

The Western Cave Conservancy

Protecting the West's Last Frontier

Vol 1 No 3

Summer 2004

New Light on M2 Cave

Note that previous newsletters referred to M2 cave by a different name. WCC's editorial policy, which already disallowed publishing specific cave locations, now also discourages using overly location-specific names.

Nearly a year ago WCC launched a campaign to secure permanent protection for an important cave in southern Oregon, arguably the most significant and threatened cave remaining on private land in that state. As part of ongoing negotiations to protect the cave, in early September the owners invited WCC representatives to inspect it. M2 cave was last opened to organized cavers in 1997, and we wanted to determine whether the vandals and rock hounds that plagued it in the 1980s and early '90s had regained access in the intervening years.

During our short visit, we found that the cave has indeed suffered damage since 1997. Trash and blankets sullied the pools and passages, and at least one prominent stalagmite has been removed. It is possible the vandals entered with



Photo: Rolf Aalbu

ADD YOUR VOICE OF SUPPORT FOR SAVING M2 CAVE!

Join others who have, to date, pledged a total of more than \$10,000 to give WCC financial leverage in its negotiations. A downloadable form is available on our web site at:

http://www.westerncaves.org/docs/M2_Pledge_Form.pdf

the permission of the owner, as he had secured the property and buried the cave entrance under many tons of rocks and boulders.

Despite the old and new damage, M2's surprisingly spacious passages contained many intact formations including fragile soda straws, stalagmites, and delicately terraced flowstone. Often they were vividly colored and contrasted beautifully against dark bedrock. We saw only half the cave and none of the lower level, but we did have time to take the accompanying photograph (more available in color on our website.) Also visible are vestiges of the 1937 commercialization attempt.

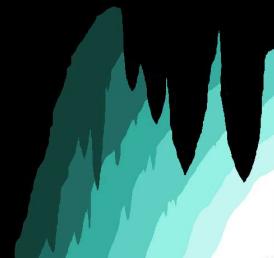
We left with renewed determination to see M2 Cave

properly managed, cleaned up, and, to the extent possible, restored. Most of the cave will never again appear pristine, but it remains and can continue to be beautiful. We are optimistic that with time, effort, and sincere negotiations, WCC will be able to save this important Oregon cave.

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A Brief History of Cave Conservation in the West

by Bruce Rogers and Pat Helton

Editors note: This article describes some, but by no means all of the cave conservation efforts that preceded the founding of the Western Cave Conservancy. However, as the authors have lamented, to adequately describe the history of Cave Conservation in the Western U.S. is a task far beyond the scope (and room) of this publication. Hopefully in the future, in some other venue, we will be able to provide a more complete history by the authors.

By the middle 1870s, the human tide of the 1849 Gold Rush had ebbed and life regained a more normal pace. California's caves, however, had paid a terrible price. Many of the pristine caves had suffered through the "we selected good specimens and moved on" mentality and were shells of their former selves. We know even less about the biota of the caves, save it must have been a rude shock to the critters when some 90,000 miners roared into the region, tearing up the earth itself, all hell-bent on getting rich quick.

The first organized caving in the Far West began with the University of California's efforts in the Pleistocene bone caves of Northern California between 1901 and 1908. While their thrust was paleontology, they recognized that preservation of these cave sites was important for future studies. With the discovery of the Rancho La Brea tar pit deposits in 1908, paleontologist's attention shifted to these fabulously rich deposits and the Northern California bone caves were relegated to history. Since most of the Klamath and northern Sierra caves were already on Federal land, they were thought to be relatively immune from vandalism, a grievous misconception given the actions of visitors to these caves over the next half-century.

Cave studies and conservation in the Far West lay idle for nearly 40 years until Erwin Bischoff began solo caving in California. Bischoff learned of the newly formed National Speleological Society (NSS) in 1941, joined, and set to compiling the first California cave list between 1940 and 1946. While it is hard to read between the lines of Erwin's few writings, we

can surmise his thoughts about the future of California's caves. Erwin was basically a conservationist and while compiling a list may have made the caves known to uncaring visitors, it also provided the roots for an informed and concerned caving community. This informed community could then act as advocates for the caves' management and preservation. Generous with his cave knowledge with pioneer NSS grottos in the state such as Southern California and Stanford, Erwin was truly the Father of California Speleology and cave conservation.

