

# BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: CONSTRAINTS TO ROCK CLIMBING PARTICIPATION IN SOUTHERN ILLINOIS

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## Abstract

Rock climbing opportunities in rural southern Illinois have emerged on the national scene and are expected to grow in popularity. The present study collected and analyzed qualitative data from southern Illinois climbing enthusiasts about their perceived constraints to full participation in the sport. Twenty interviews, two focus groups, and four key informant interviews were conducted in 2009. Three themes emerged from the data reflecting aspects of legitimacy, environmental impacts, and interaction with other stakeholder groups. Participants attested to a strong sense of community and dedication to their activity, yet expressed concerns about climbing's perceived lack of stature as a legitimate resource-based recreation activity among land managers and other stakeholders. Our findings suggest that local advocacy organizations, such as the Illinois Climbers Association, can play a pivotal role in promoting the constructive dialogue necessary for resolving issues and better integrating climbing into the mix of accepted outdoor recreation activities.

## 1.0 Introduction

Rock climbing is certainly not new to rural southern Illinois and climbing participation in the area is projected to increase rapidly as the quality of the local sandstone becomes better known among the international climbing community. However, at the very time that climbing visitation is expected to increase, site closures on public and private lands have limited regional climbing access and opportunity. This highlights the need to devise an adaptive management framework that allows climbers, competing resource-based user groups, and land management agencies to communicate and collaborate.

It has long been recognized that the arrival of "new" recreation activities on public lands creates concerns about management decisions and resource allocation (Hollenhorst et al.1995). As climbing styles and gear evolve, it becomes critical not only for government agencies that manage public areas, but also for private land owners who allow climbing on their property, to understand the nature of the activity and the mindset of its practitioners. In addition to studies on economic valuation and environmental impacts, information is needed on what factors influence climbers to adopt or abandon the sport. The purpose of this study was to facilitate dialogue between climbers and public land managers by developing a more thorough understanding of climber perspectives on constraints to participation.

## 1.2 Study Area

The southernmost portion of Illinois has several popular rock climbing venues (Figure 1). There are prime climbing sites in the counties of Jackson, Johnson, Union, and Williamson. Located south of the Wisconsin period glacial advance, this area retained rolling hills and large sandstone bluffs unique to Illinois' topography. The region's public land climbing opportunities are managed by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), USDA Forest Service (USFS), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). On a smaller scale, recreational climbing opportunities also exist on private lands.

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

## 2.0 Methods

Twenty climber interviews, two climber focus groups, and four key informant interviews with resource managers were conducted during 2009. Climber subjects were identified through region-specific climbing organizations and recruited based on their willingness to participate. Digitally recorded interviews and focus group sessions were transcribed *verbatim* for analysis. We adopted the Strauss and Corbin (1998) *grounded theory* process for coding, categorizing, and comparing qualitative data.

It is important to note that our subject pool was not a random sample as would be selected for a *quantitative* public opinion survey. For purposes of this *qualitative* study, we identified and interviewed experienced southern Illinois climbers in order to obtain detailed information about their opinions and experiences in their own words. We believe that experienced climbers can provide essential information about stakeholder perceptions of regulations and user group interactions, as Mangun et al. (2007) found with deer hunters in Illinois and Kentucky. An experienced climber was defined as an individual having over 5 years of experience, regardless of climbing discipline.

## 2.1 Quantitative Data

While the present study's focus was primarily qualitative, all climber subjects were asked to complete a brief background questionnaire. These data were used to describe our subjects' climbing history in the region and verify experience levels.

## 2.2 Qualitative Data

Interviews were conducted in a semi-standardized format (Berg 2007) with individuals known or recommended as active, experienced, southern Illinois climbers. The process of conducting interviews was open-ended and continued until information saturation was achieved. Additional interviews were conducted with resource managers from state and federal agencies as key informants who could provide additional context. Only those few managers who had direct responsibility for southern Illinois properties containing climbing sites were contacted.

To ensure that the study captured the widest range of climber concerns and perspectives, two focus groups were announced to regional climber organizations and held at the Southern Illinois University Carbondale Student Recreation Center. Any interested climber could attend. Seven southern Illinois climbers attended the first focus group and nine climbers attended the second.

