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## Developing Sustainable Access to Bouldering Areas

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## DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE ACCESS TO BOULDERING AREAS

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### Introduction

Bouldering is a branch of rock climbing that has introduced unique impacts and concerns for land managers and local climbing organizations. The Access Fund, a climbing advocacy organization, is currently working on an initiative called The Boulder Project to educate boulderers on how to collaborate with land managers and maintain bouldering areas.

There is currently a lack of research on the concerns of land management agencies regarding the behavior and impact of boulderers. The purpose of this study was to determine the best practices for minimal impact development and maintenance of bouldering areas according to land management agencies in the United States.

### Method

An online questionnaire was administered containing 110 responses organized in 18 questions, primarily using a 1-5 Likert-type scale. The instrument was not tested for validity or reliability. Snowball sampling was used to distribute the questionnaire and follow up reminders to subjects. All subjects were employees of land management agencies in the United States who work directly with climbers. Data were evaluated based on a statistical significance of a mean greater than or equal to 3.5 or by percentage of respondents indicating each specific answer.

### Results

The study was conducted during fall of 2005. Of the 104 subjects contacted, 24 subjects completed the questionnaire. The main impacts of concern were disturbance of vegetation near boulders and trails/paths to new areas. Complaints from other users were most commonly associated with trash and un-managed pets. Agencies reported lack of funding and insufficient climbing-specific educational materials as the top inhibitors to climbing management. Boulderers were found to be most compliant with area closures and least compliant with pet management regulations. The most common efforts to mitigate impacts were trail work and habitat rehabilitation. About half of the subjects reported using a local climbing organization for communication with climbers and the main benefit was conflict management. Guidebooks had the most significant impact on management concerns, and managers indicated a desire to be contacted prior to publication.

### Discussion

The data from this study have helped The Access Fund understand the concerns of land managers and focus the educational materials of The Boulder Project. Results indicated that climbers should work with land managers and an agency, such as The Access Fund, to develop a management plan that accounts for the unique concerns of the site before any bouldering is done. Certain impacts not previously associated with bouldering, such as pet management, needed to be addressed and there was a decreased importance of the more commonly discussed impacts, such as chalk use. The data also indicated collaborative resource management as an effective

management tool. Subjects indicated a need for increased involvement of climbing-related publications due to their profound impact on the number and type of users in an area. The study also provided an example of how user groups can be proactive in understanding the concerns of land managers in their area. Results from this study will be used by The Access Fund for their creation of a guidebook for climbers developing new areas.

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