

Defaced petroglyphs force rock climbers to reckon with sport's destructive past

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Richard Gilbert claims he had no idea he was doing anything wrong when he drilled bolts into a rock wall in Utah to establish three new climbing routes, illegally defacing a 1,000-year-old Indigenous cultural site.

Climbers know the rock Gilbert bolted as Sunshine Wall, a crag north of Moab and Arches national park hosting the centuries-old petroglyphs of the Fremont people. Gilbert has said he didn't realize the carvings' significance, even though most climbers make it a point never to disturb Indigenous cultural sites.



“It was horrible to see,” said Skye Kolealani Razon-Olds, executive director of Kanaka Climbers, a Native Hawaiian climbing group, about the bolts. Razon-Olds noted that climbing on petroglyphs had been a problem in Hawaii for more than a decade. The recent news from Utah “hurt me as an Indigenous person”, she added, “knowing how much pain other Indigenous people would feel from seeing that”.

Even as it continues to grow in popularity, there is little recognition that climbing, like much outdoor recreation in the US, depends on land stolen from Native peoples, Native climbers say.

“The United States is unique in the fact that we have so much public land, national parks, national monuments,” said Angelo Baca, a climber and cultural resources coordinator for Utah Diné Bikéyah, a non-profit working to protect Indigenous communities' lands. “It's important to understand that it comes at a great price. Dispossession and removal of our Indigenous communities from these places has never been acknowledged or rectified.”

The 2014 documentary *Valley Uprising*, for example, chronicles the early days of sport climbing in the 1950s and 60s in California's Yosemite national park, as well as the vagabonds who flocked to its awe-inspiring granite faces. Among the climbers glorified in the film are Yvon Chouinard, founder of Patagonia; Royal Robbins; and Robbins' rival Warren Harding, whose aggressive climbing style relied on hammering pitons into the bare rock. The park's lore continues in popular culture thanks to films like *Free Solo*, the Oscar-winning documentary about Alex Honnold's ropeless ascent of El Capitan.

None of these films recognize the park's creation history, including the state-sanctioned Mariposa Battalion's systematic burning of Native villages and food stores, displacing families from their homes.

Learning history like this, Razon-Olds and Baca said, is the first step non-Native people in the outdoors should take.

Just last week, another historic petroglyph near Moab, the Ute-era Birthing Scene rock, was found vandalized with violent, racist language. Baca said the act was part of continued brutality against Indigenous people.

Although it is unclear who is responsible, Baca said climbers who wanted to confront this anti-Native violence must consider protecting sacred art as more than just a way to maintain access to their favorite crags.

“If climbers really want to up their game, they have to pick up this not just as good climbing protocol, but as a way to enact restorative and social justice,” said Baca. “Climbers are especially sensitive and aware of the environment and its changes, and because they develop that relationship with the land, they should become guardians and protectors of it too.”