

Cave Acquisition and Management Experiences of the Southeastern Cave Conservancy

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Abstract

The Southeastern Cave Conservancy was incorporated in 1991, and has since become one of the most active cave acquisition and conservation organizations in the U.S. With more than 27 caves on 15 preserves in six states, the SCCi draws on a large volunteer base for assistance with cave acquisition and management. Partnerships with caver groups, conservation organizations, and government agencies have been critical to the success of the conservancy. The organization's history demonstrates the effectiveness of private, grass-roots cave conservation efforts.

When a group of cavers got together in my living room nine years ago to discuss starting a cave conservancy, I knew we had a great idea. I just didn't know whether anyone else would agree. The idea that cavers could come together to buy and manage caves seemed reasonable, but we all knew that it would take huge sums of money and a vast amount of volunteer labor. Would the caving community really support the idea? We could not be sure, but we felt that perhaps the time was right.

The SCCi was the brainchild of Jeff and Alexis Harris. Long-time activists in the Georgia caving community, Jeff and Alexis called together a group of cavers in 1990 to discuss forming a cave conservancy. I volunteered my house as a centrally located site for the first meeting. About 20 people showed up and a lively discussion ensued. A series of planning meetings followed, culminating in the incorporation of the non-profit Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc. in May of 1991. We received the coveted IRS 501(c)(3) designation (which makes contributions tax-deductible for the donors) in November of that year, and we were in business.

At the time, we all thought that we would be relying mainly on donations of caves, and perhaps leases or conservation easements, for most acquisitions. We thought we could raise the money to actually *buy* a cave once in a while as long as it wasn't too expensive. I doubt that any one thought that in nine years the SCCi would raise more than \$300,000, and own and manage more than 25 caves and 700 acres in six states. I am sure that none of us dreamed

that our little conservancy would be able to take on a \$200,000 debt load and expect to pay it all off just to buy some caves.

But that's where we are today. And it's all because of the support we have received from the caving community. Ordinary cavers, by donating their time, energy, and money to the SCCi, have made it possible for cavers to actually own and manage a large number of southeastern caves, to re-open closed caves, and to forever protect endangered species and fragile cave environments.

The SCCi was lucky in many ways during its development. We had good advice and guidance from many people and organizations, which allowed us to sail smoothly through incorporation and to obtain the critical tax-exempt charitable organization status that makes donations tax deductible. We modeled ourselves on The Nature Conservancy and sought their advice in developing our bylaws and our acquisition guidelines. We received logistical as well as financial support from Pigeon Mountain Industries, our loyal corporate sponsor. Ask anyone who has been involved in the incorporation of a non-profit organization about the difficulties of getting started, and especially of becoming a 501(c)(3)—you'll hear plenty of horror stories. We managed to get through it all in just a few months at a cost of only a couple of hundred dollars. I remember folks passing the hat at a planning meeting to get the filing fees. We owe a great debt to the folks who made that happen.

We also got a very lucky break right off the mark when Dogwood City Grotto member

Chuck Henson offered to donate Howards Waterfall Cave to the brand new, barely organized SCCi. Chuck had to have a lot of confidence in us to do that, and I know it gave us a big boost. Other cave conservancies have taken years to acquire their first cave, and Chuck handed us our first one on a silver platter. I believe it set the stage for the good things that followed. Howards is a wonderful cave, one of Georgia's longest and most popular, and it would be hard to overstate the value and importance of Chuck's donation to the Conservancy.

We had a lot of discussions about what to tackle for our first big acquisition project. Many in the group had a great love for and attachment to Fox Mountain in Rising Fawn, Georgia. More than ten caves, including Cemetery Pit, Rustys Cave, and Hurricane Cave are located there on 332 acres owned by the heirs of Dr D. S. Middleton. Several of the caves are among the longest and deepest in the state. Local cavers Jeff and Alexis Harris and Steve and Kaycee Logan had tried to buy part of the property several years earlier, only to be stymied by a problem with the title. No bank would make a loan against the property without a clear title. The owners had the property listed for sale, and we all worried that a change of ownership would close the caves, or worse—result in development or logging of the land around the caves.

