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Bitterroot Climber

Personal Submission for "CMP Story Map"

A Brief History of Climbing in the BNF:

The Bitterroot Mountain Range of western Montana is the home of the state's most impressive rock formations. This invaluable resource is rich in historic ascents and modern technical routes. The first alpinist to have climbed here, as well as the routes they may have established are of great mystery. For decades, established routes faded back to nothing more than a probable weakness. Quoting Randall Green's introduction in *Rock Climbing Montana*, "tight-lipped locals, the lack of published information, biting ticks, fickle weather, the short climbing season and rock that requires obscure movement and protection can deter all but the most persistent practitioners". Local climbers, oftentimes, never spoke of their outings and continued to explore drainages covering vast ground and documenting little, preserving the spirit of adventure. Some publications include; Rick Torre's "Bitterroot Guidebook" (1993), "A Falcon Guide - Rock Climbing Montana" (1995), vague entries in the *American Alpine Journal*, various publications by Ron Brunkhorst, and other fragments of climbing history in binders/web. The majority of the drainages and formations in the Bitterroot Mountain Range are still undocumented and many, Unclimbed.

In the Bitterroot Range, where rescue services are lacking, loose rock is abundant and foot travel is treacherous, accurate documentation makes repeat ascents much more enjoyable, and helps produce clean well-traveled routes. To that end, it unfortunately remains a place where information travels by word-or-mouth or scratch pieces of tattered paper topos. Mill Creek and Blodgett Canyon remain the most popular and impressive climbing areas because of the close proximity in which good climbing exists in relation to access points. However those looking to follow in the footsteps of the hard men and women of the area will not be let down by the adventures and rock and that lay, often untouched, deeper in these canyons. Please be respectful of this special place.

My thoughts/concerns on the CMP and evolution of conflict:

The history of controversy surrounding climbing in the Bitterroot is not new or unique to climbing. For decades the BNF has been the stage of conflict between parties who oppose modern climbing, and climbers. We witness this type of social push back for all types of fringe sports, especially extreme sports such as mountain biking, highlining (tight rope walking), BASE jumping, paragliding, surfing, etc. In urban areas we see similar push back from society as well as authorities like city council and police, with regards to sports such as skateboarding and BMX. It is my opinion that the observer of these extreme sports associates recklessness, and carelessness with the practitioner. As is true with other extreme practices, a closer examination of "the climber" reveals the contrary - a deep connection to the sport, meticulous practice,

debates over ethics, and a sincere care for the rock/natural world. In all of the examples above there has been a history that follows a trend. First the practice is met with rejection/prohibition before gaining widespread acceptance and appreciation. For example rock climbing is now in the Olympics, so is skateboarding & snowboarding. To summarize my thoughts, climbers are misunderstood, we are sensitive to our impacts, we deserve to be supported and validated by society and the forest service.

To further illustrate the social push back that climbers have faced in the Bitterroot, I have summarized a few notable instances. In 1991 a climber, Ivan Pyatt, was the subject of what could have been a homicide when individuals at Mill Creek Canyon dropped rocks from above striking him in the leg. The details of this story are not certain, however the climber recounts being harassed by local individuals on numerous occasions surrounding this event. This incident caused serious physical injuries to the climber who claims to have never fully recovered. Police were notified and the individuals responsible were criminally prosecuted. Around the year 2010 climbers began seeing an influx of criminal activity and monkeywrenching by anonymous parties who obviously oppose climbing. These parties used libel and slander tactics against the climbing community, planting and photographing staged litter, creating false erosion areas, destroying trails, all while reporting these actions to the Bitterroot Forest Service as having been impacts created by climbers. On another occasion a well known environmental group in the Bitterroot sent pictures of a dead golden eagle carcass, that they had illegally handled and manipulated to stage photos, near climbing areas to paint a picture that climbers had killed the eagle. Most troubling of all, life supporting anchors placed in the rock at our climbing areas were being tampered with, smashed, and left in place for use. On an outing to remove these dangerous compromised anchors, I used a small wrench to attempt a removal, as I applied pressure on the wrench the damaged bolt spontaneously snapped. I sat at the cliff edge 200 feet above the ground knowing that the next unsuspecting climber would have died attempting to rappel from it. There were more than 10 rappel anchors in similar condition that I spent hours removing. Any of these damaged anchors could have failed causing the death of a party of two or more climbers. While there are impacts associated with any use of public lands, the stories relayed to the BNFS on climbing impacts have at best exaggerated and at their worst blatant lies and fabrication. Climbers have been portrayed as a group fixated on their sport, ignorant to their impacts, littering, destroying natural resources, seeking the next climb/adrenaline rush without regard for nature or other users. This is far from the truth.

