



Climbing in Scotland Statement

An Explanation of How Climbing is Conducted

(June 2010)

This statement reflects the best practice way that climbing is undertaken in Scotland. It is designed to promote mutual understanding between land managers, climbers and between climbers. It will be of use to land managers in matters such as liability and access, and of use to climbers (resident, visiting or novice) as a reflection of the general approach taken in Scotland. It has been widely consulted upon in the climbing community.

CLIMBING STYLES

The following styles are identified. These are regarded as distinct and are not combined in a mixed manner on a single climb.

Traditional

Primarily using removable protection, called 'natural protection', as well as occasional in-situ protection from pegs (pitons), slings and rope threads. The style is often referred to as 'adventure' climbing.

Sport

This involves the use of in-situ protection from bolts. These are used for the production of fully equipped climbs and would not be used on climbs or cliffs regarded as suitable for 'adventure' climbing.

Bouldering

Low-level climbing without the use of climbing protection.

RESPONSIBLE ACCESS & CLIMBING

The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 gives everyone statutory access rights to most land and inland water for the purposes of recreation and passage. Access rights do not convey a right to place in-situ protection i.e. anything left on the crag after climbing. These rights only apply if access is conducted responsibly, and guidance on what this means is contained in the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (the Code www.outdooraccess-scotland.com). Being "responsible," for climbers, entails the following three basic principles:

1. Respecting the interests of other people

Respecting other users of the countryside includes the impact of the size of a visiting group or an event, or the regular use of a specific venue, and the greater risk of causing unreasonable interference. The Code also guides access users to accept reasonable requests from land managers for alternative access arrangements when some areas may not be safe while management operations are underway.

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2. Caring for the environment

Caring for the crag environment is an important element of being ‘responsible’ under the code. In general terms it is irresponsible, as well as illegal, for climbers to disturb birds and their young while they are nesting. Care for the cliff environment to reduce the impact on wildlife and plant life includes avoiding the uprooting flowers and rare plants, damage to trees, leaving visually intrusive climbing ‘litter’, keeping noise to a minimum and considering the suitability of the venue for larger groups. The use of hammer-placed protection is agreed to be a last resort and should be avoided wherever possible. Bolts have an impact on the natural environment, and in subsequent sections of this statement are guidelines for where bolts are appropriate. An introduction to all the issues specifically for climbers can be found in the MCofS Minimal Impact Mountaineering Advice and more specific information in other guidance available on www.mcofs.org.uk/access-and-conservation.asp.

3. Take responsibility for your own actions

Climbers need to be aware of the legal principle “volenti non fit injuria” which means climbers taking access will generally be held to have accepted any obvious risks which are inherent in climbing, whether that is the soundness of the rock, condition of fixed or their own equipment etc. It is also a climber’s responsibility to assess their actions for the impact they will have on other people’s interests and the environment.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

For all styles and disciplines of climbing, it is the ethic of the sport that all climbers take responsibility for their own actions. The MCofS Participation Statement makes this clear:

“The MCofS recognises that climbing and mountaineering are activities with a danger of personal injury or death. Participants in these activities should be aware of and accept these risks and be responsible for their own actions and involvement”

Participation and Development

The development of all styles of climb is conducted by climbers themselves. It is not organised, regulated or governed. The MCofS is not a governing body in this respect, but endeavours to represent climbers’ views.

Participation and Documentation of Climbs

Climbing venues and climbs are documented by individual climbers (on the internet and in guidebooks). This is unregulated and the quality of the information is taken on trust by those who use it. This is undertaken on the full understanding that any description of a climb is for guidance only. Information regarding changes to climbs is updated in guidebooks and the internet by individuals, on an ad hoc basis.

Participation and Personal Risk Assessment

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The MCofS Participation Statement relates to both those ‘developing’ new climbs and those ‘repeating’ climbs. Climbers should make their own assessment of the quality of any protection they use, both personal (climbing ‘gear’) and in-situ (protection left in the crag including pegs, slings and bolts). It is up to the individual to assess whether such protection is suitable to take a fall or be used in any way. This is part of the risk assessment required by individuals to participate as safely as they wish to.

