

Citizens' Climbing Management Plan

Developed Collaboratively by a Citizen Coalition

Endorsed by: Wilderness Watch, Alliance for the Wild Rockies, WildEarth Guardians, Bitterroot Audubon, Montana Peregrine Institute, Friends of the Bitterroot, Friends of the Clearwater, Swan View Coalition, Friends of the Wild Swan, Flathead Lolo Bitterroot Task Force, Native Ecosystems Council, Conservation Congress, Gallatin Wildlife Association, Sequoia ForestKeeper®, Gallatin Yellowstone Wilderness Alliance, Great Old Broads for Wilderness, Bozeman, and Northwest Montana Great Old Broads for Wilderness Broadband

Introduction

The Bitterroot National Forest is home to outstanding natural values within its many glacier-carved canyons. The Forest encompasses a broad range of inanimate and living wonders from soils and rock features to wildlife and vegetation.

Rock climbing has been associated with identifiable impacts across the spectrum of natural resources, especially as its popularity has grown. Resource impacts can potentially occur during various phases of a climbing visit, from the approach route, during the climb itself, and after the summit has been reached.

Climbing can have negative impacts on cliff ecosystems. These relatively rare ecosystems are some of the most secure, least disturbed and least studied habitats. The cliffs are more than rock. They are biological gems and geological wonders. Starting at the base, this remarkable ecosystem runs up a cliff's often vertical face and ends at the plateau, rim, or summit. There are cracks, caves, crevices and ledges, replete with microclimates, providing habitat and resources for a myriad of animals and plants.



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A cliff's biodiversity can be rich and home to many species of flora and fauna which are uniquely adapted to the harsh vertical environs. From the well-suited anatomy of a mountain goat's hoof and pads, to the fighter plane design of a peregrine's wings, cliff inhabitants are specialized and marvels of nature. But they are vulnerable as they try to scrape out a living in such an inhospitable environment. In winter, mountain goats occupy small areas of the canyon mouths and are vulnerable to displacement. Eagles and falcons can be easily flushed from their nests by disturbances, jeopardizing their eggs or chicks.

The cliffs provide refugia for many species, especially as climatic conditions change. From bats to pack rats, delicate alums to 400-year-old wind-bent junipers, the cliffs of the Bitterroots are an invaluable ecosystem whose resource values merit protection in our Forest's climbing management plan.

Background

Traditional and sport climbing have occurred on the Bitterroot National Forest (BNF) for decades. Initially, there were low numbers of climbers and climbing routes. However, the number of climbers and routes has grown as climbing has gained popularity. This is especially true for fixed anchor/bolt intensive sport climbing. Nationally, climbing participation rates continue to be on the rise. The BNF is experiencing this growth.

As the sport of climbing grows, so too does the potential for environmental impacts, social conflicts, damage to cultural sites, and loss of wildland character. These types of impacts are well known and documented across the country, as are successful ways of mitigation. This Citizens' Climbing Management Plan (CCMP) promotes management methods currently used across the country. Adherence to these policies helps resource protection and reinforces a positive image of climbers.

The goals of the Citizens' Climbing Management Plan are to:

- Promote education
- Prevent/mitigate user conflicts
- Protect cultural sites
- Prevent/mitigate environmental impacts
- Promote long-term sustainability for climbing
- Be consistent with federal laws and regulations

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Disclosure

Climbing is a high-risk sport, and climbers are solely responsible for their own safety. Risk is inherent to the thrill and personal satisfaction of climbing. The United States Forest Service is not obligated to assess or mitigate these risks, nor is it responsible for assessing or maintaining the safety of climbing resources which include, but are not limited to; approach/descent paths, climbing routes, and fixed anchors.

Access Trails and Staging Areas

Unauthorized, user created trails are often created by climbers gaining access to the base of climbing routes and during descents. Loss of vegetation, erosion, and soil compaction can occur. Damage to soils can limit aeration, affect soil temperature, moisture content nutrition, and soil micro-organisms.

