

L23(650)

To: Regional Directors
From: Associate Director, Operations
Subject: Rock Climbing Management

As early as the 1890's, the then existing national parks recognized mountain climbing as a legitimate activity. In the 1930s, the advent of more sophisticated techniques and tools lead to the introduction of technical rock climbing in this country. And, over the years, this sport has become very popular and still remains acceptable and welcome. According to Management Policies, the National Park Service will:

". . . encourage recreational activities that are consistent with applicable legislation, that promote visitor enjoyment of park resources through a direct association or relation to those resources, that are also consistent with the protection of the resources . . . Recreational activities that may be allowed include . . . mountain and rock climbing . . ." (Chapter 8:3)

Technological developments in climbing equipment, and styles of climbing evolved during the 1960s and 1970s. So called "clean climbing", in which removable chocks or nuts of various sizes were placed in cracks in the rock for protection in lieu of pitons or other protection, became the norm. The removal of chocks was much easier than pitons, and the constant removal and replacement of pitons caused damage to the rock.

However, during the past few years, a new style of climbing - "competition" climbing - has rapidly developed. The focus of this type of climbing is the fostering of increased technical skills. The use of technology, such as motorized drills and chisels, has lead to an exponential increase of climbing activities on all public lands, including the parks. Some park areas now report many times the number of climbers from only a few years ago.

This increase in climbing use, spurred in large part by this new technology and climbing style, has lead to the increase of other impacts. Natural cracks are being cleaned ("gardened") of dirt and small plants, and lichen is removed from rock faces with wire brushes. There is more frequent use of chisels, hammers, and glue to alter the rock. The increasing use of chalk has also made highly visible "chalk trails" on rock faces. In addition, the number and erosion of approach trails and paths to the beginning of a climb has greatly increased, along with the resulting increase in sanitation and litter impacts at the beginning of climbs.

The National Park Service continues to support technical rock climbing as a legitimate recreational activity in park areas pursuant to our management policy. Many park areas with climbing activities have been very successful in developing close ties and working with local climbers and climbing groups in an attempt to manage climbing in their areas. However, the increasing impacts from the growth of certain climbing activities requires a certain consistency in management of these issues.

In order to allow the widest possible latitude for local management and to encourage the continued participation at the park level of local climbers and climbing groups, each park area with climbing activities should develop a climbing management plan based on the following guidelines:

1 A climbing management plan should address the five criteria for allowing recreational activities as stated in Chapter 8:3 of the 1988 NPS Management Policies.

2 Seeking public comment from local climbing groups and others during the development of local plans is encouraged (or required in some instances).

In addition, existing regulations in 36 CFR Parts 1 and 2 provide consistent Servicewide regulatory authority to manage climbing. For example:

- 36 CFR 1.5 allows for closures or restrictions or the development of special rulemaking if applicable;
- 2.1(a)(1)(iv) controls the physical altering of rock faces, such as chiseling, breaking loose rocks, etc.
- 2.1(a)(1)(ii) controls the removal of lichen or plants from rock faces
- 2.12(a)(1)(ii) and (a)(3) prohibits the use of motorized equipment (power drills) in non-developed areas (1.4 defines "developed" and "non-developed");

The use of power drills or other powered equipment in designated wilderness areas is also prohibited by the Wilderness Act of 1964 and may not be permitted for recreational use.

Regarding the use of climbing chalk, each area needs to assess this impact on its rock. In some areas the impact may be minimal and therefore acceptable. In other areas, the accumulation of chalk is quite significant. Although "temporary" in nature, some chalk "paths" may last for years, especially in arid climates. The defacing or adverse visual impacts could be addressed under 2.1(a)(1)(iv) by park management if it is warranted, such as in areas of high visitor use.

The climbing community is a long time and welcome constituent of the National Parks, with most climbers espousing the same values and mandates of the National Park Service. Climbing has occurred in park areas for many decades and should continue for many more decades. By working with local climbing groups - and to the extent that laws, regulations, and policy allow - park managers should be able to develop a mutually beneficial management program that will allow for both climbing activities and resource protection.

If you have any questions regarding this guideline, please contact the Ranger Activities Division.

RANGER ACTIVITIES DIVISION
FIELD DISPATCH

Date: July 23, 1991
To: All Park and Regional Chief Rangers
From: Acting Chief, Ranger Activities Division, WASO
Subject: Rock Climbing Management

The following memorandum was signed by the Associate Director, Operations, and sent to all Regional Directors on July 19, 1991. We are sending you an advance copy for your information. If you have any questions, please call Ranger Activities at FTS 268-4874.