Public Scoping

Spacewall Climbing Management Area Environmental Assessment

Public Input Sought on Designating the Spacewall Climbing Management Area

Sedro Woolley, WA – The public is invited to comment on a preliminary proposal to officially establish the Spacewall Climbing Management Area near the town of Newhalem in the Skagit Gorge.

Per the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), North Cascades National Park Service Complex intends to prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) to analyze the effects of the proposal, a restoration alternative, and the no action alternative.

The National Park Service (NPS) is requesting feedback on the proposed action, environmental issues that should be addressed, other potential alternatives, and sources of data that should be considered in the EA. Comments will be accepted June 1 through June 30, 2021.

There will be a virtual public meeting on Tuesday, June 8, 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. Pacific Daylight Time. For more information see the Meeting Notices on the project website. If you need reasonable accommodations to attend the meeting please contact Rob Burrows at Rob_Burrows@nps.gov as soon as possible.

Comment at:

https://parkplanning.nps.gov/SpacewallScope

Hardcopy comments can be mailed to:

Superintendent
North Cascades National Park Service Complex
810 State Route 20
Sedro Woolley, WA 98284

Substantive public comments can assist the NPS in shaping the proposal, alternatives, and the assessment of impacts in the EA. The EA will be provided for public review in late summer 2021.

Proposal

The NPS proposes to officially establish and open the Spacewall Climbing Management Area (CMA) for sport climbing day use. Sport climbing is a type of rock climbing that uses bolts drilled into the rock to provide fall protection and belay and rappel anchors. The Spacewall is located approximately 1 mile north of the town of Newhalem along Washington State Route 20. The rock formation is north of the highway at approximately mile marker 122 (Figure 1).

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of this action is to protect the natural and cultural resources through the active management of sport climbing activities in the Spacewall area. The need for the project flows from the Organic Act of 1916 through the 2012 Ross Lake National Recreation Area General Management Plan (GMP) that identified procedures for evaluating and establishing climbing management areas in the Ross Lake National Recreation Area (NRA).

Background

Due to concern for resource impacts in the Skagit Gorge from user-developed sport climbing route development, sport climbing was subject to a voluntary moratorium on route development in 2002. At that time the NPS made a commitment to develop a climbing management plan for the gorge.

In 2008, in lieu of a completed climbing management plan, a formal agreement between the NPS and the Washington Climbers Coalition (WCC) recognized sport climbing and the use of fixed anchors (bolts) as a legitimate and accepted activity in the NRA.

The 2012 GMP codified four CMAs that did not include Spacewall. However, Spacewall was, and continues to be heavily bolted. Additionally, climbers have developed access routes to the wall that included the cutting and clearing of vegetation and the placement of via ferrata (rebar ladders and cable handlines) into rock faces.

A proposal from the Washington Climbers Coalition (WCC) and Access Fund to establish a Spacewall CMA was received in 2017.

