

# Yosemite Rock Climber Survey

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ONE HUNDRED FEET ABOVE THE ground, a climber dangles effortlessly on his rope. The whirl of a power drill echoes in the mountain breeze as it cuts into the rock. By removing the "traditional" difficulties involved in establishing new routes, this European practice, known as "rappel-bolting," has enabled climbers to place safely a series of closely spaced expansion bolts for protection. The increasing competition for remaining rock resources, recognition arising from first ascents and the quest for more difficult free-climbing routes have led some climbers to adopt exceedingly questionable environmental conduct to attain their goals. Where needed, holds have been chipped, glued or artificial holds bolted to the rock. In some foreign areas, painting route names on the rock became common features. American climbers have not accepted painting, but a growing number have accepted European practices, polarizing the climbing community and increasing the impact upon the vertical environment.

In Yosemite, the first expansion bolts were placed by John Salathé in 1947 during the first ascent of the Lost Arrow Spire. However, since early climbers considered bolts taboo, they were used very sparingly until Warren Harding's first ascent of El Capitan's *Nose Route* where he installed 125 bolts to complete the climb. Three years later, Royal Robbins established El Capitan's *Salathé Wall* with only 13 bolts, "to keep the element of adventure high." Later, in 1970, Harding did yet another route on El Capitan by installing 330 bolts to ascend the *Dawn Wall*. The angered Robbins deemed the ascent "a rape of El Cap" and engaged within two months in removing the excessive trail of hardware. Royal Robbins' code of minimum impact and adventurous style forged the mold for Yosemite's purity-of-ascent style. His example guided subsequent climbers to think before drilling and to leave the rock in a natural state as much as possible.

Much like other areas experiencing ethical upheavals of the 1980s, Yosemite has also felt the hand of European practices. After 25 to 30 years of bolting and with an increased number of climbers and questionable styles, few areas of Yosemite granite are free of bolts. Many European-style, rappel-bolted routes contain as many bolts in one 150-foot pitch as Robbins placed during 3000 feet of climbing on the *Salathé Wall*. The last five years have also seen increased incidents of glued, chipped or bolted holds. The controversy has often resulted in heated exchanges in Yosemite campgrounds and parking lots.

To determine finally how the climbing community views these current controversial issues, Mark Tuttle and I designed a survey to address them. After having the form approved by Michael Kennedy, Editor and Publisher of *Climbing*, 1243 questionnaires were mailed to climbers throughout California from December 1, 1989 to April 1, 1990. Of that total, 387 were sent to members of the American Alpine Club and 856 to *Climbing* magazine subscribers residing in the area from the Eastern Sierra to the Bay Area, from Sacramento to the Tehachapis. Of these, 587 were returned. For further analysis, two zones were employed, one covering climbers residing within two hours of Yosemite and the other including climbers who lived more than two hours away. Most of the respondents were men between the ages of 30 to 39 years of age, claiming a

### Survey Totals (Includes AAC)

SEX: 536 Males, 51 Females

AGE:	Teens	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	Over 60
	23	153	252	111	28	20
Climbing Experience	5 Years or less	6-10 Years	11-15 Years	16-20 Years	21-25 Years	Over 26
	171	128	98	106	23	52
How often the respondent climbed in Yosemite	Zero (Annually)	1-3 Days	4-7 Days	8-14 Days	15-21 Days	3 Weeks+
	28	170	123	101	56	109
Leading Level	5.7 or less	5.8	5.9	5.10	5.11	5.12+
	110	78	102	171	106	20
				YES	NO	UNDECIDED
Do you think bolts are acceptable where natural or removable protection can be used?				48 (8%)	516 (88%)	23 (4%)
Do you think it is acceptable to bolt artificial holds to the rock?				28 (5%)	547 (93%)	12 (12%)
Do you think altering the rock (chipping & gluing) is acceptable to complete a route?				14 (2%)	565 (96%)	8 (1%)
Do you think the use of motorized power drills is an acceptable method of drilling holes for bolts?				316 (54%)	189 (32%)	82 (14%)
Do you think colored bolt hangers are acceptable? (Note: specifying 'brightly colored hangers' may have produced inaccurate results)				123 (21%)	365 (62%)	99 (17%)
Do you think it is acceptable to paint or permanently affix route names to the rock?				9 (1%)	563 (96%)	15 (3%)
Do you think Yosemite should be open to rappel bolting techniques or should it be a recognized traditional preserve?				"Rap-bolting" 123 (21%)	"Traditional" 418 (71%)	46 (8%)
Do you consider yourself primarily a traditional or sport climber?				"Traditional" 391 (67%)	"Sport" 14 (2%)	"Participate in Both" 182 (31%)

leading level of 5.10 and with about five years of experience. Only 28 correspondents did not climb in Yosemite, either due to age or travel restraints.

