

Rock Climbers in Indian Creek, Utah:
The Next Environmental Menace

Amelia Patterson

Highway 211 in southeastern Utah is a spur that leads you through the Indian Creek Valley and west to the Needles District of Canyonlands National Park. It is a lonely road, or at least it used to be, whose path skirts the north foothills of the Abajo Mountains, and catches up with Indian Creek as it carves down through the sandstone mesa and into a narrow canyon. Enormous cottonwoods stretch over the road, forming a golden canopy in the fall. On either side of the road walls of Wingate sandstone in long buttes and pillars enclose the canyon. After several winding miles, the canyon widens into a broad valley. In the distance the North and South Six-Shooter towers and the Bridger Jack Mesa frame the expanse of the Dugout Ranch in the center of the valley.

The landscape is spectacular to be sure but the main attraction, in this particular spread of desert, is the abundant resource of cracks that fracture the Wingate buttes. Indian Creek has become a destination for rock climbers to test their skills on some of the country's most impressive and spectacular crack climbs. The early 1970's brought the first set of climbers who discovered and established many of the classic climbing lines. The valley is made up of both private ranch property and public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Several of the most popular buttes lie on private land owned by the Dugout Ranch. At first there were so few climbers that the Dugout Ranch never bothered to inform climbers they were on private property. Unrestricted camping and access on BLM land and endless cracks to climb seemed to describe a

climber's paradise. Then, the word got out; Indian Creek began to experience growing pains. Where Indian Creek had once been almost lonely it now prompts descriptions like this:

40 cars are smashed into various small pullouts beneath Supercrack and Battle of the Bulge Butte, and hordes of climbers stand like rush-hour crowds on subway platforms, jostling each other for a burn on some of the world's finest crack climbs. Across the road, toward Beef Basin, new campsites are scattered like buckshot across the desert floor. Late-risers cloister there, plunging French press pots and taping their hands for the day's projects. Beyond them, a labyrinth of trails lead into the bushes and telltale piles of used toilet paper.¹

There is a growing public perception of rock climbers as destructive to the land. Concerns over the environmental impacts from climbers have compelled the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to draw up a new management plan for the Indian Creek Corridor. The plan is still in its information gathering stage, but already public meetings have aroused considerable passion from the climbing community. The ensuing controversy has exposed major fractures in the seeming "climbing utopia" of Indian Creek.

A closer examination of how climbers perceive themselves may help us better understand why they are in places like Indian Creek and what it is they think they are entitled to. If climbers demand a voice in the conversation over the future of Indian Creek they have to take responsibility for their part in what Indian Creek has become.

II

I found it, the exact quote that brought the article home for me: "Every area that was open and pristine has a camp ring, toilet paper and garbage around it," Heidi Redd, Dugout Ranch, Indian Creek, Utah.²

Several years ago I lived in Indian Creek; in the back of a pick-up and later out of a beat-up 1978 Winnebago. My dog, Cleo, came from Heidi's ranch. I have been part of the impact in the valley and have blamed the impact of the area on the cows and the old mines left over from the uranium boom. Although climbers have their impact to acknowledge most climbers came to Indian Creek after the land was no longer pristine. The cattle from Heidi's ranch bear more responsible for destroying the "pristine" land in Indian Creek than climbers. For this reason, feeling considerable scrutiny, climbers point across the valley at the ranch as the source of environmental damage. Heidi Redd, however, can certainly draw up a list of charges against climbers for their impact. The result is frantic finger pointing by both parties while the impacts intensify with each year.

The BLM is charged with evaluating the situation. The scoping plan put forth for Indian Creek by the BLM considers the impacts of both climbing related activities and the Dugout ranch. Many climbers fear that the land of the free camping will soon be the land of the fee complete with rangers. For many long time Indian Creek climbers, it is this possibility that most threatens their sense of freedom and "rights" to the land and living they find there. Ironically it has been locals in Western History who have championed the "Don't tread on me" bumper stickers, but in this case it is the outsider recreationists who are feeling the heat while the local rancher is the one clamoring for the BLM to get the recreationists under control.

Climbers deserve special consideration from other recreation in the area because they make up the largest user group next to cattle. Their numbers continue to grow.

Most of the rock climbers I found in Indian Creek live most of the year in their cars, trucks and vans; they have no physical address and climbing is akin to a religious cult to them. They call themselves “dirt bags.” They make up a current generation of dumpster divers; always looking to scam food and gear for free. They live in National Parks and on public land and have stripped life’s comforts to the bare minimum to maximize their climbing time. Often without a penny to their name they are unemployed and homeless; or at least in spirit. Climbing ethics are endlessly scrutinized and life is simply worthless without climbing. This zealousness has led to a sense of entitlement when it comes to access of public lands and even to sensitive areas. They hold a clear love of the land and devotion to the sport.

The dirt bag image of climbers is misleading. To be certain dirt bags do exist but more often the rank and file climber it turns out live in homes, have jobs, and more complicated lives than the mythic quintessential dirt bag living on the road. Many are college educated and are from a white middle class background. The dirt bag image is riddled with contradictions but the power of the image fuels a fierce sense of entitlement to the privileges of climbing on public lands. Heated arguments over access on public lands have lead some climbers to become so defensive of their perceived “right” to climb that they refuse acknowledge the utility of management in preserving the integrity of the very climbing areas they claim to protect. As climbing becomes more popular areas that used to host small climber hamlets have mushroomed in numbers creating “climber sprawl.” Much of the increased impact comes in the form of camping as more and more cul-de-sacs branch off from main roads encroaching further into the desert.

Some of those who claim the dirt bag myth are responsible for its commercialization. Some of Indian Creek's most ardent defenders are also directly responsible for attracting hordes of climbers with glossy ads and photos in climbing magazines. The dirt bag lifestyle has become a commodity by companies like Patagonia who extol the “committed to the core” slogans that reduces a subculture enshrined in poverty to a piece of clothing that can be bought and paid for.

IV

The environmental impact from climbers has caught the attention of a larger public. The feature article in *High Country News*, this summer ran the title: “Invasion of the Rock Jocks: Have rock climbers turned from environmental crusaders into and environmental menace?”³ Rock climbers used to be considered natural allies of the environment. Some of the environmentalist movement’s largest figures like John Muir and David Brower cut their teeth in rock climbing and mountaineering. Many climbers consider their lifestyles as extensions of the very ideals and values of these environmental leaders.

This article demonstrated that climbers are portrayed as an environmental menace akin to all-terrain vehicle’s and cattle. They have no sensitivity to cultural sites; they question wildlife closures, and simply put: climbers are selfish “fun hogs” who want all the fun with none of the costs.

Climbers have a tendency to ignore, deny or belittle their impact. This results from the fear that climbing areas will be closed if climbers are perceived as degradation to the land. Unfortunately, the standard denial of environmental impact only does a

disservice to climbers—almost as rule if you don't regulate your self the government will do it for you. The most glaring example of this is in Hueco Tanks, Texas. Concerns over the impacts from climbers to Native American cultural sites led to large area closures to climbers and other heavy access restrictions. Much of the resistance from climbers to support any management plan comes from the fear that they will bare the costs.

Recent editorials in leading climbing magazines summed up the climbing communities perspectives on climbers and the environment. In response to the *High Country News* article, *Rock and Ice* stated that: “*High Country News*, devoted six pages to vilifying bouldering culture...”⁴ Then the piece challenged the credibility of the author of being a long time climber and called the article “yellow journalism” giving it big thumbs down. Jeff Achey, editor of *Climbing*, took the other side and outlined the possibilities of restriction if climbers do not align themselves with environmentalists. Achey pointed out that “Land-management authorities consider recreation the number-one threat to wild lands... We need to do some hard thinking about our touch on the land – and act accordingly.”⁵ Defiant unilateralism from climbers could leave climbers behind fences from their favorite crags.

V

The Dugout Ranch comprises of 5,200 acres and holds 250,000 acres of grazing allotments.⁶ In 1996, the Redd family sold the working ranch to the Nature Conservancy with the agreement that the ranch would operate for ten more years and that Heidi Redd would spend the rest of her life on the ranch. In spite of the sometimes tenuous relationship between rock climbers and the Dugout Ranch climbers and related interest

groups stepped up to the plate and gave considerable money to the Nature Conservancy to buy the \$6,000,000 ranch.⁷ The BLM, the Nature Conservancy, Heidi Redd, and indirectly climbers became joint stewards of the valley. Competing interests could destroy that stewardship.

On par with the climbers are the cows. According to a report prepared for the BLM by the Rocky Mountain Field Institute:

Cattle ranching... has had a profound impact on the ecology and landscape of the area. Cattle grazing has seriously impacted cryptobiotic soils throughout the Indian Creek corridor. This, in turn, has significantly altered the structure of the soil and the composition of plant communities. It has also served as the primary force behind the introduction and spread of non-native plant species, particularly cheat grass (*Bromis tectorim*).

The impacts to the riparian zone from cattle have contributed to abnormal siltification of the creek. The impact of cattle in the area is as, if not more, significant than climbers in the region.⁸

VI

The Rocky Mountain Field Institute (RMFI) has long been involved in the management of Indian Creek, building trails, revegetating old roads and closing sensitive areas to cars. It has published a report on climber's impact to help aid the BLM in formulating a management plan for the Indian Creek Corridor. The RMFI has brought climbers and climber related groups in as volunteers to build trails and created a working relationship with the Nature Conservancy and the Redd family.

Considerable work has been done to restore heavily used areas. These separate parties worked together to establish information kiosks in several high use locations informing climbers and other users in back country edict and appropriate areas to camp

in; as well as clarifying private property issues and respecting cultural areas (ruins and petroglyphs). RMFI and the Nature Conservancy along with the BLM closed roads in Donnelly Canyon and in Shay Canyon that run through sensitive riparian water sheds. The RMFI have organized volunteers from Outward Bound and Prescott College to build trails, revegetate eroded talus cones, and old roads with a grant from the Access Fund (A Climbers interest group). In 2001, RMFI was contracted by the BLM to inventory campsites and trails.⁹

These efforts are being overwhelmed by the substantial increase in the numbers of climbers in the area. It is only projected to increase. Technical rock climbing and its related camping constitute a majority of the recreational use in the valley.¹⁰ Other recreation categories include: general site-seeing, camping, motorized recreation, and mountain biking, photography and rock art viewing. In the last five years the numbers of climbers have increased by 200 percent.¹¹ It is this increase that has forced the BLM to formulate a management plan for the Indian Creek Corridor.

The preliminary issues that the BLM will examine largely focus on the impacts of agriculture and recreation and their relationship on the integrity of the land. These issues consider the impacts of agriculture and recreation on the vegetation, wildlife, riparian areas, water quality, aesthetics and cultural historical resources in the area. The BLM also is attempting to sort out the conflicts among user groups (agriculture and recreation) including access. Infrastructure is also considered which is focused on parking, law enforcement, restrooms and camping. Indian Creek itself is being proposed as a wild and scenic river which may bring an entirely new set of regulations concerning use of the area.¹²

A new climbing guide book is expected to be released in the spring of 2004 at the latest. This new guide book will bring hordes of climbers to cliffs that hold previously unpublished climbs. Many of the cliffs in the new guidebook have no established trails and without a real trail the erosion on the talus cones becomes substantial. This leads to the proliferation of non-native plant species as more and more of the land is disturbed.

VII

It is critical at this time to nurture the collaborative effort already set in motion between the Rocky Mountain Field Institute, the Access Fund, the Nature Conservancy, the Dugout Ranch, and the BLM which have all collaborated in mediating climber impacts and access as well as creating user guidelines for climbers. A coordinated relationship between climbers, the Dugout ranch and the BLM is essential in creating a management plan that everyone can live with and creates an atmosphere that promotes better care for the land.

Many people agree that some infrastructure is needed. This includes designated camping areas that have clear site boundaries. Campgrounds need to be enclosed to separate livestock from campers and to contain the parameters of the campground. Several bathrooms need to be installed of which either pit-toilets or composting toilets. The Patagonia Company has offered to pay for and maintain a composting toilet in the Bridger Jack camping area.¹³ The solicitation of private funds is an alternative to imposing fees for camping to pay for the needed infrastructure. The BLM is unlikely to be able to fund the infrastructure without imposing fees. Fees must be limited to the cost and maintenance of the needed infrastructure. This stipulates a non-profit campground.

This consideration may reduce rouge camping by climbers in the large expanse of open public land. Fee based campgrounds may find themselves empty if the costs are not affordable and new unregulated campgrounds may begin to appear.

If any of the current problems are to be resolved and not repeated in the future the majority of climbers must be convinced of the necessity of the infrastructure and its costs. There is the possibility that an established campground will only reproduce the problems, it intended to solve, somewhere else. The climbing advocacy group the Access Fund has lobbied for a measure in the Draft Plan to maintain the status quo of free and primitive camping.¹⁴

Conflicts over land management for special interest purposes are not new. The Dugout Ranch has a stake and right to operate in peace with recreationalist of all stripes. Climbers are being asked to take a position on the future of Indian Creek. Will climbers continue to maintain their victimized mentality and continue to blame others for the environmental degradation in the valley. Or will they take responsibility both individually and collectively for their impact and contribute collaboratively in a solution. Indian Creek has become too popular to remain a free for all. The Rocky Mountain Field Institute, the Access Fund and the Nature Conservancy are all non-governmental organizations that have made a substantial effort to stabilize the impact in Indian Creek. These organizations along with the BLM and a large climbing constituency could collaborate to create a management plan for Indian Creek.

VIII

The wide opens paces and intimate community that I found in Indian Creek are not safe from the very world I thought I had escaped from. Ironically I bought into the romantic ideals that Indian Creek represents and in that way contributed to ruin of what made Indian Creek attractive. It is the very commercialization of desert climbing that brought me to Indian Creek in the first place. I worked in restaurants and profited from the tourists who were also looking for that “Desert Solitaire.” I differentiated myself from the desert enthusiasts then and to a lesser extent I still do, but a closer examination of what contributed to my landing in the desert leaves little distinction between us. The desert wilderness that is described in best sellers from Edward Abbey and Terry Tempest Williams that attracts people like me into places that are so inundated by nature lovers that it is loved to death. In our minds our use of the land is better and an exception to all who used and abused it before us; because we are there out of love we deserve a special entitlement and right to the land. In the end we are exploiting the land just the same; to benefit our own purposes. By acknowledging that mythic free spirit lifestyle that brought me to Indian Creek then and now (although I still believe in it) I bare some responsibility for the cost and resulting condition of Indian Creek. There is something real about the myth and by becoming more accountable for the costs of loving the desert I also see the preservation of, albeit altered, that sense of place, community that the mythic dirt bag encapsulates.

¹Amy Irvine, “Open Wide: Can Indian Creek Swallow the Agendas of Climbers, Cowgirls and Conservationists?” *Climbing*: No 216, November 1, 2002, 65.

² Robyn Morrison, “Who is managing Climbers?” *High Country News*, Vol. 35 No. 13, July 7, 2003, 11.

³ Robyn Morrison, “Invasion of the Rock Jocks: Have rock climbers turned from environmental crusaders into an environmental menace?” *High Country News*: Vol., 35 No. 13, July 7, 2003, 10.

⁴ “Yellow Journalism: Thanks for Nothing,” *Rock and Ice*: No. 130. January 2004. 29

⁵ Jeff Achey, “Editorial: Love is Blind,” *Climbing*: No. 226, December 15, 2003. 12.

⁶ “Dugout Ranch,” *The Nature Conservancy*, accessed 30 October 2003, from: www.nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/utah/preservesart5825.html.

⁷ Amy Irvine, “Open Wide: Can Indian Creek Swallow the Agendas of Climbers, Cowgirls and Conservationists?” *Climbing*: No 216, November 1, 2002, 66-67.

⁸ Mark Hesse and Christina Thayer, “Recreation Inventory and Report: Rock Climbing and Related Activities in Indian Creek Canyon, Utah,” (Rocky Mountain Field Institute, January 25, 2002) 3. From: www.rmfi.org accessed on 30, October 2003.

⁹ BLM, TNC, The Access Fund and RMFI, “Indian Creek Corridor Update: Information Sheet for climbers and other visitors- November 2001,” Accessed on 30 October 2003, from: www.climbingmoab.com/resources/InfosheetOct2001.html.

¹⁰ Mark Hesse and Christina Thayer, “Recreation Inventory and Report: Rock Climbing and Related Activities in Indian Creek Canyon, Utah,” (Rocky Mountain Field Institute, January 25, 2002) 4. From: www.rmfi.org accessed on 30, October 2003.

¹¹ Amy Irvine, “Open Wide: Can Indian Creek Swallow the Agendas of Climbers, Cowgirls and Conservationists?” *Climbing*: No 216, November 1, 2002. 65.

¹² *Bureau of Land Management Scoping Newsletter*, “Indian Creek Corridor Plan and Environmental Assessment,” July 29, 2003, from www.ut.blm.gov/utah/monticello : Accessed on 30 October 2003, 3; Planning Bulletin # 2, November 1, 2003; *Bureau of Land Management Monticello RMP (Resource Management Plan) and Moab RMP*: “Public Scoping for Wild and Scenic River Eligibility.” Accessed on 20 November 2003 from: www.ut.blm.gov/monticello, 3.

¹³ Brad Lynch, Backcountry Chef for Patagonia and spouse of Lynn Hill a Professional Climber for Patagonia. Interview by author on November 27, 2003 Indian Creek Utah.

¹⁴ Amy Irvine, “Open Wide: Can Indian Creek Swallow the Agendas of Climbers, Cowgirls and Conservationists?” *Climbing*: No 216, November 1, 2002, 103.