

Here Today, Gone Tomorrow? Initiating Steps for Preserving West Virginia's Cave and Karst Terrain

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Abstract

Nationwide, caves and karst terrains face serious threats from a multitude of social and economic forces such as construction activities. At the same time many have felt a strong need for greater education and outreach efforts regarding karst regions for protecting these rare and fragile environments from being obliterated. In a manner similar to other cave and karst bearing regions, West Virginia continues to recognize challenges and evolve feasible solutions for protecting its caves and karst resources. Moreover, any such forward-looking strategies must involve a proactive, rather than a reactive stance in planning. However, until recently, there was lack of a formalized, concerted, viable group dedicated to the mission of preserving the state's karst regions. This presentation offers an overview of the West Virginia Cave Conservancy, a federally-recognized, 501(c)(3) status organization presently working with communities in West Virginia to pursue its preservation and management missions. The Conservancy is doing this by working to purchase or lease caves (such as Rapps Cave, a significant archaeological site that was recently leased to the West Virginia Cave Conservancy). The Conservancy also works with cave owners to create management plans that will allow access to such areas while protecting the landowners. This presentation outlines the stages involved in the evolution of the West Virginia Cave Conservancy as a recent organization and emphasizes specific cave and karst-related goals and objectives that are central to its mission.

Introduction

West Virginia is having problems similar to those of many other states in reference to its caves. They are becoming more difficult to protect and harder to gain access to. Out of over 3,800 caves in West Virginia, only 107 are owned or managed by cavers or groups of cavers. This may seem like a high number of caves owned by cavers, but in comparison to the number of caves in the state, it is a small percentage. This paper will introduce the West Virginia Cave Conservancy, a federally-recognized, 501(c)(3) status organization that is working to protect the cave and karst features in West Virginia, describing the history, projects, fundraising, and future goals of the organization.

History

The West Virginia Cave Conservancy was created with a four-part mission statement. First was to protect the cave and karst resources in the state through education and resource management. Second was to promote the study of caves and karst. Third was to provide maximum possible access to these resources. Finally, the West Virginia Cave Conservancy would offer a full range of management resources.

Many people recognized the need for a cave conservancy. There were organizations like the West Virginia Association for Cave Studies and the Cave Conservancy of the Virginias that already existed, but the major inhibitor of buying or managing property was the question of who would be responsible. Not until George Sively,

the previous owner of Organ Cave, passed away in 1994 did this thought begin to take the form of an organization. In 1995, at the NSS National Convention in Blacksburg, Virginia, the President of the NSS set up an ad hoc committee on Organ Cave. This committee was to stay informed on the Organ Cave situation and work toward the formation of a non-profit organization that would buy the cave if and when it would be offered for sale. Bob Handley was named as chairman of this committee. Handley spoke to Cliff Lindsay, who was already managing McClungs Cave, along with Ed Swepston and Dave Cowan, about forming an organization that would serve to protect the cave.

Contact was maintained with the heirs, although no progress was made toward the purchase of the cave. Lindsay and Handley, with the help of Swepston, worked up a charter for the Greenbrier Cave Conservancy in the spring of 1997, and it was chartered in July of that year. Shortly after the Greenbrier Cave Conservancy was chartered, Mark Wolinsky of the Southeastern Cave Conservancy called Lindsay about access to McClungs Cave. The conversation continued and discussion about the two conservancies took place. Wolinsky suggested that the Greenbrier Cave Conservancy should expand the scope of its efforts. After further discussions, Handley, Lindsay, and Swepston formed the West Virginia Cave Conservancy, which was chartered in December of 1997. At the first meeting, the following were asked to join as directors: Lonnie Burns, Tim Brown, Dave and Sandy Cowan, Ray Garton, and Tina Hall. Bill Jones was later asked to be a director, followed later by J.C. Fisher and Jeff Bray in 1998, filling the 12-member Board of Directors.

In the spring of 1998, there was an opportunity to purchase the property containing the original entrance to Maxwelton Sink Cave in Greenbrier County, now closed due to debris burying the cave during a dying hurricane in the early 1970s. This opportunity came about on short notice and forced the organization, in its infancy, to react quickly. There were only two weeks for preparation before the land was to be sold at auction. Cowan and Lindsay did a survey of the land that was thought to be necessary to gain access to the cave, also feeling that the new landowners may feel more comfortable selling if they knew the West Virginia Cave Conservancy was serious. The new owners were encountered after the auction, and negotiations are still taking place. This situation did give the Conservancy some quick attention in the caving community through fundraising in preparation for the purchase of the land. This brought the organization into the eyes of the caving community.

