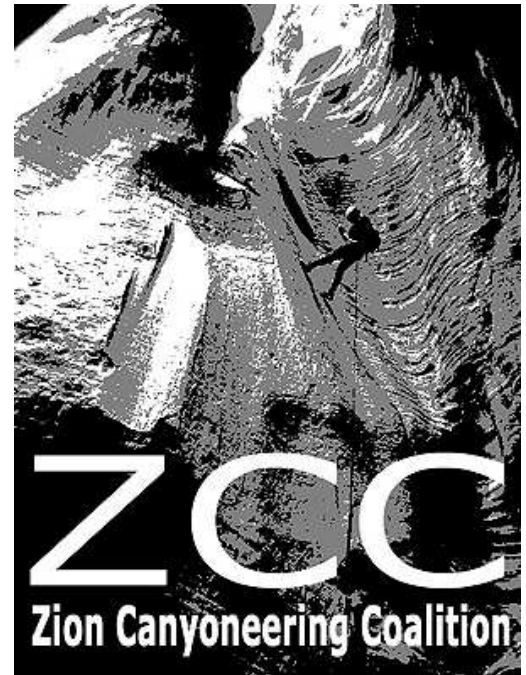


**Zion Canyoneering Social Trails Evaluation
September 29,30, 2005**

Participants:

Mark Hesse, Rocky Mountain Field Institute
Ray O'Neil, Zion National Park, Backcountry
Jill Woods, Zion National Park, Backcountry
Denise Louie, Zion National Park, Resources
Tom Jones, Zion Canyoneering Coalition

The Rocky Mountain Field Institute is an expert in building trails in difficult terrain, and especially trails that look rather 'natural', suitable for backcountry pristine wilderness areas. The ZCC invited Mark Hesse from the RMFI to come out and look at the problem trails with the Park staff, and two days of trail evaluation were arranged.



We met early in the morning and drove up to look at the exit from Spry as the first project. In addition to myself and Mark, our group included Ray and Jill from the Backcountry department in the Park, and who are working on the Backcountry Management Plan, and Denise Louie, a plant biologist charged with restoring disturbed places in the Park back to a natural state. Over two days, we looked at several problem areas:

1. Spry Canyon exit to Pine Creek

Spry became popular several years ago, and the indistinct climber trail up the sandpile became wide and deep with regular use. Backcountry posted signs advising people to stay in the watercourse for the exit last spring, and compliance has been good. However, the very wet winter and spring enlarged and deepened the social trails again, and just leaving them alone is not restoring them to a natural state.

This was the most technical discussion of the trip, and is a delicate restoration problem. Sending several people out on the sandpile to "restore" the trough would most likely just make it worse. Mark and Denise discussed a few different possibilities but no obvious solution presented itself.

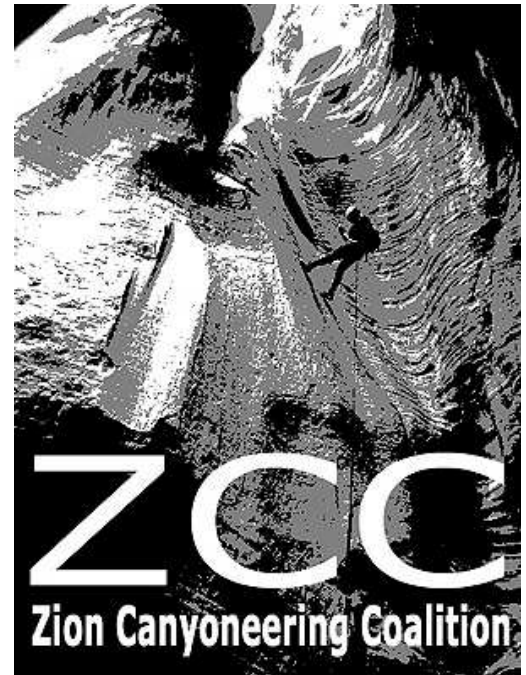
The trail is now closed, and canyoneers are encouraged to respect the closure. A few days later, some adjustments were made to the signs, to allow hiking around the Lamb's Tongue cliff half way down the exit route. This walk around stays all on hard surfaces, and allows people to NOT rap the Lamb's tongue if they would prefer not to.