## 3.0 Study Findings

Twenty background/climbing experience questionnaires were completed and usable. Fifteen of the respondents (75%) had greater than five years of climbing experience, indicating a high level of commitment to the sport. Eleven respondents (55%) reported that they had spent more than 150 days participating in some climbing discipline during the previous year. **A high percentage of southern Illinois climbers were found to engage in multiple climbing disciplines. While 60% reported actively participating in traditional climbing, all respondents reported active participation in sport climbing.**

Climber interviews and focus group transcripts were pooled for quantitative coding and analysis. After coding all transcripts, it was determined that three themes had dominated the discussions and the emergent themes were labeled *Legitimacy*, *Stakeholder Interactions*, and *Environmental Impacts*. Although not considered mutually exclusive, these primary categories were used to organize study findings.

### 3.1 Legitimacy

It was apparent in the transcripts that climbers were concerned about their activity's perceived lack of legitimacy. Several participants emphatically expressed concerns that managers did not recognize climbing as a mainstream activity and did not appreciate climbers' commitment to the environment:

Heck yeah we're legit. We are organized and we seriously care about those areas. How much more legitimate can you get?

I don't think they really understood us. We weren't down there tearing stuff up. We were probably the one group who consistently used that area and appreciated it. I was constantly cleaning stuff up down there. I can't say whether it was from people out drinking beer and walking around or climbers, but I definitely never saw any climbers leave trash down there. Sometimes I wonder if they [FWS] really grasped that situation.

When a FWS employee was asked about climbers as a user group, he confirmed their concerns:

You know, I guess I haven't really seen much to do with climbing. It seems to me that climbers are a relatively small user group. Well, relative to other user groups we deal with on a day to day basis. I don't think they're really that visible to us. From what I have seen, they're not really that vocal.

However, other agency personnel expressed an appreciation of climbers and their interest in nature:

I understand that climbers have an appreciation for nature as well. Some of the places in southern Illinois seem like they would be great locations for climbing and rappelling. I'm sure that while the physical challenge is worth it in itself, climbers still go because they appreciate nature and geology and what it took to make the land look like it does today. It's truly inspirational.

Climbers are definitely a legitimate user group. There's lots of them and they do what they need to do to take care of things.

### 3.2 Stakeholder Interactions

Climbers frequently related instances of encountering other recreation resource user groups. In particular, when describing encounters with horse-back trail riders, discussion would center on the quality of those encounters.

Yeah the trails can get kinda bad, especially after a bunch of horses come through. You can see the difference from one day to the next. One day it's not too bad, then a ton of horses come through and you can see the

difference as soon as they're gone. Trails get more sloppy. There's waste from all of the horses, too. It's far from pleasant.

I think we interact well together; it's just not a beneficial interaction to us.

They ride by and hoot and holler and that's o.k. I mean, it's not really a big deal. Sometimes it's kind of cool. When it starts to be a problem is when they walk super close to the rock and end up stepping on ropes and stuff. That's obviously not a good situation. That stuff is what keeps us safe. We can definitely not afford to have anything that big walking by and stepping on our gear.

A USFS employee commented:

I don't ever really hear anything from equestrian folks about the climbers being a nuisance. I think they like seeing you guys do your thing here. Now I do hear a thing now and again, through the grapevine, from climbers about how the horses have a negative impact on their experience.

### 3.2.1 Climber and Agency Relations

This subcategory of stakeholder interactions provides insights into relationships that range from benign neglect to strained miscommunication. When asked about relations with USFS personnel, a climber commented:

Well, I think that they do what they can. They mean well, it's just that sometimes money is what makes decisions. That and we don't necessarily raise too much of a fuss about stuff. I betcha if the horse riders got a problem they definitely let the Forest Service know about it. We just kind of deal with it and go about our business. Our business is climbing, and business is good.

However, when asked about relations with FWS managers, the same participant shared a different opinion:

As far as I know there is no relationship. We don't have any reason to have one with them. They don't let us climb at Opie's and they don't intend to. That's all I need to know.

