

Alliance for the Wild Rockies • Animals Are Sentient Beings • Bitterroot Audubon • Blue Ridge Land Conservancy • Bozeman Broadband, Great Old Broads for Wilderness • California Chaparral Institute • Californians for Western Wilderness • Center for Biological Diversity • Central Virginia Land Conservancy • Coalition to Protect America's National Parks • Conservation Congress • Doug Scott Wilderness Consulting • Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance • Eco Advocates NW • Eco Integrity Alliance • Footloose Montana • Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges • Friends of the Bitterroot • Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness • Friends of the Clearwater • Friends of the Wild Swan • Gallatin Wildlife Association • Heartwood • Izaak Walton League of America, Minnesota Division • Izaak Walton League of America, Wes Libbey Northern Lakes Chapter • Living Rivers and Colorado Riverkeeper • North Cascades Conservation Council • Northeastern Minnesotans for Wilderness • Olympic Park Advocates • Protect Our Woods • Quiet Use Coalition • Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) • Rewilding Institute • Rio Grande Valley Broadband, Great Old Broads for Wilderness • River Runners for Wilderness • Soda Mountain Wilderness Council • Southern Virginia Land Conservancy • Standing Trees • Swan View Coalition • WildEarth Guardians • Wilderness Watch

May 1, 2023

Dear Members of Congress:

The undersigned organizations are writing to express our **strong opposition to H.R. 1380**, the so-called “**Protect America’s Rock Climbing Act**” (PARC Act). This bill would take the extraordinary measure of weakening the 1964 Wilderness Act (16 U.S.C. 1131)—our Nation’s most protective environmental law—to appease the climbing preferences of a narrow constituency of recreationists. The bill’s title overstates the impact of wilderness designation on rock climbing, but the enormous impact of the bill on the integrity of the Wilderness Act and the National Wilderness Preservation System cannot be overstated. Both the Department of Interior and the USDA Forest Service have testified against H.R. 1380.

H.R. 1380 would allow the defacement and degradation of Wilderness from the permanent installation of fixed climbing anchors. The use and maintenance of fixed anchors in Wilderness is, and always has been, prohibited by the Wilderness Act’s ban on “installations.” Installations, including metal anchors like bolts, degrade wilderness character through lasting signs of human development and by attracting and concentrating use in sensitive landscapes.

The Wilderness Act certainly does not prohibit rock climbing so long as it is done without permanent installations. Given that less than three percent of the Lower 48 is protected as Wilderness, this doesn’t seem too much to ask.

What’s more, effectively amending the Wilderness Act for a subgroup of recreation interests would be the proverbial crack in the armor for Wilderness. Some mountain bikers want exemption from the prohibition on mechanized travel. Outdoor filmmakers and trail running race organizers want exemptions from the ban on commercial enterprise. Big-game hunters want wheeled-game carts and more places to land small aircraft in Wilderness, and some anglers want to increase motorboat use on wilderness lakes. The long list goes on. It is disheartening here to see support for Wilderness degradation by yet another recreational activity demanding its own slice of the wilderness pie.

Climbers themselves are not unified on this issue. Many support a climbing ethic that reflects a strong wilderness ethic. Protecting an area as Wilderness is an attempt to preserve the wildest and least tamed landscapes. Lowering the difficulty of a climbing route to a climber's skill level by bolting goes against the essential spirit of the Wilderness Act. The maintenance of wilderness character dictates that, rather than hammer a rock face into submission, a climber may have to accept that a route that cannot be climbed without bolts should not or cannot be climbed at all. Walter Bonatti, known for major first ascents, has noted that with modern equipment and bolting, "[t]he impossible has been removed from the equation." Another noted climber, George Ochenski, recently told a Salt Lake Tribune reporter that the notion that a ban on fixed anchors is effectively a ban on climbing in Wilderness is, "Total bulls***." Ochenski climbed first ascents in Wilderness for five decades and never used a bolt. And he is fine with the notion that some rock faces may never be climbed, "which would certainly be no crime against humanity." Bolting routes in Wilderness "is bringing 'sport climbing' into the wilderness -- and it belongs in the gym or on non-wilderness rocks."

