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# Climber Impacts

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Big wall climbing is one of the more spectacular uses of Yosemite National Park. Climbers love the challenge and visitors love the spectacle. But if the sport is to continue to flourish, climbers must minimize their impacts through sensitive use.

The big walls of Yosemite Valley have a different legal status from the valley floor and trails. In 1984, Congress designated the big walls as wilderness, so the Park Service has a duty to protect the walls in their natural state. But the NPS also has an obligation to minimize the regulation of climbing and to maximize climbers' freedom in pursuing their sport. Climbers have an equal obligation to take care of the park: to respect the rocks of the valley, the plants and animals that call them home, and their fellow climbers.

Most big wall climbers respect the valley. But a small group does not, and they can mess things up for everyone. At the base of El Cap—litter, illegal campsites, fire rings, soot scars and excrement bags tossed from above. On the walls—rotting fixed ropes and cracks stuffed full of trash and excrement. On the summits—abandoned belay seats, poop tubes, food, water bottles, huge windbreaks built around dozens of littered campsites, and not a stick of firewood to be found. This situation must not continue.

All climbers camping at the top of walls or at the base of Half Dome must follow park rules for wilderness camping:

## Permits and Bivies

Currently, wilderness permits are not required for nights spent on a wall or for emergency bivouacs on the summit. But if you plan to spend the night on top of the wall, you need a permit. Camping is not allowed at the base of

any walls in the valley except Half Dome, where you are required to have a permit. Wilderness permits can be obtained at the Wilderness Center in Yosemite. Camping is prohibited on the summit of Half Dome.

## Trash and Litter

Carry out everything you brought and pick up any trash you find. Don't stash food or water "for the next party" for "future ascents" or for any other reason. Stashed food and water is trash. In recent years bears have started visiting the rim of El Cap and the base of Half Dome because so much food was left there. Never throw trash off a wall saying you will pick it up later.

## Wildlife Restrictions

Check the notice board in Camp 4 for any closures such as seasonal closures to protect nesting raptors such as the peregrine falcon.

## Hammerless Aid

Use your hammer as little as possible. There are many reasons to climb hammerless: you generally move faster, you have less impact on the rock, and there is more creativity and adventure involved. Today, even notorious nail-ups like the Sea of Dreams can and should go 80% hammerless. Not having the right gear is no excuse. Come prepared to climb hammerless by carrying a selection of cam hooks, aliens and offset nuts and anything else that will suppress your need to nail.

## Constructive Pin Scarring

Favor upward blows when cleaning pitons. This will make the placement more likely to take a nut or other hammerless placement in the future.

## Bivy Sites

Follow the "Leave no trace" ethic. Do not build new windbreaks, sleeping platforms or other "improvements" to bivouac sites. There should be enough existing spots to deal with people's needs. If you really have to move rocks, replace them afterward.

## Campfires

Do not make campfires except in an emergency. Burning wood at a place like the top of El Cap inhibits future plant growth. In an emergency



situation, if you must build a fire, use an existing fire ring and be sure to put the fire completely out (two wildfires have been started by climbers' bivy fires in recent years). There are simply too many climbers to have campfires in this sensitive area.

### Human Waste

It is no longer acceptable to "bag and toss." Tossing excrement to the ground or stuffing it in cracks pollutes water, which makes people and animals sick, and is a safety hazard (several climbers have been hit by flying bags). Build a poop tube out of PVC or other rigid material and carry it with you on the wall. Defecate into a paper bag (plastic bags clog the pumps that empty the toilet vaults), add a little kitty litter to reduce odors, and empty your tube into any vault toilet.

### Fixed Ropes

If you are not actively using your ropes, they should be removed. Ropes left in place as permanent fixtures may be removed by the Park Service. They may also be in really bad condition. Don't count on finding fixed rope.

### Fixed Anchors

The use or possession of motorized drills is not allowed in the undeveloped areas of the park. Hand drilling is allowed. Think before you drill. Is that new bolt necessary or just convenient?

### How Climbers Can Help

- 1 When you see climbers tossing bags, dumping trash or running down descent trails, let them know what you think of their actions. Their impact may seem minor, but when multiplied by the hundreds of parties on the walls each year, it makes a huge difference.
- 2 Get involved. Support the efforts of the National Park Service and climbing organizations. If you have comments on climbing arrangements or ideas on how things could be better managed, get in touch with the Park Service [nps.gov/yose/](http://nps.gov/yose/) or an organization such as The Access Fund [accessfund.org](http://accessfund.org), American Alpine Club [americanalpineclub.org](http://americanalpineclub.org) or the American Safe Climbing Association [safeclimbing.org](http://safeclimbing.org).

Horrorific climber-generated refuse on Thanksgiving Ledge 1998. Photo by Chris McNamara.



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## Ethics

# Taking Care of The Big Stone

by Steve Grossman

Big wall climbing has never been more popular. There is a report that 90 individual headlamps were tallied one summer night on the Captain in 1999. With our numbers growing rapidly and traffic on some long routes becoming intense, the need is glaring to adopt a low impact wall ethic. Each party's experience on a climb can be strongly affected by thoughtless actions of previous ascents, be it trash, human waste, pin scars or fixed gear left on the wall.

Route preservation warrants attention on two levels: the preservation of the environment and the level of challenge. Environmental preservation includes obvious things such as packing out trash and feces. It needs to extend to dealing with urine and junked climbing hardware. Yosemite's modest summer rainfall and high climber traffic mean that some routes stink of piss all season long. Piss bottles should be used. Climbers should also consider leaving extra space and containers in their "poop tubes" to remove trash left by others. Take the time to remove old webbing, junked copperheads and any other worthless fixed gear that you encounter.

Preserving climbing's challenge requires using placements with the least possible impact. Today's extensive array of climbing tools has made hammered placements increasingly unnecessary. Many of the climbs in this book have been done cleanly. They will maintain their level of difficulty indefinitely if climbers substitute ingenuity for force. Clean

aid climbing requires diligence and practice but there is a payoff: the deep reward of having taken nothing away from a route but the grin on your face.

It is worth noting that although the terms "clean" and "hammerless" are used interchangeably in the rest of this book, here, a hammerless ascent means no hammer is carried, which is the height of commitment. As Bruce Carson wrote after the first clean and hammerless ascent of the Nose with Yvon Chouinard in 1974, "By leaving the hammer at home, the nut aficionado can regain the uncertainty and adventure of the first ascensionists." My own hammerless, 25th anniversary ascent of the Muir Wall was one of my most adventurous climbs in my experience because the outcome was in doubt to the last pitch!

Once a hammer enters the picture the outcome becomes much more predictable and the challenge is to use the least destructive option. Tip-stacked and over-driven pitons top the impact list with copperheads close behind. Mastery of aid climbing requires confidence in your testing procedures. Learn to avoid the extra couple of blows that exceed security and lead to more wear. Don't use the pick on your hammer to drive copperheads; missed blows mean instant flaring and beat placements. Carry the necessary tools for properly placing and cleaning heads. Try to use placements that will not become fixed and will lower the challenge for the next party.

Lines of fixed copperheads and unnecessary drilling degrade the character of a route. Reach inside yourself for the commitment to push your limits and leave minimal impact. Take pride in our heritage as climbers; make ingenuity and skill take precedence over expediency and force so that the challenge and adventure of big wall climbing will not become lost. Little that I have said is new. Hugh Burton in his 1975 "El Cap Update" proclaimed, "Our cliffs are an unrenovable resource. I know it's been said before, but it's got to be said again and remembered if the climbs are to remain as they are: incredible!"