While this information is necessary to fully understand the story. I write with a deal of conflicting emotions. I do not want to dwell in the past, I do not want to point fingers. However, this was the goal of the opposition. To create public unrest, to create a situation so dangerous, so unignorable, that not only would climbers take notice, but the Forest Service would step in and take action. Climbers received a threat during our October 16th 2020 meeting at Bass Creek when in front of BNF Rangers, Friends of the Bitterroot member Van Keele stated that "If Climbers continue to investigate the source of trail damage and bolt tampering things will get much worse". I am concerned as to why individuals are continued to be allowed access to these conversations, considering such instances. In developing the Climbing Management Plan, I

worry that the Bitterroot National Forest Service may inadvertently attempt to settle public unrest by compromising legitimate recreation for the behaviour of anonymous criminals. Therefore I urge our land managers to listen to climbers, work with climbers, and allow climbers to be the primary force behind shaping the climbing management plan.

Climbers have operated above the board, in personal communication with the forest service, in regards to issues revolving around climbing and climbing development. The Forest Service is quoted in their most recent release stating "it is recognized that there is a long history of cooperation between the BNFS and the local climbing community". To be fair, the parties who oppose climbing suggest that climbers are acting illegally by placing unauthorized bolts. While this conversation has been discussed for decades, there are still no national guidelines for placing bolts on National Forest except that power drills should not be used in designated wilderness - a wilderness prohibition accepted by the climbing community. Contrary to the contested anchor/bolting debate, the tactics of the opposition are so obviously dangerous and illegal that they have operated in total anonymity, hiding their identity. The BNFS has stated that they "think they know who is committing these acts" yet they have not investigated the issue. I worry the recent climbing restrictions issued by the BNFS have inadvertently strengthened and validated the tactics of parties who oppose climbing to continue in their ways.

Developing a CMP that will foster widespread buy-in from the climbing community will require focus from land managers on issues that are unique and specific to climbing. The CMP will also require flexibility and rely on trust in the user group. Management should avoid restrictions that will unintentionally degrade the climbing experience, lessening the likelihood for user group dissonance and barriers for compliance.

On the other hand, managing climbing on a "case by case" basis for instances requiring restrictions that reach beyond the CMP will allow for added protection against unsustainable impacts. This concept will foster buy-in from impact-focused individuals and provide opportunities for climbers to comply. Demonstration of this cooperation will be paramount in conflict resolution.

Climbers and the BNFS have co-managed natural resource preservation and user generated impacts with one known exception. This exception being some areas of erosion at Mill Creek. I sent Stevensville District Ranger Steve Brown pictures of what The Tick Farm looked like before it was destroyed and dug up by those opposed to the climbing area. While climbers tried to mitigate erosion (admittedly using a couple small treated wood boards and metal stakes) existing trails and climber created approaches/base areas were desecrated by opposing parties in an attempt to make climber impacts look unsustainable. Early on we reached out to the BNFS about creating a better solid trail. In 2016 we were in discussion with Ranger Tami Sabol, on the brink of getting some erosion mitigation work done. *Letter to Sabol in January 2016 "The WMTCC would like to see the impacts at the base area of the popular cliff known as the Tick Farm addressed. There are 11 climbs on this cliff and due to their moderate grade and easy access they are popular with climbers. The WMTCC would like to work with the BNF to use natural materials found in the area (rocks and*