- The intentional development of approach trails is prohibited. Climbers should limit impacts to soils and vegetation by using existing authorized system trails and avoid creating new approach/descent trails.
- Do not build cairns or in any way mark approach trails.
- New trails/staging areas may only be constructed after; identification, assessment, design, and environmental/cultural analysis are completed by the BNF.
- Extraneous user created paths that develop over time, will be rehabilitated to discourage or prevent future travel. Travel in high use areas should be on authorized, access trails and corridors.
- The construction of belay stations is prohibited.



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Inventories of Existing Climbing Routes and Areas

A baseline inventory will be conducted by the BNF of existing climbing sites and associated trails. The inventory will guide management decisions regarding current and desired conditions.

Site-specific inventories will document existing conditions using measurable data on soil conditions, occurrence of plant species, animal and plant habitat, approach trails, general conditions of related infrastructure, and cultural sites. Inventories will also be used to identify possible user conflicts.

Vegetation Alteration

Vegetation alteration is defined as any removal of vegetation from its natural position, destruction, or damage of vegetation.

- Vegetation alteration is prohibited on access routes, staging areas, and climbing routes.
- When using trees as natural anchors, padding will be placed in between the rope and bark surface to prevent damage to the tree.

Rock Alteration

Rock alteration includes any removal of rock from its natural position, drilling, chipping, or gluing of holds.

- Chipping, gluing, cementing, or installing artificial holds is prohibited.
- The removal of rock from its natural position will be allowed only when the rock poses an unavoidable significant risk to the climbing party.

Gear Caches

Gear cache is defined as any supply of gear left unattended.

- The caching of climbing related equipment is prohibited.
- The caching of climbing related equipment at or near the base of a climb in the event of a retreat due to weather, injury, or emergency shall be allowed for a period not to exceed 7 days.
- Climbers should be aware of existing regulations restricting gear caching.

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Human and Pet Waste

The disposal of human and pet waste is an important issue in the management of climbing as it can create human health problems and cause negative reactions by climbers and non-climbers who encounter improperly disposed waste.

- Climbers are expected to follow standard Leave No Trace practices (LNT). (See attached)
- Packing out human waste and the use of Waste Alleviation and Gelling (WAG) bags is encouraged.
- Dog waste should be buried in a "cathole" or carried out.

Pets

Dogs can harass wildlife and other visitors by barking and aggressive behavior as well as cause impacts to vegetation by chewing and digging. Proper control of pets is essential for resource protection and visitor safety.

- Climbers are expected to keep their pets under control to prevent harassment of wildlife.
- Dogs should be leashed or responsive to verbal commands.

Noise

Noise associated with climbing may affect the experience of others or disturb wildlife. Climbers are expected to keep voice noise to a minimum.

- Climbers should be aware of noise associated with power and hand drills and be respectful of other users and wildlife.
- Climbers should be sensitive to the value of natural silence and promote conduct that is respectful of the presence of others, including wildlife (i.e., avoid yelling in the presence of other parties).

Bouldering

Bouldering is defined as rock climbing unroped and within a safe distance of the ground where specialized equipment such as rock-climbing shoes, chalk, crash pads, etc. is used.

- The establishment of user created trails is prohibited.
- The caching of climbing equipment at or near bouldering sites is not allowed.
- Dragging bouldering pads damages vegetation and soils and is strongly discouraged.

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- If an area used for bouldering becomes impacted, has potential for user conflicts, or where other circumstances warrant, the area may be closed.
- Climbers should wipe off tick marks and excess chalk after a bouldering session is finished.

Slacklining

Slacklining is the activity or sport of balancing on a strip of webbing (or rope) that is fixed above the ground but not stretched tight. Slacklining does not require authorization from the BNF. If fixed, permanent hardware is to be installed for the purpose of slacklining, authorization from the BNF is required. Please see "Fixed Protection Authorization".

