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First name: Sean

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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Dear USFS,

I am writing to request as deeply and sincerely as possible that you do not proceed with your new policies to prohibit fixed anchors in our Wilderness areas. These anchor systems are a vital safety system for those of us who enjoy engaging with our amazing Wilderness through the activity of climbing.

This policy will greatly endanger the lives of many people. It is of the utmost importance that the climbing community be free to maintain our anchor systems. Often climbers, especially those new to the sport heading into the wilderness for the first time, have no way of confirming the safety of fixed anchor systems prior to committing our lives to them. It is impossible to assess most anchors from the ground and there is little safe recourse to retreat once you have already reached a fixed anchor in need of replacement. Therefore, it is vital that the community be able to proactively maintain and replace anchors as needed, a decision that must often be made in the moment and for which prior authorization is not a viable option.

I grew up in a region that had climbing areas on land under local parks jurisdiction with similar anchor prohibitions to those outlined in the drafts policies you have put forward. To say it created a significant hazard and that it is a miracle no one got hurt is a serious understatement. The local climbing coalition worked for years and years to get permission to replace dangerous and old bolts. These anchors had long surpassed any safe use standard. However, because this was in the California Bay Area (Castle Rock State Park), lots of new climbers regularly used them without the knowledge they needed to understand the grave risk they were undertaking. When the parks jurisdiction finally granted permission for a limited replacement of some of the anchors on the worst routes, the local climbing coalition found bolts in staggeringly bad condition that could have failed catastrophically at any moment. That no one was seriously injured or killed by the park's policy and resulting red tape is nothing short of a miracle.

I am a professional forest ecologist, so I fully appreciate and support the need to create policies to protect our Wilderness areas. However, these anchor systems are not disruptive to the character of the Wilderness and, in fact, enhance the ways in which people can interact with our amazing wild lands on terrain that rarely presents significant habitat for species. Instead of a blanket ban on these systems, a much better approach would be to restrict Wilderness area use in areas or times of year where it presents a hazard to cultural or natural resources. These policies are already widely implemented in seasonal falcon closures etc. These restrictions should not be specific to climbing but should limit all recreational activities, such as hunting, in these areas during sensitive times. In this way, you will achieve much greater ecological or cultural protection while also avoiding the widespread endangerment of climbers who rely on these anchor systems.

Please do not proceed with these policies. There are much better options out there that will actually achieve your wilderness protection goals. If you do go forward with these policies, you are endangering the lives of everyone who goes to the Wilderness to climb. There is no way to make this policy work within the dynamic environment of Wilderness areas. Someone will die from this policy. That is the hard truth.

Thank you for listening,

Sean