SM 2355 Climbing Opportunities #ORMS-3524

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January 15, 2024

Dear Forest Service,

The following are the comments of Rocky Smith et al on the proposed directives for climbing on national forest lands.

We are glad to see the Forest Service propose direction to regulate climbing on national forests and grasslands. Like any other form of recreation on national forest and grasslands, climbing can impact a variety of resources, including, but not limited to: wildlife, cultural and historic properties, water quality, soil quality and stability, scenery, and other forms of recreation. Regulation of climbing is likely to be needed in some areas. The preparation of climbing plans is a good idea for areas of significant climbing use.

However, modifications to the proposed direction are needed to ensure that important resources will be sufficiently protected.

FIXED ANCHORS SHOULD BE PROHIBITED IN DESIGNATED WILDERNESS AREAS EXCEPT FOR EMERGENCIES AND VERY RARE NON-EMERGENCY EXCEPTIONS.

Wilderness is a special place. This means that activities must be limited to conserve the wilderness resource. Recreation is permitted, but it cannot be allowed to subsume wilderness values such as ecological integrity, values that are too often not found in other areas of national forests and grasslands, but that should be prevalent in wilderness.

Under the proposed directives, the placement and replacement of fixed anchors would be allowed in wilderness, especially if it somehow helped preserve wilderness character. Below are several quotes from the proposed directives relevant to this issue:

The placement, replacement and retention of fixed anchors and fixed equipment are permissible in wilderness when it is determined that they are the minimum necessary to facilitate primitive or unconfined recreation or otherwise preserve wilderness character.

2355.03 5, under Policy. In other words, fixed anchors can be acceptable if they promote recreation.

The placement of a fixed anchor or fixed equipment does not necessarily impair the future enjoyment of wilderness or violate the Wilderness Act, but the establishment of bolt-intensive climbing opportunities may be incompatible with the preservation of wilderness character.

Id. at 6b.

Restrict or prohibit the placement or replacement of fixed anchors and fixed equipment in wilderness unless specifically authorized based on a case-specific determination that they are the minimum necessary for administration of the area for Wilderness Act purposes (FSM 2355.32).

2355.21 12.

Climbing, including the use of fixed anchors and fixed equipment, can fulfill important wilderness recreational purposes and can help preserve wilderness character by providing opportunities for primitive or unconfined recreation.

2355.32 1.

This is not acceptable. Fixed anchors are prohibited by the Wilderness Act, which generally prohibits structures and installations “except as necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of th[e] Wilderness Act”. 16 U.S.C. 1133(c). Fixed anchors should never be used to facilitate recreation in wilderness. If the associated recreation needs fixed anchors, i. e., permanent installations, it is not appropriate recreation in wilderness because it requires use of non-conforming and prohibited structures. If such anchors are truly needed for recreation in wilderness, then the recreation they facilitate must not be allowed. Fixed anchors cannot possibly “preserve wilderness character”; rather, they denigrate it.

The proposed directives would specifically allow the placement and replacement of fixed anchors to facilitate recreation in wilderness. One is example would be:

allowing climbers to use fixed anchors and fixed equipment in wilderness at climbing opportunities that provide outstanding opportunities for primitive or unconfined recreation.

2355.32 1. This appears designed to accommodate climbers rather than ensure that wilderness resources are protected. It could be used to allow installation of fixed anchors and equipment almost anywhere in wilderness, or at least anywhere that any climber wished to climb. It could be used to allow climbers to climb a route that might otherwise be unclimbable or very difficult, thereby spreading the human impact to wilderness character.

Fixed anchor use is not at all appropriate for wilderness. There are plenty of climbing routes outside wilderness areas, and in most of them, fixed anchors could likely be used if climbers desired.

The Forest Service should not undertake any actions to encourage more use in wilderness, especially use that goes against the spirit of wilderness and is at least arguably illegal. Wilderness does not need more human use of any kind! Wilderness is the one place on national forests where natural ecological processes prevail and where habitat for wildlife and fish takes precedence over human uses. Encouraging more use reduces the value of wilderness.

Remember the language of the Wilderness Act:

A wilderness, in contrast to those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.

16 U. S. C. 1131. The purpose of wilderness is to conserve the untrammeled character of an area so designated, NOT to facilitate recreation use.

Climbing advocates argue (or will if they haven’t already) that the use of fixed anchors creates only a very minor effect on wilderness values. That won’t always be true, but even where it is, it is irrelevant. If fixed anchors are allowed in wilderness, how will the Forest Service refuse other uses such as cabins, airstrips, bicycles, etc? Wilderness must be managed as wilderness, not just for human use.

Allowing the placement and replacement of fixed anchors and the use of other fixed equipment clearly violates the spirit of wilderness and likely also the letter of the law. Non-emergency use must be prohibited, or only allowed in a few exceptional cases. See more below.

Fixed anchors must also be prohibited in areas proposed for wilderness such as wilderness study areas.

