CHAPTER 8
ACCESS AND STEWARDSHIP

Perhaps because of their unique relationship with the mountains, climbers have long been at the forefront of protecting wild places around the globe. John Muir, a leading conservationist of the nineteenth century, was a climber, as was David Brower, a leading conservationist of the twentieth century. Nearly every powerful advocate and conservationist of the last century first connected with the outdoors through recreation.

The tradition of climbers working to protect wild places continues today. On every continent, climbers act as stewards of the mountains, taking on actions as small as packing out their own refuse and as large as fighting large-scale development that threatens the places mountaineers love.

Access and stewardship are intertwined. Access to outdoor experiences and places to climb, hike, and explore is the foundation of a stewardship ethic. Having meaningful outdoor experiences nurtures an inclination to protect these places as stewards, advocates, and conservationists. As more and more people turn to the mountains, stewardship becomes even more important for protecting these places, both today and into the future.

Stewardship, especially work to minimize the impact of recreation, ensures that climbers can continue to have access to the outdoors. Maintaining access to wild places depends on minimizing the actual and potential conflicts between mountaineers, other users, and the interests of those who manage the land. On public and private lands, recreation is often just one of many activities that take place. Land managers, who are often responsible for balancing the multiple uses and activities on public lands, sometimes must place restriction on outdoor exploration on the land where mountaineers climb. Although practicing good stewardship should rightfully be considered the moral obligation of every climber, it is also the key to minimizing access conflicts.

LESS IMPACT, MORE ACCESS

Being aware of potential conditions that can affect access to climbing areas allows climbers to protect and enjoy recreational resources. Climbers are responsible for educating themselves about local customs, land rules and regulations, and any access restrictions where they wish to climb.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Stewardship starts with the natural environments that attract mountaineers in the first place. Alpine ecosystems are typically fragile and highly affected by humans. Vegetation is delicate and shallow-rooted. Human waste is particularly slow to decompose in the ice and rock zone, and it can become a problem on popular routes and at bivouac or camping areas. If a single climber fails to utilize Leave No Trace principles (see Chapter 7, Leave No Trace), the damage may be visible for months or years.

Cliff environments often have their own unique features. Cliffs may host nesting raptors, serve as home to bat colonies, and support highly specialized (and sometimes very rare) plant communities. Because cliffs may create their own microclimates and provide conditions that are either drier or wetter than the surrounding area, the tops and bases of cliffs may feature plant and wildlife concentrations unique to an area. Climber impacts can occur both on the cliff faces themselves (through wildlife disturbance and passive or active devegetation) and at cliff tops and bottoms (often in the form of erosion and ground-cover loss associated with concentrated foot travel and group gatherings).

In addition to affecting the environment, these impacts can also lead to access restrictions. Recreation impacts can create conflicts with regulations that are intended to protect places, including laws to protect habitat for endangered species and rules about other user groups. Most land managers have acceptable levels of impacts, which can vary greatly depending on who manages the land. The same impacts that are acceptable in a park that is being managed for recreation may be unacceptable in an area managed specifically for habitat preservation.

To avoid such access problems, every climber should adhere to the principles discussed in Chapter 7, Leave No Trace. In practical terms, this means adjusting climbing practices in relation to whatever constitutes a "trace" where you are climbing. What constitutes a "trace" may be different at a popular roadside crag than at a remote alpine area. Climbers should strive to minimize their impacts everywhere, and go to even greater lengths in wilderness and environmentally sensitive areas. Become familiar with who or what agency manages chosen climbing destinations, and learn the rules that govern use of those areas.

CULTURAL IMPACTS

Local populations, including indigenous peoples and religious groups, often work to protect places based on the religious or historical significance attached to natural features. Oftentimes, tribes or local groups work together with recreation groups to protect an important place for its cultural and recreational value. At other times, the need to protect cultural values has conflicted with access for climbing.

The issues are complex when climbing intersects with religious beliefs that attach significance to a climbing objective. At a minimum, become knowledgeable of the local customs that may be harmed or affected when you are climbing at a new area, and make decisions based on cultural sensitivities and local land management practices and norms. For instance, good stewardship requires leaving artifacts and rock art (petroglyphs and pictographs) undisturbed.

> *I felt then that [this] was another special place. A place where climbers lived who cared for it, and knew it well enough to say that the yellow rock was more brittle than the red, or that there are hidden holds inside that crack, or that the number of condors is on the up,*

that the boulder in the next valley gives good shelter, or at what time exactly does the sun shine on that face of the mountain. Simple shared knowledge. That which we have of our home rocks.