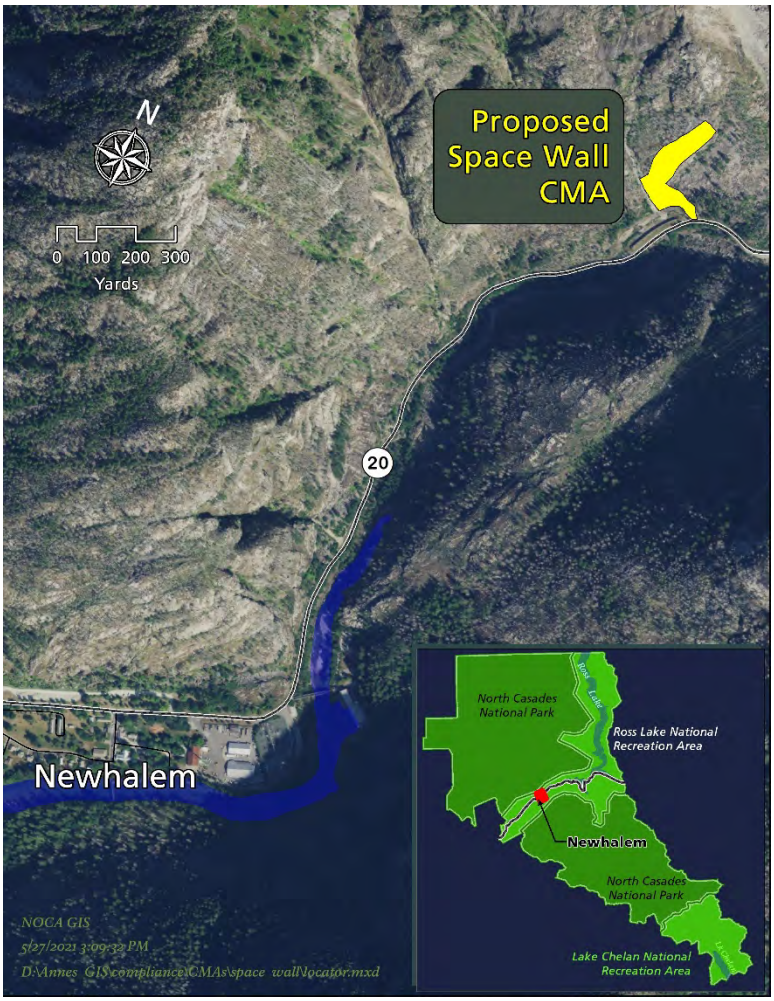

Figure 1. Location of Spacewall.

In 2019, all sport climbing in the Gorge outside the four approved areas was closed, including Spacewall, through orders published in the Superintendent's Compendium, until impacts could be assessed and vetted through the NEPA and National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 processes.

Management Action Being Considered

1. Under the proposed action:
    - Day use of the climbing area would be established though signage.
    - The existing access route/social trails would be accepted by the NPS.
    - Boundaries of the CMA would be set.
    - Parking would be delineated in appropriate pullout(s) closest to the climbing area.
    - Climbers would be required to remove human waste from the area and dispose of it.
    - Maintenance of the Spacewall CMA would be undertaken through a stewardship agreement with the local climbing association. This agreement would address access route maintenance, preventing and removing weeds, and maintaining native vegetation.
2. Under the restoration alternative, the user developments that have been put in place leading to and on the Spacewall would be removed and remediated, including:
    - The removal of bolts, fixed lines, rebar ladders, and any other foreign materials.

    - The removal of the user established access route, rehabbing disturbed areas, and closing the area to the public until native vegetation has reestablished.
    - Site access would be deterred during the restoration period with measures such as closure signs, fifteen-minute parking in the nearby access pullouts, etc.
3. Under the no action alternative, the user developments that have been put in place leading to and on the Spacewall would remain and the area would continue to be closed to climbing.

Note: This EA will not address bouldering or other potential CMAs in the Skagit Gorge.

Resources and Concerns

Initial internal project scoping identified the following resources and other concerns for possible consideration in the EA:

- Geologic features
- Terrestrial wildlife and habitat
- Cliff nesting birds
- Cultural resources, including tangible and intangible
- Aquatic species and habitats
- Vegetation, including lichens and bryophytes
- Non-native and invasive species
- Safety and visitor protection

Scoping Questions that will assist the NPS in the development of the EA

- What should the boundaries of the Spacewall CMA be?
- Should new route development and bolting be allowed within the CMA boundaries?
- If new routes/bolts are allowed what is the best permitting/administrative process for ensuring development occurs without unacceptable impacts to resources?
- How should human waste be managed at the Spacewall? Given the nearest public restrooms are about 1 mile away in Newhalem, would climbers use blue bags if provided on site?
- What are the best methods to communicate information such as boundaries and closures about the CMA? For example, should a bulletin/information board be placed on the access route to provide current information for climbers?
- What alternatives should be analyzed in the EA?
- What issues need to be evaluated and analyzed for effects in the EA?
- What other ideas do you have for managing sport climbing use in order to avoid unacceptable impacts to natural and cultural resources?

Preliminary Spacewall CMA Boundaries

Several factors were considered in drawing the boundaries shown in Figure 2, they are: 1) The Ross Lake NRA GMP states that, “boundaries will follow obvious topographic or cultural features (such as creeks and roads) to make it clear to the public and law enforcement where climbing will be allowed or prohibited”; 2) Whether the areas that have been previously developed; 3) areas that have been surveyed for sensitive natural and cultural resources; and 4) boundary location in relation to designated wilderness. The preliminary boundaries and features shown on Figure 2 are also available on the project scoping webpage as a .kmz file so that anyone can view this in Google Earth.

