

The Western Cave Conservancy

Protecting the West's Last Frontier

Vol 1 No 2 Spring 2004

Millerton Lake Caves Alert!

Many of our members are familiar with the Millerton Lake Caves on the San Joaquin River. What they may not realize is that new water projects threaten to permanently drown this world-class granite cave system. Read on for more information and a call to action.

The Caves

The cave system formed when Big Sandy Creek cut a deep, narrow channel through fractures in granitic rock. Unlike "purgatory caves" comprised of the spaces between boulders, the three caves in the Millerton Lake system are characterized by an active stream burbling through tall canyon passages with beautifully sculpted walls and large potholes and pools. Due to offsets in the controlling fractures, the roofs are often bedrock rather than boulders.



Photo: Dave Bunnell www.goodearthgraphics.com

Originally brought to the attention of speleologists in 1962, the system was thoroughly explored from 1983-1990 by members of the National Speleological Society (NSS) and surveyed to over 1.3 km. Articles in the California Caver and NSS News (April 1986, June 1997) have documented their efforts. Since then, the system has become a popular recreational destination, and many well-traveled cavers regard it as the finest of its kind in the world.

People assumed the caves would be around forever...but in late March, Paul Martzen (regional coordinator in Fresno for American Whitewater) alerted WCC and members of the caving community to a feasibility study now being conducted for

new reservoirs in the upper San Joaquin watershed. Several of the project alternatives would permanently flood the Millerton Lake Caves.

Water Wars

Ironically, the threat springs from a bittersweet environmental victory: the 2000 CalFed Record of Decision. The result of six years of acrimonious negotiations between environmentalists, urban and agricultural water districts and others affected by Sacramento-San Joaquin Valley water use, the plan laid out by CalFed was a compromise many had thought impossible to attain, bringing to a close one of the fiercest battles in the "water wars" of the twentieth century.

The CalFed program aims to restore ecological health to the

California Delta ecosystem while improving the quality and reliability of water deliveries to consumers. An important component is restoring continuous flows to the San Joaquin River, formerly the southernmost Chinook salmon run in North America. Since the 1940s when Friant Dam was built, more than ten miles of the San Joaquin (the second-longest river in California) is left dry most of the year, and lower stretches watered by agricultural runoff are badly polluted. While Millerton Lake water has been absolutely essential for irrigating nearly one million

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acres of farmland in the San Joaquin Valley and in supplying much of Fresno and other communities' drinking water, it has been at the expense of the river and Delta.

The method agreed upon to return water to the lower San Joaquin was to increase surface storage in the region, either by enlarging Millerton Lake or an equivalent alternative. New water storage would increase flood season capacity and thus enable regular releases to the river year-round.

The Threat

CalFed's goals are worthy and local political support for more water storage is very strong. Categorically opposing all the proposed reservoir projects would likely be futile, and could potentially jeopardize the delicate truce forged by CalFed that will make Delta restoration possible.

However, our input can make a crucial difference: the Upper San Joaquin River Basin Storage Investigation team is studying several options, and we can ensure that the caves are not overlooked in its decision.

Flooding the Millerton Lake caves will be impossible to "mitigate." These unusual hard-rock caves are an important recreational resource that cannot be replaced or relocated. They are the most outstanding caves of their type known in California, and among the finest anywhere. Given their isolation, the caves may support an endemic fauna, but have never been adequately studied.

Phase 1 of the feasibility study, completed at the end of 2003 (<http://www.usbr.gov/mp/scao/storage>) selected seven storage projects for further investigation. Ten other projects were rejected on environmental or technical grounds. Those remaining on the drawing board are:

- ◆ Temperance Flat: the River Mile 274 and 279 dam sites downstream of the

Millerton Lake Caves. With maximum pool levels at 1,100 and 1,300 feet elevation, either of these reservoirs will put the entire cave system hundreds of feet underwater.