Projects

In November of 1998, there was an announcement about an auction that included two entrances to Greenville Saltpeter Cave in Monroe County. This popular cave has four entrances, two of which are already owned by The Institute for Earth Education, an organization that shares the conservancy's thoughts on preservation of the cave. The West Virginia Cave Conservancy had a very short period of time in which to respond, and once again had to act quickly to be ready for the auction. It was decided that the Conservancy would work together with the Institute for Earth Education to purchase the cave. We also decided that because the location of one of the entrances was so close to property already owned by the Institute for Earth Education, we would introduce the idea of an underground easement to the auctioneer. The thought was that this could be used to connect a majority of the cave to property owned by the Institute. This idea of an underground easement was introduced and eventually used in the purchase of Organ Cave by the new owners. These were the first two times that an underground easement was used in a purchase involving a cave in West Virginia. The Institute for Earth Education was able to purchase the two entrances and the underground easement at auction with the help of the West Virginia Cave Conservancy.

The West Virginia Cave Conservancy also helps the Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc. manage Lobelia Saltpeter Cave in Pocahontas County. This cave and property was offered to the SCCI while the West Virginia Cave Conservancy was still forming. When the SCCI heard that a group had formed in West Virginia, they offered to work together on the management of the cave. The first project on this property was to clean it up since there had recently been a fire on the property. The West Virginia Cave Conservancy worked with the state in a special program, called "West Virginia Make It Shine" month, and was able to remove the garbage from the site at no charge. Artifacts were also found in the cave and these were sent to nearby Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park for protection in fear that they would be vandalized at their current location in the easily-accessible cave.

Most recently, Rapps Cave in Greenbrier County, a known archaeological site, was purchased by some landowners who were interested in conservation. The West Virginia Cave Conservancy worked with these new landowners to create a lease agreement that would allow for a professional archaeological dig. The West Virginia Cave Conservancy asked for a grant from the Cave Conservancy of the Vir-

gins and received \$16,000 to contract archaeologists for the dig. The dig begins in April of 2000. Although the cave is not open to the public at this time, any that are interested in helping with the archaeological process are encouraged to contact the conservancy.

Fundraising

The fundraising practices of the West Virginia Cave Conservancy have been varied. Many different levels of membership are available, including a charter membership for the first year of the organization. The National Speleological Society National Conventions have also been sources of funds by making brochures available through a number of vendors. At the Old Timers' Reunion which is held Labor Day Weekend each year, the West Virginia Cave Conservancy has been very noticeable since Old Timer's takes place in West Virginia. The goal here seems to be to create a fundraiser that is different and unique and which people will remember from year to year. In 1998, a small crane was constructed with a "pit" of buttons, all reading "Dig the Max," in reference to the hopeful purchase of Maxwellton Sink Cave. The patrons used a little crane to dig buttons from the pit. Each button cost ten dollars and some of the buttons had winning numbers on the backs, which corresponded to prizes donated by vendors. In 1999, we had a rubber duck race in the Tygart Valley River. The ducks were donated by the city of Ronceverte, and were sold for five dollars. Each duck had a number and the first 20 ducks to cross the finish line won prizes. The West Virginia Cave Conservancy also plans an annual banquet. This fundraiser takes place in Lewisburg and is a time for members to meet and talk to each other and the directors. Members and benefactors are also recognized for their support.

Future Goals

The West Virginia Cave Conservancy plans to continue its negotiating for Maxwellton Sink Cave, but also has other plans for the future. There are currently negotiations under way for

the purchase of Bone Cave in Greenbrier County. The West Virginia Cave Conservancy is also working on a management plan with the owner of Haynes Cave in Monroe County. There has also been some positive response concerning opening negotiations for some of the lesser-known entrances to Organ Cave. The West Virginia Cave Conservancy also plans to spread to more parts of West Virginia.

Conclusion

While only in its first two years, the West Virginia Cave Conservancy has accomplished a great deal toward preserving the cave and karst features of West Virginia. As the organization grows, its goals will be met and it will be instrumental in protecting more caves in the state, as well as raising the percentage of caves owned by cavers from three percent to a much higher percentage. It also looks toward the future to educate citizens so that caves and the life inside them may not be as endangered in the future.

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