As we were considering whether our new conservancy could raise the money to buy more than 300 acres, we received word that Neversink, the crown jewel of TAG (Tennessee-Alabama-Georgia) pits, was up for sale. After much discussion and soul searching, we concluded that we would have a much better chance of raising money to buy the well-known and much-loved Neversink. The fact that it was only 86 acres instead of 332 was also a deciding factor. I know it was hard for some, particularly Jeff and Alexis, to see Fox Mountain go to the back burner, but we all knew that Neversink would draw more attention and support and would be a great catalyst for the growth of the conservancy.

Of course, we never anticipated that it would take almost three years before Neversink became ours. We plunged into negotiations, with no money in the bank and no experience in buying land other than that of those of us who had bought homes. I won't go into all the details, trials, and tribulations, but I doubt that we will ever have a harder time getting a cave than we had with Neversink. It was sold right out from under us twice—the second time we had even shaken hands and exchanged money. Some folks chided us, wanting to know why we

couldn't close the deal. The bottom line is that you can't force someone to sell you something if they don't want or need to (unless you're the government). Many people began to question whether the Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc. was really viable.

We had a nice boost in the middle of the Neversink doldrums, when Cavers Inc. decided to give Glove Pit to the SCCi. Cavers Inc. was formed by a group of Huntsville cavers well before the SCCi, and had acquired the cave from a developer concerned with liability. It was a pioneering effort in the southeast, and that made it very significant to us that the founders of Cavers Inc. felt the SCCi was working well enough and was worthy enough of their trust for them to donate their cave. We owe Bill Varnedoe, Carl Craig, and the other founders of Cavers Inc. our thanks.

Soon after the donation of Glove Pit, everything finally came together for us at Neversink. Capitalizing on the groundwork laid by Steve Davis, Kris Green, and Linda Tucker, the SCCi's master deal maker, Mark Wolinsky, was able to work out a deal with the cave's owner which satisfied concerns about water rights, boundary locations, and access. It was a good thing that he did, because Kris, who was the SCCi Chairman at the time, had been vigorously collecting donations and pledges to pay for the cave for some time. He had quite a large chunk of the money lined up, and we'd have looked pretty bad if we'd failed. Kris never doubted, though. He used to get so mad at me for asking: "How we gonna pay for this sucker?"

"I don't want to hear it!" he'd say. Well, ol' Kris was right, as usual, and we didn't have to give the money back, thank goodness.

I would have to say that it was Neversink that finally put the Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc. on the map. That pit is visited and admired by cavers from all over the country. When folks realized that the SCCi was really committed enough to take on a \$50,000 purchase, they took a new look. Many liked what they saw, and pitched in to help pay for the purchase. More than 400 cavers bought a \$40 "Piece of the Pit" to help pay for the acquisition. Many grottos around the country sent donations, in some cases emptying their treasury to help. Over \$30,000 was raised before the closing, and the remaining \$20,000 (financed by a loan from a true hero among cavers) was raised and repaid in just six months after the purchase. Faith was restored, and enthusiasm (and membership) reached a new high.

But like the car-chasing dog that finally caught one, we were left with the question: what do we do now? Well, the obvious thing

was to bring out the Fox Mountain project and have a go at that. If we can buy 40 acres, why not go for 300? But it was not to be—at least, not yet. Before we could really get started we received word that Kennamer Cave might be available. When we checked into it, we found that not only was it available, the owner was ready to sell immediately. After the long struggle to get Neversink, the Kennamer purchase seemed like a runaway train—it was fast and furious, and was concluded in just three months. For \$36,500, in January of 1997 the SCCi acquired 100 acres containing the entrances to Kennamer and Little Kennamer caves. Maybe they won't all be as hard as Neversink after all, we thought.

Suddenly we were in debt again. Well, it worked once, so we figured it was good for another try. Let's divide the cave up and sell it off (in honorary ownership, or course) piece by piece. You have to sell the cave in order to buy it. It has a sort of twisted logic to it, don't you think? The "Buy a Piece of Kennamer" program, a shameless copy of the earlier and wildly successful "Buy a Piece of The Pit" program which financed Neversink, was launched and was soon well on its way to paying for the Kennamer purchase. We were able to raise more than half the money in advance, and only had to borrow \$16,000 this time, with the generous backing of the Richmond Area Speleological Society. By January of 1998 we had raised enough capital to repay the loan in full.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, another back burner project caught fire. We'd been talking with the owners of Surprise Pit and the Fern Sink entrance to Fern cave for almost a year. The cave had been temporarily closed after a couple of back-to-back rescues, and we were trying to get them to lease it to the SCCi. The owners would get the benefits of our liability insurance, and the cavers would regain access to Alabama's deepest pit. After almost a year of friendly discussion, we arrived at an acceptable 99-year lease agreement and the deal was done. In March of 1997 the SCCi entered into the first of many cave leases. The SCCi's Fern Cave preserve is managed jointly with the surrounding Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge, which contains the rest of the entrances to the Fern Cave System, Alabama's longest.

