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Climbers, BLM reach for compromise at Thompson Creek

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CARBONDALE -- The raw beauty of the rocky fins that tower over Thompson Creek is part of what has made the area a recent magnet for rock climbers.

Those same stunning spires prompted the Bureau of Land Management to set aside the land as a spot for solitary visitors and prompted environmentalists to seek to protect it as wilderness.

These varying visions for the same landscape have created controversy over what has become a hot climbing spot in the past year, but an agreement between climbers and the BLM seeks to keep everybody satisfied.

"It's a really cool cliff," said Carbondale rock climber B.J. Sbarra. "It's a really unique climbing resource. There's nothing like it nearby."

The series of rock fins along a remote trail west of Carbondale had been largely ignored by rock climbers until last summer when a group of climbers bolted about 45 routes up one of the rock faces.

The bolts opened up climbers' access to a group of challenging routes that they couldn't climb before. The solid rock didn't have the sort of cracks climbers need to put in removable protection to clip their ropes into.

Over the summer, the spot became a sensation for valley climbers who otherwise had longer hauls to reach good climbing areas -- places like Rifle Mountain Park and Independence Pass.

Ordinarily, drilling bolts is allowed on BLM land. But the agency considers Thompson Creek an area of critical environmental concern. That doesn't necessarily mean that bolts are prohibited, said Brian Maiorano, outdoor recreation planner for the BLM, but because the special designation was put in place largely to protect those rock outcroppings, the bolts seemed to defeat the purpose.

The agency considered asking the climbers to pull out all but a handful of routes.

"What we feared was that having 45 bolted routes there was going to attract a large number of climbers, and people who currently use Thompson Creek for little day hikes and a stroll along the creek and are expecting that primitive setting were suddenly going to be seeing a lot of people," Maiorano said.

Meanwhile, the BLM is revising its resource management plan for the entire Glenwood Springs field office region. That could change the use of the area completely, from sealing off climbing there altogether to making it wide open.

Climbers are hoping for full access.

"Our hope is that in the long run, it's recognized by the BLM as an important local resource for climbers in the area," Sbarra said.

But in the short term, climbers have agreed to some concessions to keep a foothold in the area. When the area opened this spring, climbers agreed to disable about half of the bolted routes and restrict access to just nine climbers at a time, with a sign-in sheet at the trailhead to let climbers know how full the area is when they show up. The restriction is voluntary, but climbers and agency officials say it seems to be working.

On a recent weekend, Sbarra said, a park ranger noticed too many climbers at the area and set out to talk to them. On the way, he ran into four leaving after other climbers told them they shouldn't be there.

"They turned around and left," he said. "That was very encouraging."

The appearance of the bolts last summer also worried some wilderness advocates, who feared the human improvements could jeopardize the area's ability to receive special wilderness protections. It was included in a previous wilderness bill proposed by Rep. Diana DeGette, and the Wilderness Workshop has included it in its latest proposal for wilderness expansion.

"Looking into it further we decided that there are many instances where there are lots of bolted climbing occurring in existing wilderness areas," said Sloan Shoemaker, director of the Wilderness Workshop. "Bolted climbing is not in any way a deterrent in getting wilderness designation. It's not about the bolts themselves but about the level of use that occurs. So that's what we're in discussion with the climbing community and the BLM about.

"It's just figuring out how to meet everybody's needs. They want to have continued access to that climbing attraction and that's fine with us. We just want to figure out a way that the amount of use doesn't impair wilderness values."

Sbarra and other climbers were already forming the Roaring Fork Climbers Coalition to advocate for climbing access. At a recent event, organizers stressed the restriction to climbers.

Thompson Creek has become a popular after-work spot for climbers, he said, a convenient place to train on a variety of different routes. But it's not so popular on weekends, Sbarra said, when climbers head off to bigger areas. Compared to Independence Pass and Rifle, which each have hundreds of routes, Thompson Creek is small-time, he said. Most of the fins have rock that's too soft for climbing bolts. Only one seems to work, he said.

"It's not going to be a headline in Boulder: 'Awesome cliff discovered in Carbondale. Check it out!'" Sbarra said.

But it has helped unify midvalley climbers who often didn't run into each other on outings.

"There really wasn't a spot where everybody would go," he said.
"You'd go out on Tuesday night and there'd be 10 or 15 of your buddies out there."

Because the climbing spot is removed from the main trail, Sbarra said he's hopeful climbers can continue there without disrupting the solitude hikers are seeking.

Shoemaker said he'd like to find a balance between users.

"You know, climbers are wilderness supporters, too," he said, "and part of the attraction of that area is the wild character of it. That's what they like. It's off the beaten track. It's beautiful. It's wild."

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