logs) to create stances under the climbs to keep climbers close to the cliff to prevent further erosion and damage to vegetation. We would also like to see the area re-vegetated. In addition, the WMTCC would like to use natural materials to stabilize a few steep, loose areas on the approach trail directly below this cliff to avoid erosion and braided trails that have developed. The WMTCC would be eager to help raise funds for these efforts and provide volunteers.”

Adam Washerbek - BNF Wilderness ranger removed all foreign materials from the base areas at mill creek due to its MA6 status and to resolve conflict. He has also helped document the use, erosion patterns and development of the area.

Examples of Successful Cooperative Management WMTCC & BNF:

1. Voluntary Bolting restrictions at the North Rim Climbing Area: 100% compliance. An example of what we have “given” to the non-climbers point of view on this issue. We agreed that route density had reached a reasonable level to discontinue development. Many climbers have unfinished routes and amazing pieces of stone that have been left untouched for years in compliance with this rule. We are happy to spread out and look elsewhere.
2. Voluntary Bolting restrictions Canyon Wide at Mill Creek: 100% compliance. We received a letter from the FS lifting this restriction allowing for bolted development canyon wide. This opened the possibility for development of the canyons multi pitch and traditional routes. *Here is a guide with examples of alpine and multi-pitch routes that require minimal bolts. This style of climbing has almost no user impacts as base areas see little traffic. Climbers are off the ground for most of the day and groups do not congregate at base area. These routes would be impossible to protect without bolts, however routes like these can be helpful in spreading out users and sustaining this recreation with minimal impact.* <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B8VAgg4trAfQTVZFVmJuZzVHVmc/view>
3. Falcon Closures: 100% compliance. The community has been happy to follow these guidelines. The WMTCC helped release info on these closures as well as provide route descriptions and names to help define the area of closure (i.e.) “Pie For Strength” “The Siren” *(Picture C, posted on the WMTCC website)*
4. Climbing events at Lost Horse, compliance to all rules, clean up before and after to ensure the area was left in better condition than it was found. Rangers congratulated our efforts and clean-up.
5. Bitterroot Climbers Coalition cooperation with the Access Fund, Jeep Sponsored Conservation Team, Montana Conservation Corps and FS on trail work in Blodgett Canyon
6. Removal of routes in Kootenai Canyon that were close to pictographs - discontinuing climbing in the vicinity - 1980

What would a CMP look like?

- An informational resource for climbing, specific impacts, rules and regulations, avenues for conservation, and BNF specific concerns.
- FS places no blanket restrictions development of the recreation
- In the past climbers have followed the guidelines that Wilderness/Non Wilderness defined the boundary for areas where concentrated climbing and mechanized devices is acceptable. **We are happy to redefine this in accordance with the Recreational Opportunity Spectrum and Management Areas**
- FS will show support for climbers placed in life threatening situations such as anchor tampering by making a public statement that this is a criminal offence and actively investigate known cases. Without MWTCC retrofitting or removing damaged anchors there could have already been deaths from this. When climbers initially reported these acts the FS claimed their hands were tied as they could not recognize the existence of the anchors for liability reasons (we are past that point anchors have been recognized by the FS)
- FS will allow for the building of trails to existing climbing areas and to bolster base areas as needed - this should be done in cooperation with the climbing community (fundraising, trail volunteers)
- If deemed necessary, climbers will agree to suspend climbing in areas that become problematic due to impact on natural resources (managing climbing on a case-by-case basis)
- FS will manage and restrict the climbing relative to the impacts created by other recreations. FS will provide data for these decisions
- FS will not restrict climbing based on pressure for groups who oppose climbing without data and evidence of real climber impacts
- FS will manage and restrict the climbing relative to other forests, FS will provide data and narratives for these decisions
- WMTCC agrees to keep communication transparent, honest, and provide accurate data to the FS whenever necessary

