


DIVISION OF PARKS AND RECREATION

August 22, 1997

STAFF DIRECTIVE 97-3

TO: Administrative Staff
Section Chiefs
District Superintendents
Park Superintendents
Program Managers

FROM: Philip K. McKnelly, Director



SUBJECT: Policy for: Rock Climbing Management Within the State Parks System

This staff directive is issued to clarify the division's policy for rock climbing management within the North Carolina State Parks System. This policy has been developed with the assistance and consultation of numerous division staff and outside sources. It is intended to promote low-impact use in the parks that allow climbing activities.

INTRODUCTION AND JUSTIFICATION

Technical rock climbing (defined here to include bouldering, free climbing, and direct aid climbing) has occurred in North Carolina's state parks since the 1950s, when routes were established in and around Hanging Rock State Park in Stokes County. As climbing increased in popularity through the 1960s and 1970s, climbing became established at three additional North Carolina state parks: Crowders Mountain in Gaston County; Pilot Mountain in Surry County; and Stone Mountain in Wilkes and Alleghany counties.

Impacts to natural resources have been documented since the sport first appeared at Hanging Rock. But given the generally low numbers of climbers, Division of Parks and Recreation ("division" hereafter) managers at the time determined that the cumulative effects of climbing-related impacts were acceptable. However, as climbing's popularity increased in the early 1970s, the division recognized the need to establish regulations regarding access, designated climbing areas, natural resource protection, and visitor safety. This led in 1973 to the development of the division's first climbing policy. It was under this policy that areas such as the Big Pinnacle (Pilot Mountain), Hanging Rock (Hanging Rock), and King's Pinnacle (Crowders Mountain), remained closed to climbing due to concerns over natural resource protection and visitor safety.

The 1973 policy proved effective as long as climber numbers remained low. However, in the decade since the mid-1980s, climbing has emerged as one of the most popular outdoor sports in the United States, and the pressures on climbing areas have increased dramatically. Estimates of active climbers in the United States now approach 500,000, and data collected by the division since the early 1990s indicate that the annual number of climbers visiting North Carolina's state parks exceeds 25,000. This growth has been attributed largely to the easy availability of modern equipment, the publication of detailed guide books, a growing climbing press, the proliferation of climbing gyms in urban areas, and increased exposure via entertainment and the popular press (see Attarian 1994 and references cited therein).

Since the mid-1970s, North Carolina's state parks have experienced increases in climbing activity similar to those documented in many areas across the country. These increases have been strongly correlated with increased impacts to natural resources in and around climbing sites, both on and off the rock surfaces. These impacts typically include soil compaction, vegetation trampling and loss, erosion, unauthorized trails, litter, and disruption of wildlife. In addition to long term impacts on natural resources, increased climbing activity has resulted in concerns about conflicts between climbers and non-climbers, safety, and the general degradation of any visitor's outdoor experience due to overcrowding.

Slow-growing impacts that were previously manageable and acceptable due to the low traffic in climbing areas have now been accelerated to the point that the sport and the resources that support it are being affected in ways that warrant active management. Since the environmental impacts associated with climbing typically occur in heavily used, confined areas, they can be difficult to mitigate. Long term planning and monitoring are essential if impacts to these sites are to be controlled. Consequently, the Division's primary concern has shifted from one of allowing climbing to occur with relatively little oversight to one of more actively integrating climbing's growth with the mandates of preserving and protecting ecologically significant areas.

In order to insure the long-term protection of the state park system's natural resources and to ensure that visitors continue to utilize designated climbing areas safely and with minimal impacts, the management of all rock climbing activities in the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation will be guided primarily by the following documents:

1. The State Parks System's Mission Statement.
2. The division's Natural Resource Management Policy.
3. The division's Rock Climbing Management Policy.
4. Specific park climbing management plans.

The division's rock climbing management policy is intended to promote low-impact climbing and must strike a proper balance between two criteria:

1. The need to manage natural resources so that their long-term integrity is maintained.
2. The need to provide opportunities for safe, high quality outdoor recreation.