Liability

Climbers cannot undertake the activity, understanding the risk and their responsibility then hold any other person liable for damages (including other climbers, first ascensionists / climb developers, guidebook authors and publishers, landowners and land managers etc.).

Self Regulation

Safety in climbing is a self-assessing and self-regulating system – natural environments, in-situ protection, protection opportunities and rock quality, as well as grade of difficulty of climb may change over time and so cannot be ‘governed’ by regulation, and cannot be maintained to a particular standard. The placement of bolts to produce sport climbs is also unregulated although the MCofS recommends that they are placed in accordance with the manufacturer’s recommendations. The quality of in situ bolts on a sport climb can therefore be as variable as other forms of in situ protection.

Protection Replacement

Local climbers (or the first ascensionists) endeavour on an ad-hoc basis to replace in-situ ‘traditional’ protection (pegs, nuts, slings and threads) when they degrade, but often pegs and nuts cannot be replaced. The natural progression towards a ‘pure ascent’ of a climb without older in-situ protection is a recommended ethic in adventure climbing. The MCofS encourages voluntary ‘Adopt-a-Crag’ initiatives to help with this issue.

Climbers developing Sport Climbs may have a personal connection to the crag which allows for informal checking of bolt quality. This can be backed up by feedback from visiting climbers. A small number of local ‘bolt funds’ have been set up to help pay for the replacement of old bolts and the MCofS supports this informal system and encourages climbers to support any local bolt fund.

Assessing suitable venues for sport climbing development in Scotland

The MCofS, as a representative body, has conducted extensive consultation with climbers over many years and endorses the widely accepted view that adventurous bolt-free climbing remains the primary ethic for all Scottish climbs, but that there is a place for sports style climbing.

Established Climbing Venues:

- Sport climbing development in Scotland is considered as an integral part of the diverse range of climbing styles available
- Bolts are unacceptable to the majority of Scottish climbers on established (documented) mountain cliffs and sea cliffs, in both summer and winter

- Established (documented) ‘traditional’ and sport venues would be expected to remain in their documented style. If a change in style is to be considered in the future (bearing in mind the above guideline on mountain and sea cliff venues) then generally:
 - Retro-bolting (the addition of bolts to established climbs without them) would only be considered with the agreement of the first ascensionist and after wide consultation with interested climbers at local and national level
 - Retro-trad (the removal of existing bolts) would only be considered with the agreement of the first ascensionist and after wide consultation with interested climbers at local and national level

New Sport Venues:

- The development of sport climbs is welcomed within the context of a clear overall ethical framework
- Mountain and sea cliffs with a wild, remote character (also reflected in their surrounding environment) and adventurous nature are not suitable locations for bolts, either for the development of routes or their limited use in order to facilitate easy retreat: self rescue and descent without fixed equipment are all part of the adventurous nature of traditional climbs
- Craggs with good or adequate quality protection within strong natural lines (obvious routes) would be regarded as traditional venues. Craggs where an overall lack of natural cracks for protection together with a lack of strong natural lines may be suitable venues for sport climb development as long as they could not be classed as wild mountain or sea cliff venues
- Sport mixed climbing (and dry-tooling i.e. climbing with ice axes on rock) has an important role to play in the future of Scottish winter climbing, but should not be at odds with these guidelines
- Those seeking to develop new sport mixed venues should enter into consultation with interested climbers at local or national level before taking action
- Bolts should be placed using current best practices

These guidelines allow climbers to make informed decisions about sport development and allow the climbing world to self regulate. If there are any doubts, or ‘grey areas’, an informal approach to gaining opinion is best at local level. The MCoFS will offer assistance (through awareness / distribution of information / debate / mediation) to aid consultation when required.