

Sh*t

If you go down to the crags today, you could be in for a shock. People are systematically abusing the places we climb, and popular bouldering venues are showing the strain. Ian Hill takes a look.

In the rush to crimp, it seems that many are turning a blind eye to their damage to the crag environment. Blocking gates with their cars, taking a beeline to the crag through vegetation and over dry stone walls, splattering chalk, dropping litter and only pausing to leave a deposit behind any convenient boulder.

Water bottles, crisp packets, finger tape, apple cores, banana skins, and fag butts litter the ground, whilst paths to most crags are wide enough for several people to walk abreast, and grass has all but disappeared from beneath popular areas. On some classic problems at Stanage such as *Not To Be Taken Away* or *Deliverance*, the level of erosion has even changed their nature. Chalk and tick marks spread the beta on just about every move, and the left hand ends of Rubicon and Raven Tor are littered with toilet paper and worse, and are not for the faint of heart. At many popular areas it's now a case of beware where you tread.

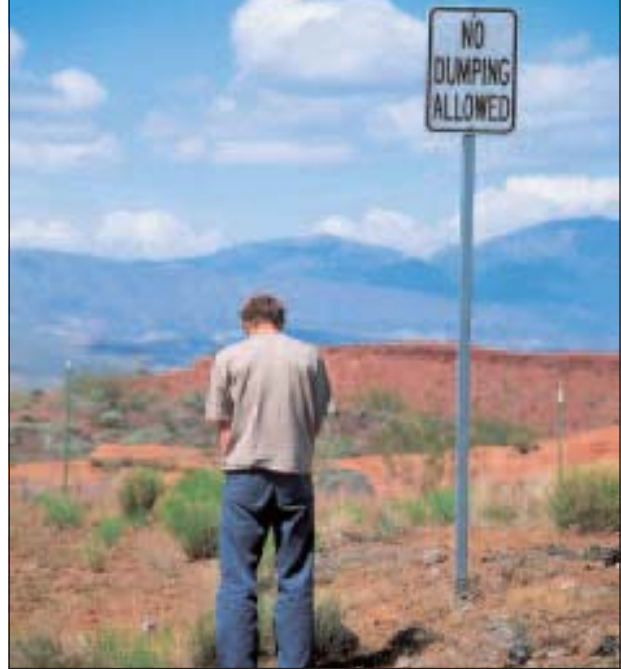
If this state of affairs continues we'll have more access problems. Pressure on the environment is increasing from many directions. We can argue about damage caused by cyclists, motorbikes, walkers or any other countryside users but that doesn't change the fact that we should treat the land with respect and avoid giving ammunition to people who would stop us using crags.

A trip to Bishop last year highlighted the issues. Apart from the superb bouldering one of the most obvious things about the place was the cleanliness of the boulders and their surrounds. The rock is relatively clean and while chalk is visible it is in fairly small quantities given the popularity of the area. Litter is noticeable by its absence, and here nobody makes a beeline for the boulders; they stick to the paths and avoid creating new tracks and damaging the surrounding soil and vegetation. But best of all, when you walk away from the climbing areas there are no piles of shit lying behind any boulder that dares to offer a scrap of privacy.

But why is this? I talked to Mick Ryan, a Brit ex-pat and veteran of the climbing scene who now lives in Bishop and works for Rockfax guidebooks. He suggested that it revealed something of a different mindset on that side of the pond;

"One of the main differences between US and UK cultures is personal responsibility. Americans don't have the culture of a welfare state as is found in the UK and so tend to take more responsibility for their actions and themselves."

The idea of having to look after themselves has spilled over into the climbing world, giving a very different approach from the UK;



"American climbers adopt their cliffs, they look after them. They build trails, have litter pick-up and liaise with local land management agencies and private land owners on access issues. In Bishop, climbers are engaged in all kinds of pro-active measures to conserve outdoor resources and protect access to local climbing areas. As a Brit who was used to leaving access and management issues to others it was quite a shift in philosophy. Everything done by climbers round here tries to include positive environmental factors; this is essential if the freedom to climb outside is to be preserved."

This impressive grass roots approach has been formalised and supported by the US Access Fund, and when combined with the heightened environmental awareness of US climbers and negative pressure from land management agencies you get a recipe for clean cliffs. But it's not just climbers that are helping, there is a big difference in corporate giving, with US climbing companies contributing far more to the Access Fund than their UK counterparts donate to the BMC's Access and Conservation Trust. To tackle the waste problem, the Bureau of Land Management has also installed Portalooos at key locations, such as the Happy Boulders. Perhaps it's time that the same is done at popular climbing areas over here?

The contrast between the cleanliness of the US boulders and the current degraded state of the UK venues is remarkable. This has to change. We need to take control before someone does it for us, and probably not to our advantage. As climbers we have to become acutely aware that our actions and behaviour directly affect the crag environment and the enjoyment of others. It all comes down to personal responsibility. So next time you go out don't expect someone to clean up after you, just aim to climb in such a way that no-one will ever know you've been there. II

(BELOW) Ian Hill on Red Rum, V10, Happy Boulders, Bishop. Credit: Pete Phillips.

A code of conduct

Take all your litter home, even the organic bits. Leave no sign of your presence, and pick up any other litter.

Use established paths to get to the crag and around the boulders. Don't take short cuts or jump fences. Minimise ground and vegetation erosion under boulders by using a mat but be careful not to squash flowers or bushes.

Cut down on chalk use. When bouldering, consider using a chalk bucket instead of a bag. Don't dip for every move. Don't use tick marks, if you see any clean them off. After you've bouldered use your toothbrush to clean the chalk off the holds. Clean up all spills.

Share cars to the crag and park sympathetically. Don't cut off roads or farm tracks or gates.

Don't shit at the crag! Go to the toilet beforehand.