Visual and Aesthetic Impacts

Aesthetic impacts are an important issue in natural settings because they can diminish the visitor's enjoyment and appreciation of the area.

- Webbing used to replace worn webbing in existing anchors will be of a natural color, similar to the color of the rock or vegetation in the surrounding areas.
- New fixed protection anchors and new fixed rappel stations will be painted a natural color, similar to the color of the rock in surrounding areas.
- Leaving fixed ropes in place for more than 24 hours is prohibited.
- If using chalk, climbers should use a chalk color similar to surrounding rock.
- Climbers should remove chalk residue from rock surfaces.

Plant and Wildlife Species of Concern

The BNF is home to Threatened, Endangered, Sensitive, and Candidate species. Some of these species live where rock climbing and associated activities occur. Bighorn sheep and Townsends big-eared bat are examples of such species.

The BNF is required to comply with a number of federal laws, regulations, and policies, such as the Endangered Species Act, the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, the Forest Service Manual (FSM 2600), the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and the BNF Forest Plan. Each of these laws and policies require specific actions be taken to ensure the long-term viability of the species in question.

Climbing routes and areas may be authorized after they have been assessed and it has been determined that these actions do not harm individual species inhabiting the immediate area, contribute negatively to overall species viability, or cause downward population trends to the species in question.

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Raptors

Various species of raptors occur on the BNF. The Endangered Species Act, Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Bald and Golden Eagle Act, as well as other regulations and policies may apply.

- Rock climbing is not allowed within ½ mile of known peregrine and golden eagle nests beginning February 1st of each year.

After Forest Service employees have determined the nests are not occupied or that young have fledged, the area(s) may then be opened to climbing.



Cultural Resources

Many cultural sites such as rock cairns, pictographs, and stone circles are located on the Bitterroot National Forest. These sites may be hundreds or thousands of years old. To help protect and preserve these sites, authorization from the BNF for new fixed hardware/routes is required. After review of the location by the BNF where route installation is desired, the authorization may be approved or denied

Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, and Recommended Wilderness

The BNF has a Congressionally mandated responsibility to preserve wilderness character in three designated Wilderness Areas and two Wilderness Study Areas along with similar guidance for other wild lands recommended for wilderness designation. Important components of these responsibilities include minimizing human development and maximizing opportunities for the experience of silence and solitude as well as recreation that is dependent on self-reliance and acceptance of risk.

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Educational outreach with climbing groups will incorporate use of the BNF's CMP Story Map and Designated Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas & Recommended Wilderness interactive map to raise awareness about the location and management considerations for these areas of special concern.

In these areas, climbers will use traditional clean climbing techniques and removeable temporary climbing protection. The placement of permanent fixed anchors (e.g., bolts) or use of motorized drills is not allowed.

Educational outreach to raise awareness about the potential for climbing impacts to wilderness character will include information about Forest Plan standards that relate to recreational site impacts, system or non-system trails, and social encounters in wilderness that were developed through the Limits of Acceptable Change planning process.

Recommended Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas are, pending action by Congress, managed to maintain their wilderness characteristics and potential for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. If added to an existing Wilderness, these areas will be administered in accordance with Forest Plan standards established for that wilderness.

The BNF has authority and responsibility to restrict or prohibit climbing use or related activity in designated Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas and Recommended Wilderness if unacceptable impacts to wilderness character and/or such use interferes with the experience of solitude and naturalness experienced by other visitors.

Fixed Protection Authorization

To proactively protect natural and cultural resources, mitigate user conflicts, and promote sustainable climbing, the placement/installation of fixed protection requires authorization from the BNF.

Existing route density levels, climbing opportunities, access, potential conflicts, cultural and natural resources, infrastructure, and other factors may be considered when reviewing applications.

Climbers wishing to construct climbing routes may obtain applications from the BNF. This form will be available online on the BNF website. The applicant must provide information as to the location of the desired development, anticipated number of routes, anticipated number of bolts for each route, number of existing routes in the area, and estimated time for completion of the installations.

