

# **History of the McDowell Sonoran Preserve Rock Climbing Plan**

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## Background Activity

After losing many close-in climbing areas such as Troon Mountain and the Boulders to land developers, the AMC learned to get involved early on and to put in the long hours that it takes to develop a positive, working relationship with land owners and land managers. Much great rock climbing that has historically existed and now thankfully exists due to the efforts of the AMC, and others, to secure the rock climbing in the McDowell Mountains. Climbers don't own the land they climb on, and it is better to think of rock climbing as a privilege and a guest rather than as a right to be taken for granted.

The rock climbing community was involved in the grass roots efforts to get Scottsdale to consider preserving the McDowells. Paul Diefenderfer, former AMC President and following his involvement with preserving rock climbing at Pinnacle Peak, was among the key folks who met in the early 1990's with other area preservationists to start the McDowell Sonoran Land Trust. In the later 1990's Bill Berkely, a local rock climber, was invited to participate on the McDowell Sonoran Preserve Commission (MSPC). The MSPC is the citizens advisory group appointed by City Council to give them advice on land acquisition and planning of the Preserve. As such it is the chief policy development body in the City with regard to the Preserve.

Bill introduced Wayne Schroeter, then Access Chair from the AMC, to the various players. In the mid to late 1990's I became active as a Scottsdale resident and as a representative of the Arizona Mountaineering Club with the Planning Sub-Committee of the MSPC. I held office in the AMC as Vice President and then as President in the late 1990's and early 2000's and took over the Land Advocacy Chair position. I later was elected to the MSPC where I served as a commissioner for 6 years ending in April of 2009, the last couple of years also serving as its Vice Chair.

Paul, Bill, Wayne and I all advocated for the inclusion of rock climbing as a legitimate and sanctioned activity in the Preserve. The underlying premise was that all the historic rock climbing in the Tom's Thumb area should be preserved and access would occur on designated approach trails. This was an important compromise because the City's Preserve Ordinance did not allow "off-trail" activity and the only trails identified and built were the official multi-use public trails – not paths to access climbing crags. Scottsdale, as other land owners have done, could have prohibited rock climbing due the "no off-trail" hiking policy.

## Obstacles and Successes

In the middle 2000's, in my governance roles I placed the rock climbing plan on the MSPC's agenda of priorities and began working with staff to actually get it documented and approved. I enlisted the support of two different groups – a group of climbing experts and a large group of AMC members volunteered to research climbing management plans from around the country. Many hours were donated and the resulting spreadsheet helped formulate defensible positions for potential negotiations with the City or other involved entities. To help provide a single point of contact and communication with the rock climbing community, I was given the working title of Climber Liaison to City Staff, probably one of the most fulfilling titles I've held over many jobs and community appointments!

There were some elements of the preservation community that didn't want any off-trail activity and even discussed removal of all bolts from the Preserve to restore the Preserve to pre-human historical datum. Fortunately I was both a Preserve Commissioner and Chair of its Planning Sub-Committee at the time these objections were aired and I was able to garner sufficient support for a practical and workable plan – We identified limited crags on which we would climb and we would identify specific Climber Access Routes to those crags. And we agreed to a policy of "No new bolts in new locations."

The compromise hinged on the concept of allowing rock climbing and that minimal environmental damage would occur if we were able to channel use onto specific and approved paths to the crags. The Preserve management philosophy was to "manage" the use and allow travel on only those specific trails from the general public trails to the climbing crags themselves. The Climber Access Routes were intended to be minimalist, perhaps a foot wide, and not a typical trail but

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more of a common path to the crags with sufficient identification and route marking to keep climbers on those single paths.

During this same time period I began a multi-year project of scoping out and cleaning up many of the routes in the Preserve. The City did not want visible slings if possible to avoid, so I and others have systematically hardened many anchors with bolts, chains and rap stations.

As a parallel community involvement and recognition, I had been appointed to the Board of the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy, which is a 501(c)(3) tax exempt entity that has a contract with the City to provide volunteer support in managing and maintaining the Preserve. As a Board member I enlisted the support of the MSC for the rock climbing plan and I took numerous tours of MSC Stewards, City officials, MSPC commissioners and MSC Board members to show the rock climbing resources and historic trails.

