



Protect America's Climbing

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Hearing on “Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act”
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My name is Sasha DiGiulian, and I am here today on behalf of Access Fund, which represents and advocates for the more than 8 million climbers across the United States. Thank you to Chair Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and the rest of the committee members for considering this testimony.

As a professional climber, world champion, and environmental advocate, I am honored to be here today to support the “*Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act*”, or EXPLORE Act. I thank Congressman Westerman for leading bipartisan support for this important initiative. [Access Fund](#) is the national advocacy organization for climbers in the United States. Access Fund has worked for more than 30 years to ensure that climbers can enjoy safe and sustainable access to climbing, while leading the climbing community’s efforts to protect and care for the land. Our experiences in wild places inspire us to become champions for conservation and protection of public lands.

I strongly support the EXPLORE Act because it will:

- 1) Update recreation policy to meet the increasing demand for high-quality recreation experiences;
- 2) Protect America’s climbing history, as well as safe and sustainable access for climbers on federal public lands;
- 3) Promote economic development and job opportunities in rural and gateway communities;
- 4) Simplify access to recreation on federal lands;
- 5) Inspire new recreation opportunities for kids, veterans, and people with disabilities; and
- 6) Improve public-private partnerships and to help address land agency workforce housing shortages.
- 7) Reform long-outdated and inefficient policies that permit guides and outfitters to provide services on federal public lands.

The EXPLORE Act has also been endorsed by the Outdoor Industry Association, Outdoor Alliance, Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, American Mountain Guides Association, and American Alpine Club as well as dozens of businesses and conservation groups around the country. We are united in support of this bill.

Background

I started to think about my testimony for this hearing while I was in Yosemite National Park climbing in the designated Wilderness on El Capitan—arguably the world’s greatest climbing venue. As I climbed one of the most difficult routes in the world, I thought about how privileged I am to be able to experience wilderness in the

way it was intended when the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964. I am humbled by the lessons I continue to learn while navigating complex vertical terrain. My experiences climbing in Wilderness areas have taught me self reliance, humility, and a deep appreciation for the conservation of American Wilderness and public lands. I cannot think of a better way to experience wilderness than accepting what the natural landscape offers, and adapting my mind and body to the lessons that climbing in wilderness provides. Climbing has been my primary focus since I was six years old, and my life's mission is to inspire other people to challenge their preconceived notions of what is possible as well as to introduce people to the profound benefits of America's Wilderness areas.

The Protecting America's Rock Climbing Act, or PARC Act, passed out of this committee with unanimous consent because it specifically protects America's climbing legacy and supports the health and wellness of the American public. The PARC Act is one of the important bills included in the EXPLORE Act and it is especially important right now.

Harmful new federal agency proposals

Two weeks ago, the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service proposed a new interpretation of the Wilderness Act, going against nearly sixty years of precedent, to prohibit fixed anchors in Wilderness. For over one hundred years, our beloved federal land agencies have allowed climbing and the use of standard climbing equipment to explore public lands and wilderness areas. John Muir, David Brower, and many of the early proponents of the National Park Service and the Wilderness Act were climbers. The mountains opened their minds to the importance of adventure, recreation, and conservation. Climbers have a long history of stewarding our exceptional public lands, and I am proud to continue this tradition so that the next generation of climbers can benefit from these experiences as I have for more than two decades.

First, the federal land agency proposal would create significant safety issues by forcing local rangers to consider fixed anchors prohibited and implement a costly administrative exception process, called a "Minimum Requirements Analysis," to determine whether to allow the standard maintenance of gear that allows climbers, mountaineers, backcountry skiers, hunters, canyoneers, and other backcountry travelers to safely ascend and descend dangerous terrain. For over a century, climbers have taken responsibility for making sure that wilderness adventurers can get off of mountains safely. The new proposal places unnecessary obstacles on the routine and standard practice of replacing fixed anchors, which are slings, bolts, and other gear that become weathered in unforgiving environments.

Fixed anchors are essential pieces of the climber's safety system that allow people to safely and sustainably access vertical terrain. Without fixed anchors, many of the most inspiring places in America—like many of the walls on El Capitan—would become inaccessible to the American public.

