



THE  
CLIMBING  
INITIATIVE

# THE IMPACT OF ROCK CLIMBING ON KALYMNOS

February 2020





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# ABOUT THE CLIMBING INITIATIVE

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The Climbing Initiative is a Colorado-based nonprofit supporting climbing communities worldwide. Through research, community engagement, and partnerships, we bring together organizations invested in the future of climbing and develop best practices for supporting the growth of climbing in emerging contexts. We believe rock climbing can empower individuals, create new sources of livelihood, and foster the development of a more sustainable and equitable world.

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[climbinginitiative.org](http://climbinginitiative.org)

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Luisa Zoe Millonig powering up the tufas on Sevasti (7b) at the Iannis sector



# SUMMARY

- ◆ Kalymnos has more than 3,400 routes on a 109 square kilometer (42 square mile) island and receives thousands of climbing tourists every year.
- ◆ Climbing has injected new life into the island's economy and mitigated the effects of the Greek economic crisis.
- ◆ A significant social shift is occurring as locals embrace climbing tourism, though there is still not a great degree of integration between climbers and locals.
- ◆ While climbers have relatively low environmental impact, environmental practices throughout Kalymnos need to be improved to preserve the island.
- ◆ A small number of volunteers are responsible for route development, maintenance, and rescues on the island.
- ◆ Without this volunteer work, Kalymnos risks losing its status as a top climbing destination, as failure to maintain routes could have severe safety consequences.
- ◆ Kalymnos demonstrates the incredible economic benefit of climbing tourism, and highlights the need for climbing communities and locals to work together to preserve this resource.

# INTRODUCTION

The Greek island of Kalymnos is one of the most popular climbing destinations in the world, boasting world-class limestone cliffs and year-round climbing conditions. Since the 1990s, climbers have bolted more than 3,400 routes. The presence of climbers has reshaped the economy of the island

**Kalymnos is one of the most popular climbing destinations in the world**

and dramatically extended the tourism season. Thousands of climbers visit Kalymnos each year, but exact numbers are unknown. A handful of volunteers dedicate their time and resources toward the development and safety of the island. As Kalymnos grows more and more popular as a climbing holiday destination, issues are emerging. From environmental impact to tensions surrounding funding for maintenance, Kalymnos provides a unique lens into the challenges faced by a climbing

community at a later stage of development. This case also offers insights into the benefits of collaboration between stakeholders—and foreshadows the consequences of inaction.

