



Caving and Scouting

Written by: Tray Murphy

Scoutmaster, Troop 891, Bon Air, VA

*Richmond Area Speleological Society, Richmond, VA
National Speleological Society, NSS#29211 Life Member*



Some time ago, I was asked to write the definitive work on the ever popular subject of Scouts going caving. This will be in two major sections, one for Scouts and their leaders, the other for cavers. First a little background.

I started caving 23 years ago at 14 years old. The cavers of ESSO Grotto took me under their wing, and taught me how to cave without getting hurt and to minimize my impact on any cave I visited, "sacrificial" or not. In other words, cavers taught me how to preserve caves, and do it safely. At 18, I joined a Boy Scout Troop that my brothers belonged to, mostly to take the older Scouts caving, and teach them climbing, and rope work. I've been involved with both groups on a local, regional, and national level ever since. I regularly take Scout troops caving, and so far, have a perfect safety record. Some of these Scouts have become accomplished cavers, while others have never been underground again. The next few paragraphs should help to explain how we do it safely, and why I do it the way I do. Unless otherwise cited, the opinions herein are mine, amassed over the previous 20+ years of Scouting and caving.

Caving has been found to be the third fastest growing "adventure" sport in the country. That means the pressure on cavers to introduce people to the underground environment will only continue to grow. This is a fact of life, owing greatly to the exposure caving has received in recent years in the news media (Lechuguilla's discovery, rescues of both cavers and non-cavers, articles in magazines such as Boy's Life - featuring the caving Brown family, Outside and National Geographic - featuring Bill Stone during his Huautla expeditions, etc.). All we as cavers can hope to do is educate, alleviate (more later), and find cave trip leaders that know how to take groups caving safely and responsibly. What cavers are trying to avoid is finding 25 Scouts with little or no equipment, several hours back in a cave with high exposures, and other dangers, mindlessly stomping through a cave tramping down everything in sight, while daintily plucking bats from the walls; this is an accident waiting to happen not to mention against the law. What Scout leaders are trying to do is find ever more challenging, educational, and exciting things to inject into their program, since they compete with so many other activities.

Cave resources are limited, and threatened on many fronts, all across the country. Laws have been enacted to help protect the natural resource of caves, and we all need to do everything possible to protect both the cave and its environment, and the health and safety of the people who explore them.

For the Scouters:

First, read the Guide to Safe Scouting. It is available from your local Scout Service Center. It is the bible that you should follow when planning trips and activities for your Scouts. It has a specific section on caving, climbing, and rappelling. It says:

Cave Exploring

These minimum safety requirements apply:

1. Cave exploring, other than simple novice activities, should be limited to Scouts and Venturers 14 years of age or older. (Emphasis BSA's, indicating mandatory standards).
2. Group leaders qualify through training and experience in cave exploring and through knowing established practices of safety, conservation, and cave courtesy. (Meaning land owner relations, etc.)
3. Leader and group must understand and agree to follow the basic practices and policies of caving approved by the National Speleological Society and the Boy Scouts of America.

References: Venture activity pamphlet, Caving, No. 33468, Ranger Guidebook, No. 3128, and detailed information prepared by the National Speleological Society available from the Council Services Division at the National Office."

Pretty clear, yet a lot of the SM's I see writing, and calling, seem to think the rules don't apply to them. The 14 year old age limit is there for a reason. There has to be a carrot-and-stick approach to keeping boys interested. If they've done everything by the time they're 14, there's not much left. That's why it is a Venture Scout pamphlet, and not a merit badge!

Also, it's very clear in Scout literature that not every activity is for every boy. Project COPE limits its participants, as does Philmont and the other high adventure bases, even National Jamborees have age limits. This age limit also helps with another problem. The literature cited as references talks about it: group size. Cavers try to limit the size of any group to 12 or less, except under some exceptional circumstances. This includes caving trip leaders, and the 2-deep leadership (that means 2 registered adults) required by the BSA. That only leaves about 8 youth spaces. The size limit helps to control the group, its whereabouts, and its activities. Small groups are more easily supervised, and are generally better behaved.

Realize that an injury to a Scout only an hour from the entrance of a cave could take 15 or more hours to affect a rescue. Only one Scout has to get out of line for someone to get hurt. Also, limiting group size helps the group in moving through the cave smoothly. Except for show cave trails, few caves have hiking grade footing throughout. Tight spots, or a tricky crawl or climb can slow the group to a snail's pace. Too many people means the ones in back get cold and antsy while waiting, and the ones in front tend not to wait for them, creating a situation where the group is split up - obviously a dangerous situation. If you have too many 14 and ups, find another way to cull out some - use attendance, rank, dues status, or other method to weed out those who only show up for the "fun stuff".