After review of the application, an on-site evaluation of the area in question will be conducted by BNF employees. If the area is deemed appropriate, a permit will be issued.

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When the applicant picks up the permit, the BNF will provide them with Leave No Trace guidelines, information of the flora and fauna which may be impacted, information regarding Native American cultural history of the area, and other pertinent information. The applicant will sign an acknowledgement that they have received and read the provided literature.

Route and Area Closures

The Bitterroot National Forest may close any climbing area/route(s) to protect wildlife, natural or cultural resources, visitor safety, or visitor experiences. Long-term closures may include the removal of fixed anchors.

Educational Outreach

Part of an effective resource/recreation management plan is education. As the number of recreationists grow each year, it's important to have outreach programs in place. Multiple opportunities exist to promote ethical, responsible behaviors that reduce environmental and social impacts. The BNF will provide LNT brochures on kiosks at trailheads, to local sporting goods stores, and display them on the BNF website. The website will also contain easily accessible information about precautionary closures and Best Management Practices for climbing.

Partnerships and collaborations between the BNF and local climbing organizations, local environmental groups, and individual citizens can aid in the promotion of educational materials, and with stewardship efforts and events. These events may include activities such as visual impact mitigations, developing LNT and other educational collaborative videos, access trail and staging area maintenance, erosion control and closure of user created trails, educational seminars concerning Native American cultural sites/values, wildlife and plant issues, and ways to avoid social conflicts.

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The Principles of Leave No Trace

The principles of Leave No Trace might seem unimportant until you consider the combined effects of increasing numbers of outdoor visitors. One poorly located campsite or campfire may have little significance, but accumulation of such instances seriously degrades the outdoor experience for all. Leaving no trace is everyone's responsibility.

1. Plan Ahead and Prepare

Proper trip planning and preparation helps accomplish trip goals safely and enjoyably while minimizing damage to natural and cultural resources. Recreationists who plan ahead can avoid unexpected situations, and minimize their impact by complying with area regulations such as observing limitations on group size, scheduling trips to avoid times of high use and obtaining permits or permission to use the area for your trek.

Proper planning ensures:

- Lower-risk adventures because visitors obtain information concerning geography and weather and prepared accordingly
- Properly located campsites because campers allotted enough time to reach their destination
- Appropriate campfires and minimal trash because of careful meal planning and food repackaging and proper equipment

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- Comfortable and fun experiences because the outing matches the skill level of the participants

2. Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces

Damage to land occurs when visitors trample vegetation or communities of organisms. Barren areas develop into undesirable trails, campsites, and soil erosion.

Concentrate Activity, or Spread Out?

- In high-use areas, users should concentrate their activities where vegetation is already absent. Minimize resource damage by using existing trails and selecting designated or existing campsites. Keep campsites small by arranging tents in close proximity.
- In more remote, less-traveled areas, campers should generally spread out. When hiking, take different paths to avoid creating new trails that cause erosion. When camping, disperse tents and cooking activities—and move camp daily to avoid creating permanent-looking campsites. Avoid places where impacts are just beginning to show. Always choose the most durable surfaces available: rock, gravel, sand, compacted soil, dry grasses, or snow.

3. Dispose of Waste Properly (Pack It In, Pack It Out)

This simple yet effective saying motivates backcountry visitors to take their trash home with them. It makes sense to carry out of the backcountry the extra materials taken there by your group or others. Inspect your campsite for trash or spilled foods. Accept the challenge of packing out all trash, leftover food, and litter.

- **Wastewater.** Help prevent contamination of natural water sources: After straining food particles, properly dispose of dishwater by dispersing at least 200 feet (about 80 to 100 strides for a youth) from springs, streams, and lakes. Use biodegradable soap 200 feet or more from any water source.
- **Human Waste.** Proper human waste disposal helps prevent the spread of disease and exposure to others. Catholes 6 to 8 inches deep in humus and 200 feet from water, trails, and campsites are often the easiest and most practical way to dispose of feces.

