October 19, 2021

**ATTN:**

Steve Brown, Stevensville District Ranger

Bitterroot National Forest, Stevensville Ranger District

88 Main Street Stevensville, MT 59870

**RE:** Responses to questions about climbing and ROS

Dear District Ranger Brown:

In the process of developing the climbing management plan, the Western Montana Climbers Coalition (WMTCC) received your email dated, September 9th, 2021, with three questions about climbing in relation to Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) classes of opportunities:

1. What types of infrastructure (i.e., toilets, trails, staging areas, etc.) are needed for the different types of climbing activities (i.e., bouldering, sport climbing, trad climbing, etc.)?
2. What level of infrastructure development do you think would be appropriate for the various ROS classes?
3. Do these correlate to being able to utilize the ROS as an effective zoning method for a CMP?

To address our perspectives and recommendations, we will briefly present context-based relevant information in relation to how the reality of climbing in the Bitterroots affects climbers' needs and expectations. These comments are intended to assist the BNF to ensure the protection of the climbing experience through appropriate zoning and management actions.

To create a shared perspective, we list our understanding about climbing in the BNF

* Climbing is one the values associated with the BNF that should be protected.
* Rock climbing areas are places of special recreational significance related to climbing cultural identities.
* Healthy and resilient environments provide a diverse sense of place for climbers and enhance a variety of high-quality sustainable rock climbing opportunities.
* Climbing is a relatively low impact activity that can be managed sustainably.
* Climbing is a legitimate activity in wilderness and non-wilderness areas.
* Climbing is an appropriate activity across all ROS classes of opportunities.

**Climbing in the Bitterroot National Forest**

The BNF offers several opportunities for rock climbing, including options for all modalities of climbing, mostly for residents of Western Montana, particularly climbers living the Bitterroot and Missoula valleys. The limited availability of easy and moderate routes as well as the scarcity of published information impact the popularity (or lack thereof) of climbing in the BNF. The combination of these aspects with the quality and quantity of the climbing routes makes the area a local destination for a limited volume of climbers, who are mostly experienced (WMTCC & UMT survey 2020). The local context, level of experience and specialization of local climbers influence their needs and perceptions about management actions all need to be considered in the decisions on the CMP.

**Answering the specific questions**

1. What types of infrastructure (i.e., toilets, trails, staging areas, etc.) are needed for the different types of climbing activities (i.e., bouldering, sport climbing, trad climbing, etc.)?

Climbing activities (i.e., bouldering, sport climbing, trad climbing, etc.) on the BNF do not require any types of infrastructure specifically dedicated to climbers. However, climbers do sometimes share various types of infrastructure with other visitors, such as parking lots, trails, campgrounds, and toilets. In addition, depending on levels of use, and *not* type of climbing, some infrastructure may be needed to improve resource conditions and the climbing experience. In generally, currently and the foreseeable future, when compared to more popular climbing locations of FS lands, climbing opportunities of all types on the BNF are limited, dispersed, difficult to access, and lightly used. Currently, with a few small exceptions, the BNF does not need to provide infrastructure specifically dedicated to climbers. That said, there are a small number of climbing areas near roads and trailheads that should be monitored as part of an adaptive management process. At some point management erosion controls on social trials and staging areas at the base of routes may be needed. The WMTCC is committed to shared stewardship of the BNF’s climbing resources based on adaptive managment. We encourage monitoring of levels of use and the conditions of climbing resources as part of an adaptive management process.

1. What level of infrastructure development do you think would be appropriate for the various ROS classes?

Our comments to this question consider the particularities of climbing in the BNF.

**ROS: Roaded Natural & Climbing Activities:** Given current moderate levels of climbing activity, social trails and staging areas may be apparent, which should be monitored and may require management actions. If needed, natural-looking erosion controls may be apparent. In areas shared with other visitors, parking lots, campgrounds, and restrooms are appropriate, but currently adequate. Signs and regulations can be posted at the trailhead.

**ROS: Semi-primitive Non-motorized & Climbing Activities:** Given the low levels of climbing activity, social trails and staging areas below climbs should not draw attention. If needed, natural-looking erosion controls should be minimal and subtle.

**ROS: Primitive & Climbing Activities:** Given very low levels of use, social trails and staging areas below climbs should not draw attention. If someday needed, natural-looking erosion controls should be minimal and subtle.

1. Do these correlate to being able to utilize the ROS as an effective zoning method for a CMP?

The ROS is an appropriate tool for recreation planning, as it is used in questions 1 & 2. However, we believe that ROS is not the best instrument to regulate climbing, as it does not account for the many nuances and subtleties of the various climbing opportunities and activities specific to the BNF. If using ROS, some characteristics climbers value throughout the Bitterroot might be compromised. In that sense, because of the local context, a more appropriate way to think about climbing regulations for the BNF is by defining specific regulations for wilderness and non-wilderness areas.

***Support from the WMTCC and the Access Fund***

The WMTCC and the Access Fund are eager to continue to work with planners to protect the Bitterroot National Forest and the climbing opportunities.

Erik Murdock

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Katie Williams

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