Limiting the group size also lessens the impact on the cave. Studies have shown that very small air temperature changes in the cave, caused by body heat, can adversely affect bats living there, especially if they are hibernating. Lint, trash, and other human debris is left in caves, no matter how small the group, but smaller groups tend to police the cave better, leaving it in better shape than a convoy of people on a stampede. Also, consider the older Scouts, too. In the last stampede I witnessed, the older Scouts were clearly tired of having to push the younger, smaller Scouts along. The younger ones were exhausted, cold, and in way over their heads. The older ones resented having to push them every step of the way. As a result, the group saw little more than the entrance room and a couple of dead passages, while my crew visited the prettiest sections of the cave, only 45 minutes beyond where the other group was stalled.

Now, what about that "simple novice activities"? Lots of discussion with leaders & cavers has brought me to this conclusion:

Simple novice activities are: no exposure (danger of falling) over the height of the shortest participant, and that exposure must be spot able. The trip should be no more than 2-3 hours long (not enough to challenge a gung-ho patrol of 14-year-olds, plenty enough for a bunch of 11 and 12's). Our troop sends younger Scouts to commercial show caves for their trail tours, and since we only schedule caving trips about every two years, after a 12 year old goes to a commercial cave, he's generally eligible to go on the sport trip next time. Young Scouts simply don't have the maturity to handle many of the challenges, both physical and mental that go along with sport caving if you intend to go much beyond an entrance room. Our grotto leads "kids" trips with a ratio of 1 caver to no more than 2 kid ratio for the families in our grotto, but we still stay within simple novice activities. This approach would not work well with Scouts because only 3 or 4 Scouts could go with a 1:2 ratio of cavers to novices.

Another question I often hear: Why won't cavers talk to me about taking my troop caving? Well, it will be a lot easier if you read the above references first, and plan to let them know that you will abide by their rules for going underground. Remember, you're the one asking someone else to do you a favor, and possibly expose him or herself to liability by taking your Scouts caving. No one has a "right" to go caving. Many cavers are simply not willing to leave themselves hanging out like that. If they have insurance, they're a potential litigation target. If someone gets hurt, they have to prove they weren't negligent, and if some judge or jury doesn't understand what the case is all about, they could lose everything they own. Sound like fun? The BSA will not help them if they are not registered Scouters, so most cavers are on their own with liability coverage, and most probably have no more than their homeowner's blanket policy, if that. Another reason is that so many Scoutmasters seem to think that they know all about taking boys on adventure activities, even if they've never done it themselves. Books and literature are no substitute for experience when it comes to adventure programming. You should no more take a group to the top of Denali without years of experience than you should insist that someone else take your crew underground. Realize that some cavers may not feel qualified to lead a novice group underground. I've seen some excellent underground group leaders, and some abysmal ones. Trust the caver if he/she says they can't (or won't) lead and offers no further explanation. I don't like to admit when I can't do something, either.

Probably the biggest reason that cavers don't respond well to requests to go caving is that they get so many. Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, college (and high school) outdoor clubs, parks and recreation groups, the list goes on and on. So, many grottos have had to say "no more outside group trips". They're just inundated. If you were my fifth grader caller on a given night, I think I'd be a little short, too.

And finally, there's the question of equipment. Cavers have to be properly prepared to be safe in the underground. Remember how long it takes to get an injured person out? Where's the food and water? How about warmth and light? A lot of cavers live on a shoestring caving budget, and cannot afford to outfit 12 other people with helmets with chinstraps and a light source, spare lighting for each, and all the other things you need to be safe and comfortable underground. Construction hardhats with string under the chin will not cut it. \$5 headlamps are OK only for the simple novice activities. Packs need to be bigger than a wallet, and hold all the correct stuff. It's mighty expensive if you're trying to equip a whole crew.

If you do approach a caver, try to do it in person. The NSS Home Page can help you find a grotto and contact near you. Go to a grotto meeting. Meet some of the cavers. Maybe go caving with them, if you can. Stress that you want to teach your Scouts something about caves and caving, rather than coming off as a thrill seeker, and maybe they'll talk to you. In any case, they're going to talk to you about it on their terms. So accept that, and go from there. Cavers aren't necessarily standoff-ish or cold. They just don't get approached in the right way (I know from firsthand experience!). Don't ask to camp underground in a cave. Your Scouts can get the full caving experience without spending a night underground. Few cavers will accept such a request anyway. Little camping is ever done underground, except for expedition style cave exploration where there is no choice. The reason is cave conservation: how do you manage human wastes, trash, and body heat warming the cave? What about drinking water? Lots of reasons to camp in campgrounds and cave in caves!