Results indicate that the majority of climbers are opposed to European tactics. Only 3% of respondents living farther than two hours from Yosemite indicated that bolting artificial holds to the rock was acceptable, yet 7% of climbers within two hours felt it was acceptable. One climber commented, "Bolted-on holds are better than chipping or gluing. At least the bolted holds could be removed and all that remains is a tiny hole. Besides, a bolt is a bolt, no matter what it is used for." The most common response, however, was characterized by, "I am appalled that some people want to bolt an artificial sport route onto El Capitan. Artificial holds are for artificial walls, not natural settings." A similar percentage of climbers also favored the installation of permanent hardware where removable or natural protection was not available; 8% felt bolts along cracks were acceptable. Respondents nearly unanimously denounced rock alternation, with only 2% favoring chipping or gluing holds while only 1% accepted painting on the rock.

One of the greatest disagreements emerged over the use of power drills. Although using power drills in Yosemite is a violation of the Wilderness Act, nearly 54% of the total respondents favor their use, while 32% remain opposed. While mechanical drills could clearly produce deeper, safer holes for bolts, many climbers felt their acceptance and wide-spread application would produce an accelerated proliferation of bolts.

Not surprisingly, the greatest controversy involved "rappel-bolting" (establishing routes from the top on rappel) versus "traditional" routes (climbing from the ground to the top). While 71% of total respondents felt Yosemite should be preserved for traditional climbing methods, 21% embraced the idea of rappel-bolting and 8% were undecided.

Arguments for Yosemite as a "traditional preserve" included, "It's an issue of preservation. We must let those faces remain unclimbed for generations talented and bold enough to lead them from the ground up. Preserving Yosemite will preserve the remaining test pieces unaltered for tomorrow's climber." "Rap-bolters tend to use up the resources too quickly and sometimes sandwich routes too closely and many times botch the job." "Acceptance of rap-bolting would probably give us what France has: a 10-foot by 10-foot grid of bolts."

Arguments for the acceptance of rappel-bolting included, "Traditional climbing limits the potential of my physical ability. Instead of just looking forward to a red-point work-out, I have to deal with death, my own. Placing bolts on rappel makes good sense when your life is hanging on it." "I think Yosemite ought to be open to rappel-bolting because better bolts could be placed to increase safety." "Rappel-placed bolts don't alter the rock any more than a bolt placed on lead."

Interestingly, more climbers claimed to participate in "sport climbing" than favored rappel-bolting in Yosemite. Since further analysis revealed that 122 out of 196 respondents claiming to participate in sport climbing had a leading level of 5.10 or less, it seems likely respondents subscribe to a broader definition. This information would suggest sport climbing to encompass artificial walls and

competitions, or the possibility of rappel-bolting to lower levels if this practice becomes widely acceptable.

Respondent members of the American Alpine Club held some views which differed from the overall results. The largest differences were those concerning the use of power drills and rappel-bolting. AAC respondents denounced the use of power drills by 53% to 30%, with 17% undecided. Only 12% of AAC respondents favored rappel-bolting.

Perhaps the survey did not address the most fundamental question of all: should bolts be placed at all in National Parks? Seldom do rock climbers fully appreciate the unique privilege they enjoy. Campers are subject to fines and/or imprisonment for driving a nail into a tree. Yet, climbers have long been