Soon after, we were able to adapt the Fern Cave lease for use in two other acquisitions in Tennessee. Gourdneck Cave is an active stream cave, which serves as the only reliable water supply for its owner. As part of the lease, the SCCi agreed to maintain the water lines in the cave, which is also home to a wide variety of aquatic cave life, including the blind Tennessee

cave salamander. South Pittsburg Pit is a 160-foot open-air shaft with more than 2,500 feet of passage at the bottom. The pit was closed several years ago following the rescue of some inexperienced cavers. In April of 1997 the SCCi signed long-term leases on both caves.

We have since used the lease again as the basis for an agreement with the Nashville Grotto, leasing the grotto's William Halliday Cave Preserve in Kentucky, which contains Logsdon Cave. Logsdon is a difficult multi-drop cave, which may one day connect to the Fisher Ridge cave system. It is the SCCi's first project outside the TAG states. The lease allows the grotto to participate in the SCCi's insurance policy, while the SCCi provides support and delegates management authority back to the Nashville Grotto. I expect that the SCCi will be doing many more leases in the future as cave owners recognize the benefits of this arrangement.

Early in 1997 we received yet another unexpected opportunity. The owners of Fricks Cave in Walker County, Georgia, were planning to sell their farm and retire. Fricks is home to an estimated 10,000 federally listed endangered gray bats. It houses the largest known concentration of the bats in Georgia, as well as Georgia's only confirmed population of Tennessee cave salamanders. Naturally, we were quick to look into the details. It turned out that the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and The Nature Conservancy were also very interested in seeing the cave protected, but were unable to make arrangements to purchase the cave in time for the rapidly approaching auction. With the blessings and assistance of both, the SCCi went to the auction and was able to buy 34 acres including all three entrances to the cave. The \$105,000 price tag sent some conservancy members into shock, but we received generous loan financing through The Nature Conservancy of Georgia. Once again, many cavers, grottos, and sponsors are stepping up to help pay for the acquisition.

And then, finally, after simmering on the back burner for six years, the Fox Mountain property was ready for the main course. In a surprising turn of events, Mark Wolinsky emerged from the first face-to-face meeting with the owners with an agreement to purchase the entire 332-acre property at an affordable price of \$89,640 complete with owner financing and generous terms. Once again, fortune smiled on the cavers, and the purchase was completed in September of 1997. While Cemetery Pit, Hurricane Cave, Rustys Cave, and the other smaller caves on the property have always been open to cavers, isn't it wonderful to

know that they are ours to love, enjoy, and protect now and forever?

Just when I thought the Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc.'s plate was completely full, another great property came to our attention. The owners of Horse Skull Cave and Jacks Hole, near Bridgeport, Alabama, were reportedly interested in leasing or selling the caves to the SCCi. We met with one of the owners, Bill Kampmeier, and found him to be very enthusiastic about the idea of a cave preserve. After discussing the options, we settled on a purchase of 40 acres surrounding the two caves. Horse Skull Cave is an interesting horizontal cave with more than 2,500 feet of passage. Jacks Hole is a 90-foot pit with about 200 feet of passage at the bottom. The \$16,500 purchase was completed in January of 1998, with a five-year owner-financed mortgage.

As for future plans, we have many other acquisition projects underway. We are negotiating for Tennessee's Tiftonia Pit and Airplane Cave, and have submitted a proposal to acquire Alabama's Anderson Cave and a 50-acre tract that includes several smaller caves. Anderson Cave is another gray bat cave and access will have to be limited to protect the bats. We are also working with the State of Tennessee and the owner of the Woodard Sink entrance to Dunbar Cave to arrange the cleanup and acquisition of the sink entrance. We are also pursuing several other possible acquisitions, including Anvil Cave, Walnut Cave, and Coon Creek Cave in Alabama, Junkyard Cave in Tennessee, and several other caves in Tennessee, Georgia, and Florida.

