

CAREFUL Top climbers Tommy Caldwell and wife Beth Rodden, who spent three weeks on El Capitan's face this summer, understand their impact on the environment; some new climbers don't



Are rock climbers leaving cliff faces in less than peak condition?

By **TERRY MCCARTHY** YOSEMITE

HALF A DOZEN CLIMBERS, WEARING nothing more than shorts and rubber-soled climbing shoes, are gathered around a large boulder in Camp 4 in Yosemite National Park. They are all trying to crack Midnight Lightning. With its 6-m overhanging rock face and minuscule handholds, it presents one of the best-known bouldering challenges in the country. As yet another climber burns out after only two moves and falls back onto the mattress-like crash pad, the talk turns to the impact of climbing on the natural environment—a hot topic among climbers. Kurt Hack, 37, from South Bend, Ind., points to a cedar tree that grows right up the side of the boulder. Someone has used an ax to cut climbing steps into the trunk all the way to the top of the boulder. “Whoever did that didn’t know much about low-impact climbing,” says Hack.

The scarred cedar is a poignant example of the damage that climbers can do to the fragile ecosystems where they practice their sport. Camp 4 has long been home base for climbers in Yosemite, the birthplace of U.S. rock climbing. Here, where every cliff face presents an Ansel Adams moment, climbers should know better. But as the number of climbers grows—from 800,000 in 2000 to 1 million today, according to industry sources—so too does the impact they are having on the wilderness. Public-land managers, already short of funds, are struggling to keep up. Modern climbing techniques make it possible to scale rock faces that were previously inaccessible to humans. And the new craze for bouldering, a sub-discipline that focuses on short climbs, 4.5 m to 6 m from the ground, is bringing a younger and more unruly generation to the sport.

Certainly the depredations of a bunch of rubber-soled, chalk-bag-toting rock rats are minor compared with forest clear-cutting

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or strip mining. But because climbers are drawn to some of the most spectacular landscapes in the U.S.—the Tetons in Wyoming, the Sawtooths in Idaho, Joshua Tree National Park in California—their footprints are closely scrutinized, and a debate is under way between climbers and U.S. federal land-management agencies on what and where people should be permitted to climb.

This fall the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service are due to release a long-awaited policy on where to allow bolting—the practice of drilling bolts into cliff faces to which climbers attach safety ropes. Other contentious issues include protect-

the field. About three kilometers west of Camp 4 is El Capitan, the majestic 915-m cliff face that is America's most famous climbing spot. On a busy day in the high season, there can be as many as 50 climbers on the face of El Cap, and each one is dragging up a considerable amount of equipment, trash and human waste. "On big walls, people get very intense after a few days up there—they feel more at risk, and ethics tend to go out the window," says Lincoln Else, Yosemite's sole climbing ranger. He regularly finds gear and trash left behind on the top or cast down to the base area below.

Like snowboarders or surfers, says Else, climbers see themselves as part of a counter-

ness experience. Bouldering is cheap, requiring no ropes or expensive equipment, and it attracts younger climbers, who hang out in groups watching each other try different maneuvers.

"The impact is more immediate because there is a lot of activity at the base of the rocks," says Scott Fischer, climbing ranger at Joshua Tree National Park. He sees vegetation crushed by crash pads being dragged between sites, multiple trails created across the desert surface and an abundance of "micro trash"—climbing tape, bottle tops, cigarette butts.

The Access Fund, a national advocacy group for U.S. climbers, set up a bouldering

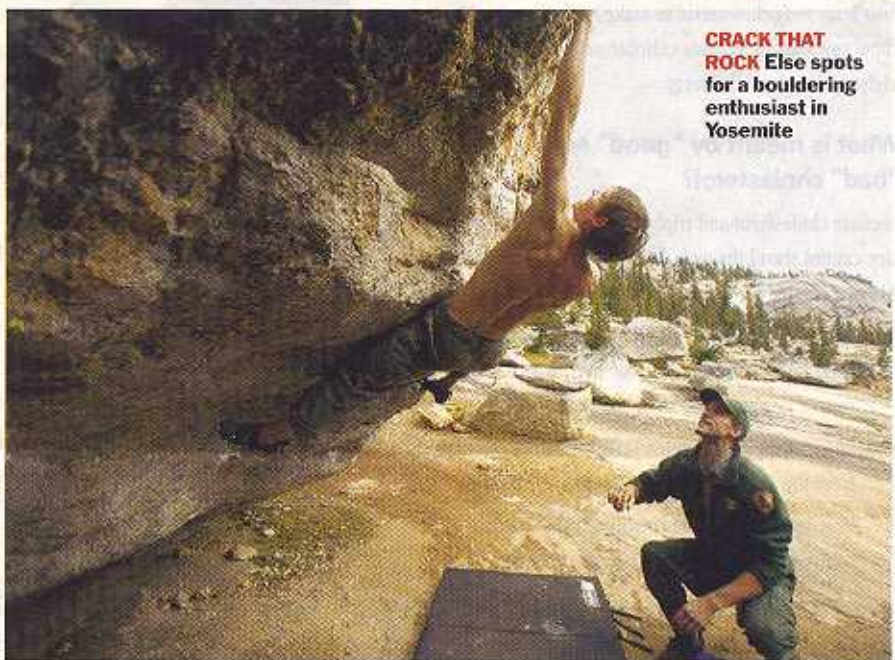
ring Down the Mountains

ing ancient rock art, preventing degradation of the base areas around climbing cliffs and minimizing interference with wildlife, such as nesting raptors. Even the chalk that climbers put on their hands to get a better grip can be a problem. Often it leaves a smudgy trail on rock faces, resistant even to rain.

"There's plenty of us who are cognizant of these issues, but you get knuckleheads everywhere," says Hack. Hueco Tanks State Historic Site, 48 km northeast of El Paso, Texas, for example, was a popular destination for climbers until graffiti was found in the early '90s on some of the park's ancient rock art, and park officials severely restricted climbing. "Hueco was a wake-up call," says climber Tim Janke, 42. "If we fail to be good stewards, we'll lose what we have."

Janke was preparing for a two-day, 335-m climb last week on Yosemite's Washington Column. He proudly showed off a device that climbers are adopting to reduce an unpleasant residue of their sport—a sealed plastic drum on a drag rope to carry human waste off the cliff. In the early days of climbing, people bivouacking halfway up a rock face would throw their waste to the ground below. "Today that's simply unacceptable," says Janke.

Still, good intentions in camp do not always translate into the best practice in



CRACK THAT ROCK Else spots for a bouldering enthusiast in Yosemite

culture and dislike being dictated to. To spread his message of "leave no trace," he mingles with the climbers as much as possible and plays host to a coffee each Sunday morning at Camp 4. Hardest to educate are the growing legions of boulderers, many of whom started climbing in gyms and regard the sport as a social activity, not a wilder-

campaign last year. It has donated money to clean up campsites and trails around popular bouldering sites, though some continue to be trashed. "We have a real challenge getting the message out to younger climbers," says Access official Shawn Tierney.

By the end of the afternoon in Camp 4, nobody has managed to get up Midnight Lightning. Hack heads back to his tent. "Yeah, climbing is an impact sport, but so is hiking or horse riding," he says. Of course, horses have no desire to conquer cliffs like El Capitan. Only humans do that. ■

**GET VERY INTENSE AFTER A FEW DAYS UP THERE
GO OUT THE WINDOW.??**

—LINCOLN ELSE, climbing ranger
at Yosemite National Park