

Caves in Magazines, Caves on Television: Mass Publicity and the Growth of Caving

by John H. Ganter

There is a thing my father and his colleagues do which has always baffled me: whenever they find a good place to fish they return as soon as can be with a truckload of friends, take a hundred pictures, concoct descriptions intended to render it as alluring as possible, tell exactly how to fish it, and sell this veritable tourist brochure to the biggest publication they can find. Looking at the evidence we can only conclude that they seek the prompt annihilation of their fishing grounds.

--- Gus Hale-Orviston in *The River Why*, by David James Duncan, 1983.

I recognized the location at once. In the background there was tropical green and jet black. Jagged karren, parallel fissures in white limestone, sloped towards the edge. The camera zoomed in close on the handsome man in the rawhide jacket. He spoke with animation and dramatic expressions to the camera. His hands moved in quick gestures. The man might have been hosting a game show. He might have been hyping cars, or breakfast cereal, or deodorant. But I realized that this was a carnival sideshow, and the attraction was Sotano de las Golondrinas.

What does the mass media do to caves and caving? How are cavers to deal with those that want to use caves as sets for entertainment? How should we respond to those among us that exploit wild caves to make a quick buck? A dramatic increase in attention to caving, both sought and unwelcome, has motivated me to consider these issues. Caves are appearing on television and in magazines with unprecedented frequency. I will consider the costs and benefits to caves, their owners, the public and the NSS, of both publicity and growth in the number of cavers. Is a bigger NSS necessarily a better NSS? How softly do even the most conscientious cavers tread? It is time that cavers have a very frank discussion of what this means for us and, much more importantly, the fragile places in the earth where we are occasional guests.

Descriptions, Caver Accounts, Cave Stories and Media Events

To begin, let's make a distinction between four types of reporting on caves and caving. The *description* is removed, impersonal and objective -- the author writes about the cave only. The intent is scientific; the author is practicing speleology.

Caver accounts tell about caves, but also caving. Often they are written in the first-person, and may contain anecdotes, humor, philosophical asides, personal reflections, etc. The audience is assumed to be other cavers, and the author is telling the story because of some intrinsic motivation: pride of accomplishment, desire to teach, ego, peer acceptance, etc. I love to read and write caver accounts. Some classics have moved me deeply, and affected years of my subsequent caving. I have learned an enormous amount about caves, techniques, motivation, expeditions, and the nature of cavers from these readings. I have had the thrill of meeting a respected caver acquaintance after a long separation and having them, without the slightest preamble, start in: "So you went downstream for a couple hundred feet, you downclimbed the pit and the passage sumped... was there air? How about across the top of the pit?" No need to specify the subject; it is obvious that your work has been read. Your volunteer time was well-spent, because a peer has read it, evaluated it, and 'been there' in the

words and graphics that have come from your mind onto the page. And the discussion is off and running.

The caver account is evaluated by a jury of peers. This is a self-selected audience; they pay dues. Everything is verifiable. Skeptics can talk to your companions and find out if you are, in fact, a buffoon. They can also, in many cases, check what you claim to have found.

The caver account is constrained by group norms. It is expected to be serious if entertaining, and objective if dramatic. Cavers are a tough group to write for. The writer typically gets strong feedback: at the next grotto meeting, the regional conference, the Convention. Caver feedback, I will attest, can be just as brutal as it is gratifying. My writings have been critiqued around the campfire and it's painful. It also keeps me honest.

A third type of writing about caves is the *cave story*. It is about caves, but it is different. The cave story appears in mass-circulation magazines or newspapers. The cave is thus only another attraction within a money-making enterprise. The audience is not self-selected; they paid their money to read the comics and... hey! ...spelunking! There is generally little feedback to the writer, because they never meet their audience in the way that the writer of a caver account does. They are off spending their income, while the audience may be wondering about the truth of what they have read.