Along the way we have made valuable contacts with a number of organizations interested in caves and the endangered species which sometimes use them. The Nature Conservancy of Georgia has been a strong ally, providing financial and logistical support for the Fricks Cave purchase as well as valuable advice and contacts. The Nature Conservancy of Alabama and the Alabama Natural Heritage Program have also been helpful, and we appreciate the assistance of Jim Godwin, one of their zoologists, in surveying a number of our preserves. We have implemented a Memorandum of Understanding with the Nature Conservancy of Tennessee that has some wonderful possibilities. We have worked with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources in supporting the study of the gray bats in Fricks Cave, and helped support the second season of research at that site. We also appreciate the support we have received from Bat Conservation International and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In 1997 I was pleased to see the Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc. become an institutional member of the National Speleological Society. We have always valued our relationship with the NSS and its southeastern grottos. All of our directors and most of our 400 members are NSS members. Several of the directors are NSS Fellows and some are Life Members. Much of our early support came from the Dogwood City Grotto, Huntsville Grotto, Birmingham Grotto, and Chattanooga Grotto. We have always felt that the SCCi and the NSS serve complimentary roles and share the same goals when it comes to cave conservation. I am sure that the two organizations will develop even closer ties in the future. All of our property management and access plans encourage membership in the NSS, as well as in the SCCi. We deeply appreciate the support we have received from the Society and its members and grottos, as well as the generous access to conventions, meetings, information, and publications that the Society has provided.

1998 was a year of consolidation for the conservancy. We worked hard to raise money and pay off out mortgages on the Fricks, Fox Mountain, and Horse Skull Preserves. As a result, we did not seek acquisitions as aggressively as in previous years. In spite of this, we acquired four new caves—two by donation and two by lease. Long-time caver Marsall Fausold donated the historic Lobelia Saltpeter Cave and 30 acres of land in West Virginia. The cave is a little far from our usual stomping grounds, and is managed for SCCi by the West Virginia Cave Conservancy, which was formed later that year. We also received the donation of Jennings Cave from the Florida Speleological Society. The FSS acquired the cave in a tax sale, put up the money for the purchase, and donated the cave to SCCi. They now serve as the management team for the preserve. With help from the Nashville Grotto of the NSS, we obtained leases on two caves near Nashville, Tennessee. Swirl Canyon Cave and Hardins Cave are gated and managed for SCCi by the grotto's Cave Management Committee.

So there you have it—the SCCi in a nutshell. In one year the Conservancy's holdings grew from 37 acres to over 700, and the number of caves under SCCi ownership or management went from four to over 25. This phenomenal progress was possible only because of the tremendous support of cavers throughout the southeast and across the country. Their contributions and efforts are the life blood of the Southeastern Cave Conservancy. I truly believe that we are receiving this support because of our aggressive acquisitions

and our demonstrated commitment to cave ownership by cavers.

These accounts also demonstrate the many partnerships that we have developed to acquire and manage caves. Working with so many different groups is sometimes complex and demanding, but it is the only way we can distribute the workload out to the people who have the knowledge, resources, and proximity to the caves to effectively manage them. Our all-volunteer organization manages an ambitious program of cave acquisition, fundraising, and cave management with no paid staff and no office. We run an organization with an annual budget ranging from \$80,000 to \$118,000 and more than 95 cents of every dollar goes to cave acquisition and management. The tiny remainder is spent on newsletters, member services, and administrative expenses like liability insurance.

I was going over the membership list with our Treasurer, Buddy Lane, a while back and we noticed that over 30% of the current SCCi members live outside the TAG states. We have members in California, New York, and even Canada. I think this shows the broad appeal of the SCCi to cavers, and that's important. The SCCi cannot continue to grow and prosper without the strong support of the caving community. It needs you and every other caver. The same is true for the other cave conservancies in Indiana, Missouri, Texas, and the northeast.

