

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 1/1/2024 7:00:11 PM

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Comments: Jan 1, 2024

Dear US forest service,

As an avid climber for the last 44 years I am very interested and concerned about the new policies you are developing regarding fixed anchors in America's wilderness lands. There are three points I would like to clarify initially that I feel are hard to dispute by anyone knowledgeable about climbing:

1. Climbing is a well-established traditional recreational use of our national parks and wilderness lands.
2. Fixed anchors are well established devices used to protect climbers both during ascent of otherwise unsafe expanses of rock, and as points of protection for safe belays and for safe escapes (rappelling). They have been used for half a century or more. They are not prohibited installations under the Wilderness Act.
3. Prohibiting fixed anchors or removing already existing anchors will create serious safety issues to climbers AND to the rescue squads dispatched in an emergency (at which point the rescue squads will be forced to create fixed anchors for safety reasons).

The recent explosion of climbers and bolt-protected routes does not invalidate the above points, it only forces an increased scrutiny of their impact on the natural resource in which they are occurring. Any ruling that entirely bans climbing and fixed anchors is a blow against traditional established land use. On the other hand, a complete ban of fixed anchors, without banning climbing, would lead to significant safety risks to people undertaking the sport (and potential forest service liability for inappropriately dangerous regulations?). The two are therefore integral to each other.

While I agree that "sport climbs" - a method that requires extensive bolting of steep rock faces and sometimes slings attached to those bolts - should be illegal in the wilderness, I disagree that this can be translated into a policy of no fixed anchors whatsoever. I understand that distinguishing what is a sport climb and what is an acceptable use of fixed anchors in the wilderness may be a difficult definition to conquer, but I believe with the input of the Access Fund and climbers we can all come up with a reasonable agreement.

What then is the real reason for the NPS and USFS desire to regulate climbing and fixed anchors? I hope it is to minimize environmental impact, especially in light of climbing's increasing popularity. If so, a well thought out evaluation of climbing's actual environmental impact should be considered. A compromise that is fair both from an environmental standpoint and from a comparison to other traditional land uses and their relative impact needs to be developed. For example, to eliminate safe climbing practices (occasional fixed anchors) but to allow safe trail construction so humans and horses can get into the wilderness would not be a fair compromise. Both are necessary for safety, and the latter has far more visual impact than the former. The majority of climbing cliffs in the wilderness are in areas where the non-climbing public rarely ventures closer than a few thousand yards, and most fixed anchors, especially bolts or pitons (especially if camouflaged), are invisible to anyone not standing very near them. To imply these fixed anchors are a blight on the wilderness experience while sitting on your horse walking down a mud filled, torn up trail, past stacked cairns, blazed trees and occasional trail signs, to your camp with large tents and a camp fire is silly.

I have written many similar letters to this one over many decades. I don't understand why this continues to come up. Perhaps the bipartisan supported "Protect Americas Climbing Act" will put this to rest? I hope you seriously consider these comments. We all have different ways of self-affirmation. Whether some government officials respect it or not, some of us do this through climbing and other "risky" behaviors, and we leave very little impact at all. I for one have never found any outlet as rewarding and satisfying (including my job as an emergency

physician in major trauma centers caring for extremely sick and injured patients) as climbing large unexplored rock faces in our nation's wilderness. I am seriously concerned that if our national land managers write a law forbidding me to ever place a fixed piece of protection they will make it extremely risky for me to consider ever climbing on unexplored rock again. I do not believe the impact I make is as significant as many other uses that are condoned in our forests. Please be very careful and thoughtful in your decision. Whether you believe it or not, we as a group are very supportive of wilderness preservation. However, this issue of fixed anchors is making me closely re-evaluate what "environmentally conscious" actually means and reconsider a number of donations I make to environmental groups. Be careful and thoughtful of all of us.

Sincerely,

Tim Wolfe, MD