

October 2, 2003

Superintendent Mike Tollefson
Yosemite National Park
ATTN: Yosemite Lodge Area Redevelopment
P.O. Box 577
Yosemite, CA 95389

Re: Access Fund Comments to the Yosemite Lodge Area Redevelopment Environmental Assessment Concerning Camp 4

Dear Superintendent Tollefson:

The Access Fund welcomes the opportunity to submit these comments on the Yosemite Lodge Area Redevelopment Environmental Assessment (Lodge EA). While the changes to the layout of the Lodge are a significant improvement to the experience of Yosemite visitors, the proposed alterations to Camp 4 in the Lodge EA are very significant for climbers, who are the Valley's largest single user group. Accordingly, the Access Fund notes the importance of the proposals within the Lodge EA to climbers. We feel that Alternative 2 (the Preferred Alternative) best serves the interests of climbers and the general public, and we support the implementation of this Alternative at Camp 4.

The Access Fund

The Access Fund is a 501 (c) 3 non-profit advocacy group representing the interests of climbers throughout the United States and is America's largest national climbing organization, with over 15,000 members and affiliates from across the country. We advocate on behalf of approximately one million climbers in the United States. The Access Fund's mission is to keep climbing areas open and to conserve the climbing environment. Preserving the opportunity to climb and the diversity of the climbing experience are also fundamental to our mission. Working in cooperation with climbers, other recreational users, public land managers and private land owners, the Access Fund promotes the responsible use and sound management of climbing resources. We encourage an ethic of personal responsibility, self-regulation, strong conservation values and minimum impact practices among climbers.

Camp 4

The Access Fund has a long history of involvement and participation in Yosemite National Park planning issues generally and regarding Camp 4 in particular. We recommended Camp 4 improvements as far back as 1993 while working on a team planning an as-yet unfinished climbing management plan for Yosemite National Park. We also formally commented on Camp 4 improvements in letters to the Yosemite Fund (1997) and Yosemite National Park planners and rangers (1999 and 2002). We also submitted extensive comments on the Lodge Plan, Lower Yosemite Falls Plan, Valley Implementation Plan, Valley Plan, and Merced River Plan.

As noted in previous correspondence to Yosemite National Park, the Access Fund enthusiastically endorses the expansion and improvement of Camp 4. Camp 4 is a climbing resource of international significance because of its long and close association with the history of climbing in Yosemite. Although we feel that Camp 4 improvements are central to climber interests, there are broader reasons to support the improvement of Camp 4. Camp 4 not only is the Valley's climbers' camp, but it is the international youth center for Yosemite, a place where young people and the young in spirit from many nations come together in a semi-communal living environment to enjoy the immense beauty of the park and to test themselves against its unique challenges. Offering low-cost, non-reservation, communal-style camping, Camp 4 is the only lodging in the Valley that appeals specifically to young people. Moreover, Yosemite National Park's 1980 General Management Plan recognizes the importance of serving special populations, which include the young and foreign visitors. See GMP at 23. Camp 4 has traditionally served climbers and the young, and particularly young foreigners, and consequently the concept of improving Camp 4 furthers the goals of the 1980 General Management Plan. Finally, the proposed expansion and improvement of Camp 4 serves to recognize climbers as Yosemite Valley's largest and most significant user group. The expansion and improvements to Camp 4 underscore this long overdue acknowledgement.

As a general matter, we strongly support the efforts of the Park Service to improve the visitor experience in Yosemite Valley. The Lodge EA represents a significant step towards the implementation of the Valley Plan, and we believe that it will greatly improve the visitor experience for campers in Camp 4. In particular, we are encouraged that the NPS is working towards providing more economy lodging and expanding camping opportunities at Yosemite Lodge.

Alternative 2

The Access Fund supports the selection of Alternative 2 (the Preferred Alternative). We have long advocated for additional improvements to Camp 4, which has at various times been neglected by the NPS, especially when compared to the care given to more expensive lodging in the Valley. Providing more services to Camp 4 visitors, acknowledging the central role of climbing in the Valley's history, and upgrading the physical environment at Camp 4 have been the focus of our recommendations.

As such, the Access Fund is pleased that in the Lodge EA the NPS acknowledges the importance of Camp 4 to climbers, and the historical significance of this campground, and is acting accordingly by providing a climbing display building. This climbing display should educate all visitors to the Valley as to the international significance that Yosemite National Park has to climbing. If ever there was a public land unit that should have such a climbing display, Yosemite National Park is it. We are also pleased with the proposal in Alternative #2 to build a shower building, a cooking pavilion, gear storage lockers and shared fire rings, and to provide additional restrooms and renovate the existing restroom at the west end of the campground. These improvements are long overdue and acknowledge that climbers deserve consideration as much as other Valley users. Finally, we support the restoration of the landscape within the camping area to a more natural setting, the retention of the parking lot within the bounds of Camp 4, and the relocation of Northside Drive to the south of the Lodge area.

Improving the experience of Camp 4 through these physical alterations will go a long way towards transforming Camp 4's reputation from a camping ghetto to the historically significant campground that is listed on the national registry of historic places. The Park Service should be commended for stepping up and taking care of this significant camping area.

One item in our previous recommendations that does not appear in the Plan is the installation of natural-appearing fencing around the denuded perimeter of Camp 4, with gaps at intervals to channel foot traffic. This would allow the growth of perimeter screening vegetation between the campground and other uses, particularly the busy multi-use trail along the former Northside Drive. The fencing material could be split rail or post and rope, as in other developed areas of the Valley. As a final note, it is not clear from the Lodge EA whether Alternative 2 would retain picnic tables at each campsite. While the construction of a cooking pavilion in Camp 4 will add greatly to the social atmosphere of the area—and provide a sheltered cooking area during inclement weather—the NPS should retain one picnic table for each campsite for campers who wish to cook in privacy.

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We look forward to the opportunity to discuss the improvements to Camp 4 with park staff further and, if appropriate, to meet with you in the Valley to further discuss any planning issues related to Camp 4.

Sincerely,

Jason Keith
Policy Director
The Access Fund

cc: Steve Matous, Executive Director
Shawn Tierney, Acquisitions and Access Director
Paul Minault, Northern California Regional Coordinator, The Access Fund
Armando Menocal, Access Fund Honorary Board Member
Linda McMillan, Vice President, American Alpine Club