GENERAL CLIMBING GUIDELINES:

- Cultural/historical resources may exist and are protected. Do not tamper with evidence of indigenous archeology. Report sightings to the BNF
- Soils are highly susceptible to erosion. Ignoring established trails is detrimental to the resources, and reflects poorly on user groups.
- Federally protected species and state species of concern occur within the BNF and are identified Climbers should be able to recognize these species
- Pets must be controlled, dogs frequently contribute to resource degradation (such as digging, chewing vegetation and chasing wildlife) and user conflicts.
- Users should respect the natural quiet of the area
- Visitors should practice "Leave no Trace" techniques
- Climbers should be respectful of other recreation users
- Climbers should be respectful of private property adjacent to climbing areas

- Climbers and route developers should notify BNF staff of serendipitously- discovered cultural resources or raptor nests, and leave those resources intact and unimpaired
- Chalk users should make every effort to remove unsightly markings (especially tic marks) before leaving the route.
- Climbing is inherently dangerous, and adults should give special attention to the activities and location of children in and around climbing activity
- Climbers are expected to comply with this climbing management plan.
- Adherence to the fixed anchor policy helps resource protection and reinforces a positive image of climbers.
- Alterations to ground cover and surrounding areas (e.g. movement of rock or woody debris) is strongly discouraged unless effort is organized by the BNF and local climbing groups
- Dragging bouldering pads damages vegetation and soils, and is strongly discouraged

PARKING AREAS:

- Build good relationships with land owners, roads are dusty - drive slowly!
- Park in designated spots, do not block roads
- Lock vehicles and do not leave valuables in the car
- Haul away trash, clean up dump piles, clean up broken glass, help out!

THE APPROACH

- Stay on the Trail
- Keep pets leashed and on the trail
- Be aware of erosion areas - foot traffic causes soil compaction, trail widening, and soil loss

AT THE BASE

- Wear a helmet - this area experiences abundant natural and user triggered rock fall
- Stash gear neatly while climbing, disturb as little ground as possible
- Tread lightly and as little as possible trying not to disturb the fragile soils on these steep grades
- For the long climbs in this guide especially, consider leaving the dog at home
- Leave no trace, pack it in/pack it out
- Do not cache gear for more than 14 days

THE CLIMB

- Always climb with a helmet
- Be constantly aware of rock fall and detached blocks
- Climb with appropriate emergency equipment
- Climb with proper clothing
- Considering bringing a fully charged cell phone, there is often good service here
- Always tap and check holds and blocks for security
- Plan ahead for situations where communication with partner might be difficult

- Consider joining The American Alpine Club and donating to The Access Fund to help areas such as these flourish. The local organization, the Western Montana Climbers Coalition has been monumental in securing access for climbers in The Bitterroot.

DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES:

- Fixed anchors can only be placed in areas not already restricted to bolting
- Stainless steel hardware (hangers and bolts) Minimum of 3/8-inch bolt diameter
Minimum of 2¼-inch bolt length (3 ½-inch is preferred)
- Bolt heads and washers must be painted to match surrounding rock. Use commercially produced camouflaged or powder-coated hangers that best match surrounding rock
- Top anchors shall consist of two separate hangers bolted to the rock with a minimum 3/8" X 3½" stainless steel bolts. Attached to these shall be minimum 5/16" threaded screw links, with minimum 3/8" chains attached. The chain length shall be as short as possible without compromising safety.
- Zinc-plated chains and threaded screw links may be used or commercially available stainless steel climbing top anchors. All top anchor components must be painted to best match the surrounding rock
- Top anchor should be placed in appropriate location with safety, as well as rope retrieval considered. Top anchor bolts should be placed at least twice the distance apart as the depth of the bolt holes. For example: 4" deep bolt holes (for 3.5" bolts) X 2 = minimum 8" apart for the 2 anchor bolts.
- Top anchors should not be set back from the edge, this is dangerous and causes rubbing on the rock and rope.
- Bolting is discouraged where removable protection (cams, nuts, etc.) is adequate and available
- Fixed anchor spacing shall be consistent and reasonable.
- Chipping holds or excessive cleaning (i.e. contriving/manufacturing a route that the natural rock does not provide) is not permitted. Avoid climbing dirty/chossy routes which will erode and require excessive cleaning. Rock fall creates base area erosion and generates more impact.