An extremely popular area known as Opie's Kitchen on Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge (CONWR) was recently closed to "technical" rock climbing. Climbers expressed their frustration with the decision:

They didn't care what we thought. I've been climbing there for almost 15 years. I wonder how many days their employees spend there? Not even like that matters, but that place matters. We weren't doing any harm. If anything we're helpin' out. I picked up all kinds of stuff down there. Maybe we put a bit of chalk here and there. O.k., fair enough. But, when it came down to it, we wanted to talk with the refuge [CONWR] and they just didn't even care to sit down with us.

A FWS manager framed the issue strictly in terms of the agency's mission, yet offered hope for future collaboration:

If we were able to cater to the needs of climbers and still do what our mission charges us to do, then I'm sure we would have a positive working relation with rock climbers... I'm not going to say that we won't ever open that area back up to climbing. I think it would be great if some type of partnership could be worked out in the future. If the climbing community took an approach that could potentially enhance the environment and the Refuge and still allow climbing then there's no reason why we wouldn't give it consideration.

### 3.3 Environmental Impacts

One of Illinois' premier state parks, Giant City State Park (GCSP) has long accommodated climbers but it recently enacted a ban on bolting (drilling holes into cliff faces and inserting metal anchors for guiding and supporting climbing equipment). Several participants articulated concerns over unintended environmental impacts of a bolting ban:

Having bolts that are below the actual top of the cliff really helps maintain vegetation on top of the bluff. Instead of tromping around on top, we all access the canyon from a couple of specific points. Then we really don't ever have to go on top of the bluff again. There are reasons that bolts are placed below the lip or edge or whatever you wanna call it. Climbers really, in general, don't want to go around beating up a place we love.

If the park would just let us put in some more bolts for easy top roping we wouldn't have to use those trees for anchors. I mean, come on. They close some of the best climbs in the park to us, then give us no choice but to love Shelter One [site within GCSP] to death.

However, when asked about the potential for permitting fixed anchors, an IDNR manager brought up liability concerns as part of the reasoning behind the agency's decision:

I don't think we'll ever let that happen. It's a liability issue. If we go out there and start putting in bolts then we're held liable when someone gets hurt.

#### 4.0 Discussion

An objective of this study was to identify issues that could restrict the rock climbing participation potential in southern Illinois. As stakeholders articulate their concerns, issues created by misunderstandings or information gaps can be identified and addressed.

The dominant theme emerging from the data was the pervasive perception on the part of climbers that they are not offered the recognition they deserve. Interviews reveal that climbers generally perceived themselves as a legitimate and responsible user group. Climbers expressed a nuanced sense of place and ownership for the resources they used. When asked to comment on climbers and their behavior, managers for the most part responded positively. More channels of communication need to be opened so that climbers feel confident that their contributions do not go unrecognized. A local climbing organization, the Illinois Climbers Association (ICA), is determined to have a significant positive impact on climbing in the region. Seventy-five percent of the climber participants in this study were already members of the ICA; all participants expressed awareness of the organization. Having a structured advocacy organization in place will give climbers a unified voice and facilitate better working relationships with land management agencies.

The data also confirm that a significant number of encounters occur between climbers and other stakeholders. Trail-riding equestrian users and climbers have a high rate of interaction because their activity is concentrated at specific resource amenities. If tensions occur between these two groups, it becomes critical for climbers to be perceived as a legitimate user group. In a review of USDA FS wilderness policy, Grijalva and Berrens (2003) reported that in situations that require balancing multiple uses, public land management agencies make judgment calls about which group's costs and benefits carry more weight. They refer to this relative stature as "standing" (as having legal standing in the policy process). Southern Illinois horse-back trail riders are widely recognized as benefitting the depressed regional economy. In the future, climbers can use organizations like the ICA to disseminate information about their financial contributions as a means to enhance their relative standing.

Climbers reported interacting to some degree with personnel from the various land management agencies in the region. Interaction with agency personnel can be a negative experience when climbers perceive that management decisions are based on inaccurate or incomplete information about climbing gear. In the Comprehensive Conservation Plan prepared for CONWR and issued in January of 2007, the FWS stated that "technical rock climbing" is not in compliance with the refuge plan and is therefore prohibited. Unfortunately, "technical rock climbing" is not clearly defined in the document. Although the FWS acknowledged that the CONWR is unique among refuges with recreation as a stated objective, they claim that the scope of permissible recreation is limited. This situation has left climbers feeling frustrated that their input is not valued and that they have no working relationship with the FWS and its policy process.

