

ENVIRONMENT

Climbing conflicts: Forest Service intervenes in Tensleep Canyon



by **Katie Klingsporn**

April 27, 2021



Ken Hilton climbs "Question Crack Center," 5.11b, in Tensleep Canyon. (Matt Enlow)

Tensleep Canyon, a breathtaking landscape of cliffs and sky near the base of the Bighorn Mountains, was once a little-known diamond in the rough.

Long distances from major population centers kept it quiet for decades even as an impressive inventory of feature-rich limestone and dolomite cliffs drew a dedicated cadre of in-the-know sport climbers.

Then word got out. And as climbing's global profile exploded in the last two decades, so too did the canyon's popularity, threatening it with the now familiar fate of so many Western recreation destinations — being loved to death. Parking lots became overcrowded, user-created trails proliferated, erosion began to degrade areas at the base of cliffs and human waste became an issue as dispersed camping mushroomed.

The discovery of heavily manufactured climbing routes — a widely condemned practice in which the rock is manipulated with tools or glue

fueled a battle over ethical development. Before long the controversy boiled over with online fulminations and a nighttime raid by climbers manually chopping bolts from rock faces.

Into the mess stepped the U.S. Forest Service, which in July of 2019 issued what amounted to a moratorium on the establishment of any new climbing routes or trails in the entire Bighorn National Forest.

In the two years since, the Bighorn's Powder River Ranger District has been drafting a climbing management plan for Tensleep Canyon. It released a scoping document in February, and received nearly 500 comments by the March deadline. The agency will work through the summer to prepare the draft environmental impact assessment.

The issues in Tensleep Canyon made it clear that the plan was overdue, Powder River District Ranger Traci Weaver said.

“Our stance was: ‘Timeout, give us time to finish our climbing management plan, give us time to move forward thoughtfully and work together with all our user groups ... and come up with something that’s sustainable into the future,’” she said. “What was happening in Tensleep Canyon was not sustainable.”

The plan has the potential to ripple beyond the walls of the canyon, climbing advocates say. As one of only a handful of Forest Service plans specifically focused on climbing, it could influence how the pursuit is managed on national forest land across the U.S.

Lovers of the canyon say they hope it strikes a balance that protects the precious resource while still allowing for human enjoyment of the place. But with more people than ever visiting public lands like Tensleep Canyon, that task only grows more complicated.

From zero to hero

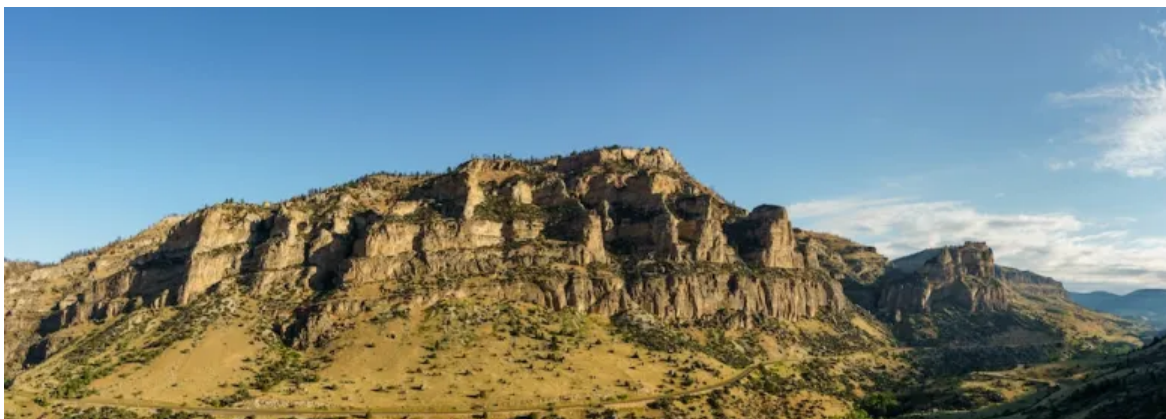
Today, with roughly 1,200 established routes, the former backwater half an hour east of Worland is the most popular sport-climbing destination in the Northern Rocky Mountains, according to the Forest Service.