Cave stories sell caving, and I confess that I do not see the benefits of this wholesale advertising. One of the things that appeals to many of us, I think, is that caving is independent and intrinsic. There is so little obvious reason to do it. It is not in fashion. Nobody invented it. There is no packaging. It is not on billboards, doesn't look good, doesn't brighten your teeth or improve your sex life appreciably. For this reason, I cringe when I see stories about caving appear in magazines that seem to exist solely for the advertisements in the back. The message is always "buy yourself an adventure." Watch elephants, pet baboons, tickle penguins. The folks in the office will be so envious when you buy yourself an even more outrageous vacation than theirs... for just \$7,000 per day. VISA and Mastercard accepted. Tax and gratuity extra. Will caving become the next fad?

Caves and caving areas could never stand such an onslaught, and they must be protected from exploiters who would put them as yet another stop on the tour. Cavers usually do it right; nobody makes money on our trips-- they just spend it. Expeditions come together through innumerable long-distance calls, emails, and a special kind of teamwork where everyone gives: skills, time, money, trucks, ropes, stoves, mechanics, medicine, translations, diplomacy. The result is a group with an investment and plans to return. They try to leave the caves and the locals the way they found them. And because the whole endeavor is difficult and challenging, traffic is limited.

One caver that is writing cave stories these days is Michael Ray Taylor. I think Taylor is a good writer and I read his stories with interest. But I am also disturbed by them, mainly their quantity. Why does Mike Taylor write cave stories? Partly because he enjoys it. But there is a larger reason. They pay his rent. Suddenly everything is different, because instead of giving an account for a group of peers, Mike Taylor is making a living.

Since Taylor depends on writing for his income, he can exercise less discretion about placing articles. Some time ago, I opened an issue of Nissan Motor's advertisement for college students. There was a big article by Mike Taylor: Treasures in the Sierra Madre.¹

The first sentence was this: "Susanne O'Sickey trembled at the edge of the pit." Fabulous, I thought, the next time I go to Rio Choy there will be college students driving Nissans and trembling at the edge of the pit. But the article continued through swimming holes and discos with no more mention of caving. Choy was not identified by name and did not appear on the area map. This is commendable discretion. Still I feel that Taylor used the cave for a cheap opening line in what was essentially an extended advertisement for an 'adventure tour' run by a

Texas caver.

Taylor's *Sports Illustrated* article on Great Ex Cave² was well-rounded in that it informed rather than simply entertained. Taylor has explained how he negotiates with editors to reduce hype and emphasize reality,³ but his most recent article on Lechuguilla has drawn criticism for distortion and inaccuracies.⁴ Where cave stories are concerned, the bottom line is the bottom line; the editor has a business to run and the writer a living to make. If there is doubt, whatever grabs the reader wins. Move those mags, sell those ads.

Writers of cave stories can't work alone; they need helpers. Why do cavers participate? For money, and exposure, and fame. It can be gratifying to appear before an audience larger than the caving community. Mom & Dad can be proud of you.

The *media event* can spawn a wide range of reporting, usually focused on a single cave. Something happens, usually an accident, that results in national or regional 'news.' A relatively unplanned and uncontrolled information release occurs, which is often presented in a dramatic manner.

Two of these four broad classes (cave stories and media events) result in caving publicity whose effects can be subtle and wide ranging. We'll look closer at publicity. But first, let's consider television, a special medium whose content and tone can range from objective to sensational.

Television

A journalist in television, called upon to use the tools and techniques of fantasy, is constantly aware of having to defend the small 'reality' corner on the vast entertainment stage. But in recent times, as networks fight ever more fiercely for shares of a shrinking audience pie, the reality corner has come under heavy siege. --- Daniel Schorr, National Public Radio, reflecting on his 31 years with CBS and CNN television⁵

The pretty man sitting on the pretty rocks tells us that his name is John Schneider, and that he is the host of a program called the *World's Greatest Stunts*. In this episode, a stuntman will jump into "the biggest cavern on the face of the planet."

I am watching a video tape of the Golondrinas sideshow with a group of cavers at a regional meeting. Most of us have already heard about this tape, and are watching intently as a familiar place appears on the magic screen. This is deepest, darkest Mexico, we are informed in somber tones. There are "no real roads," and "few outsiders have travelled these treacherous trails." Nonetheless, for our entertainment and to sell advertising for breath mints, "some very professional people" have brought in "2 tons of equipment" and been here 3 days.