Informational Links:

- An interesting example of climbing trajectory in North Conway New Hampshire. This area is a "seed" in the forest of modern climbing.
 - <https://www.northconwayrockclimbs.com/north-conway-climbing-history.html>
- - Video of early El Capitan climbers Shows early tactics, i.e. pitons and how they are used in cracks. These are removable but repeated use damages rock. It is hard to restrict the use of pitons as they are not considered caches, items left, or permanent

installations. Pitons are used in the Bitterroot and ubiquitously but are becoming less popular. Look closely for the use of bolts as they are needed through the film

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75Zm5hC5Q8o>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3m3no8H711o> (another old Yosemite film)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cf1-WPXfY8Q> (another old Yosemite film by John Long - Director of Movie "Cliff Hanger" and pro climber)
- This video explains the birth of climbing that focuses on technical difficulty and how bouldering originated in the USA
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9yaGXFkC8M>
- Old School Climbing. Climbing is an international tradition. Notice climbers using fixed anchors (old ring pitons) to rappel. Yes, climbers have relied on iron in rock since the inception of climbing.
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Os7cP6OV5p0>
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZgBDDWaR6o>
- Climbing Stewardship:
 - <https://www.accessfund.org/learn/for-advocates/climbing-area-stewardship>
- Falcons:
 - Podcast on climbing and falcons:
<https://runoutpodcast.com/index.php/2019/05/08/runout-22-room-to-reproduce-with-eric-chabot-of-hawkwatch-international/>
 - Adirondaks falcons and climbers plan <https://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7868.html>
 - Climbers help save peregrine population in Yosemite
https://www.accessfund.org/newsletters/Winter_2011_VT_Ir.pdf
- This website is beautiful, it helps illustrate the vision of climber Yvon Chouinard, climbing icon and industry mogul and he's deep thought about the sport and impacts
 - <https://www.patagonia.com/company-history/>
- Climbing Community
 - Stone Locals: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yj7ZCYMgSvw>
- An amazing example of 100% modern sport climbing. This is Alex Megos, one of the best in the world. There is nothing like this in existence or geologically available in the Bitterroot. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbWvFjUlt5k>
- An amazing example of 100% trad climbing. Indian Creek Utah. An area of the Bears Ears National Monument. In 2019 climbers helped fight to preserve the monument from a land sell-off by the federal government. The best and most popular trad climbing in the world. There is nothing like this in existence or geologically available in the Bitterroot.
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSI3kSU76ys>
- An example of bouldering. The most esoteric and physically demanding form of climbing. Fun, accessible for all, super weird from the outsider's POV. There is likely a ton of good bouldering in the Bitterroot, other than Lost Horse, overly little documented or developed.
 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaDgKdRq_E8
- An amazing example of 100% Alpine Climbing. The Incredible Hulk in the High Sierra. 4.5 Mile hike in. Notice the quality of the stone. We have a ton of moderate quality alpine

climbing in the Bitterroot, it is very abundant and also very hard to access much of it. Alpine climbing in areas of moderate quality is self-sustaining in that there are few users and it is very dispersed. Notice the use of occasional bolts in this video. This is in wilderness and these bolts are hand placed. Also note this is one of the most popular and famous backcountry alpine wall in the country.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGA1vI2HxTs>