

Access and the Politics of Climbing

A long-simmering stew

by Michael Kennedy, *President, The Access Fund*

When the history of climbing in the United States in the last two decades of the 20th century is written, 1998 will likely go down as a watershed year, not so much for technical breakthroughs in the mountains or brilliant performances on the crags, but for the fact that this was the year when a long-simmering stew of issues finally came to the forefront of the American climber's consciousness. Loosely categorized under the rubric of "access," these questions of where we climb and the methods we employ will continue to haunt our "sport" (although I hesitate to use that term) for many years to come.

In June, the Forest Service banned the use of fixed anchors in all Wilderness areas under its jurisdiction, arguing that pins, nuts, slings, and bolts left in place by climbers are "installations" similar in character to roads, dams, landing strips, and radio towers. In September, the National Park Service released a climbing management plan for City of Rocks National Reserve, Idaho, that made permanent (after a five-year moratorium) the outright closure of the Twin Sisters to climbing and all other use because it lies within the "historic viewshed" of the California Trail. Meanwhile, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department imposed such draconian restrictions on climbing at Hueco Tanks that this state park, once the world's preeminent winter bouldering area, was virtually abandoned by climbers.

1998 was also the year in which American climbers rose to the challenge more than ever before in fighting these and many other climbing-related battles. Although it didn't involve closing down an area or restricting climbing, the fight to preserve Camp 4 in Yosemite, initiated and financed entirely by climbers, was a powerful example of activism that put the National Park Service and other federal land management agencies on notice that climbers were a force to be reckoned with. Similarly, within a few months of the announcement of the fixed-anchor ban, a coalition of climbing organizations and outdoor industry notables had galvanized the efforts of mainstream environmental groups, local and national politicians, and hundreds of individual climbers, and convinced the Forest Service to rescind its system-wide fixed anchor ban, at least temporarily. (It is important to note that fixed anchors are still prohibited in the Sawtooth Wilderness, Idaho, an action that sets a troubling precedent.) The Forest Service also initiated a "negotiated rulemaking" process in which climbers, the agency, environmental groups, and other interested parties will (theoretically) come up with a consensus-based plan for managing fixed anchors in Wilderness. (As of mid-May, this group had yet to meet.) In November, the Access Fund, acting on behalf of nine individual climbers, filed a lawsuit against the National Park Service demanding that the Twin Sisters closure be lifted. Unfortunately, ongoing attempts to ease the restrictions at Hueco Tanks have so far produced less encouraging results. All these issues are still to be resolved, but at the very least we've gotten the agencies' attention and let them know that climbers won't take such actions lying down.

Make no mistake about it, though: closures and restrictions like those mentioned above, as well as the increasing number of user fees and permits aimed at climbers and the emergence of solitude as a guiding principle in Wilderness management, herald the dawn of an era in which climbing is in grave danger of being marginalized and perhaps even regulated out of existence. As our numbers have grown, so too have our physical and social impacts and our visibility as a user group. There are powerful and often subtle forces at work, both within our community and outside it, that have transformed, and continue to transform, not just how we act as climbers but how we think about climbing. The climbing world five or ten or 20 years hence will be vastly different from the one we inhabit right now, as will be our relationships with land managers, fellow climbers, and other users of public lands. Whether the changes we've already seen and the ones bearing down on us are good or bad depends on your point of view, but the direction these changes take is still up to us.

For much of this century, climbers have operated at the fringes of American culture. Climbing was something you did when you were young and restless. You learned the ropes from other climbers, much as an apprentice learns from a master, and toiled in obscurity at your craft. It was a harmless enough diversion that would eventually give way to the adult pursuit of work, marriage, mortgages, and children. Those who shunned such norms in favor of a lifetime of road trips (Fred Beckey comes to mind) or who were brilliant and driven enough to advance the standards of the day (Royal Robbins, Jim Bridwell) were lionized by a small and relatively close-knit climbing community. To society at large, though, climbers were seen as vagabonds in pursuit of an incomprehensible and vaguely foolish Holy Grail—if they were noticed at all.

