

Published in the April 1999 *NSS News*

Commentary

Caving on the giant screen: Perspectives on the *Amazing Caves* controversy

By John Ganter and Bill Storage

Filming has begun on *Journey into Amazing Caves*, a movie that will appear in hundreds of giant-screen theatres around the world. This feature will bring caves and caving to the attention of millions. Do you, as a caver, know about this forthcoming movie? Will it have consequences for you and the caving activities you pursue? Will publicity benefit the caves in your area? While the NSS's official association with the movie (if any) has not been determined, some NSS members are key players and supporters. Yet many others are not even aware of the project.

When cavers learn of *Amazing Caves*, they voice diverse and interesting views. The movie raises some complex issues that are not initially apparent – nor easily resolved. The goal of this article is to provide an overview of perspectives on the movie and to encourage discussion of its possible effects. Background information, including press releases from the producers, is available on the website listed at the end.

First, we want to draw attention to an issue that has already surfaced, regardless of what happens with *Amazing Caves*. It concerns the way we as a National Speleological Society communicate, work together, make judgments, and decide issues. Nearly all of the activity surrounding *Amazing Caves* has been invisible to the NSS membership. Obviously, individual cavers can work with a private movie company as they wish. Yet some key backers of *Amazing Caves* are working under the auspices of NSS committees, in some cases using the contacts that they developed as NSS officers.

These individuals are well intentioned. They have understandable concerns about sending mixed messages to a movie company that they want to support and impress. But given the importance of this matter, it is the responsibility of the NSS leadership to bring the *Amazing Caves* issue to light, and to encourage open debate. There may be raised emotions and heated arguments. But this debate will be far healthier for the NSS than any erosion of trust between cavers, and toward the NSS leadership, that might result from a feeling that major issues were intentionally understated. The long-term functioning of our Society depends on an informed, thoughtful membership, and encouraging this is a prime responsibility of our elected and appointed leaders.

To promote discussion, let's take a look at the two sides that have emerged, and what we have heard from them so far.

The supporters

Cavers backing *Amazing Caves* see this as our big break, the chance, finally, to tell the world about the wonders of caves and their need for protection. The movie will be made with or without our support. We might as well be involved, claim the supporters, so that we can increase accuracy and reduce hype.

It's time caves and cavers got some recognition, supporters assert. The growth of the NSS has flattened. We need new, young members. We need support from lawmakers and federal land managers to protect caves against external threats like mineral exploration. The NSS is too small and quiet for the mission it is trying to accomplish, supporters suggest. We must accept that real lobbying power comes from organizational size and national recognition. Our scope must widen. For too long we have sought to save a stalactite in cave X without facing risks to entire karst systems brought on by urban growth, mining, logging, and the like. People won't protect caves unless they know about caves. Publicity will result in some new cavers, and that can be good. Most of them will join the NSS, become conservation-minded, and preach our gospel. Others will stay only briefly, but they will take with them understandings of conservation and safety.

Amazing Caves will project an exciting, positive, scientific image of caves and cavers, supporters maintain. It's time to get into the media age. Low profile caving is appropriate in some cases, but not as a universal policy. This is a tremendous personal opportunity for a few of our members to be stars, and others should help. We should work with the movie producers, who have had many successes in bringing topics like marine life to wide audiences. With new technology and our guidance, filming can be done with minimal damage to the caves.

The benefits of an IMAX movie will outweigh the costs, the supporters conclude. IMAX will be perceived by the public as authoritative, and it is important for the NSS to be included in this perception.

The skeptics

The skeptics see *Amazing Caves* as likely to be another "Hey wow!" movie that excites first and educates a distant second. Yes, the proposal always sounds good. The producers say what we want to hear and so we help them. But the science and conservation footage often ends up on the cutting room floor, sacrificed in favor of action scenes that will appeal to a broad audience. The result is an image of caving as just another adrenaline sport. This is good neither for caves nor caving, the skeptics assert.

Skeptics also foresee unintended consequences. We need to take a broader view, they maintain, looking at both the benefits and costs of such broad exposure. The fundamental reasons for our tradition of low profile caving have not changed, and a chance for fame is not in itself a reason to adopt a different policy. A movie about caves is different from a movie about dolphins. Yes, caves need protection and protection requires education. But caves are also vulnerable to interest that leads to greater visitation. Dolphins don't get

bootprints on them, and people don't usually break off pieces of dolphins to take home as souvenirs. Caves can only take so much human traffic before they are damaged beyond repair.

Yes, the skeptics acknowledge, very few people who learn about caves actually go caving, and the growth of the NSS is flat. But the number of people going into wild caves is not flat; it seems to be rising. Let's consider the Guadalupe of New Mexico, the skeptics suggest. While permits are available to all, these caves are hard to find and many require technical caving skills. But a large percentage of visitors are *not* NSS members. In the last decade, many of these spectacular caves have been closed by their managers because of damage caused by heavy traffic. In some cases, there have been blatant acts of speleothem theft and vandalism. We can educate people about caves, but does the conservation message often get lost along the way?

And what about the 90% of caves that are on private land? Do cave owners really want more general interest in caves? True, the famous caves in the movie will probably be well protected. But won't people transfer their interest to caves closer to them?

Look at the number of cave closures, and the negative incidents we've been hearing about, observe the skeptics. People show up at caves. They are not NSS members, they are not conservation minded, and they trash the caves and the landowner relations we have worked so long on. Doesn't every little glimpse of caves and caving generate a little cumulative interest, just the way endless soft drink ads relate precisely to sales increases?

Given the unique situation of caves we need to keep caving quiet, the skeptics assert. Selective publicity can be a useful education strategy, because it is sensitive to local cave conditions. But mass publicity is by definition unselective. If people have an interest in caves, all they have to do is type <www.caves.org>. The door to the NSS is always open. But let's not build a giant billboard pointing to it, the skeptics suggest. If we support this movie, we send a message to all of our members and the world: Mass publicity is good for caves. More publicity will then follow, and more caves will suffer.

The undecided

As with many complex issues with long-term consequences, some people have polarized. Those at the extremes may never change their views, just as Tychoans went to their graves knowing that the sun orbits the earth. For others, this movie, and the larger issue of mass caving publicity, presents a mix of costs and benefits. There is little hard data to help balance the two.

Where do the authors of this article stand? We generally oppose mass publicity about caving, but find certain arguments from the other side compelling.

So this article is aimed outward at the undecided. What do *you*, as a thoughtful NSS member, think about caving publicity and this movie? What are the costs and benefits?

Which ones outweigh others? What have we missed in the discussions? What should the NSS do, now and in the future? □

We thank the following cavers for contributing perspectives, and for their critiques of drafts of this article: Donald G. Davis, Paul Fowler, Louise Hose, and Michael Ray Taylor. The opinions expressed are our own.