With the establishment of the Stanford and Southern California Grottos in 1948, cavers began to compile greater amounts of cave data and take stock of what spelean wonders were there for the exploring. The near legendary Stanford Grotto in particular was far-sighted in its attempts to compile as much information as possible about the current status of California caves. With the Stanford Grotto disbandment in 1954, a few hard-core members formed the Western Speleological Institute to carry on the high caliber work. This organization rather quickly transformed into Cave Research Associates (CRA).

Their credo was extremely conservative for the time, advocating scholarly research and publication along with sport caving while publishing virtually no "cave lists" as we know them today. They cautioned against even publicizing cave names for, as Ray de Sassure cautioned in 1953:

It must be remembered also that once publicity has been given to a cave, it can never be withdrawn, as numerous examples will instantly show. The quickest way to invite destruction, total destruction, of any of the above sites is to publicize them, lock them for a period, then, withdrawing the protection, permit uncontrolled access.

Observing the destruction wrought upon California's caves up to that point, they had a chilling view into the possible future of the state's caving legacy.

At about the same time, a few more liberal members of the recently inactivated Stanford Grotto combined forces with other NSS members and formed the Western Speleological Survey. This group, led by Bill Halliday, quickly morphed into the California Speleological Survey. Similar to Cave Research Associates, they began to compile a large volume on caves in California. Unlike CRA, these efforts were for eventual publication. Initially it was to be an NSS Bulletin, but production problems scuttled that plan. Then it was to come out as a California Division of Mines and Geology Bulletin, but funding problems forced abandonment of that scheme as well.

By ten years later in the 1960s, California's caves were showing a great deal of wear and tear and some cavers began to feel uneasy about their future. Land was being bought up in the Mother Lode, southern Sierra Foothills, and even in the far northern volcanic country. The rush was to escape the San Francisco Bay and Los Angeles Basin megalopolis and retreat into the more rural expanses of the state. With this rural population boom came the first blossoming of what we now call ecotourism. Outfitters ran groups down semi-pristine rivers, took them backpacking in the high sierra, and also took them into caves for pay.

The organized caving community itself was undergoing a population boom as the Baby Boomers acquired the time and funds to adopt a more "natural" mode of recreation. Political awareness spilled over into conservation awareness and the youth of the U.S. became aware of the threats unbridled development posed to the natural world. A flurry of new NSS Grottos and other unaligned caving groups sprung up in the middle 1960s to 1970s. Some cavers were uneasy about the caver population boom, but with cave access still fairly open, nothing was done to prepare for the inevitable crunch of too many cavers, too few caves, and way too many liability-shy landowners.

Slowly and almost imperceptibly, access to some of the better-known caves in the Mother Lode and other cave-rich areas was withdrawn, forcing cavers into a "polite trespass" mode of cave visitation. Nearly 80 caves throughout the Sierra Nevada and Coast Ranges became either closed to access or were quietly visited on a "don't ask, don't tell" basis. At least 20 caves have been either blasted shut or quarried away—resources and recreation sites lost forever. Most of the larger caves in the southern Sierra were on public land, but there, too, access began to be selective with the Federal and State managers restricting what was, up to that time, unfettered access. While East Coast cavers were starting to negotiate for cave access with private landowners and outright purchase of caves, Western cavers were more reluctant to address the loss of

access to caves since many of these were on public land.

Over the years, cavers had become habituated to politely trespassing on many cave-containing private landholdings. This has become and will increasingly become more difficult as the widening spread of rural development and remote surveillance of otherwise inaccessible locations accelerates. Caves to which visitation has been successfully prevented may fade from caving community's collective consciousness. It will be thus that the caves are left without advocates in the event they are threatened by mining, clear-cut logging, or simple residential development. Caves to which no legitimate access exists are denied proper management and experience steady aesthetic and habitat degradation from well-meaning, but careless or ignorant, trespassers.