These criteria are addressed by the Mission Statement for the North Carolina State Parks System, which states in part:

The North Carolina state parks system exists for the enjoyment, education, health, and inspiration of all our citizens and visitors. The mission of the state parks system is to preserve and protect representative examples of the natural beauty, ecological features, and recreational resources of statewide significance; to provide outdoor recreational opportunities in a safe and healthy environment; and to provide environmental education opportunities that promote the stewardship of the state's natural heritage.

The methods and management philosophy used to protect the state parks system's natural resources are guided by the division's Natural Resource Management Policy, which states in part:

The preservation of significant resources shall have priority in the management of park resources. Natural resources will be managed by allowing natural environments to evolve through natural processes with minimal influence from human activities. The primary objective in natural resource management will be the protection of natural resources for their inherent integrity and for appropriate types of enjoyment while ensuring their availability to future generations. Division managers will attempt to maintain all of the components and processes of naturally evolving ecosystems. Intervention may occur in order to correct or compensate for the disruption of natural processes by human activities; to protect, restore, or enhance rare species and natural communities; or to protect, restore, or enhance significant archaeological resources.

POLICY

The Departmental rule concerning rock climbing states that "a person shall not engage in rock or cliff climbing or rappelling in any park except at designated areas in designated parks and only after obtaining a special use permit from a park official." (15A N.C.A.C. 12B .0204). Rock climbing and rappelling will be allowed in designated areas in the following North Carolina state park units: Crowders Mountain; Hanging Rock; Pilot Mountain; and Stone Mountain. Each of these parks also contains cliff areas that are designated as off limits to climbers.

Violators of climbing and other regulations and laws on park property are subject to prosecution resulting in fines and/or imprisonment in accordance with G.S. 113-23 (Control of State Parks in North Carolina); 113-34 (Rules Concerning Public Use on State Park Lands); 113-35 (Control Over Parks); and North Carolina Administrative Code 15A, Chapter 12B (State Park Regulations). The following standards will apply for all parks with designated climbing areas:

General Information

- New routes are not allowed.
- All climbers must register and keep in their possession a valid rock climbing/rappelling permit every time they climb in a state park.
- Climbing and rappelling are allowed in designated areas only and must coincide with a park's posted hours of operation.
- Temporary, seasonal, or permanent closures of individual routes or specific climbing areas may occur to protect natural or cultural resources or for visitor safety.
- Unroped climbing is not recommended.
- The use of fixed anchors is limited to those already in place. Existing fixed anchors may be replaced for reasons of climber safety, but only after notifying the park superintendent.

Climber Safety

The Division of Parks and Recreation recognizes, as should all climbers, that all climbing activities are inherently dangerous. Further, it is impossible for park staff to guarantee the safety, experience, or ability of any climber. Division staff will not inspect or certify the climbing equipment or ability of any visitor. Nor will division staff certify any route's difficulty rating or the reliability of any fixed anchor.

Park visitors climb at their own risk and are responsible for their personal safety while climbing on state park property. Climbers are expected to secure proper equipment and training, and are further expected to adhere to standard climbing safety practices. Safe climbing demands that each climber have experience in route finding, route protection, rope handling, retreat from steep faces, and emergency first aid.

The following warnings will be posted on park information boards at all climbing access areas:

- North Carolina state parks do not create or maintain any climbing route.
- North Carolina state parks do not install or maintain ~~the~~ fixed anchors on any route.
- Route selection and the decision to rely on fixed anchors are the climber's responsibility.

- Climbers climb at their own risk and are responsible for obtaining proper equipment and training.
- New routes are not allowed.
- Existing fixed anchors may be replaced only after notifying the park superintendent.

Fixed Anchors

Numerous climbing routes in North Carolina state parks have been established using fixed anchors, primarily expansion bolts and pitons. Responsibility for the installation, inspection, and long term maintenance of these anchors rests completely with the climbing community. The division makes no claims as to any fixed anchor's condition or reliability and does not guarantee that any fixed anchor is still in place.