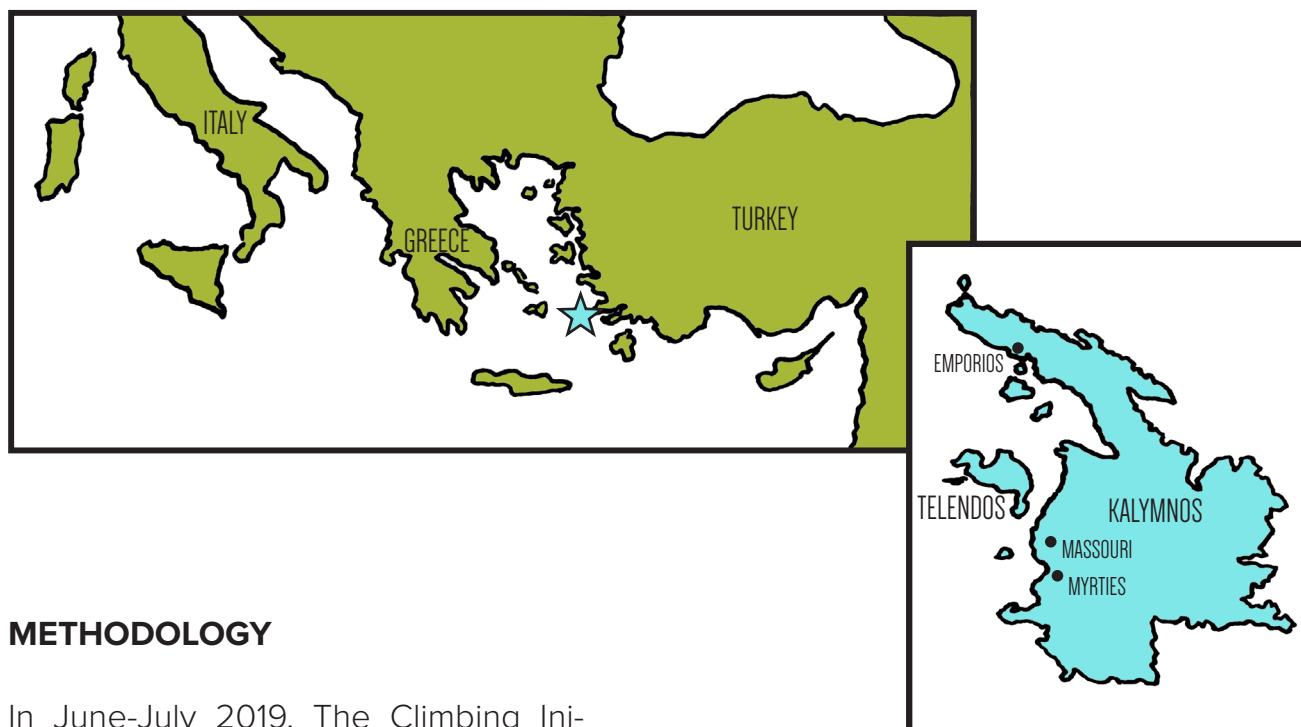
## STUDY OBJECTIVES

The Climbing Initiative conducts case studies on climbing areas and communities at different stages of development. We believe that communicating patterns in the context of climbing worldwide has the potential to change the way organizations and communities interact around climbing-related issues.

## STUDY AREA

Kalymnos is a 109 square kilometer (42 square mile) Greek island in the Aegean Sea. You can drive its length by car in under an hour. It is part of the Dodecanese island chain and lies fewer than 20 kilometers (12 miles) from the coast of Turkey. Most of the climbing is located on the northwestern coast, roughly expanding from Myrties and Massouri across to the neighboring island of Telendos and up to Emporios.





## METHODOLOGY

In June-July 2019, The Climbing Initiative conducted a case study on the impacts of rock climbing on Kalymnos. Veronica Baker, the principal researcher, conducted interviews with a variety of climbers, business owners, government officials, and others with knowledge of the impact of climbing on the island. Interview questions focused on the history of climbing on Kalymnos; its economic, social, and environmental impacts; relationships between local businesses, the municipality, climbing developers, and tourists; challenges they currently face; attempts to address those challenges; and hopes for the future. The study employed snowball sampling and semi-structured interviews.

## SUPPORT

This study was supported by funds from the Jackson Institute for Global Affairs at Yale University.

## CONTACT

The Climbing Initiative welcomes feedback and opportunities for future research. We would love to hear from you. Please feel free to reach out to [info@climbinginitiative.org](mailto:info@climbinginitiative.org) or find us on Instagram at [@theclimbinginitiative](https://www.instagram.com/theclimbinginitiative).





View of the main port in Pothia arriving by ferry from Kos



# HISTORY

Before climbers realized the incredible potential of the limestone cliffs on Kalymnos, the island was known for its sponge diving industry. It also saw a moderate number of tourists. In the 1980s, tourists booking a Greek island getaway would often visit neighboring islands which more developed for tourism. If the hotels on those islands were overbooked, tour companies would re-route their visitors to Kalymnos. “In the Dodecanese, Kalymnos was not a major part of the tourism industry contrary to Kos or Rhodes,” said Dimitris Roditis, who works as the information technology manager for the municipality and helps his wife, Evdokia, run her accommodations and restaurant. After the tourism peak of the 80s, “tourism sort of faded. Other places were more interesting and their economies developed. Tourism in Kalymnos started to decline. As things started to go downwards—boom!—the climbing wave started.”

In 1995, Greek climber Giannis Torelli visited the island and discovered pristine white limestone. The following year, Italian climber Andrea di Bari arrived and established 43 routes. In

1996, while managing the website for the municipality, Roditis had an idea. “I thought, ‘This is a nice topic for the website.’ I started a whole section on climbing. It developed into lots of information: a forum, a place for climbers to exchange information.” After a few years, he said, “You could see that the website visits skyrocketed.”

**“I went to the mayor and I told him we should do something to promote climbing”**

In 1999, a European magazine published photos of this new climbing paradise. Greek mountain guide Aris Theodoropoulos saw the article and immediately traveled to Kalymnos. He soon realized the island’s immense potential. “I went to the mayor and I told him we should do something to promote climbing,” he said.

George Hatzismalis, who works for the local tourism office of the municipality,

was one of the individuals contacted by Theodoropoulos in 1999. “We had a meeting and the mayor at that time decided that we must try to develop climbing.” At this meeting, Hatzismalis, Theodoropoulos, and the mayor came up with a set of priorities: counting existing routes on the island, bolting more routes, and developing a guidebook. The team found 180 routes on the island established by visiting climbers.

“Our intention was to increase the total number of routes on the island and develop routes of a wider range of difficulty in order to attract more climbers,” said Hatzismalis. “Someone who wants to make his holiday on this island will not come when he could easily climb all the routes in his level of ability in 1 to 3 days. So we needed to create new routes on the island in order to make the visit here worth it from a climber’s point of view.”