In large measure, too, climbers were paid scant attention by land managers and others concerned with the stewardship of our public lands. When I started climbing in 1970, you had to have a doctor's note for some climbs (like Denali), or comply with silly rules involving helmets and climbing a particular route to prove your expertise (at Devil's Tower), but we were largely beneath land managers' radar screens. No one outside the climbing tribe had much to do with telling you when or where or how to climb, what type of or how much gear you could use. Inexorably grounded in the tradition of exploration, the rules of climbing, though often as strict and unforgiving as the rock itself, were codified and enforced by climbers alone. This state of benign neglect was a perfect fit for an activity like climbing, especially when our numbers were small and our impacts, both social and physical, could be either ignored or simply went unnoticed.

Starting in the 1980s, though, something curious happened: climbing became popular. Better equipment and clothing made traditional climbing and mountaineering less risky and more comfortable, enhancing their innate attractiveness. By emphasizing the gymnastic and reducing risks still further, sport climbing helped open climbing to the masses, with climbing gyms providing a convenient entry point. Power drills made it feasible to climb on numerous previously unattractive cliffs. Information about climbing became readily and quickly available via magazines, guidebooks, videos, and web sites. Climbing schools and guide services, once rare, became nearly ubiquitous, offering an efficient path to the mastery of once-arcaic techniques. The climbing and outdoor industries grew in size and clout. The media shone its bright spotlight on our world, and climbing became an icon of the newly legitimate pursuit of adventure in the American cultural landscape. To be a climber today means you no longer have to answer a question like, "How do you get the rope up there?" You're more likely to be asked how you feel about guiding on Everest, or whether the X-Games portrays what climbing is really all about. In short, climbing in 1999 is hip, sexy, and, dare I say it, even respectable.

Of course, much of this is a gross oversimplification. American climbing has always had its upright citizens and its renegades, its visionaries and its derelicts, and society's view of our activities has never been quite so black-and-white as I've portrayed here. An aura of danger and mystery has always surrounded climbing, and pundits have historically been quick to point out the essential irresponsibility of our activity and the unreasonable burden it places on public resources. This is most obvious when it comes to the issue of safety: witness the outcry in 1992 when 11 climbers were killed in a single season on Denali, and the relative ease with which the current \$150-per-person "registration fee" was imposed a few years later. (Tellingly, the National Park Service originally proposed a \$500 "rescue fee" for Denali climbers, but backed off because of concerns over liability and the "duty to rescue" implied by such a fee. Many, myself included, view the current fee as a thinly-disguised effort to charge a targeted group—climbers—for rescues without actually saying so.)

Increasingly, though, it is the physical and social impacts of climbing that have become the targets of criticism. Anyone who has been around longer than a few years can attest to the fact that today any popular climbing area is more crowded, more frequently, than ever before. This reflects simple math. The number of climbers in the United States has probably tripled since 1985. That's my own conservative, seat-of-the-pants estimate, based on the fact that the circulation of *Climbing* magazine grew more than three-fold between 1987 and 1997. Assuming, for argument's sake, that one in ten climbers buys *Climbing*, you end up with 500,000 climbers in the United States right now versus maybe 150,000 in 1985. I suspect that most manufacturers, retailers, guidebook publishers, climbing schools, and land managers would peg the numbers much higher.

The pace at which new climbing areas and new routes in existing areas are discovered and developed has also increased dramatically—just look at the guidebook section in your local shop or in Chessler's mail-order catalogue. But really good climbing resources are still relatively rare. New mountains don't suddenly arise from the forest, and while climbers are ingenious and persistent in their quest for new rock and ice to explore, very few places offer the combination of quality, ambience, and accessibility that even an average climbing area requires. Well-known crags and mountains that are adequately documented in guidebooks and convenient to major population centers or worthy as destinations in their own right have inevitably borne the brunt of an increasing climbing population.