It is the division's intent to limit the impacts in all climbing areas by encouraging low impact climbing. Therefore, upon the approval and implementation of this policy, the installation of fixed anchors or the development of new routes will be prohibited at all climbing areas in North Carolina's state parks system.

The replacement of existing fixed anchors for reasons of safety will be allowed, but must be preceded by notification of the park superintendent. Upon such notification from the climbing community, park staff will immediately post information at climbing access areas advising climbers that the division has been informed that suspect anchors may be present on a specific route. The Resource Management Program, the appropriate District Superintendent, and the Division Safety Officer will be notified of the request and given the opportunity to comment. Upon agreement among division staff to allow the replacement, the park superintendent will notify representatives of the climbing community and request their assistance.

If representatives of the local climbing community are not known to park staff, then in accordance with Section 11.3 of the Volunteer Program Guidelines (Determining Volunteer Resources), the park superintendent will consult with organizations specializing in climbing issues, such as local outfitters, the Carolina Climbers Coalition, Outward Bound, The Access Fund, etc. The selection and certification of all anchor replacement team members will be the responsibility of the consulting organization(s). All anchor replacements will be done on a volunteer basis by members of the climbing community; park staff will have no role in anchor replacements beyond logistical coordination and record keeping. Prior to the project's initiation, all climbers performing the repairs will be advised in writing by the park superintendent of the following points (see Appendix 1 for sample notification):

- Their status as volunteers means that the State will not provide medical coverage or worker's compensation for any participant who is injured during the replacement project.
- All climbing equipment, tools, anchor hardware, and any other costs associated with anchor replacements are to be provided by the climbing community.
- Park staff must be notified prior to the initiation of the project, and all work must occur during posted park operating hours.
- Old anchors are to be completely removed and carried out. When possible, old anchor holes will be redrilled and reused. Otherwise, old anchor holes are to be sealed with a mixture of epoxy and rock dust. The replacement must occur as close as possible to the old anchor site.
- On completion of the project, climbers will provide the park superintendent with written documentation on anchor location, condition, type, date and method of installation, and who performed the work.

Park Specific Climbing Plans

In addition to these division-wide standards, each park with climbing areas will develop a climbing management plan that provides for the following:

1. Information on designated climbing areas, park hours, where and how to obtain a climbing and rappelling permit, access routes to climbing areas, and emergency assistance.
2. A program to monitor and evaluate climbing impacts on the park's natural resources.
3. Voluntary involvement and support of the local climbing community.

Park management plans may also address use limits, temporary, seasonal, or permanent closures, weather-related closures, natural or cultural resource management and protection, or any other issue deemed pertinent to resource protection or visitor safety.

POLICY REVIEW AND REVISION

At a minimum, each park plan and the Division's policy will be reviewed on a five year rotation by the Resource Management Program, the Division's Safety Office, the appropriate District Superintendent, and the Superintendent of State Parks. Such reviews will also consider and incorporate input from division field staff, the division's Resource Management Program, the Attorney General's Office, park advisory committees, and representatives from the local climbing community. Specific responsibilities for these reviews are included in Appendix 2.

DEFINITIONS

Bouldering: Climbing that occurs on rock faces usually less than 20 feet high. Typically involves repeating a sequence of moves up or across a rock face. Usually done without a rope.

Direct Aid Climbing: Climbing in which the climber is completely dependent on the rope for support and safety. Progress is made by installing protective anchors (usually removable) in the rock and then relying on them to support the climber's weight as the climber stands on them and reaches up to install the next anchor.

Fixed Anchor: Climbing protection that is installed and intended to be left as a permanent fixture on a route. The most common examples include pitons, which are hammered into cracks, and expansion bolts, which are drilled into smooth rock faces.

Free Climbing: Climbing in which the climber relies on the rope only for safety. Progress is made by using the hands and feet on the natural features. Anchors are typically used, but only to stop a fall; they are not used as climbing aids.