Now what happens, if no one will take you caving? Well, you can keep looking, perhaps contacting another grotto, or another caver. Or you can limit your trip to a commercial show cave. Some of these caverns offer "wild" trips, typically for a fee. They are usually geared for a lowest common denominator, and can be little more than exploring unlit commercial trail, or they can venture out into undeveloped areas of the cave, adding in something more than simple walking. A last resort can be cave-for-pay operations. With cave for pay, it's a toss-up as to what you get. Few "operators" carry liability insurance, and as "commercial outfitters", they certainly should. Checking credentials can be extremely hard. There is no organization which "certifies" cave trip leaders. With a profit motive, they are more likely to cut corners with equipment and safety. They may or may not have permission to be in a cave. Not many landowners are happy to have cave-for-pay operations going on in their caves, and the discovery of trespassers can be embarrassing and expensive for the operator and his charges. And, you are not likely to get any education in caving techniques. They also seldom limit group sizes (\$\$\$\$\$), and a huge group in a cave just isn't going to have any fun.

For the cavers:

As I've said before, the requests to take Scout groups caving are not going to go away. I do know that some cavers simply will not, under any circumstances, take a youth group or even any other non-caver group underground. In this case, you're wasting your time reading this, it won't change your mind, no matter what your reasons for your decision: liability concerns, concern for the caves' well-being, lack of equipment to loan, etc. Nor am I going to encourage groups to contact you, or even suggest that you take them caving. What I do ask, is that you at least consider the possibility, for reasons I'll set out later.

Not all Scoutmasters are enemies. If you read the section intended for them, you'll see some of the reasons why caving is such an attractive activity, and where many of them are coming from when they contact you and ask for a caving trip. Most all of them are looking for an activity that is educational, challenging, and exciting. Their motives are 99.9% pure: they're trying to fulfill their commitment to Scouting by providing the best possible program for young boys to grow into young men.

Some of the reasons we as cavers should consider fulfilling at least some of the many requests to go caving are these:

1. We are, on the whole, better educated about caves, and therefore better able to teach the conservation and safety aspects to novices in a convincing way.
2. We have knowledge as to which caves can safely be visited by various groups, and we keep up with landowner status regarding by whom, and when their caves may be visited.
3. We have the resources available to teach the general public about caves and cave resources, and dispel some of the myths about caves and caving (and bats, too).
4. We will undoubtedly have to rescue at least some of the people we refuse (not that we should accept any and all requests). Some bull-headed people never learn, and will try to go on their own, without any preparation, and there's nothing we can do about it.

Probably the best way to explain this topic is to use our grotto's method of accommodating requests to go caving (by any group, by the way, not just Scouts). We have had an Education Committee for many years to handle the requests, from initial contact, until the trip comes off. They also arrange public demonstrations, and schedule our grotto display for outdoor shows, and other public events, such as Earth Day. We are not soliciting new cavers, we are merely educating the public about caves and cave resources, and hoping to reel in the few that are really interested in caving, and steer them right from the beginning, as I was at 14 years old. Anyone who calls our office, or contacts any member of the grotto about taking a group caving is put in touch with the Education Chairman. The Chairman explains our policies about age and numbers limits, and a few other minor things. They also explain that for us to take them caving, we require an orientation by a grotto member about the trip. Then, dates are negotiated. Then Chairman is responsible for finding a trip leader (from a pool of cavers who have indicated a willingness to take groups, and who, in many cases, go out with more experienced trip leaders to learn cave routes, and techniques for dealing with the groups). Usually, a new leader will go on a trip as an "assistant leader" to get used to working with crews of non-cavers.

We require an orientation meeting or two, especially with youth groups. We have developed a scripted slide show that any member can present to a group with only a little preparation. It covers everything from how caves are formed, conservation of resources and why, what formations are, biota, and the human history of cave exploration. It takes 45 minutes to an hour to present. Then, we go over cave safety, more conservation, and give out an equipment list. Every item is required to be supplied by the participants: proper clothing, extra lighting, food, water, extra light sources, and batteries. We, as a grotto, supply helmets with mounted electric light sources. We are not afraid to refuse to take someone underground who shows up ill-prepared for the trip. **SAFETY COMES FIRST!!!** This orientation usually takes about 30-45 minutes, which is why we usually take up two Scout meetings. It also provides a different program for the Scoutmaster for 2 weeks. We never supply maps, directions to caves, or other information directly to group leaders. If they make a map to the cave as they drive, there's nothing we can do about that. Hopefully, the orientation teaches them that you must have more than just a map to the cave to cave safely.

We limit trips to one per group per year, at the minimum. Usually, we won't take Scout troops more than once for several years. Participants with Scout troops must be 14 or older, and we require First Class rank. The rank requirement weeds out slackers who don't participate in the Scouting program except when it is "exciting". You get a better bunch of kids this way. The troop must supply two leaders to go underground. That way, if there is an accident, the Scout leaders can deal with the boys, and the cavers can deal with the emergency. We take a minimum of two cavers, which is why we occasionally stretch the group limit to 14 total - 2 cavers, 2 Scout leaders, 10 Scouts. We do not camp underground. Our trips stress safety, conservation of cave resources, and education about the cave. If it's exciting too, great! Usually, they boys are so engrossed with the formations and other pretties, or so busy slogging through whatever fun the leader has found now - a nice mud crawl, or a belly crawl through a stream, that they are having fun, whether they realize it or not!