Although prohibition is the ultimate regulation, there are other management strategies put in place that can also limit climbing. The third emergent theme was climber concern about environmental impacts, in particular those inadvertently caused by a bolting ban. While bolts certainly affect the aesthetics of a natural area, bolts can also help mitigate climbers' detrimental environmental impacts such as by minimizing soil compaction. Giant City State Park is not the only site where bolting practices are being re-examined. The Shawnee National Forest currently places no restrictions on bolting. This has led to relatively natural cliff-top vegetation in climbing areas on this USFS unit. However, if the USFS proceeds with plans to implement bans on fixed anchors in officially designated wilderness areas, this policy could be precedent-setting for management of all public lands (Grijalva & Berrens 2003).

The time appears right for the southern Illinois climbing community to propose working toward a region-specific resource plan that accurately addresses their concerns. As Hollenhorst et al. (1995) observed about the sport of mountain biking, a cooperative effort between bicyclists, other user groups, and land management agencies offered the best approach for trail management on public lands. If southern Illinois stakeholders invest in a collaborative approach to management of climbing resources, there is immense potential for rock climbing to attract visitors to the region.

Rock climbing in southern Illinois appears to have a bright future. The region has a wide variety of high quality rock, a fiercely committed group of local climbers, and resource managers who are receptive to learning more about the sport and collaborating with the user group. As media coverage and public knowledge of the area increases, the region's participation potential will grow as well. The formation of proper working relationships that manage this expansion while minimizing environmental impacts are crucial elements in guaranteeing continuation of a sport that already has a strong hold in the area. Collaboration will surely prove pivotal in this development. A first step to ensuring that rock climbing resources in southern Illinois are managed appropriately is to open dialogue among stakeholder groups. If climbers initiate that dialogue and assert themselves as a legitimate resource-based recreation user group, they may find that present constraints can be replaced by opportunities.

## 5.0 Citations

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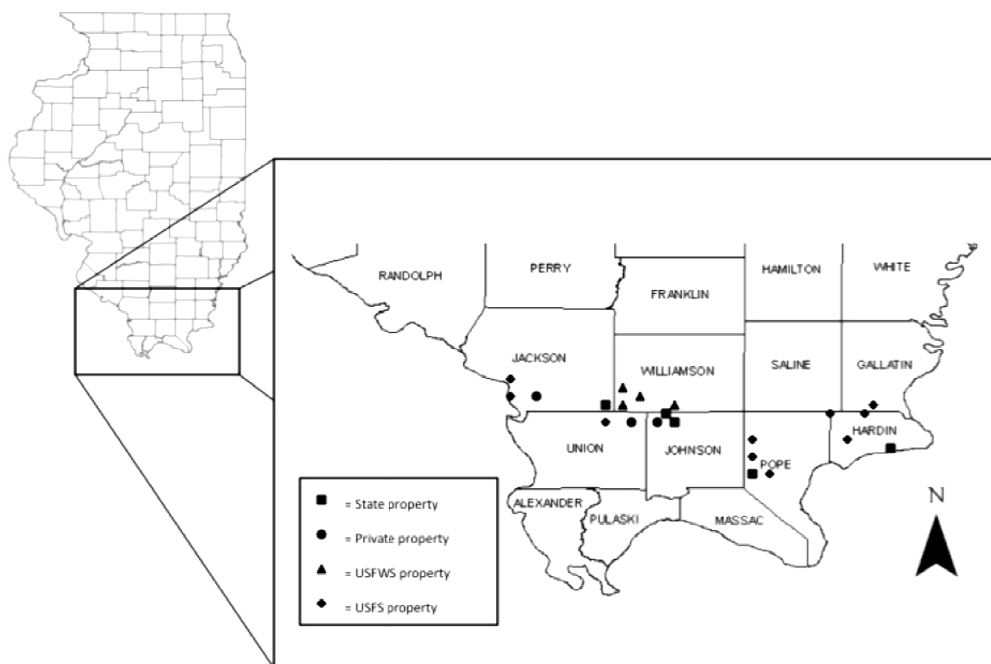


Figure 1. Rock climbing sites in southern Illinois.