

Joshua Tree Climbing Plan

Question 1: Yes, visitors should be required to stay on official trails in order to protect plants, animals, and historic artifacts.

Question 2: Bolts are not just inappropriate in Wilderness, they are illegal in Wilderness.

Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act prohibits “permanent improvements” in wilderness areas designated by the Act. The permanent climbing bolts and other permanent fixed climbing anchors are “permanent improvements” prohibited by the Act.

Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act also prohibits any “structure or installation” in designated Wilderness. Bolts and other permanent fixed climbing anchors are included in this prohibition. The National Park Service should accordingly prohibit all bolts and permanent fixed climbing anchors in the designated Wilderness portions of Joshua Tree.

In 1990, the USDA Office of General Counsel (OGC) ruled that permanent fixed climbing anchors violate the protections of the Wilderness Act. The Department of Interior needs to face this issue head-on, finally, and also prohibit permanent fixed climbing anchors in designated Wilderness.

Question 3: In designated Wilderness, bolts should not be replaced because they are prohibited by the Wilderness Act. Removal of existing bolts should be allowed, but replacement should not, since such a replacement violates the Wilderness Act. Replacement should only be allowed if a federal judge permits such a violation of federal law.

Question 4: The park should prohibit all rock climbing at culturally sensitive sites and sites of importance to Native American communities. The recent tragic and senseless bolting in April 2021 up a 1,000-year-old ancient petroglyph site called Sunshine Wall just north of Arches National Park in Utah shows the importance of protecting these sites from climbers, as well as the damage that permanent bolts can cause even if, as is the case of Sunshine Wall, the bolts are later removed.

Question 5: Some climbers argue that some rock faces may not be climbable in designated Wilderness without the use of bolts or permanent climbing anchors, and that they need permanent bolts or other fixed climbing anchors in order to safely ascend these rock faces. But designated Wilderness is different and special. In Wilderness, it’s OK if some rock faces are unclimbable. Humans don’t need to dominate and occupy every rock face in Wilderness, especially if climbers degrade the wildness of these areas and of these particular rock faces with permanent bolts. Climbers need to acquire the humility and restraint that all visitors in Wilderness need in order to protect these special places without the permanent marring and defacing that bolts and other permanent anchors inflict.

There is also the case that “unclimbable” rock faces of today may well be climbable in the future by increasingly skilled climbers who don’t need permanent bolts or other anchors to complete a climb. As one example, renowned climber Alex Honnold scaled El Capitan in the Yosemite National Park Wilderness in 2017 without any ropes or other safety gear at all, a remarkable feat previously thought to be impossible. If a wilderness rock face is unclimbable today without permanent bolts that doesn’t mean it can never be climbed in the future without bolts. And we shouldn’t scar and deface those wilderness rock faces for the convenience of today’s climbers.

Comments: In 2000, the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture appointed Wilderness Watch executive director George Nickas and me to serve on the Fixed Anchors in Wilderness Negotiated Rulemaking Advisory Committee (FAWNRAC), so we are familiar with many of the issues related to fixed anchors in Wilderness. Wilderness Watch has remained active in trying to protect Wilderness from permanent fixed climbing anchors since that time.

All across the country, in case after case, the National Park Service appears to treat Wilderness as just situational, that administering Wilderness can change depending on the local circumstances, rather than that designated Wilderness is protected by federal statute and needs protection regardless of local situations.

In the case at hand, the National Park Service needs to strengthen its climbing policies nationwide to prohibit bolts and permanent fixed climbing anchors in all of the designated Wildernesses it administers, in accordance with the Wilderness Act. These decisions are a matter of federal law, not subject to the whims of local Park Superintendents.