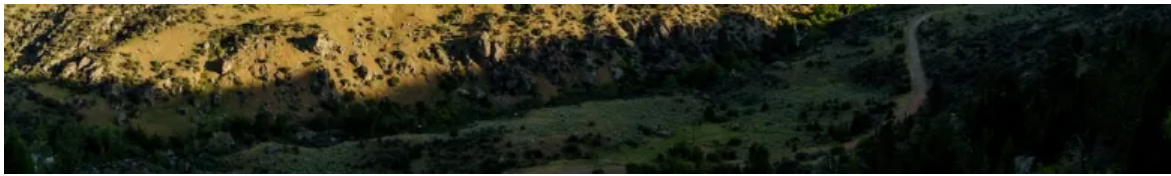
Sport climbing is characterized by the use of metal anchors permanently bolted into the cliff face. Climbers attach carabiners and ropes to them as they ascend. It differs from traditional climbing, in which climbers place protective gear that is temporary.

The 2005 Bighorn National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan predicted the sport would require formalized management; it included recommendations to develop a climbing plan.



These photos, which have been widely shared on Facebook, show climbing holds that have been allegedly manipulated by humans either by chipping out rock or glueing. That practice is condemned unethical in the climbing community. (Screenshot/Facebook/Ten Sleep Canyon Aerospace Society)





The cliffs of Tensleep Canyon are home to scores of climbing areas, including Dry Wall, which is visible in the center-right of this photo. (Matt Enlow)

“We tried to do that within 10 years, we’re a little bit behind that,” Weaver said. “It took us a while to make Tensleep a priority. But we are now.”

The scoping documents released in February identify several issues the Forest Service hopes to address in the 26,000-acre project area. They include dangerous highway and parking conditions, improper disposal of human and pet waste, erosion at the bases of cliffs, impacts on wildlife like nesting raptors and a proliferation of dispersed camping — including within 100 feet of Tensleep Creek, which flows into the nearby town of Ten Sleep.

There’s also a network of user-created trails that weren’t developed under resource-protecting standards. “None of the access trails right now are system trails,” Weaver said. “They’re all user-created.”

The agency also needs to consider the full range of users and impacts, Weaver said.

“Tensleep is important to people for so many things other than just climbing,” she said, citing uses like bird-watching and hunting.

What happens in the canyon also impacts Ten Sleep, the town of roughly 200 people just miles downstream from the canyon.

Ten Sleep Mayor Ernie Beckley said the explosion of climbing has pros and cons.

“Any time you have a big influx of people there’s gonna be some people who like it, who benefit from it, and others who find it a distraction,” said Beckley, who grew up in Ten Sleep. Climbers have brought an economic boon to certain businesses, he said, in addition to parking and waste challenges to the area.



Beckley believes the town has on balance benefitted from the sport, which hasn't changed the overall feel of Ten Sleep, he said. "It's still small-town Wyoming."

The burning concern for most users — climbers or not, Weaver said — involves the issues that inflamed such drastic actions in 2019: the unmanaged climbing-route development and proliferation of heavily manufactured routes.

In comments submitted on the scoping materials, she said, "that was probably the No. 1 issue because we heard from climbers and non-climbers alike about that."

Glued rocks and guerrilla tactics

Mike Ranta began visiting Tensleep Canyon as a young Casper climber around 2007.

"It was kind of this unreal canyon of potential," said Ranta, who today designs updated editions of a popular climbing guide, "Tensleep Canyon – A Guide to the Buttery Sickness." The canyon, he remembers, was also empty.

"You'd go out there on a weekend and be all alone," he said. "Now the popularity has grown so much that it's unrecognizable."

Still, he said, he saw that part coming to some degree: The canyon is home to world-class climbing, after all.



Climber Kyle Abrams on "I Just do Eyes," 5.11b, in Tensleep Canyon. (Kyle Abrams)

What surprised and dismayed him, he said, was something he began to notice in the late 2010s: manufactured routes.

"At some point, I was like, this is not rock, there is glue on this route and it's painted to look like the rock," Ranta said. "Once you saw it, you

would see it everywhere. It was just really upsetting. I remember just being very deeply upset. Distressed is the best word.”

