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First name: John

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Organization: The Climbing Stewards

Title: President

Comments: To Whom It May Concern,

During the Autumn of 2012, I donated four months of my life as a Climbing Steward in Yosemite National Park. It was an honor to dedicate this time to stewardship, to giving back, and I had the great fortune to be able to do so at a relatively young age. The experience inspired me to found The Climbing Stewards, a 501(c)3 non-profit dedicated to supporting Steward programs and like efforts around the country. To date, this has resulted in dozens of climber volunteers spending thousands of hours over twelve years in national parks, national forests, and other public lands. We come from all walks of life, span several generations, and contribute in a myriad of ways including badly needed trail work, PSAR, SAR, the popular Ask-A-Climber program and Climber Coffee, and educating other climbers on Leave No Trace practices. Climbing Stewards are but one example of the widespread efforts contributed by the climbing community each year to take care of our crags and peaks and the lands surrounding them. The draft policies concerning fixed anchors in Wilderness are a bad faith attempt to end run around the PARC act and a betrayal of the climbing community, a betrayal of all of these thousands of volunteer hours climbers have donated over decades.

Fixed anchors are an integral part of climbing, providing access to Wilderness experience for thousands of climbers each year, and they save lives. Alex Honnold is virtually a household name because of his singular achievement of free-soloing The Freerider on El Capitan. His ascent will go down in history as one of the single most groundbreaking, impressive physical and mental feat of any human being. Still, this is not the experience that the vast majority of climbers seek when climbing in Wilderness. Using his example to justify the banning and removal of bolts in wilderness is facetious logic, and a slap in the face to all of us in the climbing community. Climbing is a supported activity in Wilderness, and today's climbing often requires the use of fixed anchors for safety and other reasons. This is a fact that the Wilderness Act did not foresee, but has been able to accommodate, until now.

Fixed anchors have many benefits. They are often placed by the first ascent team specifically to avoid leader fall and rock fall hazards. On routes of all lengths, they are used to guide the rope so as to avoid certain sections of rock, edges, loose blocks, and the like. They are used to segregate climber ascent and descent routes to avoid clustering on long routes, improving safety. They can and do minimize human error, on a regular basis. Anchor hardware needs periodic replacement in order to remain safe. Fixed anchors provide safer and speedier escape options when incoming weather conditions dictate retreat. The ability to safely retreat prevents the massive impact often caused by SAR callouts, to say nothing of the taxpayer expense of these rescues. Finally, when a SAR incident does take place, the responding team often places fixed anchors during the rescue in order to facilitate their safety as well as that of the climbing team. The proposed policies make no exception for this type of situation. Simply put, bolts save lives.

Bolts also provide access to climbing in several ways that traditional climbing does not. Bolted climbs offer opportunity for those with disabilities to find meaning and adventure in climbing. There are many climbers that can protect themselves using a bolt, but cannot use traditional gear. Economically speaking, fixed anchors offer an pathway to climbing for people unable to invest the thousands of dollars it can take to purchase traditional climbing equipment. In addition, the placement of fixed anchors opens up areas to climbing where the rock is less suitable, or unsuitable, for traditional protection. These areas are sometimes closer to population centers, helping to reduce carbon emissions, and also dispersing climber user days across many more climbing areas, thereby reducing impacts.

The non-profit organizations that represent us, including The Access Fund, The American Alpine Club, and the

myriad of local climbing organizations around the country recognize the need for climbing management and have been working diligently with USFS and NPS units individually and nationally to develop appropriate CMPs in various locations. We are taxpayers, we are Americans, we are organized, we are united in this, we are millions, and we are not going away.

I urge you to reconsider the draft policies. They are in direct opposition to the desires of millions of American climbers.

Sincerely,
John B Connor
President, The Climbing Stewards
Board Director, Friends of Joshua Tree