WILDERNESS ETHICS
by Bill Maher

There has been a lot of discussion about wilderness tree climbing encounters with rangers and other law enforcement officials throughout the United States. Here is a list of wilderness ethics suggestions that we hope every climber will follow.

At the center of it all is the principle of respect – respect for the tree and wildlife, respect for other forest visitors, and respect for the rangers who have the often-difficult job of keeping it all clean and safe for everybody.

There is also a need to differentiate between the various kinds of federal and state-owned public lands where many of us climb.

The most restrictive areas for tree climbers are usually the national and state parks. National parks are run by the National Park Service, a branch of the Department of the Interior. Park Service rangers are primarily involved in providing large numbers of visitors with the opportunity to safely view nature up close. State parks generally have similar missions and are normally run by rangers with attitudes similar to their federal counterparts. Many of these parks have regulations which require that people stay on designated hiking trails and in designated areas. Any unusual activity (tree climbing is definitely one of those) is immediately stopped because the rangers fear it might harm someone or interfere with another visitor's enjoyment of the outdoors.

Less restrictive are national and state day-use historic sites, battlefields and monuments. On the federal level, these are also run by the National Park Service and are generally too small or too crowded for enjoyable tree climbing activities. The regulations at many of these sites are similar to those in national parks.

Next down the list are national and state wildlife refuges, where any activity that disturbs wildlife is generally discouraged. Nationally, these refuges are run by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This is a separate branch of the Department of the Interior, but it cooperates closely with the National Park Service and with the Agriculture Department's U.S. Forestry Service. Small groups of two to four people who climb in out-of-the-way areas likely would be ignored by rangers unless climbers become destructive or noisy, or pose a real or perceived threat to wildlife or other visitors. Many wildlife refuges have strict limits on the number of daily visitors.

The least restrictive areas for tree climbers are national and state forests. National forests are run by the U.S. Forest Service, a branch of the Department of Agriculture. State forests are usually run by the various forestry commissions in each state. The rangers are primarily involved in fire and pest protection for the trees, although some have been designated to work with hunters and other visitors to the forests.

There are two types of national forests, and tree climbers should be aware of their differences. The first is the kind that is managed for the normal production of timber and pulp. These areas are usually served by well-maintained logging roads and have generally loose regulations that allow a wide range of activities for visitors. Professional guides are allowed to lead groups into most national forests, and people are generally allowed to camp anywhere except in areas specifically posted for no camping. Many national forests are also managed as wildlife management areas for hunting.

The second type of national forest is the wilderness area. Most roads into wilderness areas have been closed off and allowed to grow up, motorized vehicles are prohibited, logging is not allowed, and commercial activities such as professional guide services are not allowed. Backcountry

camping is generally allowed except in areas specifically posted for no camping. Hunting is allowed in some wilderness areas on specific days or at specific times of the year.

State forests generally have rules and regulations similar to the national forests. We have found that most federal and state rangers usually get along very well with visitors who respect the regulations and the rights of other visitors.

Here are a few suggestions for wilderness climbers compiled from lists by the Sierra Club, the Nature Conservancy, the National Park Service, and U.S. Forestry Service, and various tree climbers.

1. Pack it in, pack it out! Do not leave even one piece of litter in the forest or at parking areas. In fact, tree climbers can score a few points with rangers by cleaning up the occasional mess left behind by previous visitors to the forest.

2. 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 tree climbers), follow existing trails when possible, and avoid trampling bushes and other undergrowth.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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 tree climbing. 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.

7. 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 that 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.

8. Obey any orders from a ranger! If he or she tells you to stop climbing in a tree or to 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 may 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.

9. 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 the exact longitude and latitude of the tree if possible and the telephone number for the ranger district office or the proper law enforcement agency.

10. 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, 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.

11. Always follow the rules for safe tree climbing! 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.

12. 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.