The following year, in 2000, the municipality hosted the first climbing festival on Kalymnos. “The first festival was 180 people,” said Theodoropoulos. “I never imagined that Kalymnos could be the best in the world. Greece had good money then and said ‘why not,’ so they helped.”

2006 was a turning point for the island, when Theodoropoulos reached out to Petzl and organized a RocTrip. “They brought twenty of the best climbers of the time like Chris Sharma. It was great publicity for the island,” he said.

The municipality has continued to organize festivals semi-regularly in the years since. Funding and organizing the festival is how they choose to ‘support’ the climbing community: the municipality does not regularly contribute funds for bolting or maintenance, and instead



16-year-old Adam Ondra climbing on Kalymnos

Photo by Nikolaos Smalios



relies upon volunteers to provide these essential services year-round.

Today, Kalymnos is known as a world-class climbing destination. “It is the star of Greek climbing,” said guidebook co-author Katie Roussos. “A lot of international visitors keep coming back every year. That is pretty unique around the world.” Hotels and studios on the island make up approximately 3,500 beds, but the true scale of accommodations is unknown, as the municipality does not count Airbnbs and other studios not officially registered.

With more than 3,400 bolted routes, including many moderates, Kalymnos is a haven for climbers of all ages and abilities. “The majority of climbers who have a real economic impact here are 40-50 years old, they climb from 5a to

6b, and they want to have a safe experience with clean and easy routes. This is 90 percent of climbers,” said Claude Idoux, one of the main route developers and vice president of the Kalymnos Rescue Team.

Kalymnos offers an affordable and peaceful vacation atmosphere. “People say they come because the climbing is amazing,” said Dimitrios Chalikos, who owns and operates Climbers Massage, a physiotherapy studio on the island. “They say that we are friendly people. We have everything—we are close to the sea, we have nice rocks, the food is beautiful, the nature, and everything is good to them. And the life is simpler. It’s not like other big climbing communities.”

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## Kalymnos by the numbers



Including small neighboring islands Telendos and Pserimos





Dave Mora on DNA (7a) in the Grande Grotta



# ECONOMIC IMPACT

Climbing has completely transformed the economy of Kalymnos. “Kalymnos is fortunate to have these cliffs on the west coast,” said Theodoropoulos. “There was some infrastructure from the 1980s and early 1990s, but there wasn’t much here. There was one place to eat and only a couple of places to stay. Twenty years has made a big difference. Most of the old developments are being restored. A growing handful of foreign climbers have invested. There actually is construction going on, unlike in the rest of Greece. Climbing has absolutely helped Kalymnos avoid the massive Greek crisis. A lot of service jobs, restaurants, rentals. I am a thousand percent sure that people are aware that climbing is contributing to the welfare of the island.”

The influx of climbers over the years has dramatically extended the working season on Kalymnos. Idoux described the change he has seen on the island since his arrival in 2004. “Climbing was developing, but the season was only from May 20 to the end of September. So my idea was to create some new lines and develop more routes. Over the years, the time frame of econom-

ic activities centered around climbing grew, and now we can start at the beginning of March and end on December 10. But, if Kalymnians wanted, we could work all year long.”

In addition to extending the tourist season, climbing has triggered the creation of dozens of businesses. “Especially in these difficult years for the country, this is a lifesaver,” said Roditis. “I’m not just talking about accommodation and restaurants. All the services around climbing came alive.” These include gear shops, mini markets, a day-care/play area for climbers’ children, guiding businesses, yoga lessons, and companies that offer scuba diving and other ecotourism services aimed toward climbers on their rest days. Many of these businesses are founded by international climbers. However, businesses owned by locals have also adjusted their offerings to climber needs: for example, cafes open very early in the morning to accommodate climbers before they set off for the cliffs; they serve breakfast (traditionally an uncommon meal in Greece); and some have started juicing vegetables or creating “power breakfasts” with imported



ingredients like quinoa, spirulina, and goji berries.

Chalikos sees massage clients coming back to Kalymnos every year. “And some of them, mostly people from Europe, are coming two or three times per year,” he said. “My family and I were thinking many years before to leave Kalymnos, like most of the people after the crisis, but we decided to stay here

and try to see if it could work. And for the moment for us, and for many other people, I think, Kalymnos is our paradise. We find our future on Kalymnos.”

However, some believe that not all locals recognize the economic benefit of climbers. “Businesses open earlier and close later in the year now, but they do not know why they work, or how to work,” said Idoux. “The biggest mistake from the community is that they don’t understand that the main economy from the island is the climbers,” said Chalikos. “The community here doesn’t understand the power of the climbers and they don’t do anything to help the whole system.”

Tania Matsuka, a climbing guide on Kalymnos, emphasizes that maximizing the economic potential of climbing on Kalymnos will require effort from everyone on the island. “What we should all remember is that it’s good to benefit from the climbing development, but we should also give back. It’s not an endless resource. We have to keep it alive. Everyone, climber or not, who loves the island can come up with some ideas and try to help—financially or otherwise.”