Picking the proper cave can be a chore. It's a good idea to pick something with relatively large passages that a group can move through fairly easily. Tight crawls slow everything to a crawl, and the guys in back get cold and anxious waiting their turn in the barrel. The cave should not be vertical at all. Some low exposure is OK, but avoid slippery ledges that pitch off into a bottomless chasm. Remember, these guys don't have the cave savvy that we cavers have to move easily over the tough stuff. Belays really aren't much good with an inexperienced group unless you are going to take the time to rig them properly, and supervise the crossing of the heights. It's easy and safer to find another route with less danger. Excitement doesn't necessarily have to mean dangerous places where sure injury or death can occur on a misstep. See my description of "simple novice activities" in the Scoutmasters' section of this paper for further guidance. Base your selection on your best judgment of the groups' capabilities and desires.

What about liability? That's a question best left for the lawyers, but this is what little I know about it. If you do not accept money to take someone caving (and we do not even solicit a "maintenance donation" for helmet use), you're only liable in cases of negligence, i.e., where you go off and leave the group behind, or quit supervising them, or take them somewhere they clearly don't belong (like the edge of a 200 drop without vertical gear and training).** Of course, anyone can sue for anything, and if little Johnny gets hurt underground on your trip, someone will probably sue you for it. Proper safety training can go a long way towards alleviating that risk: witness our grotto's perfect safety record (and mine, too). You can't ignore, or duck all risk, just taking a group underground is risky, and if you aren't comfortable leading groups because of this, by all means explain this to a Scoutmaster. If you are a registered Scout leader, working within your training and experience, and within National BSA safety standards, they will help defend you, unless it is clearly negligence or worse. Get yourself a copy of the Guide to Safe Scouting from a local Scout Service Center, along with a copy of the Venture Scout pamphlet Caving, and the Scout Fieldbook, both of which have sections on caving in them. Also, get the NSS guidelines. You'll know the rules, and if nothing else, you can fend off the Scoutmaster who insists on taking the 11 year old munchkins along with you on the trip. Our grotto has helmet users sign a liability waiver, but no state allows you to sign away your right to sue. The waiver basically says that caving can be hazardous, and the participant assumes these risks. The National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) has an assumption of risk form - unlike a liability waiver, it spells out in plain English the risks associated with outdoor adventure programs, and tells participants they must take responsibility for their actions in the activities they engage in. They will be happy to send you a copy if you request it. Whether a judge will throw out a suit against a leader if the plaintiff has signed such a form remains to be seen. So, there is a risk involved in taking other groups caving, you can't avoid it. It is a consideration.

**Like I said, I'm not a lawyer, if you are really concerned about this, contact a liability or personal injury lawyer for more details. The liability lawyer will give you the case law, the P.I. lawyer will tell you he'll sue no matter what the merit of the case - you have to balance the two.

If you've made up your mind that neither, you or your grotto will take non-caving groups underground, at least use a little tact when turning down Scoutmasters or other group leaders. Part of the friction between the groups stems from Scoutmasters insisting that they should be taken no matter what, or the cavers insisting they won't with no further information. At least return the call, or send a form letter..."We regret to inform you that we do not take outside groups caving because...blah, blah, blah". If you won't do it, explain why. A simple courtesy call saying "we're afraid of being sued" at least does not promote the idea that we are "elitists" of some sort.

Cavers and Scouters can co-exist. As with any outdoor adventure sport, it will continue to grow. Scoutmasters can try to understand cavers' fears of too many people heading underground, and cavers can try to understand a Scoutmaster's desire to provide a vibrant, exciting program to his troop. Working together, cavers can tap a huge reserve of conservation-minded folks like themselves to help spread the word about caving and the natural resources associated with caves. Scout leaders can find a whole new adventure just waiting for his charges to learn about and try out as a new learning experience. Let's just douse the sparks, and keep the lines of communications open.

For more information:

**My home page, with links to other caving and Scouting resources on the web:
http://www.scoutresources.org/boy_scout/high_adventure/hi_adven.html**

**American Cave Conservation Association
P.O. Box 409
Attn: Publications
Horse Cave, KY 42749**

**Cave Books
4700 Amberwood Drive
Dayton, OH 45424**

**National Speleological Society, Inc.
2813 Cave Avenue
Huntsville, AL 35810-4413**

**Speleobooks
P.O. Box 10
Schoharie, NY 12157**