

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 1/15/2024 9:43:38 AM

First name: Michael

Last name: Callen

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Dear NSFS Review Board,

I am writing this letter to strongly urge the NSFS to reject the proposed "Evaluation and Authorization Procedures for Fixed Anchors and Fixed Equipment in National Park Service Wilderness" document. With over 25 years of climbing experience, I have traversed the United States and explored climbing destinations worldwide. Throughout my journey, I have cherished the collaborative spirit between climbers and park services in the United States, which has set an international standard for responsible climbing practices. The NPS has consistently allowed climbers to guide best practices in highly technical climbing decisions, resulting in some of the safest climbing routes globally. I implore the NSFS and the NPS to uphold this legacy by avoiding unnecessary red tape that could potentially lead to perilous situations if the location and number of fixed anchors are not determined wisely.

Allow me to share a specific example from my climbing experiences in Rocky Mountain National Park, where my climbing partner, Kim-Lee Tuxhorn, and I tackled the Petit Grepon. I'd like to highlight how fixed anchors played a crucial role in mitigating our physical risks. This remote 1,100-foot tall rock tower poses unique challenges, particularly due to its isolation and susceptibility to afternoon thunderstorms, like clockwork, during the summer months. Although the technical climbing on the Petit is relatively straightforward, the dangers lie in its remote location and the impending storms. On that day, we efficiently scaled the wall and reached the summit before 11 am, but ominous clouds were already forming, and we sensed the impending threat of lightning. Traditionally, climbers rappelled off the same face they ascended, which, due to increased climber traffic, caused delays for both descending and ascending climbers, effectively creating bottlenecks on the climb.

Thanks to the remarkable efforts of the climbing community, dedicated climbers strategically placed six sets of fixed anchors on the backside of the Petit Grepon. These anchors significantly reduced rappel times and alleviated traffic on the main routes. These anchors were well-placed and saved us hours of descent time, enabling us to descend safely just before a torrential downpour. The fixed anchors were instrumental in our safe return to the ground, especially as the thunderstorm rolled in. Without a doubt, the shared wisdom and experience passed down from climber to climber played a pivotal role in the installation of these fixed anchors in ideal locations, avoiding rope-snagging cracks and ensuring the gear's reliability. Lacking these anchors, we would have found ourselves marooned on the route, devoid of a swift means of departure, and confronting the ominous prospect of a life-threatening scenario that might have necessitated search and rescue intervention.

I hope this case makes clear: banning fixed anchors in national parks will necessarily mean increased search and rescue intervention and corresponding resources. Climbing is rapidly increasing in popularity, with gyms opening rapidly across the country and the world. That has been an accelerating trend for the last 30 years, and it is not changing. Banning fixed anchors won't materially affect the number of climbers headed into the wilderness, that is determined by other factors. It will, however, mean more issues, more accidents, and more challenges and expenditure for search and rescue.

I earnestly hope that the NSFS and NPS will continue to entrust climbers with the responsibility of making informed decisions about their gear. Climbers' lives are at stake, and climbers possess the most profound understanding of how to ensure safety in their pursuits. The technical expertise required for understanding and placing fixed anchors is unparalleled. For the sake of preserving lives and maintaining the collaborative relationship between climbers and the NSFS NPS, I implore you to reject the policy "Evaluation and Authorization Procedures for Fixed Anchors and Fixed Equipment in National Park Service Wilderness."

Sincerely,
Michael Callen