We frequently receive cards, letters, and email from donors and new members expressing their amazement and excitement at our success and the pace of our acquisitions. I, too, am amazed at the way the SCCi is racking up the acquisitions. Sometimes, though, I wonder if we're really going to be able to keep this up—especially the fundraising part. After all, we're already committed to paying off \$210,000 in acquisitions over the next five years. To borrow a phrase from the movie "Field of Dreams," our philosophy seems to be "Buy it, and they will give." Our Acquisitions Chairman, Mark Wolinsky, puts it another way, saying "We have sailed to the New World and burned our boats." As the person who signs on the dotted line for these massive loans and purchases, I can tell you that it takes a lot of faith in your fellow cavers.

Most cave conservancies depend on donations of land or conservation easements for their acquisitions. Some hold only leases or conservation easements and own no actual property. They get their caves cheap, but they don't get many caves and their protection may not be very secure. The SCCi is unique among cave conservancies in that we aggressively try

to buy property at fair market value. What we can't buy, we try to lease.

This approach is obviously working for us, but it is extremely capital-intensive compared to the methods traditionally used to acquire caves or other conservation property. Leases are good, but it's not hard to terminate a lease, so the protection isn't very secure. Conservation easements have a lot of promise, but they are complicated and time-consuming to implement. There are also significant risks related to costs of enforcement when ownership of easement-protected property changes hands. In the end, it comes down to private ownership of land—one of the fundamental principles of our society. The best way to protect something is to own it, don't you think? And sure, we'll take a donated cave any time we can get one, but that's just it—you can't get them very often. If you are serious about owning caves, and I mean *lots* of caves, there is no alternative to going out there and buying them. It's the American Way.

Many of the people who write want to know what else they can do to help besides donating money. There are countless things that we need help with on a regular basis, such as organizing work days and cave cleanups on our properties, designing brochures and artwork, building signs and information kiosks, and working the SCCi booth at caving events. But the bottom line is that it takes cold, hard, cash to buy land and caves. Some folks don't like that part. "Money, money, money," they say. "That's all you care about." But like it or not, you can't become the owner of very many caves without it. Give money, help raise money, or do both—that's what it takes.

Our targeted fund raising programs are very popular and have been crucial to our Neversink and Kenamer purchases. But they take a lot of work to administer, cost a significant amount for shirts, certificates, stickers, and the like., and bring in money only at irregular intervals (mainly at conventions like SERA and TAG). We can't plan in advance when we don't know how much we will raise, and it's difficult to prioritize acquisitions without that kind of long range planning and budgeting. We started our credit-card-based Sustaining Contribution program to address that problem, and to ensure a steady cash flow to cover monthly and quarterly mortgage payments. That program is now generating over \$2,500 per month and covering about $\frac{2}{3}$ of our regular loan payments. Hopefully, the donors will keep their support coming as the current loans are retired and new purchases are made.

It takes a combination of regular sustained giving and targeted fundraising to make a continuing acquisition program work. Naturally, we are busting our butts to get all the outside grants that we can from conservation and wildlife organizations, philanthropic foundations, corporate sponsors, and so forth. But they don't make up the bulk of the money, cavers do.

I don't want to seem chauvinistic here. The Southeastern Cave Conservancy is certainly not the only successful cave conservancy around. But I have spent some time looking into the activities and operation of most of the other cave conservancies in America, and it is obvious that many have potential beyond their current circumstances. What does it take to make the quantum leap forward? Vision. Passion. Confidence. Maybe a dash of bravado. Be bold and take risks. When we see someone step up and make a commitment, we are drawn to follow. Join your local cave conservancy. Pick a special cave in your area and come up with a proposal to buy it. Believe in your heart that your fellow

cavers will back you up—they will! It's working for the SCCi and it can work for you. We'll be glad to help anyone who asks. There is nothing preventing cavers from owning, managing, and protecting caves all across America.

Consider for a moment the amount of money required to pay for the SCCi acquisitions described above. The total cost of these properties is well over \$200,000. We can not raise that much money in a single year, no matter how many "Piece of the Cave" packages we try to sell. We have to finance these acquisitions with loans or owner financing, which means making monthly payments. Can't we all spare a few dollars a month to buy and preserve caves? Just 200 people giving \$5.00 per month on a credit card can generate enough cash to cover the payments on \$200,000 in mortgage loans. For only \$5.00 per month you can finance the acquisition of hundreds of acres of cave lands. That's what I call leverage! It's working for the SCCi, and it can work for you.

And that's what it's all about: Buying Caves for the Future.