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Comments: Dear US Forest Service,

As an avid climber for the last 57 years I am very interested and concerned about the new policies you are developing regarding fixed anchors in America's wilderness lands. My family is three generations of climbers. My Father started climbing in the early 60's in the Sierra Nevada, Joshua Tree and Tahquitz. These are the areas I learned to climb and create a spiritual connection to family and wilderness. This is something I passed on to my children all around in the Western US. Without fixed anchors to allow for the adventure and recreation of climbing these experiences will be lost (both my family and others along with future generations). There are three points I would like to clarify initially that I feel are hard to dispute by anyone knowledgeable about climbing:

1. Climbing is a well-established traditional recreational use of our national parks and wilderness lands.
2. Fixed anchors are well established devices used to protect climbers both during ascent of otherwise unsafe expanses of rock, and as points of protection for safe belays and for safe escapes (rappelling). They have been used for half a century or more. They are not prohibited installations under the Wilderness Act.
3. Prohibiting fixed anchors or removing already existing anchors will create serious safety issues to climbers AND to the rescue squads dispatched in an emergency (at which point the rescue squads will be forced to create fixed anchors for safety reasons).

The recent explosion of climbers and bolt-protected routes does not invalidate the above points, it only forces an increased scrutiny of their impact on the natural resource in which they are occurring. Any ruling that entirely bans climbing and fixed anchors is counter to the traditional established land use (banning fixed anchor is essentially banning climbing). The increase in number of climbers should not be tied to the established use of fixed anchors, I disagree that this can be translated into a policy of no fixed anchors whatsoever. I understand that distinguishing what is the appropriate number of climbers and what is an acceptable use of fixed anchors in the wilderness may be a difficult definition to conquer, I believe with the input of the Access Fund and climbers we can all come up with a reasonable agreement.

I hope the goal is to minimize environmental impact on wild areas, especially in light of climbing's increasing popularity. If so, a well thought out evaluation of climbing's actual environmental impact should be considered. A compromise that is fair both from an environmental standpoint and from a comparison to other traditional land uses and their relative impact needs to be developed. For example, to eliminate safe climbing practices (fixed anchors) but to allow safe trail construction so humans and horses can get into the wilderness would not be a fair compromise. Both are necessary for safety, and the latter has far more visual impact than the former. The majority of climbing cliffs in the wilderness are in areas where the non-climbing public rarely ventures, and most fixed anchors, especially bolts or pitons (especially if camouflaged), are invisible to anyone not standing very near them. To imply these fixed anchors are a blight on the wilderness experience while sitting on your horse riding or hiking down a mud filled, torn up trail, past stacked cairns, blazed trees and occasional trail signs, to your camp with large tents and a camp fire is imprudent.

I hope you seriously consider these comments. National parks and wilderness lands offer us chance to reset away from noise and light pollution on a climb where the sound of nature can help you forget about the stresses and the busy lifestyle back home. It offers the chance to feel reinvigorated, more energetic and full of life when you return home. We all have different ways of self-affirmation. Whether some government officials respect it or not, some of us do this through climbing and other "risky" behaviors, and we leave very little impact at all. I for

one have never found any outlet as rewarding and satisfying to do with friends and family as climbing large unexplored rock faces in our nation's wilderness. However, this issue of fixed anchors is making me closely re-evaluate what "environmentally conscious" actually means. Please be careful and thoughtful of all of us. Thank you.

Regards,  
John Fowler