

History of cave conservation; New York State, USA

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New York cannot look with pride upon its early cave conservation history. In 1831 John Gebhard explored what was called Ball's Cave and is now called Gage Caverns. When they first found it "Its sides were covered by crystalline masses of calcareous Spar; and the roof by stalactites." Over the next few years John Bonney and John Gebhard stripped the cave of formations in the name of science sending them to museums and universities all over the US. In 1945, Sims said "Tons of rare minerals have been removed from the rooms of this cavern to adorn the cabinets of practical geologists." The collecting mentality was at its height and it would be over a century before the preservation mentality came into play. In a 1842 NY Daily Tribune, a tourist wrote "Formerly there were many stalactites dependent from the roof but they have long since been carried off." Meanwhile a spectacular cave was destroyed. We will return to Gage Caverns a little later.

Howe Caverns was also explored and developed as a show cave in the mid 19th century. Although Howe depended on the beautiful speleothems to make his living, he could hardly have sold tours in a barren tunnel of a cave, he often sold formations to tourists as souvenirs. Evidence of broken formations can be seen in many areas on and off the tourist trail today.

We have found several methods of protecting caves in New York over the years. The most successful method to date has been the acquisition of caves and then limiting the access. The second, oddly enough, is make access easier. The third is the attempt to pass State cave legislation. The protection of the ground water is tied into cave and cave life protection.

Although McFails cave and the surrounding caves and sinkholes, had been explored in the 19th century it was not until the 1960s and 70s that the cave was explored with modern techniques. The cave itself has some deterrents to vandals and trespassers. The Ack's Shack entrance is a tight narrow traverse and the 100

foot long, foot high crawl at the bottom is less than inviting. After major exploration and a breakthrough extending the length of the cave to over 5 miles, the Cornell Grotto purchased the land surrounding the entrances to the cave and donated the land to the National Speleological Society in the mid 1960s. There was a great deal of controversy over the NSS owning caves mainly because of liability issues. McFails was the NSS's first cave and the ownership problems would appear again.

A gate was placed on the Ack Shack entrance after a death from hypothermia in the entrance passage in 1968. Another cave on the property, Cave Disappointment, could not be gated because of the size of the entrance but there are so few formations in this cave that it was not deemed a problem as far as conservation is concerned though there have been rescues there.

In 1978 the Hall's Hole entrance was dug out and the land surrounding it was purchased. This entrance, although it has a 65' entrance drop, provided much easier access to the cave. A gate was placed on the entrance to protect both the foolish, who might enter the cave without the correct equipment, and the beautiful formations of the cave. It has also been used to help restrict access during winter as the cave has been found to be a major bat hibernaculum with over 5000 bats.

The purchase and gating of McFails cave has succeeded in protecting one of the most beautiful and the longest cave in the state. We have only had two forced entries into the cave in the time the gates have been in place.

Knox Cave has been known since the late 18th century. It has suffered the fate of many of the areas caves. Largely stripped of smaller formations it was still interesting enough to merit development as a show cave in the early 20th century. Boardwalks, staircases and electric lights were placed in the cave. A roller skating rink was placed outside. All of this fame would come back to haunt us in the 1970s and 80s. In 1960 the commercial venture of Knox Cave was ended. The cave changed

hands several time in the next few years finally being bought at tax auction by Dr DeLisa. The doctor had a very good relationship with local cavers and in 1970 asked them to gate the cave for him. Each lock placed on the gate lasted only days before it was broken. Too many knew of the cave, it was on some road maps until 1996.

In 1971 members of the Boston Grotto removed much of the old wood in the cave including a rotting staircase at the 20 foot entrance drop into the main room. They had brought materials to place a ladder in the entrance but it was not done soon enough. Locals and out of town inexperienced visitors climbed down clothes line, tree branches or anything else they could find to enter the cave. The parking lot became a party site with trash and beer bottles broken everywhere both in the cave and out. The local cavers tried to keep it cleaned out but it was trashed again in no time. The Knox fire department threatened to blast the cave shut as they were called to pull people out of the cave on several occasions. Dr. DeLisa attempted to donate the property to the NSS but before discussions could be complete there was a death and a major injury on May 3 1975 from falling ice at the cave's entrance.

