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Title:

Comments: I write to you as not just a climber, but as an outdoor educator (with a degree in Outdoor Education & Leadership, and a minor in Forestry, specialized in Wilderness Management), climbing instructor and expedition leader (for NOLS, the gold standard of outdoor education and leadership), Leave No Trace Master Educator, and, most of all, a new route developer.

That means I spend the precious free time I get wandering the canyons and crags of Northern Arizona, looking for new routes to be climbed. I spend days finding my way through washes and slickrock benches, to find the next beautiful vertical challenge. I spend hours, if not days, finding the best (most enjoyable and safest) way up a wall that no one else has been on. I spend hundreds of dollars of my own money a year to install fixed protection (bolts) ONLY where removable protection (camming devices, stoppers) are not able to be used, and at anchor stations (necessary to rappel back down). I take pride in painting these bolts at home to closely match the color of the rock I plan to climb to camouflage them from sightseers below.

I also take pride in abiding by the policies regarding the prohibition of power drill use in Wilderness areas, instead using a hammer, masonry drill bit, and exponentially more time and elbow grease to install each bolt. I revel in the fact that I'm doing this "like they did in the old days." That doesn't mean I'm littering the wall with metal, just to remove it and leave scars in the rock, changing the personality of the route forever. I am strategically placing NECESSARY, PERMANENT PROTECTION for myself and for any others who wish to follow, investing in the safety of the climbing community for decades to come.

This choice to personally invest my time and money into this hobby just happens to accomplish similar goals as federal land management agencies. I am creating opportunities for recreation in a wilderness setting and eliminating undue risk while undertaking these opportunities. For too long now, climbing has fallen into a gray area of land management. Climbers themselves, not the managers, have regulated themselves, individually developing new routes for their community to enjoy, and forming local and regional organizations to spearhead efforts to replace old, unsafe fixed hardware. We do this without funding and with very little oversight from land managers. Imagine if you asked hikers to do the same thing? Or, on the other hand, imagine if hikers were so adamant about maintaining and creating amazing trails, that they willingly donated their own time and money to COMPLETELY UPHOLD the maintenance and creation of all trails in Wilderness areas.

So why is this an issue now? Policies allowing fixed hardware in Wilderness areas have been in place for nearly 60 years. There appears to be a severe lack of understanding in what actually occurs when rock climbing, especially when developing new routes. And apart from new routes, there are massively influential, classic climbs in Wilderness areas that were in place before the area was even designated Wilderness. Under this new policy, how would we keep these routes safe when the original fixed hardware rusts away? Again - imagine prohibiting the free, donated maintenance by hikers to keep a treasured Wilderness trail safe. Absurd, right?

I support updating decades-old policies to more accurately reflect the current conditions of this recreational niche, but this is not the way. If federal land management agencies truly saw rock climbing as an accepted use (which they claim they do), they would put in their due diligence to learn the role of the installation and replacement of fixed hardware, and then they would realize that prohibiting the free and open allowance of these actions is SUBSTANTIALLY ENDANGERING to the climbing community. Land managers need to allow climbers to explore Wilderness in a way that permits in-the-moment decisions that are necessary when navigating complex vertical terrain.