Whatever the actual number of new climbers, new routes, and new areas, we've seen a lot of growth in a relatively short period of time. And with that growth comes all the impacts associated with greater use: eroded trails, human waste, vegetation loss on and around the cliffs, trash, and conflicts with other user groups, to name only the most obvious. With very few exceptions, climbing resources lie on public lands that we share with many other people. Human-powered activities like hiking, backcountry skiing, mountain biking, backpacking, and kayaking create their own unique needs and impacts, and they've all become more popular. Ditto with ski areas and windshield tourism, snowmobiling and dirt biking, horseback riding and bird watching. There aren't only more climbers, there are more people, period, using and sometimes abusing our state and national parks and forests. We all think we're special, and we're all competing for our share of a limited pie.

It should come as no surprise, then, that decisions about where and how we climb are no longer being made by climbers alone. Indeed, climbing policy has become subject to the same bureaucratic inertia and compromise, the same power struggles between competing interests, and the same quasi-backroom deals to which so much else in our culture is beholden. In short, it's politics as usual.

That's not to say there is some grand, anti-climbing plan being hatched in the labyrinthine halls of the Forest Service, or that a secret cabal of rabid environmentalists at the Department of Interior is out to "get" climbers. In the past ten years we've come under ever-greater scrutiny from land managers, environmental groups, and a public concerned with the fate of our wild lands, but however gratifying conspiracy theories might be, the truth is far more complex.

Climbers have unquestionably found themselves at odds with the small but influential faction within the land management and environmental communities that regards virtually all human use as detrimental to resource and/or historic values. This viewpoint bolsters the argument that fixed anchors are illegal under the Wilderness Act (since any resource impact, however inconsequential, is suspect), and reinforces the closure of Twin Sisters for historic preservation reasons (this despite that agency's own study concluding that climbers had no significant impact on the historic value of the formation). For these zealots, the only way to save public lands is to eliminate impacts entirely. One way to do that is by simply keeping people out, which has largely been the effect of the Hueco Tanks climbing management plan. The recent attempt by the Forest Service to severely limit the number of climbers on Mount Hood, Oregon, by defining solitude as the critical Wilderness value worthy of protection is yet another indication that the arch-preservationist faction is one we'll be battling for the foreseeable future.

Other more subtle factors, though, have had far greater influence on climbing's fate. Chief among these is the simple fact that land management agencies are bureaucracies, and it is the nature of any bureaucracy to perpetuate itself. One way to do this is by favoring activities that serve large constituencies, because wide popular support invariably leads to continued political and economic sustenance. If these activities are economically beneficial to the surrounding communities, or the agency itself, all the better. Land managers also pay the closest attention to those who speak the most forcefully for their interests. As the old adage goes, "The squeaky wheel gets the grease."

Climbers have faced new restrictions in the recent past—and we'll face even more in the future—mostly because our numbers, while growing, are still relatively small. Climbers' economic impacts are poorly documented, but are certainly dwarfed by those of hikers, bikers, skiers, horseback riders, and windshield tourists. While much of what drives climbing policy today is based on an inaccurate picture of what climbers actually do, the true impacts, costs, and management requirements of climbing are rarely viewed in comparison with those of other user groups. The sense that climbing is a dangerous and frivolous activity undoubtedly makes many people less than sympathetic to our needs. (That's one reason there's been no public uproar about the Denali fee.) We have often compounded these political and economic disadvantages by our infighting and our reluctance to band together to protect our common interests.

This at least partly explains why the Forest Service tried to ban the use of fixed anchors in Wilderness, and why the restrictions on climbing in Hueco Tanks, Texas, are now so severe. In both cases, climbing was seen as an easy target. (You can imagine the outcry if backcountry camping or horseback riding were prohibited outright in national forest Wilderness, or if you had to have a ranger accompany your car-camping group at a Colorado state park.) The Forest Service has discovered, to its chagrin, that climbers aren't as powerless and politically naïve as they appear, but this is no cause for celebration. We still have a long and difficult road ahead on the fixed anchor issue, and the outcome is far from certain. And the prospects at Hueco, dismal as they may be right now, should only cause us to redouble our efforts there.