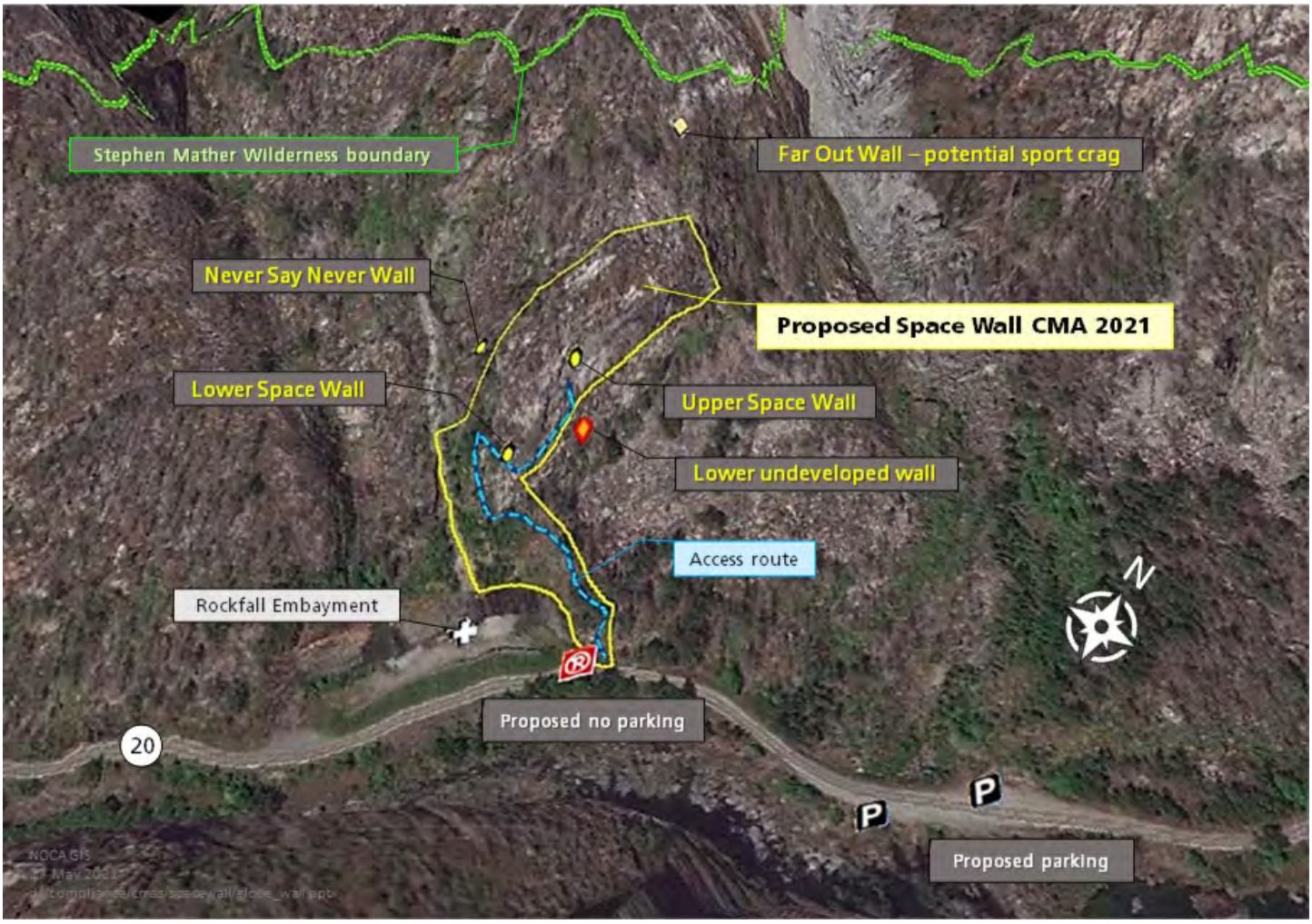

Figure 2. An oblique aerial view map showing area features and a preliminary Climbing Management Area boundary for Spacewall. The preliminary boundaries and features shown here are also available on the project scoping web page as a .kmz file so that anyone can view this in Google Earth.

Access Route

The lower access route is a primitive, user-built trail that starts from Washington State Route 20 that initially transverses over steep bedrock slabs, loose rock, and soil (Figure 3). The trail leads to the base of a rebar ladder that goes up steep rock slabs to the base of Lower Spacewall (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3. Looking down the lower rebar ladder on the lower access route. The location where the car is parked in the background is adjacent to the rock embayment and the start of the access trail. This is shown as proposed closed on the map because of threat of rockfall from above.

Figure 4. Looking up the Rebar ladder on the lower access route. The Lower Spacewall is the rock formation in the upper part of the photo.

Lower Spacewall and Upper Access Route

The Lower Spacewall has several sport routes that begin from a wide ledge (Figure 5). Follow this ledge to the right (east) and there are some steel cables bolted to the wall to provide safety lines for traversing around a corner along a narrowing ledge (Figure 6). This ledge brings you to another rebar ladder with steel cable. This ladder brings you to the base of the Upper Spacewall (Figure 7).

Figure 5. The wide part of the ledge from which several climbing routes start on the Lower Spacewall. The yellow measuring tape was strung up as a basis to inventory impacts at the base of the wall.

