
Decision Case: “The Towering Dilemma”

Late in 1994, Deborah Liggett faced a towering dilemma. Deborah was superintendent of Devils Tower National Monument in northeastern Wyoming, and for almost two years, she and her coworkers had been trying to find a way to manage the conflicting uses of the monument. To many casual tourists, Devils Tower is best known as the backdrop for the popular 1970s film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Rising 867 feet above the surrounding landscape, Devils Tower is thought by geologists to be an isolated monolith from an ancient volcanic core. Established as the nation’s first national monument in 1906, Devils Tower now attracts nearly 500,000 people annually to camp, picnic, hike, climb—and pray.

“We’ve known for a long time that climbing on the tower was offensive to American Indians,” stated Deborah. “Devils Tower is the only area [in the Park system] where the most significant issue is traditional cultural use in conflict with recreational use.” In 1992, the National Park Service (NPS) began an environmental assessment that led to development of a management plan to “preserve and protect the monument’s natural and cultural resources for present and future generations.” Key to this effort was a need to increase understanding between two of the monument’s principal users—rock climbers and American Indians—each of whom saw Devils Tower very differently.

Indian Perceptions and Use

For American Indian tribes in the Northern Plains region, the explanation for the origin and significance of Devils Tower is much different from that of modern geologists. Traditional tribal cultures of the region regard Devils Tower as having a supernatural origin. For example, the Crow people believe that Devils Tower was “put there by the Great Spirit for a special reason, because it was different from other rocks.” Another narrative attributes the origin of Devils Tower to an encounter between seven small girls and a large bear. When the bear chased the girls and was about to overtake them, the girls jumped onto a flat rock and prayed for the rock to help them. The rock responded by elongating upwards, taking the girls out of the reach of the bear. In its frustration, the bear clawed at the sides of the rock, creating the cracks that are a characteristic feature of the tower today.

The Lakota Sioux maintain that their people have an ancient and sacred relationship with Devils Tower and the nearby Black Hills, which they believe was their place of creation. One Lakota wrote, “Those who use the butte to pray become stronger. They gain knowledge from the spirits that helps us preserve our Lakota culture and way of life.” Because of its cultural significance, Devils Tower is considered eligible for listing on the National Register of Traditional Cultural Property.

Thus, to American Indians, the tower long has been regarded as a spiritual place and a pilgrimage destination. People from as many as 20 tribes gather at the site annually for prayer offerings, spiritual dances, vision quests, and sweat lodge ceremonies. One of the monument’s archaeological sites is a shelter made of stone and wood, which is thought to have been used long ago for such vision quests and ceremonies.

Rock Climber Perceptions and Use

For climbers, Devils Tower is one of the premier destinations in North America. Since it was first climbed in 1893, the fame of Devils Tower as a technical climbing site has grown. The director of a national climbers advocacy organization once stated, “It [Devils Tower] is nationally, if not internationally, significant. It is recognized as one of the premier crack climbing areas in America.” Records of climbs have been kept since 1937 and show that in recent years more than 6,000 climbers have scaled the tower annually. There are almost 220 climbing routes charted. Climbing involves teamwork and individual effort, and some even describe it as a “spiritual” experience. Climbing also calls for individual courage and self-confidence. The climbing “season” at Devils Tower usually runs from spring through early fall, although climbs have been made in all months of the year. About two thirds of the climbers choose routes that do not reach the summit, emphasizing that it is the technical challenge, not necessarily the destination, that is important to many climbers. Eighty percent of the climbs occur on only 23 of the

routes. In 1994, there were seven commercial climbing guide companies operating in the monument under NPS licenses that depended on climbing activities at the monument for their economic well-being.

Controversy

As the number of climbers grew, Indians in the region became increasingly angry at what they considered desecration of the tower by climbers, as seen in the words of one Indian woman from South Dakota:

A group of elders would be telling the children about honor and respect, and we could hear the climbers [on the tower] being very loud, using real profane English, real vulgar language. And the children are looking up and saying, "How come he gets to say things like that when you're telling us to respect the tower?"

