
Opening a Discussion of Tree Climbing Standards

Posted by Patty Jenkins - 09/25/2005 07:12pm

At this year's Tree Climbing Rendezvous in Oregon, there was general talk about the need for "tree climbing standards." TCI was asked to use our message board for this discussion, and we are happy to host it. As we thought about how to begin this conversation, however, we figured there are lots of different ideas about what "standards" are, so for starters, we went to two dictionaries to see how the term is defined. Here's what we found:

"Standards: Something, such as a practice or a product, that is widely recognized or employed, especially because of its excellence" ; "something established by authority, custom, or general consent as a model or example".

No doubt there are many discussions which are needed around standards--for tree climbing excursions, specific types of forests, climbing technique and safety, etc. But it appeared that the most pressing problem to the Gathering participants is forest protection: tree-climbing is becoming more popular as an activity for lots of people, and everyone is very concerned about the impact this will have on our trees and forests. Therefore, we decided to start with a discussion of wilderness ethics.

This is not a new topic. Some time in 2003, Bill Maher (Wild Bill) posted a message on our Board listing general tips for all forest and backcountry users, and specific tips for recreational treeclimbers, reproduced below. (This list was put together from lists created by other organizations such as the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the Sierra Club, and The Nature Conservancy.) Our intention is not to rewrite what Bill did, but to refine and add to these points where necessary in order to come up with a "Tree Climbers' Wilderness Ethics Guide" that can be used by new and experienced climbers alike.

We invite you to contribute your thoughts and knowledge to this discussion. To make the conversation easier to follow, please let everyone know if you're referencing a specific point in Bill's list. Also, to keep the discussion as organized as possible, we may feel it necessary from time to time to move your messages and/or to create new threads as new topics come up.

Here is Bill's unabridged list:

1. Plan ahead to minimize impact! Avoid holidays and popular weekends. Treeclimbing usually isn't much fun when there are large crowds using the forest and adjacent recreational areas.
2. Limit your group size! The U.S. Forest Service recommends six or fewer as the optimum number of people in the backcountry, and the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society both suggest eight. Actually, many areas can handle more people if they're careful. Treeclimbing groups should use common sense to determine the number of people their climbing area can handle, and large groups could easily be split into several smaller teams that climb in widely scattered trees.
3. Pack it in, pack it out! Do not leave even one piece of litter in the forest or at parking areas. In fact, treeclimbers can score a few points with rangers by cleaning up the occasional mess left behind by previous visitors to the forest.
4. Minimize your impact on the forest! Wear clothing that blends with the terrain or woods, avoid loud noises and shouting (two-way radios work well with treeclimbers), follow existing trails when possible and avoid trampling bushes and other undergrowth. Walk single-file in the center of the trail and try not to kick up dirt and stones.
5. Avoid over-camping in an area! Most wilderness campsites will return to normal in just a few months if they're not overused. Pick a site that's invisible from popular trails and other camping parties, and camp at least 25 feet from natural water sources and "beauty spots" in the forest.
6. Don't contaminate water sources! Never wash dishes, clothes or yourself directly in streams or springs, always use biodegradable soap and dispose of wastewater at least 100 feet from the stream. Latrines should be dug at least 100 feet from the stream, and should be thoroughly filled in before leaving the area.
7. Use extreme care with fires! When possible, avoid building a campfire. If you must make a fire, make a fire ring with rocks, do it in the safest possible spot and keep it small, so it can be easily and quickly extinguished to avoid forest fires. Never cut standing trees or pull up vegetation to build a fire. Check for fire danger before entering a wilderness of backcountry area. Campfires are often illegal during peak fire seasons.
8. Respect wildlife! Don't disturb wildlife if possible, and never feed a wild animal. Mother Nature has done a wonderful job of providing wildlife food and habitat in the last few million years and it's not likely that man can improve on her efforts. For example: white oak acorns have extra protein to give animals more energy in early fall as they gather food, while red oak acorns usually drop a few weeks later and have extra fat to help animals store up weight for the winter. Wild berries from dogwoods, persimmons, hollies and other trees and plants are loaded with the right carbohydrates and complex vitamins that wild animals need in various seasons. Your picnic lunch likely does not contain the nutrition that

most wild animals need to survive. Also, avoid climbing a tree where a wild animal has its nest or den.