Manufacturing refers to the process of either glueing holds to the rock or chipping them out using drills or hammers. It can be used to turn a featureless rock wall into a climbable route. While some degree of TLC is often employed to blow out loose stones or clean up routes during development, most climbers agree that significantly altering the character of the rock is unacceptable.

The Forest Service confirms the presence of many heavily manufactured routes in Tensleep Canyon. What is not as easy to confirm is who is behind them. But in articles and social media posts, many [have fingered](#) Louie Anderson. Anderson, a longtime climber and guidebook author, moved to the area from California in 2016 with his wife; they run a popular private campsite called Rock Ranch, where many climbers stay.

In an interview with WyoFile, Anderson admitted there was an element of manufacturing in his early route development, but said “it’s not prevalent in all my route development.”

He said a group of climbers raised concerns about the practice in 2018 and asked him to meet. “They said they didn’t want it to continue,” he said, so he stopped.

“I thought it was resolved,” he said. “Then social media got a hold of it.”

Ranta remembers the events differently. Anderson did not cop to the practice during that meeting, he said.

“We kind of left the conversation feeling like we didn’t get any closure,” he said. “That’s when we started making a bigger deal about it online.”

Climbers in February of 2019 posted an [open letter](#) blasting the practice and photos of what they claimed were manufactured holds. Climbing magazines [covered](#) the controversy and famous climbers like Lynn Hill signed letters against manufacturing. Many pointed to Anderson as a culprit. Anderson remained quiet; he says now he didn’t want to get dragged into unconstructive online spats, preferring face-to-face conversations.

Ranta knows how the squabble may look to outsiders as both sides drill into rock, he said.

“It is hard to make that argument that he is defiling the rock while we are putting silver bolts into the wall,” he said. “But you know, the wholesale destruction of rock for the sake of just making it popular and fun ... the reason that it’s looked down upon by the climbing community is that it just goes against the ethos of climbing.”

Anderson “knew better,” Ranta said.

Months after the posting of the open letter, in July of 2019, a group of anonymous climbers under the cover of night stripped about 30 routes deemed to be heavily manufactured and placed red padlocks on the bolts of others.

Those actions, many say, did not help the situation.

“I understand they were very upset that heavy manufacturing was going on and that was their statement,” Weaver said of the climbers. “But were the padlocks unsightly too? Yes.”

In response to the unmanaged development and the manufacturing controversy, the Forest Service that same month shut down development of any new route or trails, citing the code of federal regulations that prohibits activity that damages federal property or makes unauthorized improvements to national forests. The agency also closed some climbing areas deemed to be dangerous due to manufacturing or bolt stripping.



The closures and development ban are still in place.

The future of Tensleep

The idea behind the ban was to pause and take a breath, Weaver said. The Forest Service hired a climbing ranger to begin monitoring the canyon and educating climbers, and began work on its management plan.

As that process now unfolds, many stakeholders are keenly interested in the fate of access and route development. Most are relieved the agency stepped in.

“I was like, ‘I don’t care if they extend it for 10 years,’” Ranta said of the development ban. “It’s OK that we take a break. The trails got out of control, the trash is everywhere. This is not going to get less popular. We need to figure something out.”

He thinks the Forest Service is a capable partner to take that on, he said.

The Bighorn Climbers Coalition has been working closely with the agency in the plan’s development. Coalition President Brad Burns said the group hopes to see access preserved and the ban lifted, particularly in light of the many climbing areas that exist outside of the canyon.

“Mostly, we just tried to stick to kind of the mission of the Bighorn Climbers Coalition in the first place, which is to protect climbing resources and allow them to be accessible for people,” Burns said. “In the Climbers Coalition’s perspective, there’s a lot of potential for future development in both Tensleep and the surrounding areas.”

The coalition, like most other climbing advocacy groups, “is and has made the stance adamantly against any sort of manufacturing,” Burns said.

Support independent reporting – donate to WyoFile today

Anderson too said he is “hopeful that they will allow route development again.

“There’s a lot of established routes right now in the canyon,” Anderson said. “There’s already a lot of opportunity for people to climb. But what keeps an area popular ... is having the opportunities for new challenges.”