In the early to middle 1970s several Mother Lode Grotto members, among them Dave Cowan, attempted to start a California Cave Conservancy intending to buy up a few of the more popular caves. This effort, while laudable, was doomed from the start by a lack of cash and a still nascent conservation ethic that failed to see the threat to most of caves on private land looming at the horizon and already spilling into the Mother Lode. The California Region of the NSS debated the idea of cave access agreements and even possible cave purchase, but little came from it. The incorporation of Nevada into the California Region made a name change to the California-Nevada Region, and with the addition of more grottos in 1973, the name changed to the Western Region. Despite this larger member base, only a small amount of constructive action was undertaken. Individual cavers or small groups of cavers, with little region-wide participation, took on the brunt of dealing with increasingly contentious cave access/land owner awareness situations.

The confluence of the Main and South Forks of the Stanislaus River lies nearly in the middle of the Mother Lode cave area. The building of the New Melones Reservoir along the middle reach of the Stanislaus River in the late 1970s resulted in several cave areas being acquired by

the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and administrated by the Bureau of Reclamation. Despite the reports resulting from this project being essentially a data base of cave locations and descriptions, they did point out caves and cave areas that should be protected to preserve their rich speleological resources for future studies. While technically protected, the caves were never managed in a conservation-oriented manner.

With the completion of the Cataract Quarry in the 1970s, a large area along the Stanislaus River canyon was fast disappearing into the crushers as raw material for cement production. Access to popular caves in and around the quarry was restricted and several caves were destroyed as the quarry enlarged. These actions finally tilted the balance of benign neglect to active concern for preserving the Mother Lode caves.

By 1979, at least one NSS member had taken steps to preserve California caves. Ralph Squire of the Stanislaus Speleological Association Grotto moved to Columbia in the Mother Lode and purchased the old Columbia Marble (Bell Hill) Quarry as a travel trailer park. Now located in the heart of the Mother Lode cave belt, he started the Columbia Grotto of the NSS. In addition to owning a viable recreational area, Ralph researched the area, finding old reports of caves and fissures in the Bell Hill Quarry. His action, along with Cowan's constant urging for some sort of collective inter-grotto or regional action, while not generally being recognized as an initial step in cave conservation, was instrumental in beginning to alter caver's thinking about buying caves as conservation areas.

In the 1980s, the availability of tourist-oriented travel and relatively cheap airfares lured cavers far afield from their homes. Expeditions to other U.S. classic cave areas and, increasingly, foreign countries became commonplace. With these enlarged horizons of apparently endless, intact caves, many cavers ceased visiting their local caves. By the end of the 1980s many of the popular regional caves were further stripped of their remaining decorations and their cave life

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Millerton Lake Update

Last May, we asked our members to write letters to the Upper San Joaquin River Basin Storage investigation, expressing the desire that these world-class granite caves be preserved from flooding by reservoir projects now under study. The investigators have informed us that they have received letters from all over the United States and are now "well aware of the concerns of spelunkers."

Jamil Ibrahim, the hydrologist at MWH America (consultants for the storage investigation) contacted the Conservancy in July for further information about the caves. Thanks are due to Dave Bunnell, editor of the NSS News, for providing a color copy of Bob Richards' 1996 map of the main system.

Volunteers from the Conservancy will be guiding Mr. Ibrahim and other investigators through the caves as early as this fall. Since the project personnel have no caving experience, we'd like to provide them a safe ratio of experienced cavers to beginners. If interested, please contact the WCC office at mail@westerncaves.org and tell us your experience and availability for the months of October and November. This

will be an excellent opportunity to advocate for the caves in person.

Not only have our members been heard, there is a positive development in the reservoir investigation. PG&E, unhappy at the prospect of losing the Kerkhoff #2 and other powerhouses in the project area, has proposed several new alterna-



Photo: Dave Bunnell www.godearthgraphics.com

tives that the investigators are now studying. Details have not been released, but Mr. Ibrahim informs us that the new proposals would not threaten the Millerton Lake caves.

As a result of this development and in order to respond to public comments

made during scoping meetings last spring, the investigation schedule has been pushed back. A scoping report is due out shortly, and the Final Alternatives Report, originally to have been released in June, is now due at the end of October. The draft EIS/EIR will not be completed until fall 2007, more than two years later than originally scheduled. This allows advocates for the caves valuable time to prepare a variety of responses to the threat.

