



Protect America's Climbing



Access Fund and American Alpine Club Policy on Fixed Anchors

April 27, 2015

Purpose

The purpose of the following joint Access Fund and American Alpine Club Fixed Anchor Policy is to provide the climbing community, partner organizations, community stakeholders, agency officials, and land managers (public and private) with a clear and consistent policy position regarding the placement, maintenance and management of fixed anchors for technical climbing. The Access Fund and the American Alpine Club collectively represent tens of thousands of individuals throughout all fifty United States who access – for climbing – public and private lands. Therefore, the policy statements herein are intended to have broad application on both private and public lands, and on lands with and without federal wilderness designation.

Fixed Anchors Defined

Fixed anchors are defined as climbing equipment (e.g., bolts, pitons or slings) left in place to facilitate ascent or descent of technical terrain (USDA Forest Service, 1999ⁱ). These anchors are a critical component of a climber's safety system. Fixed anchors are typically placed by the first ascensionist on technical ascents and descents (rappels) where removable anchor placements are not viable.

Fixed Anchor Policy

Below is the joint Fixed Anchor Policy for the Access Fund and the American Alpine Club. Policy statements are clarified for two land management designations: 1) lands consisting of "all climbing resources," and 2) those climbing resources that are located on lands that are "designated wilderness."

A differentiation of policy statements between lands that are formally designated wilderness and those that are not designated wilderness is necessary to acknowledge that the Access Fund and the American Alpine Club have been working since 1989 with federal land management agencies to resolve the issue of how fixed anchors should be managed, especially on lands that are designated as wilderness. Moreover, Access Fund and American Alpine Club have negotiated directly with individuals and organizations throughout the environmental community to achieve broad support for a national fixed anchor policy that allows, but appropriately limits, the use of fixed anchors in wilderness.

To further clarify, a vast majority of climbers have not placed fixed anchors, opting instead to climb established climbing routes and avoid the burden of the careful deliberation and labor associated with placing a fixed anchor.ⁱⁱ Moreover, most climbers favor some form of fixed anchor regulation in wilderness in order to preserve wilderness character.ⁱⁱⁱ In our experience, concerns about fixed anchors are almost never related to measurable resource impacts that may be associated with the physical placement of these traditional climbing tools, but rather to philosophical convictions.^{iv}

Fixed Anchor Policy for All Climbing Resources

1. **Climbing is an appropriate activity and fixed anchors are necessary tools for climbing.**^v
2. **Some level of fixed anchor use shall be allowed wherever climbing is allowed,** and that the appropriate level of use should be established on an area-by-area basis.^{vi}
3. **Fixed anchor maintenance and replacement shall be allowable** for existing fixed anchors.
4. **Climbers should bear the responsibility,** in accordance with land management regulations, for determining when and where to place and replace fixed anchors, and how to use these tools.
5. **Fixed anchors are a significant tool for resource management.** Fixed anchors can be strategically placed to minimize climbing related biophysical impacts that can occur to fragile soils, vegetation, and wildlife. This value is sacrificed if any use of fixed anchors is prohibited.
6. **Fixed Anchors are a significant tool for managing the climbing experience.** Fixed anchors can be placed in such a way to improve social conditions, enhance safety, reduce the need for land management restrictions and provide outstanding recreational opportunities.
7. **Public input is critically important for the management of fixed anchors.** Climbers need to have a voice in managing key elements of the climbing safety system.^{vii}
8. **Administrative actions regarding fixed anchors should be well substantiated and noticed to the public.** Decisions regarding fixed anchors should be grounded in a firm understanding of resource capacity, associated impacts, and acceptable rates of change to the natural and social environment. Fixed anchor management alternatives should be evaluated before any decisions are made to restrict the use of fixed anchors. All administrative changes to the condition of fixed anchors (e.g., removal) should be well-publicized to help mitigate potential negative impacts to climber safety.