2. Social trails at Pine Creek exit, second switchback, the "Swimming Hole"

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We next looked at the social trails coming up to the road above the Swimming Hole, the normal exit for canyoneers from Pine Creek. Four or five social trails leave the road and drop down into the woods. Some parts are steep in loose sand and badly eroded.

Mark and Denise agreed that this was a pretty "normal" social trail problem, and fairly straightforward to solve. This would involve some rockwork (retaining walls and steps) at the top, focusing of the braided trails and possible some rockwork at the bottom. The exact location of the rockwork at the top would probably best be left to the discretion of the rockwork supervisor. This project could break down well for volunteer projects, and is within the domain of work that can proceed without further authorization.



3. Social trails INTO Pine Creek, from Tunnel East

We spent a few minutes looking at the social trails that drop into Pine Creek from Tunnel East. The Tunnel East area has been scheduled for a substantial rebuilding this fall, and stabilizing a trail down to the creek from the parking lot will be included in the project. (This project has probably already taken place).

4. Social trails at the Keyhole Exit

Due to constant use, the area between the end of Keyhole leading up to the road is pretty chewed up. We discussed options here, and Mark figured out an all-slickrock path from the streambed up to the road that would require only a little bit of work to establish. The social trails out could be restored. Since this was an easy project, it was put high on the list for a volunteer project.

5. First Entrance to Keyhole

Next we looked at the first entrance to Keyhole. My take on it is that this entrance is only used by people retrieving their slings from the tree, or by those people who don't know that the Primary entrance is up the road a couple hundred feet. This trail is fairly small, and where it crests over into Keyhole is fairly eroded out (but not awful).

I have discussed with a few information-source authors about dropping the suggestion to go back and get the sling. I am in talks with a few concerned parties about adding a bolt anchor to the first rap in Keyhole, so that impacts on the tree can be reduced. I suggested closing off this first entrance, rather than trying to harden it. This was put high on the list of projects to take care off.

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6. Primary Entrance to Keyhole

We then went and looked at the main entrance to Keyhole. As expected, Mark's first impression was "impossible". We discussed and looked at various ways or routing traffic around the steep, sandy downclimb that gets people in, but nothing practical was found. Mark then took a closer look at the actual 'trail' down to the watercourse.

On further examination, maybe it is not so bad. Much of the downclimb is already down to bedrock, though it has unpleasant loose sand on it because sand bleeds off the adjacent eroded area. Mark suggested stabilizing the sandy area, then cleaning off the bedrock, and maybe sculpting the rock a bit to make the downclimb easier. Since this route is a backcountry downclimb into a technical canyon, the trail need not be brought to a "Class Two" standard, which makes the job much easier. Placing bolts at the top was suggested to provide an opportunity for a handline, for those who want it.

Conclusion: not a perfect solution, but workable.

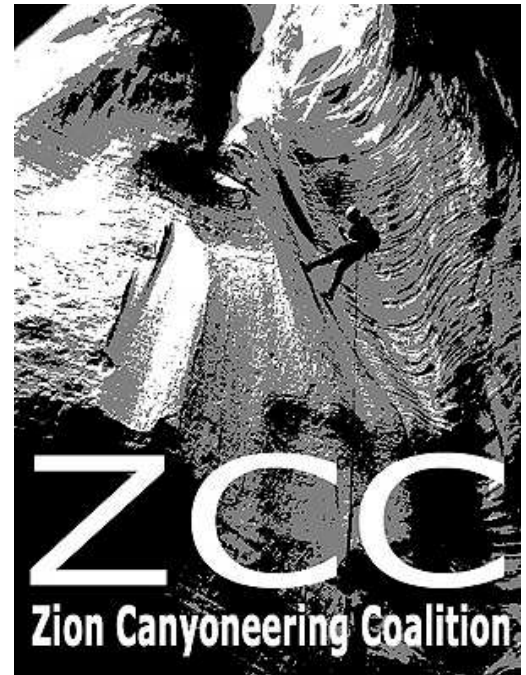
7. Entrance Gully to Mystery Canyon

Next we went to go look at "The Big One". The trail down into Mystery has long been recognized as an unpleasant venture, earning the moniker "The Death Gully". With the heavy snowfall and rain this spring, the lower 2/3 of the the Death Gully broke out and slid this spring. The slide is more accurately described as a debris flow, as saturated clay-rich soils flowed down the route. The surface of the route has only changed a few inches, but the lower two-thirds is covered by a thin layer of solidified clays, and actually makes a better walking surface than the loose sand that was there before. The boulder that formed the top of the first rappel was moved downcanyon. This was the first time I had seen the approach since it had slid.