Some also disapproved of the climbers' practice of driving metal bolts and pitons into the tower to assist with climbing. They felt that this practice, which had grown as new climbing routes were established in the 1980s and 1990s, also adversely affected the spiritual quality of the site. Approximately 600 bolts and several hundred pitons had been driven into the rock by the mid-1990s.

Environmental Concerns

Naturalists consider Devils Tower National Monument part of a significant ecoregion, where mountain and plains species of plants and animals coexist. More than 450 plant species, 200 vertebrate species, and 550 insect species have been documented, including falcons, white-tailed deer, and prairie dogs. Some expressed concern that increasing use of the tower by climbers would destroy or disrupt the natural qualities of the tower. Although the tower was not known to be a habitat for endangered species in 1994, there were concerns that larger numbers of climbers and climbing routes would destroy vegetation, increase erosion, and lessen the tower's capacity to serve as suitable wildlife habitat. Of special concern was the negative effect that climbing could have on nesting raptors.

Management Plan Alternatives

In response to the many climbing issues at Devils Tower, the NPS prepared a Draft Climbing Management Plan. This plan presented six management alternatives:

1. Allow unlimited climbing and bolting year-round.
2. Continue current monument climbing management policies and restrictions.
3. Phase in a voluntary closure of the tower to climbing during June, a time that was deemed significant because of use of the tower by Indians for ceremonies around the summer solstice. The June closure would become fully implemented in 1997. Regulated new bolting would be allowed. Close climbing routes within 50 meters of nesting raptors.
4. Impose voluntary June closure to climbing in 1995 with a ban on new bolt placements (replacement of existing bolts or pitons would be permitted). Climbing routes would be closed within 50 meters of nesting raptors.
5. Mandate a June closure of the tower to climbing, beginning in 1995, with no new or replacement bolting permitted.
6. Indefinitely close the tower to all climbing year-round, beginning in 1995. All bolts would be removed from the tower, and trails to and on the tower would be rehabilitated to a more natural condition.

Approximately 1,200 copies of the plan were distributed to the public for comment during the period from July through November 1994. A total of 286 letters and two petitions were received. During the public comment period, six public meetings also were held within the region and comments recorded. Substantive public comments from these letters and meetings are summarized in Exhibit 2.1.

The Decision

As 1994 drew to a close, Deborah Liggett had to decide what policy alternative the NPS would adopt.

Exhibit 2.1. Selected (Paraphrased) Responses Received by the National Park Service During the Public Comment Period Following Release of the Draft Climbing Management Plan in July 1994

A. Area of Closure and Scope of Closure of the Tower

- There are no alternatives to climbing at Devils Tower because there is no way to walk to the top. This is the only place in the region where this type of climbing is possible.
- Conflicts between climbers and Indians will decrease without climbing restrictions if there is an education program. A cross-cultural education program should be tried before imposing any closures.
- A June closure will lead to more conflict between climbers and Indians, not less.
- Any closure should be for everyone.
- If June is closed, there should be specific language in the plan ensuring that the tower is open for the other 11 months in the future.
- Close the tower during a winter month, not June.
- An option should have been given to close the tower for two to six months (not just one).
- Shorten the closure period. The June closure should be intermittent, only a few days per week.
- Any climbing closure should be exempted for Indians who climb for spiritual purposes.
- A voluntary closure with a threat of mandatory closure is not an equitable attempt at mediating the competing interests. A voluntary closure is not voluntary if there is a threat that it will become mandatory.

B. Bolting and Pitons

- The final plan should make it clear that noncompliance with bolting restrictions would lead to tighter restrictions.
- The National Park Service is making sport climbing more dangerous by restricting bolting. Bolting is needed to make new climbing routes safe.
- For climbers' safety, the replacement of existing bolts (and fixed pitons) should continue.
- Climbers are still predrilling holes in the tower. This is an illegal activity now, although holes predrilled before summer of 1994 were legal.
- There has been insufficient damage to the rock to warrant banning bolting. . . . There is no documented evidence that bolting affects the rock.
- Asphalting the Tower Trail was done for tourist convenience. It affects the tower more than bolts do.