Rappelling: Using a rope to descend from a steep slope or face.

REFERENCES

Attarian, A. (1994). Management Strategies for Reducing Climbing Related Impacts. Unpublished manuscript submitted to the NC Division of Parks and Recreation. 33 p.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This policy was implemented in August 1997 following extensive consultation and review with Joe Sox, Crowders Mountain State Park Superintendent; Tommy Wagoner, Hanging Rock State Park Superintendent; Andy Whitaker, Pilot Mountain State Park Superintendent; Jim Billings, Stone Mountain State Park Superintendent; Lewis Ledford, West District Superintendent; Jim Hallsey, Parks Chief Ranger; Marshall Ellis, Resource Management Specialist; David Berry, Assistant Attorney General; representatives of the Carolina Climbers Coalition; and numerous state and federal agencies that provided us with information on their climbing policies and procedures. Their cooperation and input are greatly appreciated.

PKM/JME

August 22, 1997

APPENDIX 1: Sample Notification/Authorization for Fixed Anchor Replacements

Dear _____,

This letter is to notify you that the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation has received and accepted a request to replace the fixed anchor(s) on the following climbing route(s) at *[park name]*:

Route Name	Pitch Number and Anchor Number
1.	

This letter authorizes you to replace only these anchors. Anchors in new locations are prohibited. As directed by the division's Rock Climbing Management Policy, all fixed anchor replacements are performed on a voluntary basis by members of the climbing community. Decisions regarding climber and hardware selection will be left to the discretion of the climbing community. Be aware that the State Attorney General's Office has notified the division that your status as a volunteer in this activity means that the State will not provide medical coverage or worker's compensation for any participant who is injured during the replacement project. Also, participants must be aware of the following conditions:

- All climbing equipment, tools, anchor hardware, and any other costs associated with anchor replacements are to be provided by the climbing community.
- Park staff must be notified prior to the initiation of the project, and all work must occur during posted park operating hours.
- Old anchors are to be completely removed and carried out. When possible, old anchor holes will be redrilled and reused. Otherwise, old anchor holes are to be sealed with a mixture of epoxy and rock dust. The replacement must occur as close as possible to the old anchor site.
- On completion of the project, climbers will provide the park superintendent with written documentation on anchor location, condition, type, date of installation, and who performed the work.

[Additional park-specific issues, such as concerns over sensitive natural resources, project logistics, points of contact, etc., should be inserted here].

On receipt of this letter, please contact the park to schedule the work. Thank for your interest and assistance in this project. Please contact me at *[park phone number]* if you have questions.

Sincerely,

Park Superintendent

APPENDIX 2: Responsibilities for Management Plan Review and Revision:

Division Director: Sets the division-wide management policy for all climbing areas in the state parks system.

District Superintendent: Reviews individual park plans and the division-wide plan. Assists in the review and approval of all requests regarding the replacement of fixed anchors.

Park Superintendent: Prepares the park's climbing management plan and assists in the review of the division-wide plan. Coordinates fixed anchor replacements or repairs through local climbing community. Tracks climbing activity via the park's permit system. Monitors climbing areas and documents impacts to soil, vegetation, and rock surfaces. Coordinates mitigation and resource protection in climbing areas with division Resource Management Program staff and division Trails Program staff. Develops working relationship with knowledgeable local climbers.

Parks Chief Ranger: Reviews individual park plans and the division-wide plan. Assists in the review and approval of all requests regarding the replacement of fixed anchors. Serves as liaison between the division and the Attorney General's Office in the review and/or revision of park or division climbing management policies and plans.

Resource Management Program: Reviews individual park plans and the division-wide plan. Assists park staff in monitoring and documenting climbing impacts. Maintains database on climbing use in each park. Maintains database on rare or sensitive species located in climbing areas and provides technical advice on mitigating climbing-related impacts. Assists in the review and approval of all requests regarding the replacement of fixed anchors.

Interpretation and Education Staff: Assist park staff with developing signs and interpretive information for climbing areas.