- ◆ Raising Friant Dam: three possible dam crests are being modeled; the highest, at 718 feet elevation, will flood Lower Millerton Lake Cave and the Grand Canyon Passage of Middle Cave.



- ◆ Fine Gold Creek: with a maximum pool level at 1,100 feet elevation, a proposed reservoir here could flood a number of caves reported from that watershed.

- ◆ Other options not affecting known caves: a dam at RM 286 on the San Joaquin, enlarging Mammoth Pool, and a new reservoir in Yokohl Valley.

The project investigators are considering many factors. Potential for restoring river

flows, improvement of water quality and water supply reliability, whitewater rafting runs, productive hydropower plants, pristine riparian habitat, archaeological and historical sites, technical and economic factors, existing water contracts: all these are being weighed in the balance...but not the caves, until now.

We Need Your Help

In June, the Upper San Joaquin River Basin Storage Investigation is scheduled to release its Alternatives Report, identifying the final set of alternatives to be studied. The Phase 2 Investigation Report, providing a preliminary analysis of costs, benefits and environmental impacts of each of the final alternatives, will be released in December 2004. The Draft EIS/EIR is scheduled for completion in June 2005, but we certainly don't want to wait for the public comment period to weigh in.

We urge our members and everyone familiar with the Millerton Lake Caves to write the investigators to let them know how important the caves are. Until last March, the investigators were completely unaware of the existence of the caves, let alone their significance. Consequently, the caves

are unlikely to have played a major role in their selection of final alternatives.

Although we are late to the table, it's up to us, and to you, to assure that the Investigation Report and draft EIS/EIR will not neglect cave resources. Don't let the Millerton Lake Cave system go down without a fighting chance!

We know writing letters is hard for many people, but a simple letter can make a big difference. Below is a

sample, but we suggest personalizing your letter using your own experiences and feelings, or even better, writing a letter from scratch. Mail a copy to each of these people:

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MWH Americas, Inc.
100 Howe Avenue, Suite 210 South
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Phone: (916) 978-5070

SAMPLE LETTER:

RE: Upper San Joaquin River Basin Storage Investigation

Dear (Mr/Ms) _____,

I just learned of the danger posed to the Millerton Lake Caves by several of the upper San Joaquin storage proposals under study. I urge you to include the caves in your team's evaluation of which storage options to choose. While I support restoring the lower San Joaquin and improving water quality and reliability, I feel strongly that we must not overlook the importance of these unusual caves in doing so.

Several of the options (raising Friant Dam and the RM 274 and RM 279 Temperance Flat options) would inundate some of the world's most significant and spectacular granite caves.

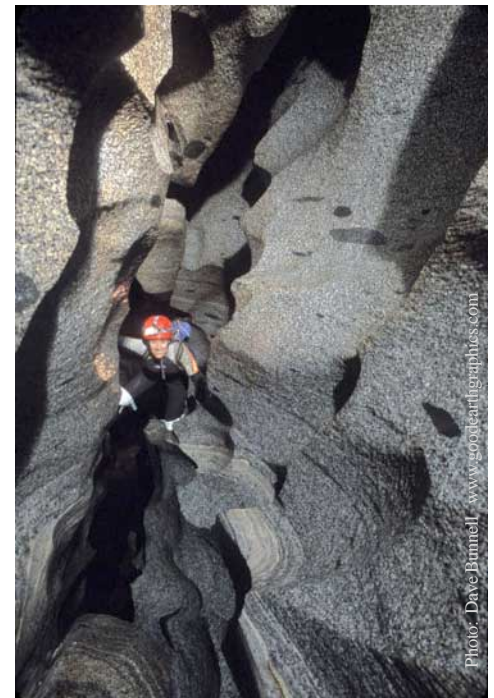
I have been visiting these caves for ____ years. I love/enjoy/value them because _____. I would hate to see them flooded because _____.

Also, I request that a thorough biological assessment of the caves be undertaken. Similarly isolated western caves have been found to harbor invertebrates found nowhere else.