One of many climbing-related businesses

Photo by Veronica Baker





Kristína Ondrová climbing at the Odyssey sector



# SOCIAL IMPACT

The evolution of Kalymnos from an under-visited island to a climbing hotspot has resulted in a significant social shift. “What brings social change on Kalymnos? The presence of rock climbers on this island,” said Sevasti Chalkiti, who works for The Kalymnos Experience, an adventure tourism company. “They arrive from places outside here, so what they bring is very new. This is a great way for people to mingle socially. We

**“If we define ourselves as a place that attracts climbers, this means that slowly this nature-loving lifestyle becomes one of the elements of our society”**

get to observe ourselves through their eyes and they do the same. Through tourism, if we define ourselves as a place that attracts climbers, this means that slowly this nature-loving lifestyle

becomes one of the elements of our society. Local people are just now starting to appreciate the rocks that nature has given to this place. It will define socially what Kalymnos will be a few years from now.”

The presence of climbers has led to a change in the way Kalymnians provide services to tourists. “It was, at first, a bit interesting for the locals because they knew how to behave to someone who comes here to experience the beaches and walks and stuff like that,” said Roditis. “Climbers brought something new to tourism, such as a different diet. They’re athletes, so they eat healthy. Not that it was unhealthy before—but they focus on nice healthy foods to help with the physical effort. Vegetarianism, also lots of other interests too. So this was, I think, a basic change in the tourism circuit that had to do with climbers.”

Many people agree that climbers are well-perceived on Kalymnos. “I think the locals are very grateful to have the climbers here and I think they do appreciate them. I think the majority are very friendly,” said Matsuka. However, others point out that there is a lack of

meaningful exchange and understanding between climbers and the locals. “There aren’t that many Greek climbers in general,” explained Roussos. “We don’t have a mountain tradition. We take to the sea. The mountains are the place to hide from the Germans or pirates. The attitude is, ‘climbing is for crazy foreigners.’ They can’t fathom it.” “Even today most locals refer to climbers using the Greek word for ‘mountaineers,’” said Michalis Gerakios, one of the founders of The Kalymnos Experience and a member of the rescue team. “Local society should get more actively involved.”

According to Chalikos, the number of Kalymnians involved in rock climbing is around 30 to 40 people. “This is not good for the island. Most of those people are on the rescue team. I think that for the last three or four years, there have been lessons on climbing in the schools. This is good of course. It’s better if the parents understand how safe climbing is, because their idea of climbing is: ‘one guy, one rope, and one bolt.’ But it’s not like that... Here the parents are so protective. We have to be more open about these situations.”

Safety is an enormous focus of the climbing community on Kalymnos. The Kalymnos Rescue Team, founded in 2013, coordinates emergency response on the island. “The rescue team has

proven vital so many times,” said Roditis. “There have been lots of messages to the municipality praising the rescue team, saying ‘Thank you so much. If it wasn’t for you, I would be dead.’”

**“There have been lots of messages to the municipality praising the rescue team, saying ‘Thank you so much. If it wasn’t for you, I would be dead.’”**

When asked about social tensions on the island, Roussos explained that for the most part, things are good. “Everyone is benefiting [from climbing]. At first there were some concerned voices, but this had to do more with personal disagreements. Shepherds were protesting that climbers were disturbing their animals. This is too funny to me. I believe they were just worried. Climbers are the only people I know who were closing the gates behind them. Because they knew it was important.”





Mateusz Mikosik climbing at the Poets sector

# ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Considering the number of visiting climbers and the small size of the island, Kalymnos has stayed relatively clean. However, there is a feeling among the climbing community that more should be done to protect the environment. “Climbing can give so many things to the community, but unfortunately, the environmental impact is something that comes with it. The more people, the more pollution. Around the crags, there is so much toilet paper. There is so much trash. I feel it could be better taken care of,” said Matsuka. “The island of Kalymnos is small, and we only succeed if we respect the ecology of the island,” said Roussos. “Sadly, there is no discussion about environmental impact. I wish there was more of a discussion. That has been on my list, but I don’t know where to start.”

“Whenever I go up to the cliffs, I clean up toilet paper, cigarettes, climbing tape, etc.,” said Idoux. “And towards the end of the season I grow anxious because people are not changing their behaviors.” Matsuka feels that “the way to improve the island and make it cleaner is through education—through the municipality, through schools, through

advertisements.” Roussos notes that attempts have been made to educate climbers about environmental impact through the guidebook and [climb-kalymnos.com](http://climb-kalymnos.com), but “people don’t like to be preached to. It’s a fine line.”