Dr DeLisa was named in a suit and discussion of donation of the cave was halted. The NSS did not want to get involved in a cave with so many problems and recreation was not a goal, so a non-profit organisation was formed to accept donation of the cave after the suit was settled. The North Eastern Cave Conservancy owned Knox Cave as of January 1979.

This was not the end of Knox Cave's problems. The constant stream of trespassers continued to leave trash everywhere on the property and over 300 'No Trespassing' signs were to be torn down in the next 10 years. An attempt to place a gate at the junction of Knox cave and the access road to the cave lasted a short time. In 1988 an active protection campaign was entered into. The land was patrolled often, as many as 5 or 6 times a week to start with and then as often as 1 or 2 times a week. The signs were replaced weekly and over 100 people were arrested in 1988 and 92. Sixteen ton of rock riprap were dumped on the property line to prevent cars from driving onto the property. The rocks, the arrests and new neighbors moving into a house in sight of the

access road have cut trespassers down to a small fraction of previous years.

Other New York caves have been gated to protect formations and bats, some more successfully than others. Surprise or Mystery Cave has had several gates but they have all been destroyed, the most recent by a cutting torch. Caboose Cave has had two different gates since its discovery in the mid 1970s. This one was destroyed but the new one has not been breached.

In all of the previous cases there is easy access to the caves to those with the correct equipment during safe, for either the cavers or the cave life, time of year. The NSS or Northeastern Cave Conservancy's ownership does not mean the end of sport caving but a protected environment. The cases of easier access meaning better conservation are shown in the cases of Knox and Gage where ladders placed in the caves mean fewer rescues which improves the chances of the caves being safer and less likely to put them into the news which causes more visitation and more destruction. The NSS has used both method 1 (limited access) and method 2 (easier access) in its cave ownership. Gage Caverns is owned by the National Speleological Society. Each cave must be considered individually to decide how to conserve it.

There are actually two other ways to view cave conservation through access control which I haven't mentioned. These are our least favourite ways of dealing with cave access. The all or nothing method of cave control. The all method is to have no control whatsoever. This is commonly called a "sacrifice cave". Knox was one of these and Clarksville caves were also considered sacrificial caves. These caves have constant visitation, constant trash and frequent rescues. To control them would take numerous gates, thousand of man hours and constant frustration. The theory is that if we leave them open, the party cavers will leave the other caves alone. The nothing method of control is best for the cave and does not allow for experienced careful cavers. This method is the complete and total closing of a cave by the owners; either by filling it in as the cave on Ice Cave road or just refusing permission to enter like Skull Cave or Church Cave. These cases may change but not without some help from a cave law with protection against owner liability. Occasionally by good relations with the local

cavers as in the probable opening of Hailes Caves to limited trips.

The third major method of cave conservation (in many states) has been the passing of laws which protect caves cave formations, cave life, and cave owners from liability. At this time 28 states have cave protection bills of some type. Most protect all of the aforementioned areas. Virginia has even been able to test its law in court when a tourist was seen breaking a formation and attempting to remove it from the cave property at Endless Caverns. The culprit was convicted. Many other states post the entrances of both show and wild caves with simplified copies of the cave protection bills. New York made its first attempt to pass such legislation in 1979 as bill 5668-a. It was never passed.

In 1990 Assemblyman Paul Tonko presented a new bill which stalled and was re introduced in 1991. There were many problems last year. Some disliked the protection of wildlife as only one type of bat in the state is endangered. And it was argued that if some one wanted to shoot a deer in a cave entrance they should be able

to. Senator Cook introduced the legislation in the senate as well but finally it came down to the Assembly being willing to pass the modified bill without an owner liability protection clause and the Senate wanting to pass it only with the owner liability clause. It was at an impasse. We are trying with Assemblyman Tonko's help to put the bill through again even without the owner liability clause because we feel that some of the bill is worth more than none of the bill. The bills were dropped in 1994 but there is rumour they will be revived this year.

This is where we stand in cave conservation. The cavers of the state are having to protect caves in a piecemeal fashion. The acquisition of other major caves, including Clarkesville and Onesquethaw by the North Eastern Cave Conservancy, seem imminent if there are no unforeseen problems but we are having to re-invent the wheel each time a new owner buys a cave property or someone breaks a gate. A cave conservation bill would certainly simplify matters.