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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Dear US Forest Service,

As an educator, professional mountain guide, lifelong climber, board member of the Southwest Montana Climber's Coalition, and the Executive Director of the Montana Mountaineering Association, I am deeply concerned about the proposed prohibition of fixed anchors in Wilderness areas.

The history of climbing on the American continent stretches back to time immemorial; from the indigenous people of the Colorado Plateau scaling to cliff dwellings, to modern day climbers exploring the most remote and wild places on the planet, the history of humanity is inextricable from climbing. In the modern timeframe, I have personal experience with climbing my whole life, and as an educator and guide have seen the transformative power of climbing on young people whom I help mentor through the Junior Mountaineering Team program at the Montana Mountaineering Association.

Fixed anchors are an integral part of the safety systems that climbers have used for more than a hundred years of technical roped climbing. From the first technical climbers exploring remote cliff bands at the beginning of the 1900s, to 10th Mountain Division veterans bringing their skill set and experience to the mountains following World War II, to carefully installed pitons and bolted anchors today, fixed anchors are critical to the pursuit of climbing. The proposed new guidance restricting the use of fixed anchors is both unreasonable, goes against over a hundred years of climbing history, against nearly 60 years of precedent through the Wilderness Act, and threatens the very pursuit of responsible Wilderness climbing.

The proposed guidelines raise significant issues, from impeding the moment-to-moment decisions by individual climbers regarding their security, to the ability of local climbing organizations to perform regular hardware inspection and replacement. As a board member of the Southwest Montana Climbers Coalition, I have personally assisted with important hardware maintenance, replacing aging bolts and anchors that presented a hazard to climbers, with high quality modern hardware that minimizes visual impact, reduces waste, and keeps climbers safe. Climber coalitions such as SMCC are also critical partners in trail maintenance, invasive species control, and trash pick up at climbing locations around the country.

The Wilderness Act itself spells out the need for "outstanding opportunities for solitude or for a primitive and unconfined type of recreation." I can think of no better example of unconfined recreation than a small, experienced team of climbers setting off on an unknown and unclimbed route. The discoveries along the way and need for in-the-moment decision-making are essential parts of the experience, including the occasional need to install pieces of fixed protection to ensure team security.

In a time where we are increasingly concerned about "nature deficit disorder" among the next generation, facing the increasing effects of climate change, and in which numerous peer-reviewed studies have shown the positive impacts that outdoor recreation and mentorship have on youth mental health, I am particularly concerned about potentially depriving the next generation of these opportunities. As an outdoor community, we need to be pursuing initiatives to increase access to the outdoors, give young people the tools they need to tackle challenging situations, and instill a sense of wonder, exploration, and appreciation for the natural world. The next generation needs to know that they too will have the opportunity to find solitude, and a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.

As the Executive Director of the Montana Mountaineering Association, an educator and guide, and a lifelong climber, I implore you to reconsider the proposed guidelines. The climbing community, led by passionate and

experienced individuals and organizations like the Access Fund, American Alpine Club, and Southwest Montana Climbers Coalition, is well equipped to engage in a collaborative process that upholds the balance between preserving Wilderness character and respecting the thousands of years of climbing history on the continent. Furthermore, through collaboration and education, we can pass along that ethic to the next generation of climbers who are the future of the sport, of Wilderness, and of our society.

Sincerely,
Matt Zia
Executive Director
Montana Mountaineering Association