Beyond the impact of waste at the crag, the municipality’s approach to public services creates additional environmental hazard. “Kalymnos pays thousands per year in fines to the European Union for burning their garbage,” said Roussos. A huge portion of the waste comes from plastic bottles: tap water on Kalymnos is not drinkable. When climbers visit Kalymnos, they often contribute to this problem by purchasing bottled water from the store. The island has tried and failed to create a recycling program. Although the municipality has provided water refill stations throughout the island, many individuals refuse to use them due to inconvenience or taste. Many interviewees noted the irresponsibility of this system and expressed that it would be in the long-term interest of the municipality to fix the water system.



A pigeon checking out the climbing scene



Photo by Veronica Baker

Impact to the rock itself is also a concern for some climbers on the island. “We must leave pristine spaces for the next generation. Taking the example of the Grande Grotta, we have broken a lot of stalactites to open new routes,” said Idoux. “I discovered a cemetery of stalactites in Secret Garden that were broken with a hammer... Geologically, this cave took millions of years to form, and in one nanosecond, we break it all.” Matsuka agrees that breakage of stalactites is of significant concern. She

notes, though, that in some areas, development has been conservative to protect the rock. “For example, in the main sector of Grande Grotta, there are only about fourteen routes set up,” she said. “There could be two or three times the number of routes, but there was a decision not to open more routes so we can maintain the rock. So that’s a good sign.”





Aris Theodoropoulos climbing at the Odyssey sector

# CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

## THE NEED FOR DATA

In order to truly grasp the economic, social, and environmental impacts of climbing visitors on Kalymnos, more data on their size and activities is necessary. “Our guesstimate is that we have around 5,000 to 10,000 climbers per year at least, but we don’t know for sure,” said Theodoropoulos. “We

“Our guesstimate is that we have around 5,000 to 10,000 climbers per year at least, but we don’t know for sure”

need statistics. It needs to be the official business of the island.” It would be relatively simple for the municipality to implement a system at the main sea port and airport that requires each visitor to indicate upon arrival the reason for their travel and their type of accommodations, length of trip, and mode of transportation on the island.

Such a program would be an excellent first step in measuring the depth and types of impact climbers are having on Kalymnos. The current lack of data likely leads to an undervaluing of the true scale of climber impact or the need for programs that support climbers, including maintenance and rescue services.

## MAINTENANCE AND SAFETY

With the large number of climbers visiting Kalymnos, having a team dedicated to rescue and route maintenance is essential. “To be perfectly clear, if we do not maintain routes or operate the rescue team and there were to be a serious accident tomorrow because of a maintenance issue on a route, with the speed of social media and the internet, we would have to close. It would be bad publicity,” said Idoux. Despite their lack of funding, he says, “all our rescues have been successful. This year, we had four major accidents, which is relatively few, and they were all due to human error and not technical failure.”



Many of the issues, Idoux said, are the result of mistakes made by visiting route developers. Numerous climbers every year come from outside of Kalymnos with the desire to establish new routes. When visitors develop a new route but fail to clean and bolt it properly, it leads to other climbers getting ropes stuck or taking unsafe falls and sustaining injuries. “I do not open routes that I am not capable of climbing, since I bolt climbs from the base (on lead),” says Idoux. “This way,

bolts are always in the right place, the difficult moves are protected and there is no risk of decking. I just ask that people who open new routes respect these rules.” He adds, “before people from the outside are allowed to open a route, I would like them to replace/maintain two old routes. And they must only open routes that they are able to climb.”



Nick Jalbert climbing at the Panorama sector

**The Hellenic Federation of Mountaineering and Climbing is implementing rules for the development of climbing nationwide.**

Those interested in learning about equipping guidelines on Kalymnos should visit [climbkalymnos.com/climbing/#equipping-new-routes](https://climbkalymnos.com/climbing/#equipping-new-routes)



## SUPPORT FROM THE MUNICIPALITY

The government considers itself a champion of rock climbing on Kalymnos. In Hatzismalis' view, the festival is the municipality's "gift to the climbers." However, most climbers see it differently. "The four municipalities I have known since I arrived on Kalymnos have never invested in rock climbing. They only invest themselves in the festival, for three days," said Idoux.

Climbers invested in route development, maintenance, and safety on the island feel that the municipality has failed to keep its promises when it comes to supporting climbing beyond the festival. "I believe that there should be annual or monthly funding collected by the municipality coming mostly from the local community and visitors that goes directly to the maintenance of the routes or to the cleaning, because money is like a circle: money spent on maintenance and development will come back through tourism," said Matsuka. "I feel that climbing gives a lot to the island. The local community should protect it more and start giving back to climbing. Yes they are nice, yes they are friendly for sure, but I feel that it could be better." In Chalikos' view, the municipality is benefiting from a resource that they don't contribute to maintaining. "Per year, they take a lot of money

from the European Union. My opinion is that they should take some part of this money and give it to the climbers. Because for the last 15 years, climbing is the only economy that comes to the island. For example, now, in July, we are waiting for the climbers for us to work. In the high season in the summer, we have a maximum of 800 people per week, and during the climbing season, we have about 2,000 people. So you understand the difference: if the climbers leave, we die here. We have started thinking about that, but we are not doing very many things. We have to do more."

