

Ed Blood

**DISCUSSION SHEET CASE STUDY
TECHNICAL ROCK CLIMBING IN WILDERNESS**

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Central Issue: To what extent should fixed anchors be placed and used for rock climbing in wilderness?

Situation: The Superstition Wilderness contains over 160,000 acres, much within the Sonoran Desert Shrub vegetative type. It is less than an hour's drive from well over 2,000,000 people. Over the past 11 years, from Mid-January through April, an average of over 24,000 hikers, backpackers, and equestrians access the Superstitions each year by two trailheads alone. In 1991, 150 of these recreationists were climbers.

Some rock climbing has occurred in the Superstitions for many years, however, it was very limited until a climbing guide was published, and the use of rock bolts became common practice among climbers. In 1989 the number of routes grew from 13 to 48. Wilderness users (including the Palo Verde Chapter of the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society) began to contact the district, objecting to the impacts associated with climbing, particularly the practice of leaving permanent anchors attached to the rock faces. Because of the nature of the rock, it is common practice to drill series of holes in the rock with a portable drill, and then insert bolts and hangers which are left in place. In some instances, power drills were used to place the bolts. A larger, more substantial bolt can be placed with a battery powered drill. These permanent climbing routes are on pinnacles of 50 feet or less in height, some of the summits can be reached without technical climbing skills or equipment. Some of the routes have existed for years. The bolts on these routes cannot be trusted to hold people any longer, but removing them may cause substantial resource damage. In addition to the equipment left and rock faces impacted, steep trails have been created by climbers accessing the cliffs and litter has been left.

The Mesa Ranger District began meeting with concerned wilderness users, the Arizona Mountaineering Club (AMC), and the Access Committee of the American Alpine Club (AC) in the fall of 1989. In early 1990 a list of issues and concerns were compiled to begin the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process of analysis. One of the first steps in the analysis was to review all existing laws and regulations that relate to the situation. The District's opinion was that bolting was a violation of two separate regulations: 36 CFR 261.9(a) (damaging any natural feature) and 36 CFR 261.10(e) (abandoning any personal property). Leaving bolts was also judged to be in violation of Tonto National Forest Order 12-59 (storing personal property, or supplies for a period of more than 14 consecutive days). It was also felt that when left in place, bolts were not allowed under the Wilderness Act. The Forest Plan does not address this issue.

1. What does the Wilderness Act and other Legislation say?

1964 Wilderness Act:

Section 2 (c): "A wilderness...is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." "...an area of Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural

conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation..."

Section 4 (c): "Except as specifically provided for in this Act,... there shall be no temporary road, no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, no landing of aircraft, no other form of mechanical transport, and no structure or installation within any such area."

2. What is the Agency Manual Direction?

Forest Service

FSM 2320.5 - Definition

4. Motorized Equipment. Machines that use a motor, engine, or other nonliving power sources. This includes, but is not limited to, such machines as chain saws, aircraft, snowmobiles, generators, motor boats, and motor vehicles. It does not include small battery or gas powered hand carried devices such as shavers, wrist watches, flashlights, cameras, stoves, or other similar small equipment.

5. Permanent Improvement. A structural or nonstructural improvement that is to remain at a particular location for more than one field season. Permanent improvements include such items as trails, toilet buildings, cabins, fences, tent frames, fire grills, and instrumentation stations.

FSM 2323.13 Improvements and Nonconforming Facilities and Activities. Provide facilities and improvements only for protection of the Wilderness resource. Document and justify conditions for providing facilities and improvements in the forest plan. Install facilities as a last resort only after trying education, other indirect management techniques, or reasonable limitations on use.

Bureau of Land Management

H-8560

.12 Prohibition of Certain Uses. ... there may be no temporary road, no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment, or motor boats, no landing or aircraft, no other form of mechanical transport, and no structure or installation within wilderness areas.

.31 Recreation and visitor use.

B.1. Minimum Facilities. Facilities and improvements may be provided only where they are the minimum necessary to protect the wilderness resource and for the health and safety of persons within the area. No facilities or improvements may be provided for the comfort and convenience of the visitor.

National Park Service

General Public Use

Park visitors must accept wilderness largely on its own terms, without modern facilities provided for their comfort or convenience. Users must also accept certain

risks, including possible dangers arising from wildlife, weather conditions, physical features, and other natural phenomena, that are inherent in the various elements and conditions that comprise a wilderness experience and primitive methods of travel. The National Park Service will not eliminate or unreasonably control risks that are normally associated with wilderness, but it will strive to provide users with general information concerning possible risks, recommended precautions, minimum-impact use ethics, and applicable restrictions and regulations.

As a general rule, public use of motorized equipment or any form of mechanical transport will be prohibited in wilderness. The National Park Service will limit authorizations for the continued use of any motorized equipment in wilderness to situations where such use has been specifically authorized by Congress and determined by Congress or the Park Service to be compatible. The specific conditions under which motorized equipment may be used by the public will be outlined in each park's wilderness management plan.

Fish and Wildlife Service

8.9 Public Use Guidelines

C. Facilities. Facilities necessary to support public use will usually be located outside a wilderness area. No facilities will be provided exclusively for the convenience and comfort of the users. However, it may be necessary to provide minimum facilities to regulate and control public use in the larger units (especially in Alaska). Minimum facilities may include fire rings, simple latrines, campsites, and potable water. Facilities must be shown to be essential to disperse visitors, protect refuge and wilderness resources, prevent or correct unsanitary conditions for the purpose of public safety, reduce hazard. All improvements will be constructed of materials which harmonize with the environment and should be temporary in nature.

What happened next:

The District shared its analysis and interpretation with the climbing groups, who disagreed with the interpretations of regulations pertaining to the existence of bolt routes. The District solicited a formal opinion from the Office of the General Council, prior to posting a closure on bolting. On June 14, 1990, the District's opinion was confirmed. The Tonto National Forest enacted restrictions on bolting. These restrictions were appealed and the appeal dismissed.

Wilderness personnel on the Mesa Ranger District asked climbers to refrain from establishing new routes until the issue concerning drill holes and permanent fixtures could be addressed. These requests initially met with very limited success. During this period, wilderness users wrote and called to object to the impacts associated with climbing, especially the use of power drills, permanent anchors, and potentially safety/liability concerns. Representatives from the Arizona Mountaineering Club and the American Alpine Club Access Committee rejected any alternative locations for this activity. There were several Congressional inquiries.

At this point the National Rock Bolt Task group was formed. Their findings have been forwarded to the Chief, but due to the freeze on new regulations, have not been enacted.

An interim policy for managing this activity has been formulated by the Southwestern Region:

In the absence of new authority and in compliance with the 2/4/92 policy letter (2320: Direction for fixed Anchors in Wilderness), the following actions have been taken:

- 1) A moratorium has been maintained on new bolting (which has not been fully respected). A commitment has been made to not remove any routes during the same period. After a couple of seasons with uniformed presence in the area, the moratorium has been successfully observed.
- * 2) The District has worked with the AMC to create and distribute a "climbing ethics" brochure. AMC has printed and is distribution the brochure.
- 3) All popular and heavily used climbing routes are inventoried.
- 4) Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) standards for evaluation of climbing routes and activities have been formulated.
- 5) The District has nearly eliminated the use of power drills.