9. Respect your climbing tree! A wilderness climb is done in a wild tree, as opposed to a tame tree in the park that has been cleaned up for inexperienced climbers. Use a cambium saver or rope saver when necessary. Do not cut or break small limbs that get in your way; instead, if you're experienced enough to climb in the wilderness then you're experienced enough to find a way around them. Leave your arborist saws at home or back at camp. Remember that many other forest visitors will get upset if they see you carrying saws into the woods, and they most likely will complain to the nearest ranger. Climbing spikes should never, ever be used in a wild tree and are, in fact, illegal in many state and federal forests.

10. Protect other visitors to the forest! Don't climb in a tree that overhangs a foot trail or road, don't block trails or roads with your equipment and packs, and don't allow inexperienced people to stand under your climbing tree. For security reasons, it is often best to hide your packs and other non-climbing equipment well off the trail while you're aloft.

11. Be friendly with strangers! Most people will eventually understand your activity if you take the time to explain it to them in a friendly and professional manner. Point out to them that you have done everything you can to protect the tree from the impact of climbing. Show them how you get the rope in the tree and how you ascend the rope. You might even gain another recruit or two for our growing sport of recreational treeclimbing. Some climbers, particularly the solo ones, leave printed brochures at the tree base which not only explain what they're doing but look official and lend an air of legitimacy to the climb. Tim Kovar at Treeclimbing Atlanta has a good brochure that he uses.

12. Climb in out-of-the-way places when possible! You'll have fewer complaints from other forest visitors and you'll probably have a more enjoyable climbing experience. And remember, many rangers stick to the main trails and the forest roads since they have too much work to do to check out every isolated spot in the forest.

13. Obey any orders from a ranger! If he or she tells you to stop climbing in a tree or refrain from another activity, then do it as quickly as safely possible. Do it pleasantly and without argument, then politely ask the ranger to explain his or her reasons for stopping the climb. Rangers sometimes might not have time right then to discuss it, but are usually willing to make a future appointment. Many rangers will work with you in the future if they know you're willing to follow the regulations.

14. Always tell somebody where you will climb! Write out the directions to your climbing area, where you plan to park, what trail you plan to hike, and when you plan to be back. Include, if possible, the exact longitude and latitude of the tree and the telephone number for the ranger district office or the proper law enforcement agency.

15. Carry a map of the area and a compass! And know how to use them. A GPS receiver is also great if used in addition to the map and compass. A cell telephone is also desirable, particularly if there are inexperienced backcountry climbers in the group, and should be carried even if you can't get service at the tree and have to hike to a nearby hilltop or high point for emergency service. Discuss the route to the climbing tree and its location with everyone in your party, and establish a place to meet if you get separated.

16. Always follow the rules for safe treeclimbing! Always take your first-aid kit, and make sure any supplies that were used on the last trip have been replaced. Make sure your ropes and harnesses are in good shape, never climb above the limb where your rope is anchored, check your knots and down lines frequently, and never allow an inexperienced person to climb without close supervision. Climb in teams of three or more if possible, and encourage climbers to take turns as the ground person.

17. Limit the number of climbers in a wild tree! In the excitement of ascending a wild tree that has never been climbed before, it's quite easy to get too many ropes and climbers into the tree at one time. Experience has shown that three to four ropes and climbers is the maximum most wild trees can handle, particularly if there is a lot of brush at the base of the trunk that will tangle lines. If possible, one climber should remain on the ground as a support person and to keep the various ropes and lines from becoming intertwined.

18. And, if you insist on solo climbing...! Solo climbers face extra risks when they go into the woods alone, but there are ways to minimize those risks. When you go aloft in a tree, make sure you have a figure-8 or a rescue descender (or a rack), a mechanical ascender such as a Jumar or Ropeman, and a 12- to 15-foot safety strap that you can use to tie off with if your rope gets hopelessly tangled beneath you. You will then be able to climb back to a safe limb, tie off with the safety strap, untie the knot system, reset for a single-rope system, and safely make an emergency descent to the ground. Sure, you might have to go back later with another rope to get your first one out of the tree, but it's better than hanging around up there for days while you wait for a forest ranger to stroll by.