Comments continue to be welcomed by the investigation team. Jason Phillips has departed as Project Manager for the Bureau of Reclamation, and comments should now be addressed to the following:

Brian Zewe
Project Manager
Bureau of Reclamation,
Mid-Pacific Region
2800 Cottage Way
Sacramento, CA 95825
Email: bzewe@mp.usbr.gov
Phone: (916) 978-5070

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History, continued from page 3

massively impacted by a generation of new cavers with a nihilistic philosophy of "why bother with cave conservation, none of this will survive anyway." The press of continued development of the Mother Lode for recreational vacation cabins and year-round homes increasingly surfaced as not only denial of access to some favored caves by liability-conscious owners, but also older access routes to some caves were shut off due to new housing developments. While many cavers in the Region privately supported a more conservation-oriented approach along with responsibility-enhancing alterations in caving styles and techniques, few were willing to publicly support or engage in these mores or support purchase or lease

of caves. Still, despite some major setbacks, individual cavers and small groups of cavers continued to actively negotiate with landowners for access to their caves, ensuring a future for California caving.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the dwindling access to caves and the lowering of expectations of how pristine these caves were reached a flash point. A region-wide drive to construct a cave research center in Lava Beds National Monument on the Oregon border had been mobilized. NSS Western Region members provided the bulk of the nearly quarter million dollars required to build the center. Regional cavers were thus energized (and slightly amazed) by their own collective ability to fund such a large ticket project. At the same time, members

of several grottos in the Western Region began to formulate a cave conservation organization of region-wide scope. A board of respected cavers and scientists was assembled, and they selected Marianne Russo as president. With these actions, the Western Cave Conservancy (WCC) was born.

With a regional scope, the WCC has pursued several major projects including multiple cave purchases (underway even as you read this article) and cave access and management agreements. With adequate funding in hand to initiate these activities and the drive of members to assist, the future of the WCC follows a long record of cave conservation concerns among Pacific Slope cavers.

Rippled Cave Update

Since its inception, the Conservancy has been trying to purchase Rippled Cave in central California. This process continues and we still hope for success, though the news is mixed.

A new neighbor to the property, upset with the heavy use the cave receives, has launched his own campaign to purchase the property. If he succeeds, we fear that little or no visitation will be allowed, placing this beloved cave permanently beyond the reach to those who value it.

WCC has been contacting all of Rippled Cave's neighbors, and has committed to addressing their concerns should we succeed in purchasing the property. These concerns include the presence of large groups of strangers on the property without adequate notice to the neighbors, the need to resurface the shared access road, use of the cave after dark, and unauthorized vehicles parking on neighboring properties or blocking the road. Should WCC succeed in acquiring the property, various management tools will be available that are not now, and we are confident we can satisfy the neighbors without closing the cave.

On a positive note, WCC has gathered over \$22,000 in pledges plus a \$500 donation to support the purchase, even before launching a pledge campaign. We urge everyone interested in Rippled Cave to pledge now and help us to save this extremely important Mother Lode cave from permanent closure.

http://www.westerncaves.org/docs/Rippled_Pledge_Form.pdf



Letter from the President

Greetings!

I hope you all had a busy, productive, and enjoyable summer. Fall is fast approaching and so is membership renewal time! Your support and encouragement throughout this last year have made a great difference for our organization. Knowing we have the backing and trust of so many people gives us great confidence and assures us that there are enough people committed to getting the job done. As we did last year, we are again appealing to the caving community by attending the National Speleological Society's Western Regional Meeting, where we are, as a fundraiser, providing a banquet dinner. During the meal, we will provide attendees with an update on the conservancy's activities and plans. We hope you can make it.

Another thing you can do if you attend the Regional is renew your WCC membership in person. We hope many people will take advantage of this and save postage costs. This year we have a special gift available for everyone who renews at the Regional. It is a lovely cloisonné WCC Logo pin, certain to please cavers and pin collectors! After the Regional weekend, this pin will only be given to members joining at the \$40 level or higher. So join us at the Regional, renew your membership (or join the WCC for the first time), get a pin, and save trees and money by reducing paper mail.

