

The West Virginia Cave Conservancy: Growing Through Acquisition Problems and Their Solutions

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Abstract

The West Virginia Cave Conservancy has encountered a number of problems since its start in 1997. Many of the problems that are encountered have to do with situations that are beyond the control of the board of directors or others involved with any particular project. They are instead common problems that any young conservancy may encounter as well. These range from land acquisitions taking much longer than expected for various reasons, landowners not finding the urgency to have their resource protected, multiple heirs in estates, and the constant struggle between saving money and getting work done quickly. There are also a number of perceived thoughts that the general public has about conservancies as a whole that should be addressed. This paper will discuss these issues and present the solutions that the Conservancy has conceived in disposing of these problems.

Summary

Through the initial years of its existence, the West Virginia Cave Conservancy has encountered many issues that have proven to be obstacles along a variety of fronts. They range from issues that are encountered primarily in the acquisition phases of hopeful land transfers to those involved in public opinion among cavers and landowners alike. The purpose of this paper is to briefly outline the different types of issues that have proven to be obstacles to the Conservancy's cause. Some of these obstacles have definite solutions. Some of those solutions may or may not work in every situation. There are also some issues that do not have solutions yet, but hopefully recognition of the existence of the problem may help other conservancies in a similar situation find a way to deal with these issues before they become too great of a problem.

A conservancy may encounter quite a wide range of problems. First and most obvious are problems with acquisition, which include the possibility of there being multiple heirs to a property, of the property being offered only at auction, and of there being an issue of easements under neighboring property (underground easements). When there are at least

two parties involved, transfers can often take longer than anticipated. Many times, when dealing with land transfers, there are more than two parties involved. There is the buyer, the seller, the lawyer for each side, and maybe a realtor, just to name a few. Each of these may have good intentions to address the issue quickly, but the fact of the matter is that other items do come up and distract each party, especially the parties that may be "hired" by the conservancy. A conservancy is not only in the business of preserving caves and karst, it is also trying to preserve money used in the acquisition of these properties. So it is not uncommon for a conservancy to have a "friend in the business" who will do work for very little or for free. This often slows things down as well, since work done for little or no payment will be put at the bottom of the to-do list. A good solution to this problem is to just go ahead and pay regular price for work done. This may seem like a great deal of money, but if your fundraising tactics are well-tuned, then it should not be a major problem raising the additional money to make up for that which was spent on a lawyer who works swiftly.

Many times the conservancy does not have a choice in how much property is available with the cave that is desired. This means that there

is a good chance that there will be too much property offered with the sale, thus running the price up. There are many ways that this can be dealt with. Sometimes it is possible to put the unneeded portion of the property back on the market. This could make back some of the money that was spent to acquire the cave. There could also be a caver who has similar interests as the conservancy and who would be interested in the remainder of the property. This could be a positive situation to explore. Of course, this would all be negotiated only after attempts with the seller to subdivide initially fail.

Public perception can be subdivided into two topics: caver public opinion and non-caver public opinion. Caver public opinion is important since this is where most of the funding for the acquisition will come from. If the cavers do not trust or like what you are doing, then it is very difficult to get their money to help the cause. The best way to deal with this is to just be honest and open. Have regular newsletters that go out to your membership. Write articles to be included in other publications that cavers read so they can see you are active. Invite your membership to act as committee members and seek their input. This helps keep the cavers comfortable with your activities.

Non-caver public opinion can be more difficult to work with. There are many ways in which one can work on this, but the most important things to remember are skills acquired by most cavers who deal with landowners. Treat them with respect, knowing that you (the conservancy or caver) are not the owner of a particular cave at the moment. Do not be too pushy, but do not be a pushover as well. Act professionally when representing your conservancy, but keep in mind that some landowners may feel more comfortable with a less professional approach. Be able to adapt quickly and sufficiently. Finally, offer to be interviewed by your local newspaper, allowing the message to infiltrate the public so they can better understand your purpose. This may also create some unexpected opportunities for your conservancy.

Possibly one of the most overlooked yet influential problems is competition. This also has two categories. The most obvious and most difficult to deal with is the concept of running

up the price of caves or land with caves. If the public begins to think that caves can be sold at a premium price, this will make future acquisitions more difficult. Unfortunately, this problem has no good solution. A conservancy can always attempt to get the lowest price, but many landowners always want the most money for their property. The hope is that you can keep the fact that the property has a cave as minor a detail as possible.

Competition as conservancy against conservancy or conservancy against caver has been discussed in a few publications recently, and is becoming a more prevalent issue. The best way to deal with this is to have very clear, open, and effective communication among the cavers in your region and among other conservancies. Even though you may belong to the Mid-Atlantic Cave Conservancy, the West Virginia Cave Conservancy may be a better manager for the cave in the long run, and vice-versa. Proximity to the property usually plays a major role in this and can sometimes be very obvious. The larger problem occurs when an individual caver has interest in a property and a conservancy does not realize it. This is very difficult to catch ahead of time. If it is known ahead of time, it is generally a good idea to support the individual in his quest. In the case of an auction, if the property's price begins to turn more costly, then maybe the two can work together, making spur-of-the-moment agreements. Usually, though, the two parties may not know each other ahead of time. There is probably no good solution for this issue at this time.

Land acquisitions can be a difficult task that can mean a great deal of time and effort for all involved. This paper does not cover all the problems a conservancy may encounter when acquiring land, but it certainly addresses some of the more common. Again, all the problems do not have definite answers, and the ones listed here are not the only solutions. They are just the ones that the West Virginia Cave Conservancy has found to be helpful when trying to acquire caves. The ultimate goal is that all cavers work together on this common goal and show support when possible. Communication tends to be the initial step in doing this, so hopefully this communication will help others in the future realize that there is a great deal involved and a great deal to learn.