It's far easier to prohibit or limit an activity than to manage it effectively, which brings up another key attribute of a bureaucracy: the need to exert control over its domain. For a land manager, that first means having the authority to define what visitors do, and when, where, how, and sometimes even why they do it. It then means being able to come up with black-and-white rules to keep people in line. Bureaucrats tend to look for a common norm they can build these rules around, which helps explain why land managers have a hard time understanding, for example, the need for new routes. If a given crag already has ten routes, what need is there for another? Why not just climb an already existing route? Why climb a mountain two or three times by different routes if you can get the same view from the top by going up the easiest way? Climbers and their actions don't fit into neat little boxes, and that makes the bureaucratic mind very uncomfortable. Combine all this with the fact that the staff, equipment, and budget resources to promulgate and enforce these rules are almost always in short supply, and it becomes clear why the land manager tends to favor simple and inexpensive management prescriptions. His job is going to be a lot easier if his "customers" don't stray too far from the beaten path, as climbers are wont to do.

In many ways, then, the ideal visitor to our national parks and forests seems destined to become the windshield tourist who drives in, snaps a photo at the scenic overlook, buys a few trinkets at the visitors' center, and leaves—that is, someone who abides by the rules and does what he's told. That's hardly the picture of the archetypal climber, which begs the question: How do we avoid a future of ever-increasing regulation in response to our ever-greater numbers, thereby preserving the freedom that is at the heart and soul of climbing?

We can start by recognizing that climbers have a legitimate interest in how public lands are managed and further, that no one is going to represent our concerns unless we do so ourselves. That means we have to join and support organizations like the Access Fund, the American Alpine Club, and the many local and regional groups that are working hard to ensure climbers' continued freedom. It also means meeting with land managers, writing to your political representatives, and encouraging fellow climbers to participate in the minutiae of climbing management. Only by working together can we stay one step ahead of those who would unjustly limit our use of public lands.

We must also become more cognizant of the impacts associated with climbing and more assertive in mitigating or preventing them. That means volunteering for trail work and chalk clean-ups, picking up trash, and generally being good stewards of our wild lands. It means treating other users with respect; at the very least, we can lower the volume on our boom boxes, tone down our tantrums, and otherwise recognize that the hikers and birdwatchers and families around us have just as much right to be there as we do. We'll also have to be amenable to reasonable restrictions on climbing based on objective criteria and political reality. I may not like the "voluntary" closure of Devils Tower in June each year, or the fixed-anchor restrictions in the new Joshua Tree Backcountry and Wilderness Management Plan, but I'll support both because the alternatives are far worse.

Contrary to climbing's maverick culture and history, it will be critically important for us to reinforce our ability to police our own actions. Management prescriptions that preserve the core values of climbing will only work if climbers can control their worst impulses. Elite climbers, guides, shop owners, manufacturers, writers, photographers, editors, and publishers all bear a huge responsibility in this arena. We'll have to become less selfish and more community-oriented. We'll have to take a critical look at our sometimes-excessive use of fixed anchors, our willingness to aggressively garden and clean routes, and all the other less-than-savory practices in which climbers engage. We can no longer ignore the "dark side" of

climbing, nor should we. At times, that's going to mean criticizing climbers whose actions harm the collective good. Climbers are simply going to have to grow up.

All this isn't going to be easy. Climbers are by nature independent, even unruly. All climbing involves variables—weather and conditions, the specific architecture of the crag or mountain, the emotions and physiology of the climbers themselves—that can't be quantified and are difficult if not impossible to regulate in a traditional bureaucratic manner. Climbing demands a high level of initiative, vision, ingenuity, and risk. It obliges us to engage in an intimate relationship with the natural world and to clearly recognize and accept our own mortality as an integral part of that association. The freedom to make our own choices and the concomitant responsibility to accept the consequences of our actions are central to the ethos of climbing and deeply ingrained in our history, mythology, and practice—indeed, they are inseparable from the meaning of climbing itself. If we continue to cultivate a climbing community that is politically active, engaged, and informed, we will, I hope, be able to say the same thing five or ten or 20 years from now.



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