**"For Kalymnos to remain a leader in climbing tourism, we must work together"**

Representatives of the municipality say they would be happy to support climbing more if they could, but the strain of the Greek economy limits their capacity to help. Despite the lack of available funds, climbers on the island still wish the municipality showed greater interest. "I haven't seen a lot of effort or initiation from their side," said Matsuka. "Most of the time it comes from climbers, trying to approach them and



Rob Carroll climbing in Ghost Kitchen

Photo by Veronica Baker

explain the importance of the impact of climbing and how much we need them. I'm not saying that no one working for the municipality is supportive, but we are expecting more initiation and effort from the locals and not just the climbers." Gerakios emphasizes that the municipality means well, but blames the larger Greek system. "There is a sense of good will. Kalymnians are really appreciative, but they lack knowl-

edge about climbing. We are talking about politicians that don't understand or care how to approach the subject. They could do a lot more and engage everyone."

### **SUPPORT FROM LOCAL BUSINESSES**

Like the municipality, local businesses benefit immensely from climbing without directly contributing to the work required to maintain it. The lack of collaboration among climbers, restaurants, hotels, and the municipality holds the island back. "I would like the various economic stakeholders to be present and deliver a common message: we must work together, and not against one another," said Idoux. "There is a cultural issue here. People here are jealous of one another, which is a common issue in small villages, and they must understand that for Kalymnos to remain a leader in climbing tourism, we must work together."

In Chalikos' view, local business owners like himself should be enthusiastic about contributing financial support to the climbing community, because without climbers, their source of livelihood would disappear. "It's very important for all of us who have a business—from the first business in Myrties to the last in Emporios, for example—to give every month about 20 or 50 euros to



put it all in one box or one bank, and this money goes only to rebolting the routes. Some people understand that, some say ‘Oh, no, why do that?’ But to me, for example, 20 euros per month is half an hour of one massage. It’s nothing. It’s nothing because if the climbers aren’t coming here, I haven’t got these 20 euros for my family.”

Others in the climbing community are less optimistic about the willingness of businesses on Kalymnos to contribute financially toward rebolting and maintenance, fearing that it would be seen as a tax. Multiple study participants noted that the challenging Greek economic context makes it even less politically feasible to have a tax that benefits climbing.

### **SUPPORT FROM CLIMBING TOURISTS**

Many climbers interviewed in this study said they would be in support of paying a fee in exchange for access to the beautiful climbing on Kalymnos. Tobias Dörig, who manages accommodations at Climbers Village, sees a climber fee as a viable and valuable path forward. “I speak with my clients about this possibility,” he said. “They would happily pay 20 euros. It would be easier if it was included in all restaurant and hotel prices, but this could create new problems.”

Idoux sees a way for climbers and businesses to both contribute through an annual fee. “We could charge climbers 30 euros to cover costs associated with opening and maintaining routes and running the rescue, but we would also like the economic stakeholders to contribute, such as bars giving climbers 5 percent discounts on drinks for example. It’s not much, but it’s a contribution. If climbers get 5 percent off on every drink and 10 percent off of a scooter rental, then the 30 euro pass is very cost effective and everyone contributes.”

In 2015, stakeholders on the island came together and attempted to create a climbing ID card. The card was expected to cost 20 euros and come with a booklet of vouchers worth over 30 euros to be used at local businesses. Despite the coordinated attempts of the municipality, the Restaurateurs Association, the Kalymnos Rescue Team, the Hoteliers Association, and others, the card “never really took off.”

### **NATIONAL PARK**

There is discussion on the island about making Kalymnos a national park. Theodoropoulos believes that having a national park will help the island facilitate a fee system, track climber numbers, protect the environment, and grow the climbing sustainably. “It will help us

know where to direct resources. People understand that climbing is a big deal on the island, but they think climbing goes on by itself. The municipality thinks they are helping by putting on a festival. They don't ask us how to help."