=====

Posted by Ponderosa - 09/25/2005 08:44pm

Thank you Patty, for opening up this discussion. A while back, I tried to collect some preliminary standards that were being used by some of us. You can view them on this site([click here](#)). I welcome any feedback.

-Harv
Tree Climbing Colorado

=====

Posted by Electrojake - 09/25/2005 11:09pm

Great idea putting standards info all in one thread.

This is what we rec climbers need.

A standard to follow and more importantly a method of justifying our presence in the tree. An "authorization" to be climbing in the first place.

My TCI membership card is cute but it needs to carry more weight. Like a firearms permit or a hunting license. When Mr. Ranger calls me down I need something, anything, that lets him know I'm legitimate.

Additionally...

The Tim Kovar brochure idea sounds like a good way for me to let others know that I'm not just a nut-case in the woods but actually a part of an informed, organized group of outdoorsmen that have the ultimate respect for the forest and my surroundings.

The sport is growing at it's own awkward pace and that's just dandy but it needs to be legitimized early in the game.

Fact: New Jersey has recently had its State Park bi-laws amended to permit climbing in State Parks. This includes roped climbing and bouldering. Sorry to say folks but it only addresses ROCK climbing not tree climbing. :(

So is it understandable why I get aggravated at the fact that I have to use Ninja tactics to gently, safely, and peacefully climb a tree in the very same park that openly allows rock climbing!?! <go figure>

Thank You for creating this thread, I will not be offended if you move my post to the complaints section... I understand. :)

Electrojake

=====

Posted by Tom Dunlap - 09/26/2005 08:10am

Just a thought on wordsmithing.

Standards, by part of the above definition, come from an authority. Along with the authority to set the standard comes the responsibility to enforce the standard. Is this what we're looking for?

Who is going to take the responsibility to enforce?

Maybe it would be better to think along the lines of guidelines or ethics like other disciplines have.

=====

Guidelines

Posted by Treeman - 09/26/2005 11:36am

We are looking more for wilderness guidelines in this discussion here. They would be on a voluntary footing too.

Policing is a different issue. This implies rules and punishment. Do you know of policing efforts in the rock climbing or mountaineering arena? I never knew of such actions when I was a rock climber in the Rocky Mountains. Possibly there is now. Does anyone know more about this issue of enforcement and rules? We could start a thread on this topic.

Here are the guidelines we print on the back of the TCI membership card:

Protect Yourself and the Trees You Climb!

- Get training from a qualified instructor!
- Never climb near power lines!
- Always stay "on rope."
- Always wear a helmet.
- Do not climb a tree that shows signs of weakness.
- Never use leg spikes.
- Avoid nesting sites of all animals and insects.
- Avoid trampling ground cover.

These are more tuned to safety practices (standards). Safety and technique standards are large discussions in and of themselves which we can discuss--they will be broken out into separate threads as they arise.

=====

Posted by charlieb - 09/26/2005 11:56pm

Standards don't necessarily imply being established by authority only. That's only part of the definition. They can also be established by them being "widely recognized because of their excellence." Therefore if not established by an authority, but yet established nonetheless by being widely recognized, then there would be no enforcement of them necessary by a particular body or person. So that, for example, there are many practices, which have become standards since they are better, or more efficient or are safer than others and the enforcement of them is not necessary, but rather natural or preferable because they keep you safer or make you more efficient.

A good example would be the use of good safety practices, such as the "widely recognized standard" that a climber should have two points of contact with the rope at or above the waist at all times." The enforcement of this, is the natural dire consequences of the loss of life or limb, which could occur if not utilized.

So YES, there are many practices that have become standards, eventhough not established by any authority, but because of their sensibility and natural consequences.

I believe as we keep experimenting and sharing and developing, that many more standards could surface from the interaction of ideas among groups and members to improve our tree climbing culture.