We have now activated our Stewardship Committee, which will oversee management activities for all future properties. Director Joel Despain is the chair of this committee and is already busy outlining its goals, general policies, and management plan development standards. Directors Russo and Johnson and volunteer Caroline Brown are the other current committee members. There is certainly room for other interested individuals. We are looking for volunteers with land or cave management experience, a strong interest in this aspect of conservancy activities, or specialty skills such as construction, welding or heavy equipment operation. Stewardship is a broad and multi-faceted undertaking and there will be room for many levels of participation and for a wide variety of skills. Contact Joel through our website to indicate your interest and skill sets.

Marianne Russo

President, Western Cave Conservancy

Cave Gating Project Coming Up in November

Help the National Park Service Protect Caves

There is another big project at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks this fall—the building and installation of three cave gates. There will be new gates for Clough, Soldiers, and the Red Belly entrance of Crystal. These gates should increase security at park caves following recent vandalism problems, and the new gates will be bat and animal friendly.

Gate design is based on the American Cave Conservation Association (ACCA) bat-friendly style, with horizontal bars composed of three pieces of

angle stock welded together. We received special National Park service funding for this to “mitigate threats to natural resources.” Zara Environmental of Austin, TX has been contracted to do the work.

The two professionals from Zara who will be driving out from Texas need lots of assistance to complete this project. Shane Fryer, Joel Despain, and fall volunteer Coner Blanchet will be at the job sites during the work, but additional people each day would be a tremendous help.

This gate work is scheduled for November 7 through November 20.

Any and all volunteer assistance would be appreciated. If you would like to help with this gate work please contact Joel Despain: (559) 565-3717, joel_despain@nps.gov, or Shane Fryer: (559) 565-4271, shane_fryer@nps.gov.

Thank you very much. Very little would get done without wonderful cave volunteers!

See us in Sonora

In August of 2003, we took our message to the National Speleological Society (NSS) Convention in Porterville, California. There, we had an information booth, set up a consciousness-raising display (the cave graveyard) and held a fundraising banquet.

This year, we are again taking our message to the Caving community in the West. We are putting on a fundraising banquet at the NSS Western Regional Meeting in Sonora, California on Saturday evening, October 2nd.

Our menu will include hamburgers and veggie burgers with all the trimmings, beans, potato salad, honeydew melon, and dessert, all for the very reasonable price of \$10.00 for adults and \$5.00 for children 12 and under. All proceeds above the cost of the meal are to benefit conservancy projects. Accompanying the meal will be a presentation updating attendees on the conservancy's activities and plans. We are looking for assistance with serving

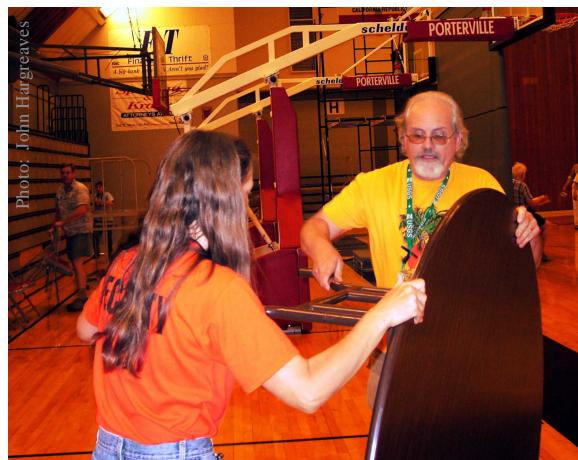


Photo: John Hargreaves
Volunteers at work at WCC's Banquet at the 2003 NSS Convention in Porterville, California



Photo: John Hargreaves

and cleaning up on Saturday.

If you can help, please email Eileen Belan: eileenb@pacbell.net, (916)344-2747, or see her at the Western Regional.

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.

Email Discussion List Up and Running

The Conservancy has launched its long-anticipated email discussion list, available only to members of the conservancy. The purpose of the list is for members to post and discuss news related to cave conservation efforts in the West, and for WCC staff to send out newsletters, volunteer opportunities, and other notifications. Posts will be moderated to keep discussions civil, relevant, and consistent with the Conservancy's goals, with zero tolerance for spam, rumor, personal attacks, innuendo, or “flame wars.”

Everyone who joined WCC (and gave us an email address) has been added to the list and should already have received a welcome message. If you didn't receive a welcome message and wish to be added to the list, please send a request to mail@westerncaves.org. Likewise, anyone wanting to be removed need only ask.