He also said he is in favor of whatever is in the best interest of Tensleep Canyon, and believes most climbers are on the same page about that.

“We all want Tensleep to come out the victor here,” Anderson said.

Longtime Casper climber Ace Ashurst, who says he watched blank walls transform into manufactured playgrounds, wants something else: he wants the Forest Service to remove heavily manufactured routes, create rules prohibiting the practice and enforce them.

“My main points are just seeing it stop but then also seeing [the Forest Service] taking that stuff down so it sets an example,” he said.

Despite the ban, route development has continued to take place in Tensleep Canyon, Weaver said.

That flagrant defiance makes Ranta less hopeful that a collective effort will look out for the resource, he said.

“That’s pretty shitty,” he said. “I want to believe that things will change. But people are proving me wrong before the solutions are even coming out.”



At the height of the route development controversy in Tensleep Canyon, a group of climbers chopped several routes – removing the bolted equipment from the rock – and secured padlocks on bolts at the base of other routes. (Screenshot/Facebook/Ten Sleep Canyon Aerospace Society)

National test case?

The Forest Service is contemplating options like permits and fees to control the flow of people into the canyon. It still needs to collect thorough data before making those and many other decisions, Weaver said.

The agency will likely hold another public meeting in May. It expects to release the draft environmental assessment in August, which will trigger a 45-day objection period.

The implications of the final plan could be far reaching, some say, as other national forests may look to it as they grapple with their own climbing issues.

The U.S. Forest Service does not currently have national-level guidance on climbing, said Erik Murdock, a policy director for the Access Fund, a national nonprofit that has made Tensleep one of its campaigns. “Even though 30% of America’s climbing is located on Forest Service land — about 10,000 discrete climbing areas,” he said.

The agency’s passive approach to climbing management is something the Access Fund has been fighting to change for a long time, Murdock said, and movement is afoot. The recently passed federal budget bill included an appropriation mandating the agency release such guidance.

Currently, there are only three climbing management plans for Forest Service crags, Murdock said, though others are in the works.

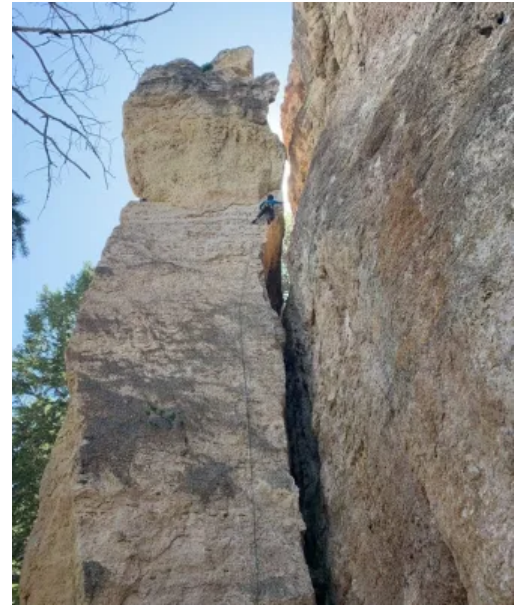
“So this plan could have an influence on other climbing management plans,” he said.

Burns of the Bighorn Climbers Coalition echoed that.

“This plan and how it’s embraced across the nation might have implications in terms of how we see people just go about development in general,” Burns said.

The problem in many places, Murdock said, is that “these climbing areas were developed in the ‘90s and no one expected the use levels to be as high as they are. So they weren’t developed to accommodate the level.

“We’re gonna have to find ways to coexist” and mitigate resource damage, he said. “And that is the goal of this climbing management plan, is to find that balance.”



Climber Kyle Abrams on “Pre-spice Blow,” 5.10c, in Tensleep Canyon. (Kyle Abrams)

George Wilten

April 27, 2021 at 2:13 pm

Lander’s chamber of commerce is probably dreaming up new ways to attract media attention along these lines as I write this. Yep, bigger things to worry about in life than a rock face but it is always fun to read. And another blow to those who think tourism comes without costs, and will save WY.