The loss of the Millerton Lake caves cannot be mitigated. They are a rare type of cave, occurring as they do in granite as opposed to limestone, and would be an irreplaceable loss if flooded.

I value your time and consideration, and would appreciate any opportunity to help you and your team members learn about these important caves. I'd also like to receive progress updates and meeting notifications.

Thank you,



The WCC Is Growing!

Amazing Statistics for Your Edification

To date we have 200 members households and organizations. Of these, 135 are from California, 14 from Oregon, 10 from Washington, 8 from Nevada, 9 from Arizona, 6 from Utah, 1 from Idaho, and 17 from other states. Additional people from Western States have made pledges contingent on certain cave acquisitions.

Of these 200 members, 198 are Founding Members.

The WCC website has attracted 606 visitors. Most visitors were from North America with a smattering from Europe, Australia, and South America. Most of the North American visits came from the following states, starting with the most hits: Virginia, California, Colorado, and Massachusetts.

How to Buy a Cave

Any new land trust faces difficulties getting its first properties and establishing credibility. The “acquisition” process—buying or otherwise obtaining permanent protection for threatened caves—is lengthy, complex, and fraught with uncertainty and legal peril.

WCC is pursuing a vigorous acquisitions program, with the help of dedicated volunteers on two committees: Research and Acquisition. We’d like to give you some insight into their work, and then update you on current news.

Selecting projects

Our policy is to proactively approach landowners, building relationships now—not ten years down the line when a threat is imminent. Still, we have limited resources and must prioritize our projects.

Many factors are involved: Which caves are actually on private land? For a given cave, could we raise enough money? Is there an opportunity to work with other land trusts or public agencies? How would the acquisition benefit the public—that is, how significant is the cave in terms of biota, archaeological deposits, geologic interest, recreational value, etc.? Are there special management challenges?

Choosing a conservation method

Many options exist: purchasing the land, obtaining a lease or a conservation easement, or forging a management agreement. Some options offer tax benefits to the landowner. Which options would they accept? Which is best?

Walking the property

Where are the boundaries? Has the cave been surveyed to ensure that it is indeed on the property? Are there potential environmental hazards, such as old oil tanks or mysterious 55-gallon drums? If in doubt, we need a Phase I environ-

mental assessment to avoid a toxic waste nightmare.

Title search

Is there a cloud on the title? Are mineral rights—surface and subsurface—included? What about timber and water rights? What easements are in effect, and how might they impact the cave? Are there liens on the property?

Negotiating a price

First, of course, we have to bring the owner to the negotiating table, which may be difficult since we usually must initiate contact. Then, can we agree on a conservation method? Can we negotiate a price? Has WCC obtained an appraisal giving the fair market value range?

Closing the deal

Do we have title insurance? Has our lawyer reviewed the documents? Have they been recorded properly?

Stewardship

The term “stewardship” refers to managing a property now and into the far future. First, we must identify the stakeholders, such as cavers, scientists, and neighbors, and involve them in designing a management plan. How will conflicting interests be balanced? How much will stewardship cost, and where will the money (and volunteers) come from?

Now you have an idea of the process. Currently we are pursuing six acquisition projects in California and Oregon. We can’t mention most of them because they involve delicate negotiations and/or might take years to come to fruition (if ever). We don’t want to raise your hopes prematurely.

However, we have made two projects public:

Rippled Cave (central California): the situation is very delicate. We can only say that significant obstacles remain, but we’re making progress and are

optimistic about preserving access to this popular cave.

Marble Mountain Quarry Cave (southern Oregon): To our relief, the holding company has finally sold the property. That’s good because the WCC couldn’t afford the entire 642 acres, whereas the new owner appears to be open to selling just the cave. We got to the negotiating table by sending a new letter of intent making an offer for 80 acres (the minimum lot size) plus the cost of the split. We’ve since discussed other options with the owner, and it’s likely some sort of deal can be reached.