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4. Leave What You Find

Allow others a sense of discovery, and preserve the past. Leave rocks, plants, animals, archaeological artifacts, and other objects as you find them. Examine but do not touch cultural or historical structures and artifacts. It is illegal to remove artifacts.

- Minimize Site Alterations -Do not dig tent trenches or build lean-tos, tables, or chairs. Never hammer nails into trees, or hack at trees with hatchets or saws. Replace surface rocks or twigs that you cleared from the campsite. On high-impact sites, clean the area and dismantle inappropriate user-built facilities such as multiple fire rings and log seats or tables.
- Good campsites are found, not made. Avoid altering a site, digging trenches, or building structures.

5. Minimize Campfire Impacts

Some people would not think of camping without a campfire. Yet the naturalness of many areas has been degraded by overuse of fires and increasing demand for firewood.

- Lightweight camp stoves make low-impact camping possible by encouraging a shift away from fires. Stoves are fast, eliminate the need for firewood, and make cleanup after meals easier. After dinner, enjoy a candle lantern instead of a fire.
- Whenever possible, use an existing campfire ring in a well-placed campsite. Choose not to have a fire in areas where wood is scarce—at higher elevations, in heavily used areas with a limited wood supply.
- True Leave No Trace fires are small. Use dead and downed wood that can be broken easily by hand. When possible, burn all wood to ash and remove all unburned trash and food from the fire ring. If a site has two or more fire rings, you may dismantle all but one and scatter the materials in the surrounding area. Be certain all wood and campfire debris is cold out.

6. Respect Wildlife

- Quick movements and loud noises are stressful to animals.
- Observe wildlife from afar to avoid disturbing them.
- Give animals a wide berth, especially during breeding, nesting, and birthing seasons.
- Store food securely and keep garbage and food scraps away from animals so they will not acquire bad habits. Never feed wildlife. Help keep wildlife wild.
- You are too close if an animal alters its normal activities.

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7. Be Considerate of Other Visitors

- Thoughtful recreationists respect other visitors and protect the quality of their experience.
- Travel and camp in small groups (no more than the group size prescribed by land managers).
- Let nature's sounds prevail. Keep the noise down and leave radios, tape players, and pets at home.
- Select campsites away from other groups to help preserve their solitude.
- Make sure the colors of clothing and gear blend with the environment.
- Respect private property and leave gates (open or closed) as found.
- Be considerate of other campers and respect their privacy.

Glossary of Terms

Anchor: Any piece of protection used to secure climbers to a cliff face for belaying or rappelling. Some are removable. "Fixed anchors" are left in place for all climbers to use.

Anchor replacement: replacing bolts or other fixed anchors on established climbing routes.

Artificial holds: a shaped grip that is usually attached to a climbing wall so climbers can grab or step on it.

Belay or belaying: The method by which one climber secures the rope to safeguard the other climber in the event of a fall.

Bolt: Bolts are small devices (usually 3/8" diameter by about 3" length) used to protect climbers where there are no cracks for other types of protection. They are placed by drilling a hole, using either a hand-turned or battery-powered drill, and then driving in the device, which is designed to hold through mechanical expansion, forced compression, or (rarely) an epoxy adhesive.

Bouldering pad: a rectangular crash mat that consists of multiple layers of foam covered in a heavy-duty material. The pad is placed where the climber is expected to fall to cushion their landing.

Boulder problem: specific route one takes when climbing up a boulder which is usually 7 to 15 feet high, and is made up of a sequence of moves that are climbed without a safety rope.

Chalk: Chalk dries the hands and is used in rock climbing in the same way it is used in gymnastics, to improve grip.

Chains: Short lengths of metal chain are sometimes used instead of slings at a rappel or belay station.

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Chipping: a prohibited practice using a hammer and chisel or a power drill (or other similar tools) to create artificial hand-holds by altering the natural rock (i.e., drilled pockets to place fingers in).

Climbing hardware: climbing equipment placed in cracks or on faces to protect climbers from falling, including wired nuts, camming devices, hexes (hexcentric-shaped metal wedges), pitons, and bolts.

Dispersed camping: camping anywhere in the National Forest OUTSIDE of a designated campground. Dispersed camping means no services; such as trash removal, and little or no facilities; such as tables and fire pits, are provided.

Fixed-anchors: hardware left in place. Permanent fixed anchors, primarily, include bolts and pitons. This definition does not include temporary anchors, such as slings, nuts, camming devices, and other removeable anchors that do not alter rock surfaces.

Fixed software: any rope, cord, or webbing, etc., which has been placed to aid in the ascent or descent of a route and remains in place when the climbing party is not on the route.

Industry-standard: the standards published and accepted by the wider rock climbing equipment manufacturing industry and non-profit affiliates (i.e., International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation (UIAA)).

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU): an agreement between two or more parties outlined in a formal document.

Permadraws/permanent quickdraws: A quickdraw permanently left on a route, composed usually of a steel cable and carabiners, screw-locked to a bolt. Often located in high-traffic sport climbing areas with steep routes.

Removeable protection (aka traditional or trad protection or natural protection): any equipment (pitons, cams, wired nuts, hexes, etc.) that is temporarily placed in natural features of the rock for protection of falls on a climb and later removed during the climb.

Riparian area: ecosystems that occur along watercourses or water bodies. They are distinctly different from the surrounding lands because of unique soil and vegetation characteristics that are strongly influenced by free or unbound water in the soil. Riparian ecosystems occupy the transitional area between the terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. Typical examples would include floodplains, stream banks, and lake shores.

Slacklining: The activity or sport of balancing on a strip of webbing (or rope) that is fixed above the ground but not stretched tight.

Special Order: special orders are put into effect to address particular management problems. Special orders are signed by Regional Foresters and Forest Supervisors and vary in duration. Special orders are posted at Forest Service Ranger District offices and Forest Supervisors offices

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in the office nearest to the area affected, or they may be posted at the Ranger Station and the actual site.

Special Use Permit: a legal document such as a permit, term permit, lease, or easement, which allows occupancy, use, rights, or privileges of agency land. The authorization is granted for a specific use of the land for a specific period of time.

Sport climbing: Climbs that are protected predominately with fixed protection, usually bolts, are called sport climbs. Sport climbs are typically short – generally a single rope-length (50 to 60 meters) or less. They rarely continue to summits, but end at fixed anchors where the sustained difficulty of the climb diminishes, the character of the rock changes, or simply at the half-rope point to allow the climber to descend by being lowered.

Staging area: the location where climbing gear is organized and climbers prepare to climb and belay.

Tick marks: typically stripes or dots of gymnastic chalk marking the location of a handhold on a boulder problem or climbing route.

Traditional climbing: A style of climbing where protection is placed by the ascending climber and removed by the last partner. Value is placed on unpracticed ascents. Traditional climbers progress up the rock face using natural hand-and footholds, with the rope and technical climbing equipment used only for safety in case of a fall. Typically, traditional climbs are protected by equipment that is removable and does not damage the rock surface.

Trail prism or Trail corridor: best thought of as a tunnel through the woods, it includes all the elements of a trail affected by construction and maintenance workers including the excavated back-slope and tread, and the entire area within the clearing limits.

Top rope: Technique of practice climbing where the rope is anchored above the climber.

Untrammeled: forces of nature operate unrestrained and unaltered and are free from man's control.

User-created trails: informal unauthorized trails, which are not National Forest System Trails, created through repeated use or illegal construction.

Waste Alleviation and Gelling (WAG) bags: the overall term for any pack-it-out bag system. WAG bags are produced commercially for human and pet waste disposal.

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Documents and CMPs used in the creation of the Citizens' Climbing Management Plan

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