Supplemental Fixed Anchor Policy for Federally Designated Wilderness

9. **Power drills shall not be used for placement of fixed anchors in wilderness.**
10. **Occasional fixed anchors are acceptable in wilderness.**^{viii}

ⁱ Federal Register, Vol. 64, No 209, Department of Agriculture, 36 CFR Chapter II, Forest Service, *Negotiated Rulemaking Advisory Committee; Fixed Anchors in Wilderness*, at: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-1999-10-29/pdf/99-28219.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Studies indicate that the vast minority of climbers (<20% based on site specific samples) have ever placed a bolt. It is reasonable to assume that an even smaller minority of climbers have placed a bolt (hand drilled) in a remote wilderness setting based on documented climber use-patterns.

Schuster, R. M., Thomson, J. G., & Hammitt, W. E. (2001). *Rock Climber's Attitudes Toward Management of Climbing and the Use of Bolts*. *Environmental Management*, 28(3), 403-412.

Murdock, E.D. (2010). *Perspectives on Rock Climbing Fixed Anchors Through the Lens of the Wilderness Act: Social, Legal and Environmental Implications at Joshua Tree National Park, California* (Unpublished). Doctoral Dissertation, University of Arizona.

Reighart, S. (2007). *Rock Climber Perspectives on Management Issues in the Red River Gorge* (Unpublished). Thesis, Ohio State University.

ⁱⁱⁱ The majority of climbers support some level of regulation on fixed anchors in general, especially in designated Wilderness.

Access Fund (2011) *Access Fund NPS Fixed Anchors in Wilderness Survey*, at:

http://www.accessfund.org/site/c.tmL5KhNWLrH/b.6579193/k.6A95/NPS_Fixed_Anchor_Survey.htm

Attarian, A. (1999). *Factors influencing responsible rock climbing behavior* (Unpublished). The American Alpine Club, Golden, CO.

Waldrup, R., & McEwen, D. (1994). *Rockclimbing and Wilderness; A Study of Climber's Attitudes Toward Wilderness, Climbing Impacts and Regulation*. *Trends*, 31(3), 38-49.

Wallace, G. N., & Trench, K. (1996). *A Study of Rock Climbers in Joshua Tree National Park: Implications for the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) Management Framework* (Unpublished). Fort Collins, CO: Colorado State University.

^{iv} Dolan, T. (2000). *Fixed Anchors and the Wilderness Act: Is the Adventure Over?* *University of San Francisco Law Review*, 34, 355-381.

^v Climbing is a legitimate and appropriate recreational activity on private lands when authorized and permitted by the landowner; and on public lands managed by local, state and Federal agencies, including on federally managed lands that are designated wilderness. Agencies may establish and implement climbing management actions via legally derived land management plans or other applicable regulatory processes. The climbing community in large part expects relative consistency in approach to climbing management among all agencies.

^{vi} Surveys of the climbing community show that the vast majority of climbers support this position.

Access Fund (2011) *Access Fund NPS Fixed Anchors in Wilderness Survey*, at:

http://www.accessfund.org/site/c.tmL5KhNWLrH/b.6579193/k.6A95/NPS_Fixed_Anchor_Survey.htm

^{vii} Specifically for National Park Service administered lands, Director's Order #41 clearly provides that "Wilderness parks with climbing use will exchange information on best practices, work together on service wide implementation, and communicate with stakeholders and wilderness users."

^{viii} Wilderness fixed anchor management must provide provisions (programmatically or case-by-case basis) to allow climbers some level of control, while in a wilderness setting, to make decisions regarding fixed anchor placements where no other options are available. Such policies allow climbers to make legal, critical decisions regarding personal safety in unforgiving conditions often experienced in rugged wilderness. Only a very small minority of climbers partake in wilderness-based first ascents that involve the placement of fixed anchors; however, the ability of climbers to place a de minimus number of wilderness fixed anchors is a privilege worth protecting because it embodies "outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation" (Wilderness Act of 1964) associated with the purest forms of wilderness exploration.