The Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area (hereafter RRCNCA) is a 197,000-acre parcel located about 20 miles west of Las Vegas and is managed by the U.S. Department of Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for the purposes of wildlife habitat and recreation. It became the seventh U.S. National Conservation Area in 1990. The RRCNCA is a fairly wild place, even though it is close to the city of Las Vegas. The area is home to numerous animals including the desert tortoise (Gopherus agassizi) which has been designated as a threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (see the series of fact sheets by Englin et al.). It offers some of the finest sandstone rock climbing in the world, has many scenic hiking trails, and a 13 mile scenic loop road which can be driven or ridden on bikes, which is typically done by over a million people per year. In some parts of the RRCNCA off-road mountain biking is a popular activity.

The BLM has suffered many budget cuts over recent years, which have affected the ability of the Las Vegas area BLM to manage the RRCNCA. The Las Vegas District of BLM had their recreation budget cut from 1997 levels of about $950,000 to about $650,000 for 1998. The lack of federal dollars contributed to the decision to charge a visitor fee for entrance to the RRCNCA for the first time since its designation as a BLM site in 1967. Fee collection began in November 1997 at the entrance to the loop road, and has been criticized by some environmental groups such as the Sierra Club (Associated Press 1998) due to concerns over the purposes to which the collected revenue will actually be put. Also, the use fee draws criticism because some feel that citizens already pay federal taxes to provide access to places such as the RRCNCA. The BLM visitor's center is located at the beginning of

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the one-way loop road. Visitors do not have to pay the fee unless they drive onto the loop road; walking to the visitors center is an option for those who do not wish to pay the fee. However, it seems that most visitors to the area prefer to drive the loop road, occasionally stopping at pullouts, and to take short hikes on trails scattered throughout the thirteen mile loop (see Clemmons et al.). Rock climbers make up a small portion of the total number of annual visitors who use the loop road.

**Rock Climber's Access**

Rock climbers' access to federally managed recreation areas in the United States has become an increasingly important issue. Cave Rock at Lake Tahoe, and Hueco Tanks State Historical Park, located near El Paso, Texas, have been closed to climbers. Climbing access to Devil's Tower in Wyoming, has also been questioned (DeLong 1997). In these three cases, conflicts between Native American and climbers' interests in the lands resulted in closures to the climbers.

Climbing at some parts of the RRCNCA may also be in jeopardy in the near future. The Federal Land Policy and Management and Wilderness Acts direct the BLM to manage wilderness areas for the use and enjoyment within their established goals. A newly proposed rule (see 61 Federal Register 66968-66974 at section 6302.70) concerns rock climbing practices at some areas managed by the Federal government. The proposed rule prohibits, unless it is provided for in the management plan, the use of any type of permanent fixed anchor, including expansion bolts. Construction or placement of permanent artificial hand and footholds, and the use of glues, epoxies, or other fixatives on a natural surface (see the Federal Register, December 19, 1996) are also prohibited. Violators of this rule would pay a fine of up to $100,000. Fixed anchors are places on a climbing route where permanent features have been added by climbers to allow safe retreat or in climber's jargon, a "rappel" down. These anchors are unobtrusive, are difficult to see until you are right upon them, and they do little or no damage to the rock in which they are placed. Anchors most often consist of one or more types of expansion bolts. If they cannot be used, then a climber can not safely descend from the climb unless an alternative way to descend exists. Elimination of use of the anchors precludes climbing safely, effectively eliminating access to many routes, especially those that do not go to the top of a mountain with a descent foottrail.

On June 1st, 1998 the U.S. Forest Service (U.S.F.S.) banned the use of fixed anchors on National Forest Lands (Osiu, 1998). The proposed rule by BLM is quite similar to the one adopted and implemented by the U.S.F.S. and is interpreted to affect only the wilderness areas on BLM lands, but it would preclude almost all climbing in these areas. This ban was lifted on all areas except the Sawtooth Wilderness of Idaho, as of August 14th, but will be reevaluated after approximately one year. The issue remains controversial, as some environmentalists are against climbing in wilderness areas, and climbing advocates insist climbing causes no permanent damage (as an example, Menocal's recent essay in the High Country News led to a flurry of letters in opposition.)
At present, there are no wilderness areas at the RRCNCA, but there are proposed wilderness areas in the RRCNCA's management plan (including Black Velvet and Oak Creek Canyons at the RRCNCA) which would be effected by the policy. Most expect that the BLM will adopt the ban, as the U.S. Forest Service has.

**Mail Survey Results**

To gauge reaction of the proposed rule changes and the new access fee at RRCNCA researchers at UNR mailed out an opinion survey in the spring of 1998. The questionnaire was sent to 284 climbers, most of whom were recruited in an on-site recruitment effort at the RRCNCA in the spring of 1997. These climbers live in places all over the world, which illustrates the importance of the RRCNCA as a world-class climbing area, but many of them had unfortunately moved by the time the mail survey questionnaire was sent, and thus did not ever receive the questionnaire. A total of 119 individuals responded.

The 119 respondents are experienced climbers, with an average of 11 years of experience climbing. They are not wealthy, with an average annual income between $35,000 and $40,000 for 1997. However, they are also avid climbers, taking an average (median) of 12 trips in the twelve-month period prior to receiving the survey. On average, this group takes about 4.35 trips to the RRCNCA. Ninety-six percent of the 119 respondents had been to the RRCNCA before, and 82 percent of the 119 had climbed in the proposed wilderness canyons (Black Velvet and Oak Creek). Though these climbers had visited the RRCNCA, they also mentioned visiting dozens of other sites around the United States (about 27% had visited Hueco Tanks in Texas), and even some climbing areas in France, Switzerland, Norway, and Germany.

**Reaction to Fee Increase**

Climbers were asked about their reaction to the new fee increase at the RRCNCA. Only about 11 percent said, "I feel quite negative about this fee because we used to get in for free." Another five percent said they also felt negatively about the fee because "$5 is a lot of money to me." Approximately 45 percent (54 climbers) said, "I do not care, as the amount of money charged is modest."

The climbers were also asked whether the fee would change the number of trips they would take to the RRCNCA. Again, there seems to be little positive or negative response, as about 88 percent (105 climbers) stated that they took the same number of trips before and after the imposition of the entrance fee. However, some climbers say they will go to other places than the loop road when they visit the RRCNCA in the future.

**Reaction to Proposed Rule Changes**

The climbers were asked to state whether they strongly disagreed or agreed with several statements in the questionnaire involving the rule change for the RRCNCA's wilderness canyons. Virtually all climbers (106) strongly disagreed with the statement "climbers could not use existing fixed anchors." However, when asked did they agree with "climbers would be allowed to do whatever they wish in regard to bolting, including using power drills", there were only ten of the 119 climbers who agreed, and 44 of them strongly disagreed.

Climbers were told to suppose that the BLM had adopted the anchor ban. They were then asked whether their future trips to RRCNCA would change. About one-third said they would change, with a slight reduction in trips being taken under the new policy. The average number of fewer trips is 1.44, which is about 30 percent of the average number of trips reported taken. One person said she or he would take more trips under the new policy. Of those that said they would take fewer trips to RRCNCA, about 64 percent (25 climbers) said they would take trips elsewhere instead.

**Inferences and Conclusions**

Our study focuses on rock climbers only. We can make no inferences about the preferences and reactions of those visitors to the RRCNCA who do not rock climb using the data described above. In addition, one must be careful in interpreting the preferences of the sample as being representative of all of the climbers who visit the RRCNCA. However, because the RRCNCA is so well known throughout the climbing community, this sample of climbers come from all over the world, and the geographical distribution of their places of origin in some sense represents a truly global sample.

With these warnings in mind, we feel comfortable coming to the following conclusions. First, it seems likely that most of the climbers who visit the RRCNCA will be opposed to BLM adopting the policy change to ban the anchors. This was expected, as there is little benefit to any climber of having fixed anchor use banned. However, climbers express a sentiment that as a group, they should not be allowed to do whatever they want, perhaps showing some respect for careful management of areas.

If the proposed rule is adopted, there will almost...
certainly be considerably fewer trips taken by climbers to the RRCNCA. There can be a substantial loss to climbers even when they take trips to alternative areas, because these areas may be preferred less than the RRCNCA (Sharf and Jakus 1996). If or when fewer climbers come, this generates a loss of fee revenue for the BLM, and there may be negative spill-overs into the Las Vegas community in the form of foregone hotel and other visitor revenue (Vossler et al.). The imposition of a first-time entrance fee, on the other hand, seems to have had little impact on the climbers and their trip-taking behavior.

We can only conclude here that visitation by climbers in our sample will likely decrease if the proposed rule is adopted and similarly that our sample of climbers are not overly concerned about the new entrance fee. However, it may be that as fewer climbers visit the wilderness canyons in response to the rule being adopted, more non-climbers may visit these same canyons. Non-climbers may also react more negatively to the fee, because their potential alternative places to visit may have no such fee, and they might get the same enjoyment at these other places as they do at the RRCNCA. To get a complete picture of what may happen in the future for RRCNCA recreation, the preferences of the people who visit the RRCNCA should be assessed in a manner similar to the above.

Finally, the road ahead for us includes an effort to combine our data with similar data on climbers collected by our colleagues at the Universities of New Mexico and Tennessee. These researchers are collecting data focusing on climbing places similar to the RRCNCA, but in Texas, Tennessee and elsewhere. After combining the data from all research efforts, we will be better able to make inferences about climbers' preferences for access changes for all climbers in the United States, because we will have a truly national database on rock climbers throughout the country.

References


