

A NEW PLAN FOR HYALITE CANYON

EMILY STIFLER

MONTANA ICE CLIMBERS WERE GRIPPED: the Gallatin National Forest's 2007 travel plan called for closing and gating the access road to Hyalite Canyon's world-class ice climbing. The new plan was a drastic 180 from the previous draft, which proposed plowing the road to the trailhead. Would ice climbers lose access to their favorite backyard alpine playground?

With leadership from the Southwestern Montana Climbing Coalition (SMCC) board and the Access Fund, dedicated local climbers pooled their resources and put their heads down. They had to work this out. Hyalite has arguably the best access to high-quality vertical ice in the lower 48.

HYALITE HAS ARGUABLY THE BEST ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY VERTICAL ICE IN THE LOWER 48.

Over the following three months, a group of climbers, led by SMCC board members Joe Josephson and Bill Dockins, met with multiple user groups including backcountry skiers, local and federal government representatives, environmentalists and advocates of motorized access. Together, they developed a coalition, and have since met with Rebecca Heath, the regional Forest Supervisor. Heath, who had previously been hard-set in her plan of gating the road, agreed to work with this coalition on a seasonal basis to determine when the road will be closed.

As a result of these recent efforts, the Forest Service proposed a new plan that acknowledges the unique non-motorized recreational assets of Hyalite and allows the community to be directly involved in the creation of a management plan for the road during the winter season. This latest proposal includes a long-term goal of plowing at least ten out of the 12 miles of the Hyalite road and will explore designation of Hyalite Canyon as a Public or National Recreation Area.

Currently, the SMCC is organizing the coalition to work with the Forest Service on development of road standards. "Things are moving forward," says Bill Dockins, SMCC board member. The statute of limitations for filing petitions for judicial review of the travel management plan allows several years to work toward improved access for climbers so "as long productive discussions aimed at solving the access issues are ongoing, and as long as the Forest Service is working with us in good faith, we won't file the appeal," Dockins says. He says climbers would like to get a plan in place before November of 2007.

This process of keeping and improving access to ice climbing in Hyalite is dependent on the support of the climbing community, both in the Bozeman area and nationally. Road improvement, plowing and recreational status, and administrative and legal work will all depend on political and financial backing. Local fundraisers, outdoor stores and national companies have all helped fund the process so far. The Access Fund and the Gallatin County and Bozeman City Commissions have provided leadership and facilitated communication and negotiation.

By working together with diverse local and national user groups on Hyalite Canyon access, SMCC is also setting a great example for how communities of the modern West can develop uncommon alliances to achieve common goals.

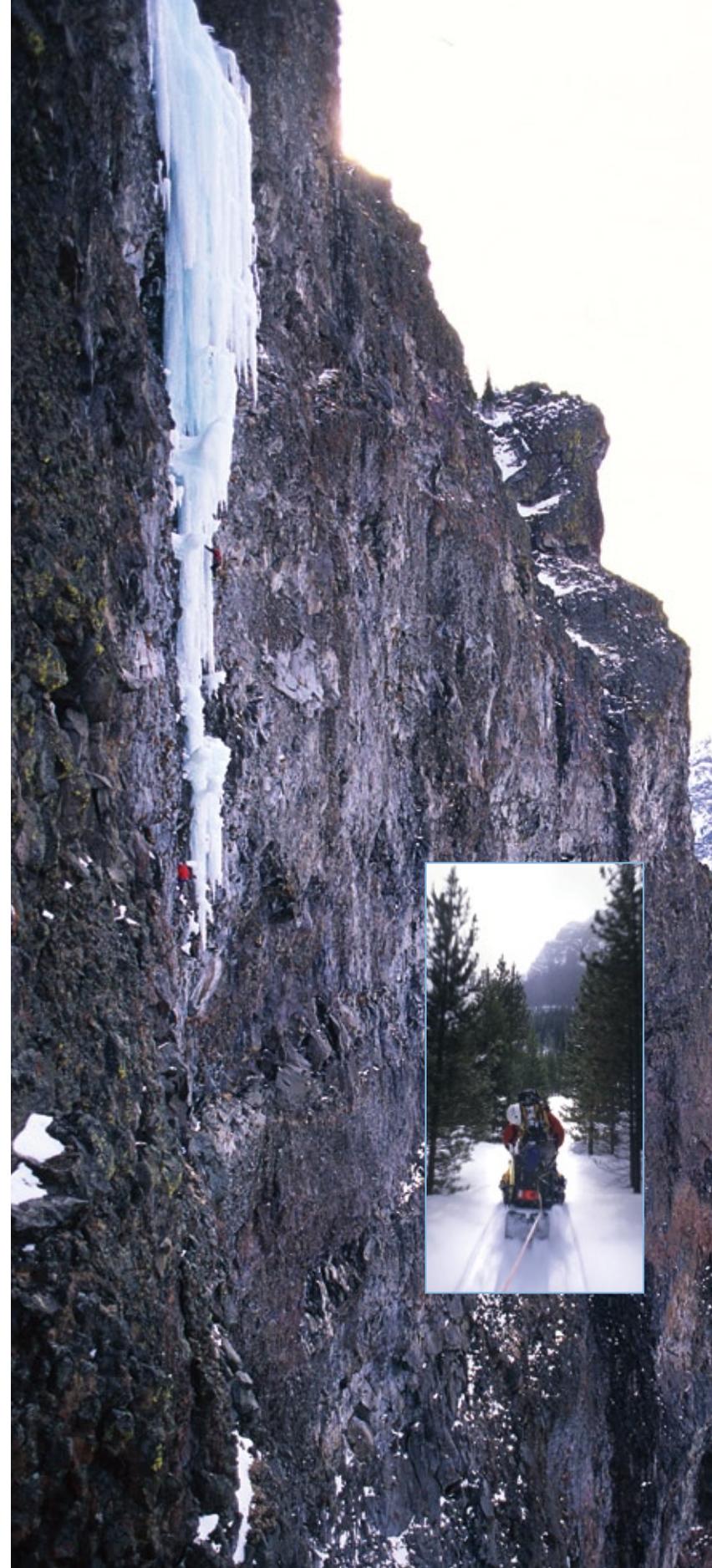
To find out more about Hyalite Canyon, Montana, go to www.hyalitecanyon.com

...DEDICATED LOCAL CLIMBERS POOLED THEIR RESOURCES AND PUT THEIR HEADS DOWN. THEY HAD TO WORK THIS OUT.



What can you do to keep Hyalite Canyon accessible to ice climbers? Write your Congressmen asking for support of the Montana delegation and the efforts of their constituency to provide funding to keep the road open in winter. Visit the League of Conservation Voters' website at www.lcv.org to find the best way to contact your elected representatives.

Emily Stifler is a writer, climber and ski patroller based in Bozeman, Montana. Her articles have been in a variety of publications, including Rock and Ice, Powder and Alpinist. This year she climbed her first El Cap route and got her first cubicle as an intern at Rock and Ice.



© (inset) When the road snows in your only option to ice climb is via the snow machine. (left) The late Alex Lowe and Vera Wong on the canyon's most spectacular Winter Dance. © KRISTOFFER ERICKSON

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