Second, the federal agency proposal threatens appropriate historic climbing routes that have already been authorized and managed by our federal land agencies. For example, the route I was climbing just last week was legally established through Yosemite National Park's programmatic approval process. The fixed anchors on the climbing route protect blank sections of rock where removable climbing gear is not available. While climbing in Wilderness, climbers always prefer removable protection, such as spring loaded camming devices, to fixed anchors. We subscribe to a low-impact ethic, but the judicious placement of fixed anchors is required to provide a modicum of safety. In fact, every single climbing route on Yosemite's El Capitan, including routes established prior to the passage of the Wilderness Act, include fixed anchors. I live in the Front Range of Colorado, and look up at Longs Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park where The Diamond, America's highest elevation

wilderness big wall, is located. Climbers first ascended the thousand foot tall Diamond in 1960, and since then, climbers have tested their skills and experienced wild conditions on The Diamond. Every single route on The Diamond includes at least one fixed anchor to protect especially dangerous, blank sections of rock. Every established climbing route in Wilderness that includes a fixed anchor, over approximately 90% of the established climbing routes in America's Wilderness areas, are now threatened by the agency proposal. America's climbing history and mountain culture is at risk. At the minimum, the federal land agency proposals need to exempt existing climbing routes that have already been authorized and have always been managed as appropriate wilderness recreation opportunities.

Third, the proposal does not align with current National Park Service policies and management practices. In 2013, the National Park Service issued Director's Order 41, which provided specific guidance for managing climbing in wilderness. The guidance clearly allows for the occasional use of fixed anchors in Wilderness and requires programmatic or site-specific authorization for placing new fixed anchors. The policy made it clear that fixed anchors were allowed, yet regulated, and the climbing community accepted it.

Now, federal solicitors assert that their new proposal aligns with existing policy. But if fixed anchors were actually considered prohibited installations, wouldn't the 2013 National Park Service policy mention that important detail?

The National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service currently—and successfully—implement numerous Wilderness Management Plans at park units and national forests that specifically allow the conditional placement and replacement of fixed anchors in wilderness. Reversing these existing plans with impractical and costly proposals would create safety concerns, erase historic climbing achievements, and block future generations from safely experiencing the world's greatest climbing venues.

Wilderness climbing

Climbing in the United States has a long and distinguished history that includes many of the leading conservationists of our time. What started out as a fringe activity enjoyed by a few privileged adventurers has grown into a national pastime, with over 500 climbing gyms sprouting up in communities all across the country. At last count there are over 8 million climbers in the country, and climbing as a whole contributes at least \$12.5 billion to the economy each year (2019 State of Climbing Report). And every day, we are learning more and more about the many benefits of spending time outside.

There are about 40,000 crags—individual climbing areas—in the United States. Nearly 60% of those are on federal public lands. Climbers feel a special connection to federal Wilderness areas across the country because they offer some of the most iconic and historic climbing opportunities in the world. The Wilderness offers unmatched opportunities for adventure, recreation, and solitude.

Despite this long history, the management of climbing has been inconsistent over the years and across land management agencies, which has resulted in waste of taxpayer resources, serious threats to climber safety, confusion among land managers, and unpredictability for rural gateway communities attempting to build their outdoor recreation economies. This confusion often relates to the use of fixed anchors in Wilderness areas. Although climbers have been allowed to use fixed anchors in Wilderness areas for almost 60 years, we are now facing an unprecedented level of uncertainty and inconsistency due to the agency proposals I described earlier. The EXPLORE Act, on the other hand, will bring consistency and predictability to climbing management by

providing the land management community with clear direction from Congress, especially regarding climbing management within Wilderness areas. It is a simple and elegant solution that will:

- 1) Require the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture to issue national guidance on management of climbing within Wilderness areas;
- 2) Clarify that climbing and the use of fixed anchors are allowable, and not prohibited, uses within Wilderness areas;
- 3) Preserve the existing authority of land management agencies to regulate climbing to ensure it protects Wilderness characteristics, natural resources, and cultural values; and,
- 4) Provide for public participation in decisions affecting climbing in Wilderness areas.

Climbers as conservationists

Climbers have been exploring the mountains and cliffs of the United States for more than 100 years. Those adventures have inspired many people to become advocates for public lands and conservation. I'm one of them. Throughout that history, climbers have depended on fixed anchors to safely ascend and descend technical, vertical terrain. Climbers have supported the Wilderness designations that post-date many of America's most inspiring climbing achievements.