There are more climbing routes in this country, both Wilderness and non-Wilderness, than a single person could climb in a lifetime. Perhaps as-yet-unattainable wilderness climbs should simply be left as a challenge to the next generation of climbers. In June 2017, for example, big wall climber Alex Honnold made the first free-solo ascent of El Capitan in Yosemite, completing the 2,900-foot Freerider route in under four hours. The important thing is that iconic climbs in Wilderness should be free of discarded climbing gear and permanent alterations. And most importantly, the Wilderness Act will remain intact and not eroded by the recreation rage de jour.

Maintaining wilderness character requires that climbers accept a higher level of risk in Wilderness and maintain some humility and respect for the peaks they scale. In the first catalog for his company Chouinard Equipment, later to become Patagonia, legendary climber Yvon Chouinard pioneered removable climbing chocks and a manifesto of "clean climbing." He wrote, "We believe the only way to ensure the climbing experience for ourselves and future generations is to preserve (1) the vertical wilderness, and (2) the adventure inherent in the experience... The fewer gadgets between the climber and the climb, the greater is the chance to attain the desired communication with oneself—and nature."

The undersigned organizations support traditional recreation uses in Wilderness as long as they adhere to the Wilderness Act's mandate to preserve "wilderness character." **There are relentless pressures on the natural world at this moment in history, including those from expanding recreation demands. Less than three percent of land in the Lower 48 is protected as Wilderness. Don't let this bill be the crack in its armor.**

Please oppose H.R. 1380 and help keep Wilderness wild!

Sincerely,

Wilderness Watch
Missoula, MT

Public Employees for Environmental
Responsibility (PEER)
Silver Spring, MD

Center for Biological Diversity
Tucson, AZ

Soda Mountain Wilderness Council
Ashland, OR

Friends of the Wild Swan
Bigfork, MT

Blue Ridge Land Conservancy
Roanoke, VA

Central Virginia Land Conservancy
Lynchburg, VA

Southern Virginia Land Conservancy
Danville, VA

Friends of Alaska National Wildlife
Refuges
Homer, AK

Animals Are Sentient Beings
Watertown, MA

Conservation Congress
Rohnert Park, CA

Bozeman Broadband, Great Old
Broads for Wilderness
Bozeman, MT

Eco Advocates NW
Eugene, OR

WildEarth Guardians
Santa Fe, NM

Coalition to Protect America's
National Parks
Washington, DC

Alliance for the Wild Rockies
Helena, MT

Heartwood
Tell City, IN

Friends of the Bitterroot
Hamilton, MT

Rio Grande Valley Broadband, Great
Old Broads for Wilderness
Albuquerque, NM

Living Rivers and Colorado
Riverkeeper
Moab, UT

River Runner for Wilderness
Flagstaff, AZ

Protect Our Woods
Paoli, IN

Swan View Coalition
Kalispell, MT

Izaak Walton League of America,
Minnesota Division
St. Paul, MN

Californians for Western Wilderness
San Francisco, CA

Footloose Montana
Missoula, MT

California Chaparral Institute
Escondido, CA

Standing Trees
Montpelier, VT

Quiet Use Coalition
Salida, CO

Doug Scott Wilderness Consulting
Palm Springs, CA

Eco Integrity Alliance
Evergreen, CO

Friends of the Boundary Waters
Wilderness
Minneapolis, MN

Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance
Frisco, CO

Olympic Park Advocates
Seattle, WA

North Cascades Conservation Council
Seattle, WA

Gallatin Wildlife Association
Bozeman, MT

Rewilding Institute
Arroyo Seco, NM

Bitterroot Audubon
Hamilton, MT

Friends of the Clearwater
Moscow, ID

Northeastern Minnesotans for
Wilderness
Ely, MN

Izaak Walton League of America, West
Libbey Northern Lakes Chapter
Grand Rapids, MN