—Paul Pritchard, *Deep Play*

AESTHETIC IMPACTS

The use of fixed gear such as bolts, in situ pitons, and rappel slings has been at the center of a number of access issues because of its aesthetic impact on natural places. When climbing has a visual impact on the outdoors, such as a high density of bolts on a cliff or rappel anchors that stand out at a distance, it can diminish the outdoor experience of climbers and nonclimbers alike. Another aesthetic impact to consider is the use of chalk by rock climbers where chalk residue on holds visually contrasts sharply with the surrounding rock or is not removed by weathering. Climbers can turn to the Access Fund, a nonprofit organization focused on climbing access and stewardship (see Resources for this chapter), for more information, background, and climbing-specific low-impact recreation skills.

We are entering a new era of climbing, an era that may well be characterized by incredible advances in equipment, by the overcoming of great difficulties, with even greater technological wizardry, and by the rendering of the mountains to a low, though democratic, mean.

Or it could be the start of more spiritual climbing, where we assault the mountains with less equipment and with more awareness, more experience and more courage.

—Yvon Chouinard, "Coonyard Mouths Off," *Ascent*

ACCESS FEES

Fees that apply to all recreational users can also affect climbing access. Access fees, climbing fees, and permit fees can create an economic barrier for some mountaineers. These fees, particularly in Asia, are sometimes used for stewardship by land management agencies, and sometimes they are chiefly governmental revenue devices.

HAVING A SAY IN ACCESS

As people who enjoy the outdoors, climbers and mountaineers have a responsibility to protect outdoor places and a stake in preserving access to them. There are a few important ways you can act to protect your outdoor experiences.

SPEAK UP AS A STAKEHOLDER

If climbers want to have a say about how to protect the places where they love to climb, one place to start is with federal land management agencies. Land management agencies—for example, the US National Park Service, Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management—manage millions of acres of public lands on behalf of all citizens. On these lands, all citizens are stakeholders. These agencies employ public processes to gather input about management decisions. These public processes solicit feedback from stakeholders, including advocacy groups such as The Mountaineers, environmental organizations, local businesses, developers, and the wider public.

For instance, if climbers love visiting a local national forest, they can get involved in protecting their access to climbing there by participating in ongoing public processes or by contacting their local land managers. Since these agencies can be huge (sometimes with hundreds or thousands of employees that take care of millions of acres of land), it can sometimes be overwhelming to get involved. Many times, a local advocacy organization that works with these agencies can help climbers figure out the most effective way to share their voices.

SPEAK UP THROUGH A MEMBERSHIP GROUP

Membership organizations such as The Mountaineers, the Access Fund, the Alpine Club of Canada, the American Alpine Club, and the Outdoor Alliance are active in access issues, stewardship projects, and advocating for wild places. These membership organizations work hard to protect climbing access and can also introduce climbers to opportunities for sharing their voices with local and federal land managers. Membership in these organizations is important not just as a symbolic contribution to climbing access, but also because a membership organization is only as strong politically as the size of its membership. An organization with one hundred thousand members has more political weight than one with only several hundred members. When climbers join one of these groups, they are not just contributing financially to

the organization's work; they are also loaning their voices so that this advocacy group has more power to protect the places and the climbing that matters to them.

These membership organizations influence policy in a number of ways and often share with members multiple opportunities to contribute to those efforts. They work with agencies that develop management plans for climbing and assist in tailoring site-specific closures to protect critical resources, such as seasonal restrictions for nesting raptors. They provide grants for land acquisition, trail building, trailhead maintenance, and other conservation projects, as well as scientific studies related to climbing impacts. Some local and regional climbing organizations have been formed at a number of climbing areas to address access issues close to home.

EXERT INFLUENCE AS A STEWARD

Small acts of stewardship matter greatly for protecting places and a climber's access to them. All climbers have the responsibility to minimize their impact on the natural environment and to practice Leave No Trace principles (see Chapter 7, Leave No Trace). If climbers love a place, they treat it with care and encourage others to do the same. Stewardship can be as simple as picking up someone else's litter, decaying slings, and abandoned fixed lines. For climbers with more time to dedicate, stewardship can also involve weekends spent on trail-building and revegetation projects. Membership organizations often offer opportunities for trail and site stewardship, as well as advocacy.

THE FUTURE OF MOUNTAINEERING

Mountaineers pursue unconfined exploration. And yet the future of mountaineering relies on all climbers taking care to mitigate their impacts and think of themselves as stewards of wild places. As more people continue to join the ranks of climbers, it is incumbent on all climbers to minimize their impacts and maximize their stewardship of shared lands and waters. By doing so, they and the generations of mountaineers who follow can continue to enjoy the experience of a new trail, a challenging climb, or a mountain summit—the freedom of the hills.