The draft Rock Climbing Plan was presented to the climbing community at a member meeting of the Arizona Mountaineering Club on January 28, 2009. Over 70 climbers were in attendance, with at least half being non-AMC'ers. I showed slides of the rock climbing resources and Bob and Scott showed slides of the City's draft rock climbing plan.

The MSPC made a recommendation to City Council for approval of the Rock Climbing Plan in March of 2009. Essentially this rock climbing plan is a Climbing Management Plan which lays out what climbing crags are available, what the access routes are and what climbers can and can't do in the McDowell Sonoran Preserve.

## **Climber Access Routes and Completion**

Once the Rock Climbing Plan was approved, I worked with Scott, Claire Miller and Robbin Schweitzer laying out the specific climbing access trails on the ground. Initially the trails were flagged with surveyor tape, and then volunteer work crews from the Arizona Mountaineering Club met with Scott, Claire and Robbin to clear and construct the trails. Joint sign installation and trail building projects were also held with Stewards from the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy and the local rock climbing community.

In May of 2009 I wrote a grant on behalf of the Arizona Mountaineering Club to the Access Fund to receive monies to place trail signs in the main Tom's Thumb showing the designated climber access routes. There were several sessions where the AMC and the MSC held a joint work parties during which they placed most of these trail signs on the Morrells Parking Area and the approaches to Sven Towers I, II and III. Other efforts built the climber access routes to Gardeners Wall and to Half and Half, Fort McDowell, and Lost Wall.

In the Fall of 2011 the City Council formally approved the Rock Climbing Plan and Rock Climbing Guidelines (available on the AMC web site) that form the Climbing Management Plan for the McDowell Sonoran Preserve. This was a true historic success. Climbers often think that just because they used to climb somewhere they can continue to climb. Unfortunately they are not being realistic. That climbing use is neither guaranteed nor secured unless the right to climb is recognized in some formal agreement with the owner of the land. Fortunately around the country climbers are beginning to learn the difference between historic use and actually securing climbing use from the land owner and land manager.

The City of Scottsdale planned and constructed the Tom's Thumb Trail Head within input from the various stakeholder groups, including members of the AMC and the broader rock climbing community. While some griping occurred about having to walk another 10 minutes from the new parking lot, climbers needed to recognize that climbing could easily have been lost. The land was prime for development and if the City hadn't purchased it with taxes from Scottsdale citizens it would have gone the way of Troon Mountain and the Boulders to houses, golf courses and resorts. And even when the City acquired it climbers had to work with the City and its rules in order to secure rock climbing. Fortunately the overall reception has been extremely positive.

A new Tom's Thumb Trail Head was constructed and its Grand Opening was reported in the AMC Newsletter. Tom  
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*The ribbon cutting with Council Member Ron McCullagh, Tom Kreuser, Mayor Jim Lane, and Vice Mayor Dennis Robbins.*



*Installation of climber access route sign*

Kreuser, after whom Tom's Thumb was named, cut the ribbon at the Grand Opening with the Mayor. The ribbon cutting involved Tom and the Mayor unclipping two carabiners linking ropes across the new threshold. It was a grand moment for Arizona climbing.

## **What Comes Next**

The Arizona Mountaineering Club and the City of Scottsdale have had a long term partnership with regard to rock climbing. That partnership has led to the great successes to date.

It is anticipated that the Arizona Mountaineering Club will take on long term responsibility of building, patrolling and maintaining the Climber Access Routes and serving as a communication channel between the City and the broader climbing community. That formula has worked to date and will in the future with the help of many current and future AMC members. Other climbing group and local climbers are helping out too. The Phoenix Rock Gym based youth climbing team, the Rock Phenoms, held a very successful trail maintenance project in 2013 and that relationship is likely to build a sense of responsibility among the up and coming rock climbers of the future.

Who knows, my volunteer effort of over 250 hours a year over almost two decades may yet pay-off when the definitive rock climbing guide to the Preserve is written.

Submitted by Erik Filsinger

AMC Land Advocacy Chair



*Scrambling Tour of McDowell Crags.*



*Stewardship Day for the Rock Phenoms (PRG's youth climbing team)*