=====

Posted by Jim W - 09/27/2005 11:17am

We had a most interesting discussion about standards and training well over a year ago. See [TCI Training and Standards discussion](#)

=====

Standards Development

Posted by Oldtimer - 09/27/2005 05:30pm

I would like to suggest than the basic rules of Ethics/Standards be fairly basic in nature, similar to the "Leave No Trace" Standards or basically what has already been put together in several postings here or in the TCC site. We do not want to take care of every possible scenario since there are potentially thousands of diverse situations that require further refinement to cover that small universe.

The ideas presented by Peter J and many of the TCI educators are fairly comprehensive and should be sufficient. Since these Rules of Ethics and Standards are mostly voluntary in nature (Since TCI and TCC do not have enforcement power) it is up to the climbers and his group to follow them to the best possible in order to maintain the good name of the Organization and the RTC community in general. Making them easy to learn and to follow will make them easy to become the Standard that we all hope for.

=====

Good Points All

Posted by Icabod - 09/28/2005 12:24pm

Lots of these discussions are old, but they do bear repeating.

I too once desired a card that carried more power. But I have come to realise that only by wide recognition of our sport will there ever be any weight to throw around, regardless of the organization that issued the card. So promotion is an important aspect of what we, the pioneers of our sport, must be prepared to do.

We at TCNC follow a practice of don't draw attention. Ninja, is perhaps too strong a term, but we are definitely don't ask don't tell. By following the guidelines set out above we will keep the officials friendly. Except for my bright red helmet I follow the blend in policy. When climbing in the wilderness, consider yourself one of the critters. You belong in the tree as much as the colony of ants, the owl, and the lizards, but follow their example, BLEND IN.

I also only climb on public property, or private property that I own or have WRITTEN permission to use. The more places you can document that you climb safely, the better your chances of being allowed to climb some place new.

I think the next big thing will be personal insurance, liability especially. I know of several places that would give me carte blanche if I was able to back up my claim that I don't plan on, and can handle it if I do, kill someone. An organization that wants to promote and publish standards should be prepared to also work to provide a group policy, perhaps we can get that in the not too distant future.

Another thing that would be FANTASTIC as far as standards would to have waivers, legal forms, examined by licensed lawyers of each state, that could be provided to participants or to property owners.

That's just my two cents. I hope at least some of these points are new.

Climb Safe!
Icabod

Posted by Electrojake - 09/28/2005 12:41pm

So then, the mission is for this group of professionals (you guys) in the discipline of recreational tree climbing, to present an intelligent and purposeful standard.

It would make sense to use ANSI Z133.1 as the template.

It would make sense for a "volunteer" to start out with Z133, scan the entire thing in to a .doc, .pdf, or other workable format, redistribute it to the members of the standards committee so they can strip out all the paragraphs that DO NOT apply to recreational climbing...

(we can probably get rid of about 85% of what's in Z133 right off the top).

After the strip-out, the committee members email the entire mess back to the secretary, who at which time will tidy it up and send it back out for the next draft.

It would be at this point in time that the committee members would begin to submit what paragraphs will be injected into the stripped-out template in order to begin the creation of the "Recreational" standard.

Seems the sooner you guys & gals start working with hard-copy, the sooner it will become a reality.

By the way, it took 5 years to put together the original ANSI Z133 standard. (good luck boys)

Yes, No, Comments, Volunteers, Committee selection, Quit your day job?

Posted by charlieb - 09/28/2005 11:02pm

I concur with EJ, since we need a good starting point. Then we can submit this doc. to the Accepted Practices review committee, as Icabod suggested, since this invokes innovative ideas being submitted to the committee for the doc. to be developed.

I dunno

Posted by Icabod - 09/29/2005 12:48pm

The ansi standards were written, and correct me if I'm wrong, by insurance men in conjunction with industry representatives. The goal is to reduce financial impact on the insurance companies, not make climbing more efficient or innovative. It has made the industry safer, but also much more expensive. I used to rap on horrible rope, using ascenders as a rope grab, on a screw gate biner, all that changed (thank God) with better standards, but I also had an OSHA representative on my site with a tape rule measuring my bosuns seat, what would a 1/4 of an inch off spec hurt? One of our guys was fined for it though. Lots of good stuff there, but not necessarily required. Triple action 'biners for example. Personally I wont climb on anything but (after a bad experience with a screw gate) but you couldnt get my friend to climb on one even if you held a gun to his head.

