

THE GREAT BOLT DEBATE

By John Betz



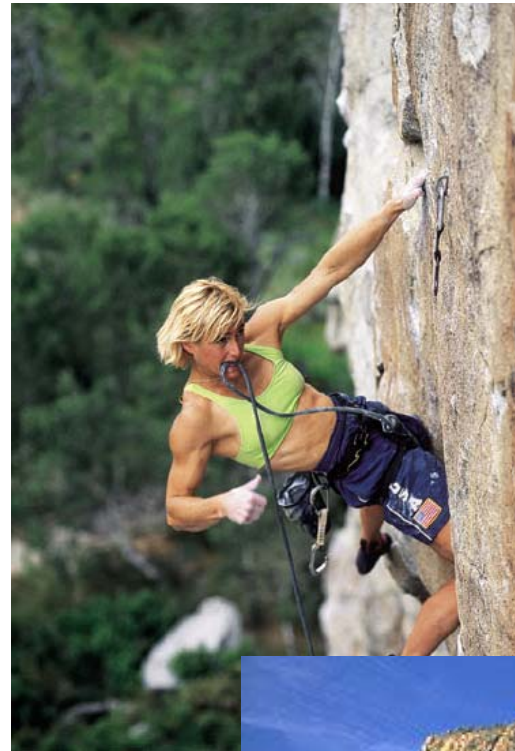
On July 1, 1998, Chief of the Forestry Service Michael Dombeck issued a statement, which, in effect, said that the installation of permanent climbing anchors was not permitted within government designated wilderness areas. On August 14, 1998, Undersecretary of Agriculture, James

Lyons issued an appeal stating that Chief Dombeck erred in making his decision. These two statements sparked a national debate between environmentalists and the climbing community over the use of fixed climbing anchors.



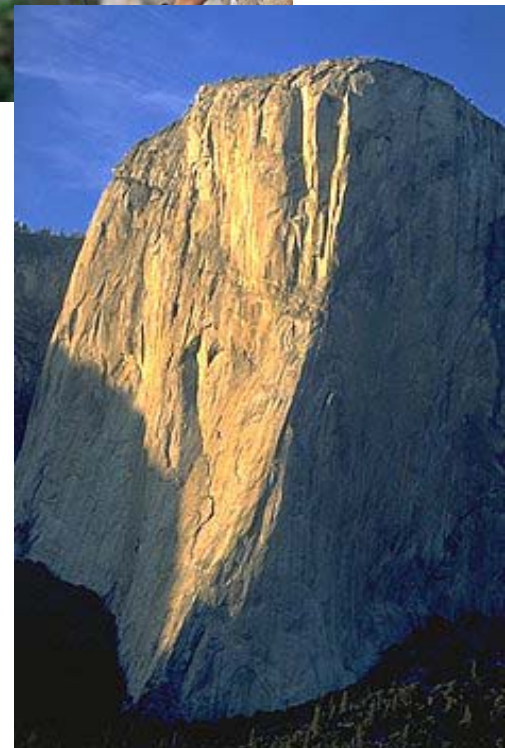
Two lines coming off rappel bolts on a popular face of North Gateway Rock in Garden of the Gods, Colorado.

No matter what your climbing ability, there is always that special circumstance, possibly a life or death situation, in which there is no other option but to place a permanent anchor. Even climbers who do not believe in the use of bolts, have at one time or another used a bolt for convenience, a back up, or a primary. On the other hand just because there is a bolting privilege, that does not excuse bolting just to bolt. Climbers should know their limits and stay within them as best as possible. According to Shannon Solomon, an experienced climber and mountain guide from the Colorado Springs area, "Climbing is such a new sport and changing so rapidly. Just because someone cannot climb something without bolts now, doesn't mean it won't be climbed tomorrow." Climbing is inherently dangerous and risky. A bolt should be a last resort, not a tool to get



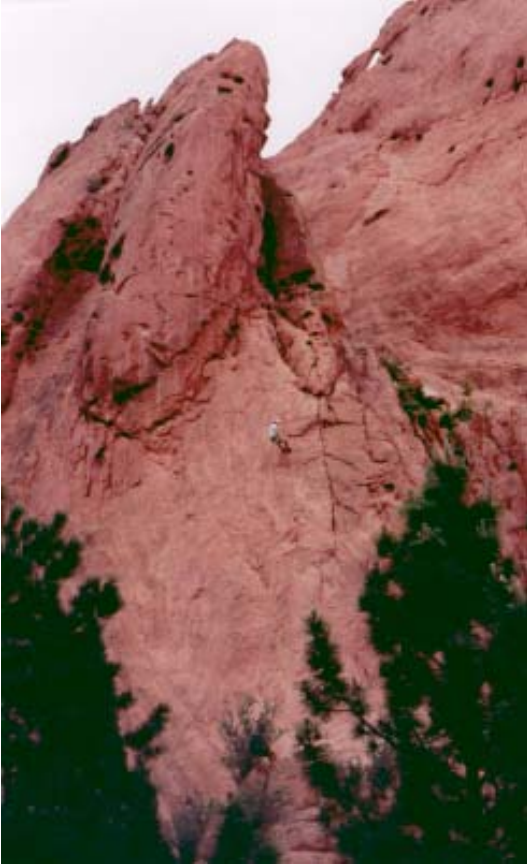
Left: Tiffany Campbell on Gemini (5.12a), City of Rocks, Idaho. Below: El Capitan, Yosemite, California is home of an estimated

an inexperienced climber on a route that should be left for a more experienced climber. Solomon also believes that completely



bolting a route, in most cases, just damages a perfectly good trad route.