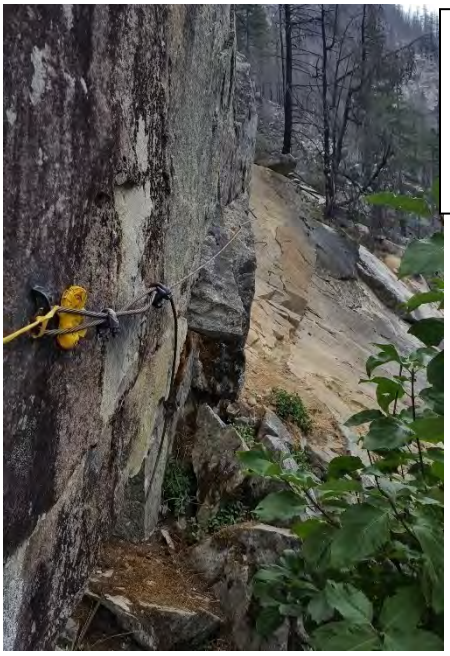

Figure 6. The start of a steel cable safety line on the right (east) side of the Lower Spacewall ledge

Figure 7. The upper access route at the bottom of the last climb to the "Launch Pad".

Upper Spacewall

Approximately 15 climbing routes on the Upper Spacewall are accessed from an exposed ledge called the Launch Pad (Figures 8-11).

Figure 8. A panoramic view of the Launch PadA from just above.

Figure 9. Looking right (east) from the Launch Pad across the middle part of the upper Spacewall.

Figure 10. Looking straight up the Upper Spacewall from the Launch Pad.

Figure 11. Looking left (west) at the Upper Spacewall from the Launch Pad.

Lower undeveloped wall

This wall is below the Lower Spacewall and the Launch Pad (Figures 12 and 13).

Figure 12. Looking up at the lower undeveloped wall and the Upper Spacewall above.

Figure 13. A portion of the lower undeveloped wall.

Never Say Never Wall

This approximately 70-foot tall, undeveloped wall is above and behind the Spacewall (Figure 2). Access to this is up a steep, loose, and brushy gully starting from the left (west) side of the Lower Spacewall ledge. This wall was surveyed for mosses and bryophytes and has many dead burned trees at the base (Figure 14). Climbing route development potential on this wall is unknown.

Figure 14. Panoramic view of Never Say Never Wall.

Far Out Wall

This is a few hundred feet above the Spacewall and was indicated in the map files included with the 2017 Washington Climber's Coalition proposal. The climbing route development potential on this wall is unknown. Park staff have not visited or surveyed the Far Out Wall. However, from the highway below a NPS biologist sighted mountain goats in this area leading him to believe this may be important springtime habitat for them. Mountain goats have been seen in the same location in years past. Additionally, it appears Far Out Wall is very close to the designated wilderness boundary and bolts are prohibited in designated wilderness.

Direction from Ross Lake National Recreation Area General Management Plan

Sport Climbing (p. 88)

Sport climbing within the Ross Lake NRA in the Skagit Gorge from Newhalem to Diablo will continue to be managed separately from other forms of recreation because sport climbing is a unique activity that requires manipulation of the climbing environment including installation of bolted anchors. Due to the manipulative actions required to establish sport climbing routes, the NPS will continue to allow sport climbing in the four areas already agreed upon between NPS and the climbing community and will maintain and monitor routes and access through an Adopt-A-Crag program. Some routes or areas could be closed for resource protection.

In addition, the NPS will allow new routes that require placement of fixed anchors and replacements within designated Climbing Management Areas (CMAs). These new CMAs will be evaluated, authorized, and managed on a case by case basis, subject to funding and personnel and following appropriate site-specific surveys and assessments. A map and description of authorized CMAs will be identified in the superintendent's compendium and maintain ed on the park website along with other climbing–related information.

The process for establishing new Climbing Management Areas will be initiated upon written request by the CMA proponent in advance of route development. The NPS will survey a proposed CMA to determine if the area is appropriate for sport climbing development and use. The NPS will evaluate various factors such as presence of natural and cultural resources, access, and other site-specific concerns. If surveys and assessments indicate sport climbing is appropriate within a proposed CMA, then the area will be formally designated as a CMA via the superintendent's compendium and managed according to site-specific conditions.

Climbing Management Area boundaries will follow obvious topographic or cultural features (such as creeks and roads) to make it clear to the public and law enforcement personnel where climbing will be allowed or prohibited. Information about Climbing Management Areas will be posted and made readily available to climbers and the public. The NPS will also evaluate and formalize access and parking to climbing routes for safety and resource protection.

The NPS will prohibit intentional physical manipulation of the landscape including scrubbing of lichen, moss, and vegetation; movement of rocks and debris (such as terracing); and harm to cultural resources that exceeds de-minimis impact, in accordance with 36 CFR 2.1 (a) Preservation of natural, cultural, and archeological resources and other regulations. The NPS will also strongly support programs that encourage climbers to take an active role in stewardship of Climbing Management Areas.