Robert Hoskins

April 27, 2021 at 11:40 am

In the 1980s I had the privilege of serving in a US Army mountain and winter warfare unit based in the German Alps. There we trained and operated as teams to accomplish missions in very hard country, and we left clean camps. In any case, the Germans insisted on a highly disciplined “leave no trace” way of doing things, and God help you if they found that you’d left a mess in their mountains. The fines were deeply unpleasant.

After I left active duty and moved to Wyoming in the early 90s I thought I'd keep up with climbing, but I found a completely different social environment from what I'd experienced as a soldier in Germany. It was an environment where "the freedom of the hills" meant "anything goes." I found most American climbers to be selfish and self-centered, more interested in making names for themselves in what then was called in the climbing magazines a "ghetto climbing culture." Even back then people were looking for commercial sponsors, and one way to do that was to pioneer difficult new routes and publicize them far and wide, with the inevitable polluting, destructive results. I found profoundly dirty camps—Lonesome Lake below the Cirque of the Towers comes to mind—and even worse, dirty routes with splattered chalk, carelessly emplaced hardware, vandalized and broken rock., etc.

I was so disgusted that I sold all my equipment, except what I needed for emergencies, and took up with horses and the study of natural history. (Horses' sensitivity to everything around them is a boon to the naturalist). Over the last three decades, much of what I have seen in the back country, even Wilderness, is the mess people leave behind.. Rock climbing on the limestone battlements above Ten Sleep (not to mention the proposed "via ferrata" on the limestone battlements of Sinks Canyon near Lander) is just another example of inherently destructive recreation.

We must acknowledge that recreation in all its forms has become an industrial process that, like all industrial processes, is inherently dirty and destructive. If we are going to make any progress in protecting the ecological integrity of the places where we live and work and "recreate," we're going to have to impose serious discipline, the kind of discipline to which soldiers submit, on how people behave in the backcountry. I don't see any other option. The majority of people simply won't act voluntarily with the necessary restraint "to leave no trace."

For those who object to this general proposal, well, they've brought it not only on themselves, but on all of us.



Paul Rock

April 27, 2021 at 10:59 am

Let's take a cue from the Wyoming G&F and have the Forest Service trap, move, and track the Ten Sleep defilers. Refer to a related WyoFile article.

Trap the defilers with snares and deep pits (punji sticks optional). Then move them to out-of-state locations after implanting a GPS chip in their skulls to keep track of them should they try to enter Wyoming again.

I recognize that such a plan would probably not survive a Supreme Court challenge.



Bruce Ostermann

April 27, 2021 at 9:28 am

The world is melting down, the threat of all out nuclear war is rising and people are all worked up about some chipped holes? Have you seen what some people do to "clean" a route???Wtf people. A little time and exfoliation will clean it up.

There are much bigger problems coming at us.



Jeffrey Olson

April 27, 2021 at 9:24 am

There is a very small minority of climbers and mountain bikers and hikers who gleefully ignore the rules, personal responsibility for the land, and a big picture sense this is all our resource. They ask for surveillance cameras at parking areas and popular routes, for BLM employees and forest service rangers to become cops.

They ruin the wilderness experience for the rest of us.



Rob Davidson

April 27, 2021 at 9:23 am

Missing from the public discussion is the fate of the Leigh Canyon Research Natural Area (RNA) with the Tensleep Climbing Project Area nor the cliff face avian nesting and breeding habitat. Tensleep Creek and its water quality are also affected by the unmanaged dispersed camping with its unconfined human waste. They are in the Bighorn National Forest Environmental Assessment and kudos to them for it. It took ten years for the BNF to address the issue as the previous District Ranger for Powder River RD would not deal with it. Two days ago, the canyon rang with the sounds of a hammer drill.



Harvey Reading

April 27, 2021 at 8:51 am

Humans love to destroy places that are, or were, beautiful. They are forever leaving their mark on nature. Fortunately, it is a trait that will result in their own destruction...



Greg Collins

April 27, 2021 at 7:18 am

Invasive weeds; especially Houndstongue, Thistle and Spurge are a greater threat to the Forest and range.



George Wilten

April 27, 2021 at 2:15 pm

A lot of those weeds got there via human activity. Just look at the trails into the Tetons.

© 2024 WyoFile.

Proudly powered by Newspaper by Automattic

