



Subject: National Speleological Society Response to Recent Cave Closures

The largest contingent of organized cave conservationists, cave scientists and cave explorers, the National Speleological Society (NSS), wishes to address ongoing concerns related to cave closures in response to COVID-19/SARS-CoV-2. The NSS strongly opposes closing access to caves on public lands.

Our mission statement:

“The National Speleological Society (NSS) is a non-profit membership organization dedicated to the scientific study of caves and karst; protecting caves and the natural contents through conservation, ownership, stewardship, and public education; and promoting responsible cave exploration and fellowship among those interested in caves.”

We are particularly troubled when measures are implemented by local, state, and federal agencies that restrict scientific, recreational, and stewardship access to caves. We are strong advocates of conservation and science as it relates to caves and surrounding lands. Many of our members enjoy exploring caves as a means of outdoor recreation, no different than hiking, biking, kayaking or other forms of outdoor enjoyment.

As the virus spread throughout the nation, we the NSS encouraged our members to temporarily limit travel and caving activities. Primarily, we intended to limit non-household individuals from meeting in groups for caving trips or organized caving activities. It was also recognized that, although rare, the potential existed for a rescue, which would necessitate the mobilization of specialty-trained cave rescue personal. While the majority of these rescuers are cavers trained by the National Cave Rescue Commission (NCRC), we understood the potential COVID-19 implications to their families and communities. Thus, we, as an organization, requested that our members limit or refrain from caving activities “just in case”.

At this time, the source of the virus is uncertain, although many early reports postulated that it had originated in bats, then jumped to an intermediary species before infecting humans. The NSS is a strong advocate for and leader in bat conservation and counts among its members internationally recognized bat experts and microbiologists specializing in viruses, some of whom are now investigating the potential interplay between bats and SARS-CoV-2. Thus far, research indicates that our native bat populations are resistant to coronaviruses¹, even SARS-CoV-2², so over-protective measures might do more harm than good.

¹ e.g. Subudhi, S et al. (2017) J Gen Virol 98(9) : 2297-2309

² e.g. Ye, Z-W et al. (2020) Int J Biol Sci 16(10) : 1686-1697

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DEDICATED TO THE EXPLORATION, STUDY, AND CONSERVATION OF CAVES

It should be noted that, overall, our membership has very limited interaction with bats. Many cave trips occur without a single bat sighting and most caves are not suitable as bat habitat. Even when seen, bats are usually at an unreachable distance and responsible cavers do not make contact with them (unless trained to do so and acting in an official capacity as part of an approved study). Bat researchers, however, are “hands on” working with bats, and thus we certainly support measures intended to protect both the native bat population and the chiropterists, such as the wearing of standard personal protective equipment during bat handling. Access to significant bat caves is already self-restricted by the caving community, which avoids bat caves during critical life-cycle events such as hibernation or maternity roosting. The contact of recreational cavers with wild bats is no different in character from that of visitors on a commercial tour cave or of the general public finding bats in their urban environments, barns, or even homes.

As some state organizations call for mandatory cave closures, several have cited the NSS as being an inspiration for this reaction. For the reasons cited above, this is a misrepresentation of our press release. Conversely, we support re-opening caves in a safe manner, consistent with our conservation practices. Our members enjoy cave exploration as a hobby or sport; and our scientists need access to caves to continue completing essential projects related to conservation and other types of research.

Please keep in mind the lessons we learned throughout the country during white-nose syndrome (WNS) cave closures—many caves suffered damage from unmonitored visitation. NSS cavers followed guidelines and stopped visiting caves while casual, uninformed visitors still entered the caves, often putting bat habitats at increased risk and vandalizing our natural resources—leaving trash, graffiti, broken speleothems, and other forms of destruction that NSS cavers later cleaned up. NSS cavers provide field stewardship to monitor, report, and protect bat populations and cave resources.

We strongly implore you to refrain from closing access to caves and allow our members to return to their stewardship duties, scientific studies, and recreational activities. The NSS has formal Memoranda of Understanding with most federal agencies such as USFS, BLM, USFWS, NPS; we welcome your requests to assist with determining reasonable access policies going forward.

Thank you for your consideration.

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