Minimum rope construction is a good point, harness required a good point, but beyond that, ANSI style standards will be a stretch.

Icabod

Posted by Electrojake - 09/29/2005 03:06pm

We have to start somewhere. The ANSI document I speak of is merely the template for our efforts. I suggested Z133.1 since at least some of it would indeed apply to recreational climbing.

When trying to hammer out a standard the hierarchy of headings, paragraphs, and sub-parts is very helpful in keeping things focused, one issue at a time.

Once the first draft is roughed-out, printed into hard copy, and mailed out to the standards committee members for comment and review, things will start to move forward.

It will be tricky to stay focused on developing a standard, not a club-members rule book.

Comments, criticisms, opinions, welcomed.

Use of "Standards"

Posted by Patrick - 09/29/2005 11:58pm

I think that trying to establish what recreational tree climbing "is" (and maybe what it "is not") is a good idea. I think that an organized presentation of what RTC is all about will help more clearly define the sport. That should help a variety of groups: newcomers to know more about what they are getting into; the media to present us in an accurate way; public authorities to know that RTC is a legitimate and safe activity. It should also help guide what we as climbers do, too. When I talk to a ranger at some park (local, state, or Federal), it would be helpful to be able to refer to the document and say, "Here is a well-thought out explanation of what I'm doing."

I think we need to be careful, however, not to be too restrictive when our community makes the standards (or guidelines, or whatever we decide to call them). The standards need to be specific enough to be clear about what we do, but not overly defined so that they don't limit innovation or safe variations of how to do things.

Patrick

=====

On the money

Posted by moss - 09/30/2005 09:19am

I think Patrick has it right. This might be designed in part as a "pocket presentation". Effective communication is important, an overly legalistic or lengthy document would not be useful when you're standing with a ranger in the woods.

=====

Posted by Electrojake - 09/30/2005 09:48am

These guys bring up a good point. One size fits all... Not.

Perhaps a standard is NOT what is actually needed here.

I will freely admit that a standard is not a friendly document.

Icabod did infer to this too. If we do create a standard, it will be the first thing the lawyers & insurance companies go to in the event of a rec-climbing "incident", (which is not necessarily a bad thing).

The pro-climbers amongst us have compiled the required info many times over. It would seem the question is: What do we actually want to do with that data?

A cold hard standard?

A brochure of accepted rec-climbing conduct?

The data is all here... How do you want it packaged?

Let TCI and the other established "www.TCwhatever.com" advocates hand down the decision on exactly what it is we are to publish here. Is this to be a legal document, a public relations gem, or general rules of conduct?

Make the call. Post the decision. Move us forward.

FYI: In case anyone missed it, Ponderosa shows an outstanding document on TC-Colorado at:

<http://www.treeclimbingco.com/standards.html>

=====

Posted by Tom Dunlap - 10/01/2005 01:38am

The Z was not written by insurance agents. The committee is made up of arborist industry professionals. All volunteers. There is no support money from ANSI for getting to the two annual face to face meetings. The meetings are open to anyone but membership needs to be voted on. From what I've seen, no one has ever been voted down for membership.

There are many good things in the Z that could become part of a RTC guideline. Double locking biners is one item that should be standard for any tree climbing.

=====

What are we working on?

Posted by Patty Jenkins - 10/01/2005 10:32am

In response to EJ's question, "Is this to be a legal document, a public relations gem, or general rules of conduct?":

Our intention at the start of this conversation was simply to come up with a set of GUIDELINES--suggested general rules of conduct for use of the forest by recreational climbers. Since Wild Bill's document (printed at the start of this discussion) would be updated here by the climbing community (at least those who participate on our message board) who are very knowledgeable about and deeply care about ethical use of the forest, I already assume that our final product will be a "gem" for public relations. I envision it appearing on every RTC website, and a summary of it used in a

general brochure about tree climbing and/or as "talking points" for the general public, the media, and park authorities, rangers, etc. I certainly would publish it in TREE CLIMBING ONLINE, and we can ask Sherrill, New Tribe, and other retailers of climbing gear to publish it on their websites and in their catalogs.

