

# AT THE INTERFACE

(Perceptions of bias in assessments of the impacts of rockclimbing)

It is held that rockclimbing was first practised as a form of training for mountaineering, an activity usually associated with the hard to reach and far-flung places of the globe.

Nowadays, the adventure-seeking types who prefer isolated crags in remote and unpopulated areas appear to be a distinct minority. The bulk of modern-day rockclimbers operate mainly in an intertidal zone, on the shores of civilisation.

This worldwide phenomenon, that holds true for most of Australia's popular climbing areas, is especially obvious in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales.

Here, the geomorphology of the region restricts the area readily available for habitation and industry to a relatively narrow sector on the plateaus and ridges carrying or adjoining the main transport corridor.

Over the years, continuing urban expansion has meant houses, and the occupants, have been pushed closer and closer to the escarpment zones that mark the limits of normal development. Thus the photogenic brown and gold sandstone cliffs that are a constant feature of Blue Mountains vistas become the boundary between suburbia and what some call wilderness.

At this interface, rockclimbers pursue their recreation. As a consequence, they can attract the attentions of local residents and the other users of an area that in many cases can be labelled a Comfort Zone<sup>1</sup> – namely the space between the “safety” of the familiar urban environment and the threatening, unknown, “out there”.

Some of the people who use such spaces for what they deem ‘passive’ recreation (a term often used but perhaps difficult to define) object to the presence and actions of rockclimbers in *their* preserve. The complaints mainly focus on the installation (by climbers) of metal fixtures, damage caused to vegetation, and the use of gymnasts’ chalk when this latter results in unsightly marks on the rock surfaces.

However, perhaps we should consider for a moment that often those who are affronted by the impacts of climbing, view those results from a man-made walking track positioned beneath a cliff. This path may have been carved through sensitive vegetation on a ledge part way down the precipice, be replete with a safety fence of steel posts and railings, and even include steps hewn in the rock. The Walls Ledge walking circuit near Centennial Glen at Blackheath is a typical example. Further adding to the affront, it has electricity cables crossing overhead!

So it is important that we think carefully about the supposed ‘benign nature’ of the various activities deemed acceptable in these areas. Bushwalking and hiking have long been viewed as causing little if any damage, but a critical inspection of some of the long term bushwalking tracks in sensitive parts of the mountains can throw that belief into question.

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<sup>1</sup> The term Comfort Zone is used here to define a tract of bushland, in a natural or largely natural state, in proximity to the built environment and in which it is possible for local residents or visitors to feel in touch with nature. The zone may include man-made tracks, stairways and such infrastructure, or can be totally undeveloped. An essential requirement is that persons who are not experienced bushwalkers don't feel threatened, rather they feel safe, or in other words ‘comfortable’.

Everything that makes a passage through the unspoilt environment leaves some trace. Native animals moving consistently from one point to another create a 'pad'; humans wear a 'track'. The larger the number of individuals using the same route, or the higher the frequency of traffic, the greater the impact.

The indigenous people who were the prior occupants of this country left signs of their passage through and across the mountains although today we may not understand them.

And since the 1930s, or earlier, bushwalkers have left ample traces of their roaming across the landscape. The tracks, the marker cairns, the spikes and chains facilitating passage through cliff lines, all provide a testament to (or condemnation of) past actions.

In the bushland surrounding the towns and villages of the mountains, a myriad walking tracks were developed in the late 1800s and early 1900s to provide recreational diversions for the tourists who came to stay at the hotels and guesthouses of the region. Then, during The Depression, restoration and rehabilitation work provided valuable employment opportunities. These pathways offered a safe and non-threatening outdoor experience. Stairways, and any dangerous sections, had safety rails, and direction signage was very much in evidence.

It is an odd quirk of fate that these same 'avenues of convenience' today often provide climbers with easy access to their cliff line resources.

So if we accept that the mountains have for years abounded with the 'tracks and signposts' of walkers and tourists, then why can't we accept and understand that bolts and other pieces of infrastructure represent the 'tracks' left by rockclimbers.

Unfortunately, it would appear that all too often the perception of what is acceptable changes according to our viewpoint.

The Blue Mountains Conservation Society distributed to schools and households a small booklet providing advice on living near the bush. Whilst in itself a commendable concept, sadly this publication contributed nothing towards increasing residents' understanding of rockclimbing by dismissively referring to "*People who hurl themselves over the side of a cliff with only a piece of rope between themselves and severe internal injuries...*"

It would be harsh to suggest the form of words used was deliberate and not just the result of a lack of understanding or research. Or it could be that this warped view of climbing activity (and equipment) is linked with an attempt to avoid contact with something foreign or feared. By denying it credibility we can convince ourselves there is no need to try to understand or embrace it.

But of ongoing concern is the possibility that such uninformed views about climbing could influence land managers in the region. Blue Mountains City Council is developing a Nature Based Recreation Strategy to deal with the impacts of a range of activities. To climbers, it comes as no surprise to find the list of targeted activities includes their chosen recreation!

Climbers would not deny their activity causes impacts and that appropriate management is required to minimise any damage. In fact, it was local climbers' own concerns about their impacts that led to the formation of Blue Mountains Cliffcare. This body sought to educate climbers about minimal impact climbing and arranged Work Days to rehabilitate damaged and 'at risk' areas. The Public Liability Insurance problems that arose in 2001 forced Cliffcare into hibernation until it can find a way to operate without any fear or likelihood of future litigation.

It is hard to imagine in this more enlightened age, how any modern equivalent of the massive walking track construction and provision of infrastructure that occurred in the past could today receive development approval. The Giant Staircase at the Three Sisters and the steps descending from Govett's Leap Lookout are a product of their time and if proposed today would likely attract serious opposition from conservationists. Yet, in practical terms, we tend to unthinkingly accept and use these facilities today because they've always been there and have become a part of our cultural heritage.

Nevertheless, they **are** man-made and they **do** have their own impacts on the environment! So, are those who use these facilities aware of the impacts? Do they acknowledge that they themselves contribute to these impacts? Are the walkers and tourists, in terms of their ongoing impacts, different from climbers in this sense? Probably not!

Perhaps it is time the so-called 'passive' users within the protectionist regimes reassessed their "holier than thou" position and viewed their activities too in terms of the real world. We ALL have an impact and there just aren't good impacts and bad impacts, as some would like to believe.

When we seek to quantify the impacts of our recreational activities on the environment, in both the developed and the wild places, no activity should be quarantined from such scrutiny.

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(amended October 2003)

(The author is presently Access Officer for Sydney Rockclimbing Club Ltd. Views expressed in this article are his own, and are not necessarily shared by members of that organisation.)