"People understand that climbing is a big deal on the island, but they think climbing goes on by itself"

### A CLIMBING BUBBLE?

Among some stakeholders on the island, there is a fear that Kalymnos could see a decline in climbing tourism if the climbing isn't well managed. "Now we are one of the top, but you never know what can happen in five or ten years," said Chalikos. "We have to think about what can happen after many years, not just what is happening now. We have to think about the future—for our children, and for our businesses." The lack of data about the number of climbers on the island leads to some speculation about whether or not the rate of climbing tourism is remaining steady. The growing reputation of Leonidio,

a climbing area in mainland Greece, worries some stakeholders on the island. "I have a lot of friends who do two climbing trips in the year, and now they decide they want to spend their Easter-time trip in Leonidio," says Chalikos. "In April, we haven't got a direct flight to Kalymnos, so they prefer to go to Leonidio for one week or ten days around Easter. In the Autumn they are coming here. Before Leonidio opened, they had only one choice. They went from Athens to Kos and then here. They didn't care if they lost two days during the trip, because this was the only way. But now it's not the only way. They have many choices and there will be more." He emphasizes that with competition for the interest of climbers increasing, seemingly small things like inconvenient plane flights can result in a large-scale loss of tourists. "Nobody is waiting for us to do something about the transportation to Kalymnos."

Because of these challenges, Chalikos said: "I worry about my future and the future of my children and my family, and that's why I can't close my eyes to the challenges. Some people do that. I don't like that. We have to wake up."





Rob Carroll climbing at the Spartan Wall



# RECOMMENDATIONS

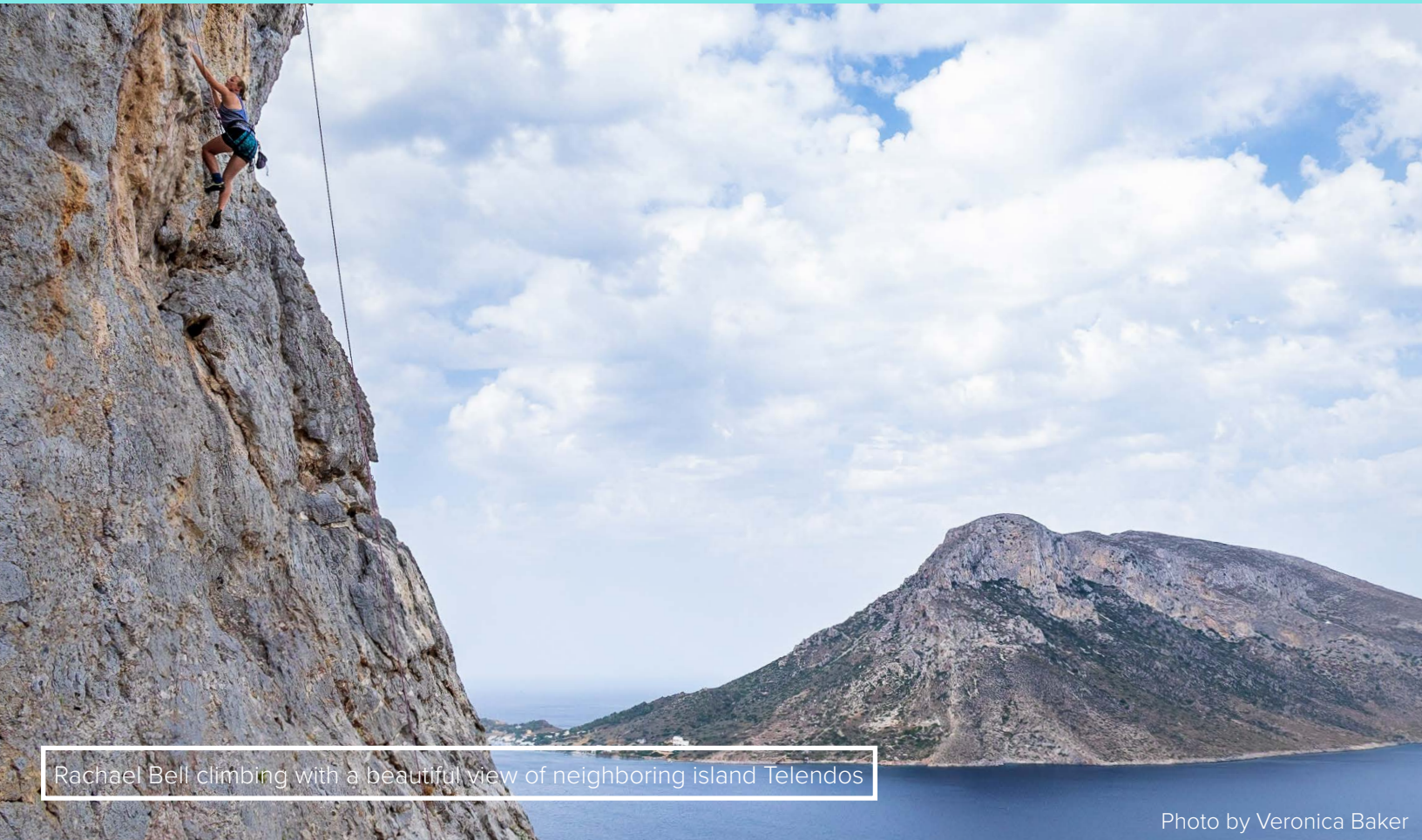
**Increased collaboration between the municipality, businesses, and climbers.** More information sharing and joint projects need to take place among those directly or indirectly invested in the future of climbing on the island. Because the prosperity of the island relies upon climbing tourism, there should be increased collaboration across shared interests of all stakeholders.