We can also create a SEPARATE set of safety guidelines for recreational climbing technique and gear (such as double-locking biners, as Tom suggests). These will be "climbing standards" that have become established in practice because they've been proven to be safe by recreational climbers over a period of many years. I envision this set of guidelines being published alongside of the forest use guidelines.

I hope this helps clarify things.

Climb safe!
Patty

Thanks

Posted by Icabod - 10/03/2005 01:26pm

Thanks for the clarification Tom. I am somewhat pessimistic about standards, due to the fact that I work in the building trades (residential design). I am constantly seeing poorly thought out changes in building codes costing people money, and causing confusion. I've never seen though a building code COST someone thier LIFE, so perhaps the time is right for us to clearly tell people what we expect to be standard practice, after all it won't kill anyone, and not doing so may contributor to getting a poorly informed soul killed.

That said I'm excited that we could possibly produce a document that will provide minimum accepted standards, and prohibit certain activities. I would say too that I'd like to see this all presented in a manner that does not limit new technology, or advacement, which I'd also love to be a part of evaluating.

I'll be glad to take part, if you guys would have me. I'll be glad also to post a copy of the final document at my site, for those who would visit.

Climb Safe!
Icabod

Posted by SRT-Tech - 09/28/2006 01:57am

stadards are great, but unfortunately your standards (ANSI) are for the USA only....Canada does not recognize ANSI in any way shape or form.....

food for thought.

Civilized Intelligent Governments

Posted by Icabod - 10/01/2006 08:33pm

...such as that of the Canadian people do not, however, allow the workplace to be run without rules and oversight to prevent employers that operate within their borders to neglect the safety of the citizens that form the workforce.

Since you are a Canadian, perhaps you should share your knowledge of similar documents (perhaps those authored by the CCOHS), instead of suggesting that we should dump any consideration of ANSI documents because you, and/or your government do not recognize them.

The idea of this thread, despite how it may have been read by some, was to provide information that might add to the safety awareness of the participants of our sport, not to spur uproar, cause division, or to create a Constitution by which this activity could be policed.

In my opinion, it is a shame that this topic went greatly by the wayside. I still believe that this and other boards contain all the information needed to build such a guideline, because most of us love the activity, and the other participants, enough to give the answers that might prevent disaster. I grew tired of the topic, because SO MANY decided to add only pessimism. I realise that we are independent souls, and that has driven the furor. That said, I also understand that some of the paranoia might have not been totally warrantless. I have recognized, though, that no one can control anothers actions, but we can control our own. Many have mentioned the SCUBA "governments". That is the way of our world though, and we do have to power to control out destiny. We can either provide a clear set of MINIMUM safety standards, or we can allow participants in dangerous activities to be labeled "Recreational Treeclimbers" and let one of them drag us into the muck by getting himself killed. I say if you don't meet the minimum standards (which haven't even yet been clearly defined) then you are not really a part of the activity, but some other activity. Perhaps the Accepted Practices name should be considered a definition of what we are.

I also highly suggest that we limit the negative, unproductive comments in the "Tree Climbing Standards" threads, so that we can continue to move in a positive direction, instead of descending into negativity. The motives and desires of those involved have been questioned long enough.

Climb Safe!
Icabod

=====

Re:Civilized Intelligent Governments

Posted by Baker - 08/20/2008 08:51pm

As I was reading some of the older posts on the forum, I found this discussion quite interesting.

My only comment is one that I make when teaching Leave No Trace Principals...and I try very hard to live by every day.

"Rules are things that people follow when someone is watching. Principals (ethics) are the things you do when NO ONE is watching.

My \$.02

=====

Re:Civilized Intelligent Governments

Posted by oldtimer - 08/21/2008 05:18pm

Baker wrote:

As I was reading some of the older posts on the forum, I found this discussion quite interesting.

I did the same after your posting and I can see that I have forgotten how heated all these discussions got a couple of years back and how everyone now tries to stay away from even mentioning the word "S-----d". It is kind of funny how silly that whole event was but that is the way we behave on line -- I guess. :blush: