

# The Greatest Threat to Climbing

YOU'VE NEVER HEARD ABOUT

*Sawtooth Wilderness in Idaho is located on the ancestral lands of the Shoshone-Bannock.*

In February, a new district ranger, who had arrived in Montana's Bitterroot National Forest just a few months before, banned climbing bolts and all new route development in the area. There was no public process; there was no opportunity to object.

Though you can find both multipitch alpine test pieces and single-pitch sport crags in the Bitterroots outside of Missoula, the routes are not well-known, perhaps because locals are notoriously tight-lipped. The fact that you're not sure if you ever want to climb there, however, is precisely what made the sweeping order so dangerous.

National forests in the United States host about 30% of America's climbing, from backyard crags, like Boulder Canyon, to some of the country's most iconic climbing areas, like Seneca Rocks, Rumney, the Linville Gorge, Cochise Stronghold, Wild Iris, California's Needles, and so many more. Yet despite the volume of climbing on U.S. Forest Service land, the agency has no national-level policy establishing climbing as a legitimate use, allowing sustainable management of staging areas and trails, and protecting fixed anchors as a critical safety tool for the sport. This leaves each national forest, of which there are more than 150—and sometimes each individual district within each national forest—to make their own decisions.

Restrictions on climbing at the district or forest level are often put into place to address local conflicts, but their impacts ripple out far beyond the immediate area, for many years to come. District rangers and forest supervisors move among forests frequently as they progress through their careers. When they are faced with tough decisions, they search for guidance on how to make them. Finding none at the national level, they look to their peers.

"If the Bitterroot National Forest can just ban new routes without any public input, why can't Mount Hood National Forest do that next?" says Access Fund Executive Director Chris Winter. "Without national-level guidance, each individual forest manager's decisions are important to the entire climbing community. Each individual decision sets a precedent that affects climbing across the entire country."

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This is how a ban on bolting in a forest you don't care about becomes a ban in a forest you do care about, and the possible ramifications of this lack of national policy is one of the greatest threats to climbing today.

### Déjà Vu

Just a few decades ago, the climbing community faced a similar threat to climbing on U.S. Forest Service land. In September 1997, the supervisor of Sawtooth National Forest in Idaho banned fixed anchors in the forest's Wilderness. The following summer, the ban in the Sawtooths became national policy, affecting all Wilderness areas.

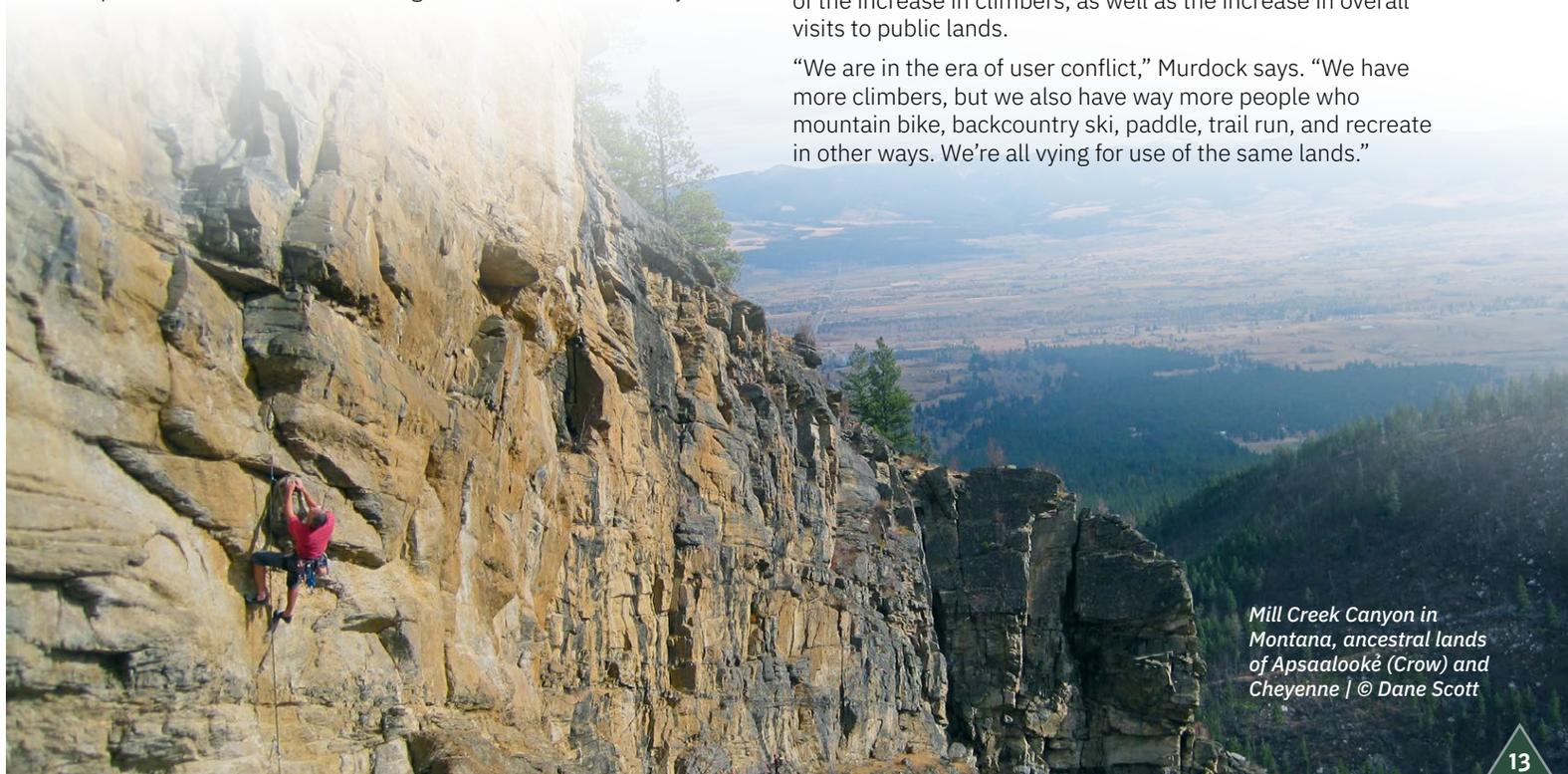
The ban set off alarm bells for climbers everywhere and galvanized the entire climbing community. With leadership from Access Fund, the ban was effectively ended with a legislative fix, but national-level guidance legitimizing climbing and fixed anchor use on Forest Service lands never emerged, despite nearly 25 years of effort.

While the 1997 ban on fixed anchors in Wilderness areas riled climbers, the scope of the restrictions was much narrower than what's at stake today. The bolting bans now being proposed or implemented in individual forests, including the Bitterroots, affect the entire forest, not just Wilderness. This means popular frontcountry and roadside crags could also be caught in the cross fire.

"It's like the 1990s on steroids," says Erik Murdock, Access Fund's policy director. "This is a resurgence in the conflict over fixed anchors, but the big difference is that in the mid-'90s, no one was really concerned about climbing outside of the Wilderness."

Plenty of people are concerned now, in large part because of the increase in climbers, as well as the increase in overall visits to public lands.

"We are in the era of user conflict," Murdock says. "We have more climbers, but we also have way more people who mountain bike, backcountry ski, paddle, trail run, and recreate in other ways. We're all vying for use of the same lands."



Mill Creek Canyon in Montana, ancestral lands of Apsaalooké (Crow) and Cheyenne | © Dane Scott



## 15 of the Most Popular USFS Climbing Areas

There's a vast amount of climbing on USFS lands. Here are just a handful of the most popular.

1. Mount Lemmon, Arizona
2. Bishop, California
3. Holcomb, California
4. Boulder Canyon, Colorado
5. The Fins, Idaho
6. Jackson Falls, Illinois
7. Red River Gorge, Kentucky
8. Mount Charleston, Nevada
9. Rumney, New Hampshire
10. Linville Gorge, North Carolina
11. Maple Canyon, Utah
12. Icicle Canyon, Washington
13. Seneca Rocks, West Virginia
14. Ten Sleep, Wyoming
15. Wild Iris, Wyoming

*The route development ban at Ten Sleep in Wyoming (ancestral lands of Apsaalooké [Crow], Eastern Shoshone, and Cheyenne) could impact climbing in other forests. | © Louis Arevalo*

### Forest Supervisors Left Wondering if Fixed Anchors Constitute “Damage”

The fixed anchor ban of the 1990s was based on one forest supervisor's interpretation that fixed anchors constituted “permanent improvements” and “installations” in violation of the Wilderness Act of 1964. The proposed bans on bolting and other fixed anchors today are not directly related to the Wilderness Act, but they still involve individual interpretations of the law, in this case, parts of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), which prohibits “damaging any natural feature or other property of the United States” and “abandoning any personal property.” Land managers are left wondering: Do bolts or other anchors constitute damage or abandoned property?

When forest officials issued a forest-wide ban on new route development in Wyoming's Bighorns, where the controversy over manufactured routes and subsequent bolt-chopping in Ten Sleep got ugly last summer, they justified the act in part by interpreting that bolts do in fact damage the natural features. Forest officials in the Bitterroots made similar interpretations as the foundation for their own ban.

“Right now, each forest is taking a crack at interpreting the Code of Federal Regulations for themselves,” Murdock says. “At Ten Sleep, they made a CFR interpretation. At the Bitterroots, they made a CFR interpretation. They just don't have any guidance.”

The recent CFR interpretations in the Bighorns and in the Bitterroots, where tensions between conservationists had simmered for years, were both levied to address immediate conflicts. But national forests across the country are also wrestling with how climbing and the CFR generally fits into the long-term management of their lands, which will require a hard look at how climbing and CFR intersect. This includes the use of fixed anchors but encompasses much more, including whether unofficial approach trails and staging areas at the base of climbs are legal, given that regulations prohibit “constructing, placing, or maintaining any kind of road, trail, structure ... significant surface disturbance, or other improvement ... without a special-use authorization.”

### Fighting for Long-Term Climbing Access, One Forest at a Time

Management of national forests is guided by planning documents, which can take years to complete and which are infrequently updated. In fact, most national forests currently operate under plans that are decades old, and because they were written in a time before the popularity of climbing exploded, most do not mention climbing at all.

As these plans are being slowly updated, spurred along by a 2012 law that sets the guidelines for how modern plans are developed, forest officials must contend with how to address whole classes of use not addressed before, including climbing but also mountain biking and other recreation.

“These documents are filled with wonky, regulatory language that will impact climbing for 20 or 30 years,” says Katie Goodwin, Access Fund policy analyst and California regional director. “What we've seen in the draft language of many of these plans is that they tend to not address climbing at all, or there's a blanket statement that bans fixed anchors altogether or provides vague language about a permitting process.”

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Without any assurance from the national level that climbing is a legitimate use of national forests, Goodwin and other Access Fund staff have to spend vast amounts of time tracking the development of individual forest management plans, engaging and building new relationships with forest leaders who frequently turn over, drafting comments, and participating in the public process—all just to preserve the tenuous foothold that climbing should be allowed at all.

In the Southeast, for example, Access Fund has been working for years to make sure that the plan for the Nantahala and Pisgah national forests in North Carolina—