You can help our acquisition efforts. Of course your monetary support is crucial, but we also need your eyes and ears. If you learn of an opportunity to protect a western cave, let us know. We’re especially hoping for projects in Washington, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona. Be assured of our discretion—the conservancy’s staff and board members have many years experience dealing with very sensitive archaeological, scientific, and cave data. Also, we’d appreciate your help if you can offer legal or professional expertise.

Contact Martin Haye, acquisitions chair: (831) 421-0430, mhay@westerncaves.org, or Rolf Aalbu, research chair: raalbu@westerncaves.org.

Be sure to check out the Western Cave Conservancy website:

<http://www.westerncaves.org>.

It’s the place to go for all the latest information about WCC acquisitions, activities, and history, and it boasts a gallery of photographs of threatened, protected, or otherwise interesting caves.

Our thanks to webmaster Matt Bowers, matt66@thirdmedia.com, for both hosting and managing the site, and Peri Frantz, peri@frantzfamily.us, for content coordination.



Letter from the President

Hello!

Greetings from the Western Cave Conservancy. We've had a busy few months since we sent out our last newsletter. It

has been a time of excitement and frustration. Our membership campaign has been a great success and many have given us strong statements of support. Our hope of acquiring a property in our first full year of operation has proven unrealistic, which, frankly, has left us feeling very frustrated. Nevertheless, we have been busy on many fronts, are still working hard on current projects, and have faith that our efforts will bear fruit in the not-too-distant future.

The recent Founding Members Campaign has been a heartwarming success. We now have 274 individual members (consisting of 200 households or organizations), representing most of the western states. We feel very fortunate to have such outstanding support. Other conservancies and land trusts tell us this response is exceptional, especially considering the very specific nature of our mission.

Recently, three of us, Martin Haye, Daniel Snyder, and myself, attended a two-day Cave Conservancies Forum in Lewisberg, West Virginia. Approximately 50 individuals from conservancies and similar organizations were there. We attended a variety of presentations and had many opportunities to network and discuss issues in a group format. We made great contacts with people who have been active in the cave conservancy business a lot longer than we have. Everyone we met was very encouraging and eager to share his or her personal experience and knowledge. All in all, it was time well spent.

We are learning that our activities can and should be wide ranging. As you see in this issue, our focus is not strictly on the acquisition of cave properties. Other ways to promote cave protection can include acting as a public advocate for the protection of a threatened cave and providing support for cave conservation work for a cave on public land. Establishing a solid reputation as an organization knowledgeable about cave conservation with a ready pool of volunteers will undoubtedly lead to future acquisitions or formal management agreements.

Please join us in making your voice heard in the fight to protect the Millerton Lakes Caves, and volunteer on the Crystal Cave project next fall. Thank you for your faith and support. Don't hesitate to contact us by phone or email if you have ideas or questions.

Marianne L. Russo

President, Western Cave Conservancy

A Letter from a WCC Member

I have been thinking a lot lately about just why, as an ancient caver (I recently joined the GSS*), I should contribute toward the purchase of caves that I, in great likelihood, will never see the insides of. Caving (or is it carbide?) has been in my blood for over 35 years. I still remember the excitement of crawling and climbing through passages that were new to me. Even though I knew that the cave I was in had received many visitors in the past, the experience was one of having the sense of being there first. Even to this day, I marvel at the attributes of every commercial cave I visit, as long as the guide just lets me look and doesn't get too cutesy with the presentation.

When I go to a national convention, I like to attend the exploration sessions and listen to the excitement in the voices of the presenters as they tell about their new discoveries and what makes any cave a unique experience. So it is with these fond memories and expected vicarious trips to uncharted caves, that I deem it is necessary to keep as many caves available for future generations. Land is just being gobbled up into private holding too fast. In the 35-plus years that I have been actively involved I have seen so much property go from "open" to "closed to the public."

So I have made a personal commitment (to myself, of course) to contribute on a regular basis to the Western Cave Conservancy with the hope that caves that are now in private ownership can be purchased and preserved for future cavers.

Bill Papke

*Geriatric Speleological Society

Come Be a Part of the 2004 Crystal Cave Restoration Project

Members of the Western Cave Conservancy are invited to participate in the 10-day 2004 Crystal Cave Restoration in Sequoia National Park, California. This has been an ongoing project for nearly 10 years. This year, due to nearly \$14,000 in funding from the Western Region of the National Park Service, the work will be greatly expanded. The money is being provided as part of a "Challenge Cost Share," whereby volunteer efforts are matched with money from the National Park Service. Most of the funding is for restoration equipment and manufactured infrastructure.

There will be three projects: hose cleaning in the middle levels of the cave, removal of the abandoned bathrooms in the cave, and restoration of the Organ Room. Of utmost importance is the safety of all participants. Everyone must be cautious with heavy loads, difficult footing, visibility inside the cave, and other challenges. Daily safety briefings will be held all week in the morning before work begins.

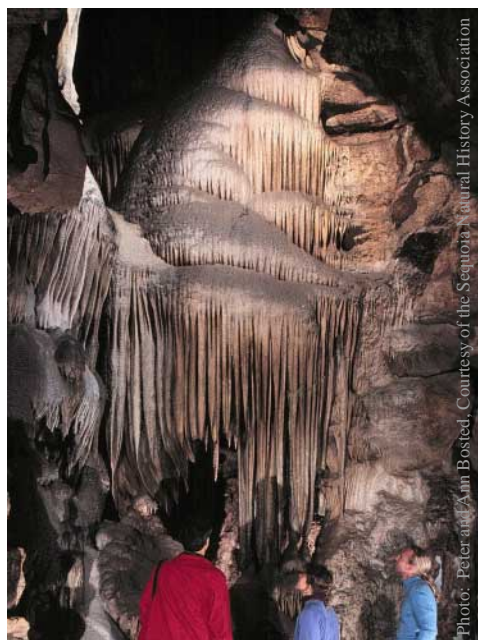


Photo: Peter and Ann Bosted, Courtesy of the Sequoia Natural History Association

Crystal Cave is approximately 50° F and generally dry. However, participants in the hose cleaning should plan on getting very wet. All areas of the

cave to be restored are horizontal, although there are challenging climbs in a few areas. Cave trips will be available for participants in the restoration, but



Photo: Bill Frantz

the timing, duration, and character of such trips will be defined by the availability of park-approved trip leaders. Trips to other caves in the area, some of which are vertical, will also be available pending resolution of the same restrictions as the trips to Crystal Cave.

The restoration is from Saturday, October 23 through Sunday, October 31. On Saturday evening, October 30, there will be a grand Halloween-themed party to celebrate the restoration of Crystal Cave and thank participants.

You need to make a reservation in order to participate. Though people are not expected to be able to stay and participate for all ten days, if anyone could stay all week, it would be great! The goal is to have approximately 30 people (not counting children and non-participating companions) on site to help throughout the week. If you want to participate, but can only help on the weekends, please contact us soon to

reserve a spot. There will be slots for more than 30 people during the final weekend, which includes the party and final cleanup. If you reserve a slot and later find that you cannot make it, please inform us of your cancellation so that others may participate.

Participants can camp in the cave parking lot and are responsible for their own food. Porta-potties and some potable water will be provided. Bears are a significant concern in Sequoia National Park, and participants in the restoration are expected to follow all bear regulations.

The restoration weekend will be advertised nationwide, but not until after Western Region and Western Cave Conservancy members have a chance to sign up for the event.

For more information or to reserve a spot in the restoration, please contact Joel Despain: (559) 565-3717, joel_despain@nps.gov, or Shane Fryer: (559) 565-4271, shane_fryer@nps.gov.

Thank you in advance for making the 2004 Crystal Cave Restoration a success!



Photo: Bill Frantz