Mark was particularly impressed with this one, and felt the solution was simple. "No chance." No point in trying to stabilize it.

Some discussion ensued. Perhaps a way could be found on the west side of the canyon down to the top of slabs overlooking the canyon, with a rappel or two. Perhaps there really is no problem other than the unpleasant nature of the descent, since the route is down an erosion gully.

Action Item: Tom and volunteers should explore the west side of the canyon and try to find a route. If we find a route and map it for the Park, they will come out and look at it, and consider

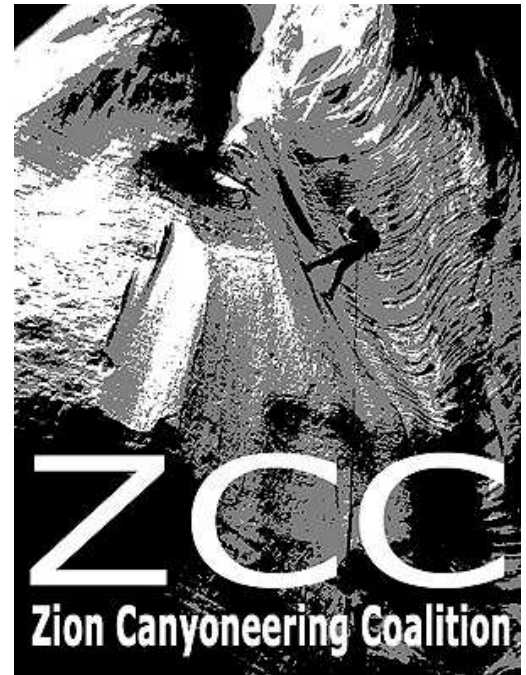


establishing a trail out that way. Since this is in the Pristine Zone, they have some hoops that they need to jump through.

8. Pine Creek exit Traverse Trail

A month earlier I had exited out the Pine Creek Traverse trail and observed substantial deterioration of the trail in the last couple of months. I suggested that Backcountry should close this trail until we had a chance to stabilize the problem areas or re-rout around it.

On Friday, volunteers from the ACA Rendezvous assisted backcountry staff in posting signs closing this trail at the eastern end. (The trail is still open for climber access from the western end). Also on Friday, Mark and I went and looked at the trail.



Mark's impression of the trail is that, in general, it is pretty good, but it has some significant problem areas. There are a few places where the trail is braided, and these could be focused on a single, established trail. There are a couple places across steep sand areas, and we scouted several possible re-routs that would get around these spots.

Much like a Mystery Canyon reroute, the action item is for Tom and volunteers to go scout, figure out and flag an alternative trails for the park to evaluate as a possible solution. Most likely this will not happen until next year, and the Park would not be able to work on it (if chosen to do so) until the year after that. We hope that in the mean time, canyoneers will respect the trail closure. (Compliance on Friday was poor – while we were hanging out at the end, two parties exited from Pine Creek on the traverse trail).

In a wrap-up conference, we scheduled a first volunteer weekend for November 4th and 5th. Unfortunately, park staff capable of supervising rockwork is available only on a very limited basis. Denise and the park trailwork expert will be available on Friday, November 4th, and work will continue with Backcountry Staff on Saturday.

Other issues discussed included paying for trailwork. The Park has the capability of obtaining grants to work on these issues, but they can be slow to obtain. There are many places where volunteer projects are appropriate, and we agreed to start scheduling volunteer projects when the weather allows for it in the spring. Mark was excited to get involved in these interesting projects, if the money could be found to bring him out.

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