

CLIFFH

**Who should pay for search-
Third in a series on our National Parks.**

by Jeff Wallach

The view is awesome. Though the sky above is overcast, you can see tree-tops in the valley below as you climb to the summit of a 3,600-meter peak. Suddenly, the wind starts to howl. Within minutes, you're caught in a blizzard, unable to see. Huddling against the rocky cliff, you bury your face in your parka. . . .

An hour later, still clinging to the icy granite, you hear the whup-whup-whup of a helicopter's blades. Like Sylvester Stallone in the movie *Cliffhanger*, someone has come to whisk you off the mountain. This must be your lucky day!

You might not feel so lucky, however, if a ranger from the National Park Service hands you a bill for \$10,000 to pay for the daring rescue. After all, the Park Service says, someone has to pay.

This scenario represents an extreme solution to the problem of who should pay for rescues in National Parks. Right now, we all pay a share—couch potatoes and hikers alike—because National Parks are run with taxpayers' money. But in real life, Park Service officials say they plan to make some "people who

**Should mountain
climbers pay
a fee to cover
search-and-rescue
costs in our
National Parks?**



If climbers pay the fee, it might save their lives. But hunters and fishermen should have to pay too.

Aaron Schwanke
Age 12
Houston, TX

ANGER

and-rescue costs in National Parks?

intentionally engage in high-risk recreation" pay more.

For example, beginning in 1995, all mountain climbers heading for Mount Rainier National Park's summit without a professional guide will have to pay a \$15 fee—just in case they need to be rescued. Alaska's Denali National Park may charge as much as \$200 per climber. Eventually, the fees may extend to other activities, Park Service spokespeople say. Though these fees may sound more reasonable than \$10,000, some climbers say they still aren't fair. Read opinions on both sides of the debate, then decide where you stand.

\$3 MILLION RESCUE

Each year, the National Park Service spends \$3 million on rescues. Most of the searches are for kids who wander from campgrounds, park officials say. But the expensive rescues—the ones that require leasing a \$300-an-hour high-altitude helicopter to pick "thrill-seekers" off snowy cliffs—are on the rise.

Such rescues use up limited Park Service funds. "Passing on a certain amount of the [financial] responsibility to climbers seems

reasonable," says Peter Whittaker, a climbing guide in Washington. Climbers, after all, are the ones who benefit from expensive rescues. In less "wild" rescue situations—when a city ambulance takes

a heart-attack victim to the hospital, say—the victim (or an insurance company) has to pay.

Others point out that the proposed fees are similar to fees charged for rafting permits in the Grand Canyon and campground fees charged at other parks. In many European countries, mountain climbers must purchase rescue insurance before receiving a climbing permit.

If fees are what's needed to keep the rescue program afloat, says recreational climber John Hayden, then he's ready to pay. "I'd sure want to know that I'm going to be rescued if I'm in trouble," he says.

But opponents of fees for "high-risk" activities say the payments may give climbers like Hayden a false sense of security. Knowing they will be rescued, "insured" climbers might take more risks—or start overusing rescue services.

That's a possibility, admits John Quinley, a spokesperson for Denali National Park. "You may be on a mountain and say to yourself, 'Why should I sit here with frostbitten toes when I can get a free ride down?'"

Some people also worry that the

fees could "invite" law suits against the Park Service. "If parks collect rescue fees, that creates a promise of rescue," says Jed Williamson, president of the American Alpine Club. It would be like a contract, he adds. Climbers who believe they should have been rescued but weren't—or who feel rescuers didn't arrive fast enough—might sue on the grounds that the Park Service didn't live up to its end of the deal.

UNFAIR?

But most opponents say the fees are simply unfair to climbers. "Why single out climbers when there's more [money] spent rescuing hunters, hikers, and fishermen?" asks Al Read, President of Exum School of Mountaineering in Jackson, Wyoming. In fact, only about 7 percent of search-and-rescue costs are spent on rescuing mountain climbers. Why not ask other groups to pitch in too?

Some experienced climbers, who claim they take adequate precautions and rarely need rescuing, are particularly opposed to the fees. Under the proposal, they would have to pay the same as an untrained, first-time park visitor who suddenly decides to climb a mountain in jeans and Nikes.

Do you think the proposed fee system is fair? Can you think of a better solution? ■

Should mountain climbers pay a fee?

Yes No

Why or why not?

Name _____

Give this ballot to your teacher for counting.



It's unfair to make people pay just to do an activity. It's the rangers' job to rescue people.

Terrance Leahy
Age 17
Portland, OR



Climbers should pay, because if something happens to them they would want to be rescued.

Brandye Clarke
Age 16
Florence, SC



If you're really experienced, you shouldn't have to pay the fee.

Jennifer Lui
Age 13
Magalia, CA