EMERGENCIES AND OTHER EXCEPTIONS TO PROHIBITIONS IN WILDERNESS

Proposed section 2355.32 4 appropriately provides for emergency use of fixed anchors in wilderness. But rather than require removal of such anchors in almost all cases after the emergency is resolved, it would allow retention of them for the same wrong reasons used to allow placement or replacement of new anchors in non-emergency situations (discussed above):

New fixed anchors and fixed equipment placed in wilderness in an emergency must be removed unless the Forest Supervisor determines that the fixed anchors and fixed equipment are consistent with the applicable climbing management plan and are determined to be the minimum necessary for administration of the area for Wilderness Act purposes, including primitive or unconfined recreation and preservation of wilderness character…

Proposed section 2355.32 5. Again, fixed anchors should never be necessary for administration of wilderness outside of emergency operations. Fixed equipment placed for emergency operations in wilderness should be promptly removed after the emergency has ended unless an analysis shows that such equipment is necessary to meet the minimum requirement for administering wilderness as wilderness.

Proposed section 2355.32 1 would allow use of fixed anchors in the following situations:

directing climbers toward designated climbing opportunities with fixed anchors and fixed equipment to protect sensitive resources such as cultural resources or nesting bird habitat; and approving fixed anchors and fixed equipment in areas where impacts on the rock face are occurring due to the use of rock hammers to chip hand holds or foot holds into the rock.

The direction here again seems geared toward accommodating climbers rather than protecting wilderness. Any recreation use that could adversely affect sensitive resources should be directed away from those resources. If any kind of recreation use is occurring and adversely affecting such resources, better management of said wilderness is required. Climbers should never be allowed to chip away rock to create hand or foot holds, especially in wilderness.

This exception to the prohibition on fixed anchor use in wilderness should be deleted or written very strictly to emphasize that such exceptions should rarely if ever be used.

The proposed directives would appropriately prohibit the use of motorized drills and construction of handholds in wilderness areas. 2355.32 7. These prohibitions should be retained in the final directives.

PROHIBIT NEW FIXED ANCHORS PENDING COMPLETION OF CLIMBING PLANS. The directives should require that each national forest and grassland unit where there is more than minor use for rock climbing complete, as soon as possible, an inventory of climbing routes and fixed anchors. This information will be critical in preparing climbing management plans.

In the meantime, there should be an immediate moratorium on any new fixed anchors anywhere in order to forestall a rush to claim new routes by installing new fixed anchors before a climbing management plan is prepared and implemented.

COLLABORATION WITH CLIMBING ORGANIZATIONS NEEDS TO BE BALANCED WITH INPUT FROM WILDERNESS ADVOCATES. Several places in the proposed directive, collaboration of some sort with climbing organizations is mentioned. Working with such organizations to promote environmental ethics in climbing and safety is good. However, under the proposed directives, such organizations would get a seat at the table for developing policy that might not be available to other interests:

--2335.04a 4, under responsibilities of the agency’s Washington Office, Director of Recreation, Heritage, and Volunteer Resources, “to work with local and national climbing organizations and manufacturers of recreational equipment to achieve climbing program objectives”.

--Under 2355.04e 4, district rangers are responsible for:

Executing and administering cooperative agreements with climbing organizations and other cooperators regarding climbing opportunities in their ranger district.

--2355.21, to “achieve desired outcomes in a climbing management plan”, agency managers are directed to “leverage funding or other forms of assistance” from climbing organizations and to specifically solicit public input from “user groups such as local climbing organizations”.

This is inappropriate, as it gives the impression the agency is primarily interested in listening to climbing organizations and trying to meet their needs. While soliciting and accepting information from these interests is certainly appropriate, it must be balanced with input from other user groups and organizations with varying interests, such as organizations protecting wilderness character or advocating management for natural ecological values, etc. Listening only to organizations that promote climbing will provide a distorted view of the natural and human environment surrounding climbing. These interests will not promote, and may not even accept, management that is designed to protect resources if it restricts or prohibits climbing in any way. Therefore, language specifically requiring consultation and solicitation of input from non-climbing, non-recreation-oriented interests must be added to the proposed directives.

The Forest Service must not be afraid to challenge narrow interests when the integrity of resources like wilderness character are at stake.

WILL MONEY AND PERSONNEL BE SUFFICIENT FOR PLANS AND ENFORCEMENT?

Climbing management plans would only be developed “[a]s funding and resources allow”. 2355.21. This calls into question whether regulation of climbing, even where badly needed to reduce or prevent resource damage, will be implemented.

The minimum requirements analysis, necessary to determine what activities might be allowed in wilderness, might not even be completed if funds are short:

Existing fixed anchors and fixed equipment in wilderness may be retained pending completion of a Minimum Requirements Analysis, *as funding and resources allow*, that determines they are the minimum necessary to facilitate primitive or unconfined recreation or otherwise preserve wilderness character.

22355.32 5; emphasis added.

If budgets are insufficient, how would the Forest Service prepare, approve, and implement climbing management plans? How would the agency monitor use and enforce restrictions on fixed anchors, motorized drills, etc., especially in wilderness? What will the agency do to ensure that money and personnel time will be available to develop climbing plans, monitor use, and enforce prohibitions and restrictions?

CONCLUSION. We are glad to see the Forest Service proposing to manage climbing on national forest and grasslands. However, such management must ensure that resources, especially wilderness, are sufficiently protected. The non-emergency use of fixed anchors and fixed equipment in wilderness should generally be prohibited. Collaboration with non-climbing interests must be required in developing climbing management plans. The proposed directives must be changed to address these issues.

Sincerely,

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