

EDITORIALS

Protect caves from climbers

The Deschutes National Forest is more than just trees; it extends below the ground into lava tubes scattered throughout Central Oregon. Charged with maintaining natural resources on federal lands, U.S. Forest Service officials have become concerned that climbers are damaging the region's caves. They have therefore recommended that strict restrictions be placed on cave use. Despite protests from climbers, those restrictions should be implemented.

The dispute has focused on lava caves located southeast of Bend primarily along China Hat Road. Spe-lunkers frequent the caves to enjoy a cool change of pace from life topside. The caves are home to sensitive native wildlife such as bats and are adorned with Native American pictographs that date back thousands of years.

Climbers threaten the beauty of the caves by embedding bolts in the rock walls for ropes and by using hand chalk that damages walls and wipes out pictographs.

The caves, like all forest resources, should be open to recreation. Yet reasonable restrictions are almost always necessary to prevent one person or group from disrupting everyone else's enjoyment. Given the limited supply of caves, the irreparable harm being caused by climbers cannot be allowed to continue.

The proposed rules for the caves would go into effect in October if there are no appeals. They include forbidding the use of bolts and chalk

for climbing. Free climbing would still be allowed in several places. Forest officials would also limit access to certain caves for parts of the year. This will protect them from intrusion during periods critical to bat habitat such as hibernation and nursing periods.

Of course climbers are not the only ones who have been causing damage. The new rules will ban mountain bikes, horses, motor vehicles, pets, glass bottles and alcohol.

The proposal is not exclusively about restrictions. It includes several improvements to cave sites. Parking lots will be redone or moved away from cave entrances to help protect vegetation and wildlife. An information kiosk will also be installed at the Boyd Cave parking area-trail head. It will notify visitors about cave rules and will provide details about the natural history of the area.

The Forest Service does not have the manpower to regularly patrol the caves. Protection will rely on the honor system. We hope climbers will respect the final decision and follow the rules. There are many other places in Central Oregon where they can practice their sport. Smith Rock and the Meadow Days Area along the Deschutes River come immediately to mind. Both offer quality climbs of varying difficulty.

The Forest Service is doing what it must to protect a unique natural resource in Central Oregon. The proposed rules should be allowed to go into effect in October, and when they do, everyone should respect them.