Many times in the debate over permanent climbing anchors, the Wilderness Act of 1964 is brought up.



John Betz rappelling from an anchor on Cowboy Boot Crack (5.7), below Kissing Camels.

The large complaint most commonly comes from the environmentalist side of the debate which claims that bolting violates the "no installations" clause. Some argue that climbing bolts should be considered installations to wilderness areas and are therefore illegal. According to George Nickas, the voice of the anti-bolt debate and executive

The Wilderness Act was meant to keep the wilderness alive and open for recreation.

director of Wilderness Watch, "The use of permanent anchors violates both the letter and the spirit of the Wilderness Act." Although the Wilderness Act was meant to keep government designated wilderness areas protected from defacement, the Wilderness Act was also meant to keep the wilderness alive and open for recreation. Congress specifically states in the Wilderness Act that "wilderness designation will ensure that [climbing and mountaineering] can continue permanently in their present unspoiled surroundings." According to the American Alpine Association, mountaineering, mountain climbing, technical rock climbing, and climbing were all reasons which government designated certain wilderness areas as such. Although there is not any specific mention of bolting in the Wilderness

Act, Congress does mention climbing and mountaineering several times, reflecting a familiarity with the safety tools used. Had Congress intended for bolts to be illegal, they would have specifically mentioned them in the Wilderness Act.

Another popular argument against bolting is that bolting violates the leave-no-trace ethics that are heavily promoted in all outdoor activities. The idea is that people should leave the outdoors in an equal or better condition than when it is found. This concept is excellent to live by when making any trip to the great outdoors, but there are some things that just cannot be helped. “Every activity has some impact”, states Lloyd Athearn of the American Alpine Club in Colorado, “Fishing line gets snagged, shotgun shells get lodged in trees, and humans defecate, trample, and

sometimes scare animals.” Athearn also believes that wilderness areas are not meant to be a sort of bioserve, they are meant to keep beautiful areas of land wild, and to keep alive the feeling that you were the first person to ever set foot in a certain area. A two-inch piece of metal the size of a pinky finger is a very mild defacement. People should be more concerned about

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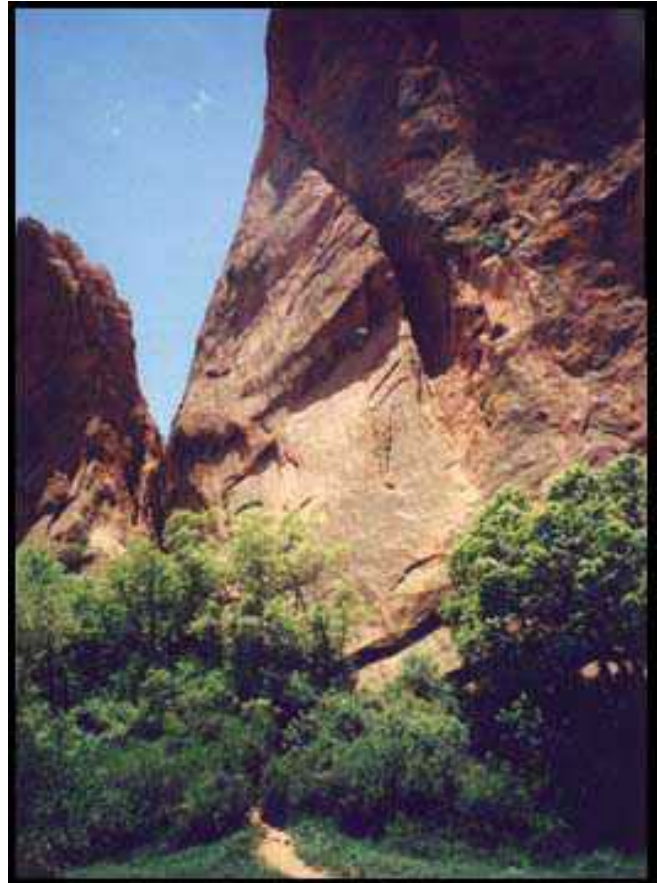


Montezuma's Tower (5.7), a popular bolted sport route in Garden of the Gods.

eliminating off-roading, midnight raves, dumping, and other such activities that are a much greater threat to wilderness areas. Bolting should not even be considered a factor in destruction of wilderness areas compared to these activities.

Another important question to ask yourself would be, how practical would a ban on permanent anchors really be? Bolts consume more than 100 wilderness area climbs. Yosemite alone, which is almost completely wilderness area, holds more than 15,000 bolts on its world-renowned rock faces. The ban is just too weak to overturn such a legacy.

There really is no legitimate argument for completely banning bolts. The bolts cause no real physical damage to the rock and are even hard to spot at times. Bolts are a good emergency device for unanticipated circumstances where there is no other option, but there



Silver Spoon (5.7), a popular sport route on The Drug Wall, Garden of the Gods.

are enough bolted routes already set up.

There is no reason to just place bolts so that you can climb a tougher route, stay in your comfort level and work at getting better and someday you will be able to do that route in a much cleaner style. Make sure to always keep a bolt or two handy though, you never know when you will run out of options.