do this joint purchasing for themselves. The Andersons’ ran the co-op out of their basement for many years. Word of the co-op and its quality products spread quickly. REI added more and more products and went beyond just mountaineering products to anything muscle-powered relating to the outdoors.

REI first became known to many Americans through the mountain climbing achievements of Jim Whittaker, REI’s first employee and first CEO. In 1963, Whittaker was the first American to climb Everest and in 1978 he led the first American ascent of K2. Whittaker led Senator Robert Kennedy to climb and name Mt Kennedy in the Canadian Yukon after his slain brother. A strong friend of the Kennedys, he was at Robert Kennedy’s bedside when he died and a pall bearer at his funeral.

In today’s world, REI is a corporate leader with a strong environmental commitment, building green elements into all its new stores and production and retail activities. On the environment, REI has stated: “We’ve identified five environmental priorities that have the most impact on our operations and in which we wish to inspire broader change: greenhouse gas emissions and energy use, green building, paper sourcing, reducing waste and recycling, and responsible product stewardship.”

REI’s flagship store in Seattle embodies REI’s environmental principles and features a 65ft indoor climbing wall overlooking the freeway, a 30ft indoor waterfall and 21,000 feet of forest surrounding the store. It is one of Seattle’s major tourist attractions.

Projects

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These achievements mean that, among US cooperatives, REI is clearly an organisational standard bearer. REI’s success in Seattle soon attracted the interest of a similar group across the Canadian border in Vancouver. Six Canadians who bought from REI were having many difficulties due to customs and taxes so, in 1971, they formed Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC). MEC has 14 stores spread across Canada from coast to coast. MEC also has over 3m members and is the leading outdoor retailer in Canada. MEC has a similar and strong environmental ethos.

In 1994, to honour of the 150th Anniversary of the Rochdale Pioneers, REI was the sponsor of the Pioneers Round, a 20 mile walk designed by Derek Magnall, starting and ending at Toad Lane. The booklet can be purchased from the Cooperative College.

For more information, visit rei.com.