C. Wildlife Considerations

- There is no basis for claiming that limiting March and April climbing levels will protect raptors.
- Significant evidence suggests that raptors need only a 100-foot radius of protection. There is no basis for establishing a 50-meter limit. Raptor closures should be based on the visibility of climbers, not fixed distances.
- A raptor expert should determine if 50 or 100 meters is enough. Fifty meters should be a minimum. . . Expand the closure distance if needed.
- None of the birds nesting at the tower is rare or endangered, so the degree of protection proposed is excessive.
- Peregrine falcons should be reintroduced to the tower.

D. Cultural Perspectives and Significance

- There is no archaeological evidence that the tower was a sacred site in historic times. The sacred nature of the tower is of modern origin. Rock climber use is older than Indian ceremonial use at the tower.
- Climbing does not desecrate sacred ground.
- There is nothing sacred about Devils Tower—it is only an extinct volcano.
- Devils Tower is culturally significant not only to Indians, but climbers too. Some alternatives in the plan ignore the rights of climbers.
- People like watching climbers on the tower. It is a positive, not negative, impact.
- Closure will affect small businesses in the region adversely. The economic effect (of a closure) is downplayed along with the impact to climbing guides and outfitters.
- Devils Tower is a place to pray, not for sightseeing or sporting events.
- The Devils Tower area should be designated a historic district.
- Indians should perform their ceremonies during the winter when there are few tourists and fewer climbers.
- The National Park Service should give the Indians someplace else to worship.
- Closure in deference to one ethnic group will lead to closures for other ethnic groups.
- The 1868 Treaty is still intact through the precepts of U.S. Treaty law. Devils Tower National Monument is Indian land.
- You can't close public land for religious purposes. Closure is unconstitutional and sets a legal precedent challenging the First Amendment.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This case was written by Steve Simmons and Tammy Dunrud. It is part of the database of cases available through the Clearinghouse for Decision Case Education at the University of Minnesota. Source: Hachen, D. S. Jr. (2001). *Sociology in Action: Cases for Critical and Sociological Thinking*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, pp. 53–60.

Step 1: The Actors

1.1 Who are the actors involved in this conflict? List all the groups and individuals mentioned in the case.

Actor	Type (individual / group / institution / business)	What do they want?

Step 2: The Problem

2.1 Describe the problem in one or two sentences. What is happening, and why is it a problem?

2.2 When did the problem become visible? What event or process made the conflict emerge?

2.3 Is this a new problem, or does it have deep historical roots? If it has roots, how far back do they go?

Step 3: The Object of Contention

3.1 What is the physical object at the centre of this conflict? Describe it briefly as a geologist would.

3.2 Now list all the different meanings that different actors attribute to this same object. Fill in the table below.

For whom?	Devils Tower is...	The value at stake
American Indians		
Rock climbers		
Naturalists		
Commercial guides		
Tourists		
The NPS		

3.3 Are these meanings compatible? Can they coexist in the same place at the same time? If not, where exactly do they clash?

Step 4: Organisations and Institutions

Institutions are the formal and informal rules that structure social life. Organisations are the concrete bodies that enact those rules. In an environmental conflict, institutions are never neutral: they were created by someone, for some purpose, and they tend to favour some interests over others.

4.1 List the organisations and institutions present in this case. For each one, describe its role and whose interests it tends to serve.

Organisation / Institution	Role in the conflict	Whose interests does it tend to serve?
National Park Service (NPS)		
Commercial climbing guide companies		
Climbing advocacy organisations		
Tribal councils / Indian organisations		
U.S. federal government / legal system		
National Register of Traditional Cultural Property		

Step 6: The Dilemma

5.1 In your own words, formulate Deborah’s dilemma. What is she being asked to choose between? Why can she not satisfy everyone?

5.2 Look at the six management alternatives. They range from Alternative 1 (unlimited access) to Alternative 6 (total closure). Place them on the spectrum below, and for each one, write who gains and who loses.

Alt.	Summary	Who gains?	Who loses?
1	Unlimited climbing and bolting year-round		
2	Continue current policies (no change)		
3	Phased voluntary June closure + regulated bolting		
4	Voluntary June closure + ban on new bolts		
5	Mandatory June closure + no bolting		
6	Total closure, remove all bolts, restore trails		

6.3 Is there a solution that does not require anyone to lose anything? If not, what does this tell us about the nature of environmental conflicts?