In 1920, Albert Ellingwood and Barton Hoag climbed Lizard Head Peak in Southwest Colorado using pitons along with their hemp rope and hobnailed boots. Congress designated this area as the Lizard Head Wilderness in 1980, 60 years after this historic climb.

In 1931, Norman Clyde led an ascent of the East Face of Mt. Whitney in the Sierra Nevada range using pitons. Congress designated this area as the John Muir Wilderness in 1964, more than 30 years after this historic climb.

In 1960, Bob Kamps and David Rearick made the first ascent of the Diamond on Longs Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park using pitons as fixed anchors. Congress designated this area as the Rocky Mountain National Park Wilderness in 2009, 49 years after this historic first ascent. Recently, the congressional members who introduced the Senate and House versions of the Rocky Mountain National Park Wilderness bill issued powerful statements that articulate their intent to not prohibit fixed anchors when they introduced the Wilderness legislation. I am proud to be a resident of Colorado's 2nd district, so I was glad to see Governor Polis, our former district representative and current governor, send a letter to the Department of Interior and the Department of Agriculture which stated:

We should be doing everything we can right now to grow the coalition of champions for public lands and to support our land management agencies in responding to climate change and taking care of the places entrusted to our care. A new prohibition on fixed anchors in Wilderness would jeopardize the safety of climbers, harm our recreation economy here in Colorado, establish unnecessary bureaucracy, and restrict access to some of the wildest places in America.

Similarly, former Colorado Senator Mark Udall recently wrote that:

As the primary sponsor of the Rocky Mountain National Park Wilderness and Indian Peaks Wilderness Expansion Act, I want to be absolutely clear: Nothing in those bills was intended to restrict sustainable and appropriate Wilderness climbing practices or prohibit the judicious and conditional placement of fixed anchors—many of which existed before the bills' passage. I used fixed anchors to climb in these

areas, and I want future climbers to safely experience profound adventures and thereby become Wilderness advocates themselves.

These examples begin to paint the picture of the rich history of climbing and mountaineering in this country, and they also show how climbing and the use of fixed anchors long predate the Wilderness Act and the designation of Wilderness areas across the country. These are truly historic recreational uses that have contributed to outdoor legacy and mountain culture that Americans enjoy today.

In 2015, President Obama called Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgenson to congratulate the climbers after their improbable first ascent of Yosemite's Dawn Wall—a Wilderness climb that inspired a generation of conservationists, including myself. That climb would have been impossible without the occasional fixed anchor.

The climbing community advocated strongly in support of the 2019 John D. Dingell Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act. In that landmark piece of legislation, Congress designated approximately 600,000 acres of new Wilderness in Emery County, Utah, a place that has been explored by climbers for decades. The Dingell Act states explicitly that the Wilderness designation does not prohibit the placement, use or maintenance of fixed anchors. The EXPLORE Act will build on the important climbing management guidance that Congress provided for Emery County.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that President Biden recently designated the Camp Hale – Continental Divide National Monument to honor the contributions of the 10th Mountain Division. The 10th Mountain Division trained at Camp Hale prior to fighting fascism in World War II and developed many of the techniques used today for climbing, skiing, and moving through risky, vertical terrain. The proclamation designating Camp Hale calls out the “original pitons used to train technical climbing” and then declares them to be “an object of scientific or historic interest in need of protection.”

In short, the history of climbing and exploration of areas that are now designated as Wilderness contributes to America's rich legacy and culture of outdoor adventure. The EXPLORE Act will help to protect and celebrate this history so that it may inspire future generations of outdoor enthusiasts who will continue to visit and explore and fall in love with these special places.

Bipartisan support for EXPLORE Act

Our country is divided on so many issues, but recreation is not one of them. I am so grateful that the Senate has unanimously supported the recreation package known as—America's Outdoor Recreation Act—and I hope that this committee will unanimously support the EXPLORE Act.

I think most Americans agree that protecting our public lands and supporting sustainable recreation are nonpartisan issues. I am so proud to be a professional climber because exploration and adventure is part of our American DNA.

The EXPLORE Act modernizes recreation policy, stimulates rural economies, gets kids outdoors, simplifies permitting processes, helps federal land managers, improves recreation infrastructure, and benefits our veterans. The EXPLORE Act represents America's potential, and that is why I am honored to provide my testimony today. The EXPLORE Act will ultimately lead to better results for the land and for the American public, and I strongly urge this Committee to pass this important legislation.