**Creation of a climbing association.** Currently, a handful of Kalymnos-based climbers are cumulatively playing the roles normally carried out by a local climbing organization. An organization should exist to communicate with the municipality and the public, represent the voices of the climbing community, and oversee the strategy of climbing development, route maintenance, and stakeholder engagement. Recognizing the immense economic value that climbing tourism brings to the island, the municipality should provide a shared headquarters for the climbing association and the rescue team, as well as annual funding to pay for equipment, training, and labor hours.

**Better environmental practices throughout the island.** The burning of trash and the amount of plastic used on Kalymnos is unacceptable from an environmental perspective. The municipality should fix the water system and implement public waste-reduction campaigns. Additionally, the air and noise pollution from scooters dramatically affects the feeling of peace and tranquility on the island. The municipality should look into developing a shuttle route or encouraging shop owners to rent electric bicycles instead of scooters in order to reduce environmental impact.

**More data on visitors.** By implementing a simple program that surveys visitors at the main port of entry to the island, the municipality can collect information that will greatly inform their knowledge of the scale and impact of climbing tourism. This will enable them to more effectively allocate resources and better support visiting climbers as well as those who make the climbing economy possible through route development, maintenance, and rescue services.





Rachael Bell climbing with a beautiful view of neighboring island Telendos

Photo by Veronica Baker

**Annual climber fee.** Climbers on Kalymnos recognize that their ability to enjoy the sport relies heavily on the time and money of volunteers, and many would enjoy paying for a pass that supports their work and allows it to continue. Given that Kalymnos is an island, it would be easy to collect the fee at the airport and the main sea port. The income from the fee should go directly back into programs that maintain and preserve climbing on Kalymnos and should not directly benefit a small group of individuals.

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**Consider a national park.** Legal designation as a national park could lead to better environmental practices among visitors, increased respect for climbing development guidelines, and enhanced protection for this incredible resource. It would also enable the creation of a governance framework through which to administer the fee, decide on how income from the fee should be used, and create long-term strategies for the development and maintenance of the island.

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Simon Montmory climbing at Balcony Helvetia (a sub-sector of Arhi)



# CONCLUSIONS

Kalymnos is unique in the world. It is truly a climbing paradise: an island with pristine limestone, beautiful beaches, sweeping landscapes, and businesses specifically tailored to climbers. With the advent of climbing, the island has gained a precious resource. “For me, the most important thing is for us to

**All stakeholders must recognize how vital climbing tourism is to their individual and collective wellbeing**

understand what we have,” said Chalikos. “Many years before the climbers started to come here, we were sad because we said, ‘God gave us these stones and they gave our neighboring island, Kos, the land.’ Now, I am saying that maybe God knows why they gave us the stone and gave the land to Kos. We have to respect the stone and to work up to this stone because now we understand that it is a gift for us to have

it. If Kos had just one climbing area like the Grande Grotta, you can imagine what they would be able to do with it. Because they are more open-minded, they are thinking more touristically—this is not always good, of course, because here on Kalymnos, it’s more friendly and authentic. But they could do more than we are doing. Their politicians are more powerful, and they have the larger airport. So we have to do some things to help our island. We need to do that for our better future.”

As climbing becomes more and more central to life on Kalymnos, a social shift is occurring. Kalymnians are founding businesses and benefiting from climbing tourism, but there is still a distinct “us and them” mentality. “The island must maintain its Greek tradition, but we must build a tighter community that works together for the environment and for the economic development of Kalymnos,” said Idoux.

To build this community, all stakeholders on Kalymnos must recognize how vital climbing tourism is to their individual and collective wellbeing. A necessary step is for more data to be collect-

ed on the number of climbers visiting the island and the degree to which they are impacting the island economically. Once the municipality, businesses, and climbers are on the same page regarding the scale of climbing impact, it is essential that they work together to determine how to best optimize the experience for climbers and support crucial services like route development, maintenance, and rescue. The island currently benefits from a system in which a small number of people volunteer their time and money to pro-

vide services that are essential to the island's tourism industry. If the island is to continue to be a climbing paradise, it is essential that the municipality and local businesses become active and engaged members of the climbing ecosystem.

For more case studies, visit  
[climbinginitiative.org](http://climbinginitiative.org)



Nick Jalbert climbing at the Iannis sector