### American Alpine Club Results

SEX: 97 Males, 7 Females

	<i>Teens</i>	<i>20-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>40-49</i>	<i>50-59</i>	<i>Over 60</i>
AGE:	0	9	27	34	17	17
	<i>5 Years or less</i>	<i>6-10 Years</i>	<i>11-15 Years</i>	<i>16-20 Years</i>	<i>21-25 Years</i>	<i>Over 26</i>
Climbing Experience	3	8	13	33	9	38
	<i>Zero (Annually)</i>	<i>1-3 Days</i>	<i>4-7 Days</i>	<i>8-14 Days</i>	<i>15-21 Days</i>	<i>3 Weeks+</i>
How often the respondent climbed in Yosemite	18	34	19	16	5	12
	<i>5.7 or less</i>	<i>5.8</i>	<i>5.9</i>	<i>5.10</i>	<i>5.11</i>	<i>5.12+</i>
Leading Level	28	11	18	29	14	4
				YES	NO	UNDECIDED
Do you think bolts are acceptable where natural or removable protection can be used?				7 (7%)	91 (88%)	6 (6%)
Do you think it is acceptable to bolt artificial holds to the rock?				5 (5%)	95 (91%)	4 (4%)
Do you think altering the rock (chipping & gluing) is acceptable to complete a route?				2 (2%)	102 (98%)	0
Do you think the use of motorized power drills is an acceptable method of drilling holes for bolts?				31 (30%)	55 (53%)	18 (17%)
Do you think colored bolt hangers are acceptable? (Note specifying 'brightly colored hangers' may have produced inaccurate results)				21 (20%)	63 (61%)	20 (19%)
Do you think it is acceptable to paint or permanently affix route names to the rock?				2 (2%)	99 (96%)	3 (2%)
Do you think Yosemite should be open to rappel bolting techniques or should it be a recognized traditional preserve?				"Rap-bolting" 13 (12%)	"Traditional" 79 (76%)	12 (12%)
Do you consider yourself primarily a traditional or sport climber?				"Traditional" 86 (83%)	"Sport" 0	"Participate in Both" 18 (17%)

permitted to drill holes in the rock for bolts. However, land managers across the country have begun to look at the increasing problems of rock defacement. In recent years, rangers have banned bolts in Hueco Tanks, Texas and in the Flatirons, El Dorado Canyon and Rocky Mountain Park in Colorado.

Analysis of the current *Yosemite Climbers' Guide* gives startling numbers on the growing bolt problem. When the guide was published in 1987, there were approximately 6200 bolts reported in Yosemite Valley alone. Since this information is three years old and nearly all new-route activity requires expansion bolts, the present figure could possibly exceed 8000 bolts. At the 1989 American Alpine Club meeting in Boulder, Colorado, Yosemite Chief Ranger Roger Rudolf was asked if rock climbing would be allowed if Yosemite had remained unclimbed until now. He responded, "No, modern climbing, primarily bolting and placing pitons, causes too much resource damage to be appropriate in a National Park."

In defense of climbers' freedoms, the American Alpine Club's Access Committee has battled the government over these restrictions. The Chairman of the AAC Access Committee, Armando Menocal III, is quoted in *Rock and Ice* N° 39 as saying, "The Access Committee adamantly opposed regulation of climbing styles and equipment. In practice, this means that climbers should be allowed to place bolts." Preserving access is important, but are access and unrestricted bolting truly synonymous? Environmental welfare and the current proliferation of bolts should outweigh the ideal to preserve practices free from regulation.

National Parks were established to preserve places of beauty for relaxation and recreation within acceptable levels of impact. While rock climbers constitute a relatively small group of land users, they currently produce some of the most challenging problems for land managers. Rangers are not pleased with the aggressive cleaning of lichen and moss from cracks, excessive drilling of rock, campground fights over style differences, the growing number of climber trails, trash at the base of cliffs and the need for rescues. The increasing number of climbers and the use of environmentally degrading styles could create regulations similar to those imposed on wilderness travelers when the Wilderness Permit System was instituted in 1972. Perhaps the best possible solution would be allowing the installation of bolts only by permit. Land managers could then regulate the impact as needed, while leaving the freedom to upgrade or replace bolts for safety and permit new routes where deemed acceptable.

Responsible environmental conduct and unity are imperative to help secure the freedom to use the vertical places. As revealed in this survey, only a minority of climbers support European methods in Yosemite. Will the majority of climbers allow this minority to compromise the beauty of Yosemite and jeopardize the freedom to climb? Climbers must soon join with environmentalists and conservationists to address the problems associated with modern rock climbing. Are an estimated 8000 bolts in Yosemite Valley an indication of an immediate problem, or shall we wait to address these issues until Yosemite resembles a construction site? Time will tell . . .