Golondrinas has been sold for a set by someone that, Schneider explains breathlessly, is a "world-renowned cave expert." Cavers around me begin to howl. "Henry is one of only a handful of experts that understand extreme vertical caving," Schneider continues. [I have used the pseudonym "Henry" for the caver's real name.] Cavers are now rolling on the floor. Henry is seen to crawl up to the edge and toss in a rock.

We quiet down and watch as the helicopter hovers over Golondrinas. What a view! "I don't know how this looks at home, but it is *very dangerous...*," intones Schneider. The stuntman jumps. He zips down into the hole and his chute opens and it is over. Big deal. It was kind of neat if you ignored the hype. We got to see some great shots of a favorite pit. It's just TV, right?

Right. But I have a few problems with this stunt and I'd like to examine it a little more closely.

My main objection is that bad habit of commercial television. It lies. It lies because it must exaggerate and distort to 'cut through the noise.' There is a constant need for novelty to attract the attention of an increasingly jaded audience. Everything is entertainment; facts fall by the wayside. Where does it stop?

Schneider and his crew had some good ones. A "local Indian," speaking excellent English, told a "legend" about Golondrinas that cavers have somehow missed in 20 years of visits. The depth was consistently given as 1400 feet, when it is actually 1091 feet at the low side and 1235 feet at the high side.⁶ Then there was all the nonsense about Henry.

An anecdote. Recently some cavers were planning a film about a large cave system that they have explored and surveyed in Puerto Rico. They had been flown in to meet with producers of a reputable 'nature' program, which relies only partially on advertising and is thus presumably a 'pure' and public-spirited operation. The cavers discussed their plans to show the surroundings, to explain how the cave fit into local culture, the geology, where water flowed, etc. A producer interrupted: Wait. You guys don't seem to understand. We are not here to educate. We are not here to inform. We are here to *entertain*. Shortly thereafter the cavers walked away. They are now hoping to fund the film themselves and distribute it through public television.

Caving is part of exploration, which has always been about telling the truth. The proceeds of exploration, whether the North Pole or a deep cave, have invited fraud. Caves especially are shrouded in folklore, myth, legend and plain baloney. One of the greatest satisfactions of caving is being able to look at such mysterious places through eyes disciplined by 'science:' a particular cave is so many feet long, so many feet deep, no trolls were sighted, and it does not come out in the next state. This is not to say that caves are not wonderful, aesthetic places--only that cavers can still experience them as such while also viewing them rationally. If I must, I would prefer to tell the viewing public something very simple about caves. The truth. Obviously I have no career in commercial media.

But the Golondrinas monologue is just TV patter; the big lie is the stunt itself and all that it suggests. Here are the messages: (a) this is "*extremely dangerous*." There is great potential for death, injury and damage; (b) We're doing it anyway; (c) We're getting away with it.

I reply:

(a) It is not extremely dangerous. It is a magic trick, albeit one with some hazards. Like all good magicians, you do not show how it is done. You do things off-camera that are not mentioned, like the fact that the stuntman did a practice jump.

(b) You are doing it because you make money doing it. It is also a thrill for those that live for the stage.

(c) You're getting away with it only because most of the hazard is an illusion and the rest is carefully dealt with.

This Golondrinas video is theater, but theater that pretends to be real. I don't think that it should be done in caves. Television says caves are places for silly games... Caves are for danger... Do it for the moment... Entertain the audience...

But cavers, officially and unofficially, say that caves are special, sensitive places to be taken care of, and that caving is an activity of planning, caution and safety. And we generally eschew performance. Wild caves have no bleachers.

Who has accidents in caves? The majority are members of the general public. Cavers routinely go down a thousand meters, stay a week, and don't get a scratch. Joe Public goes in 50 feet before burning himself, falling down a pit and then drowning. It's nothing short of amazing. Joe Public is worried about all the wrong things: snakes, massive collapse, and bats up his nose. At the same time he is not worried about all the important things: multiple light sources, head protection, and the hazards of climbing ropes hand over hand.

Where do they learn the wrong things and not learn the right things? One place is the tube. They are uninformed, misinformed, but very entertained.

Consider another program that, in theory, could be different: *Rescue 911*. Recently, cavers have cooperated in re-creating cave rescues, and it was with some trepidation that I sat down to view the results. The first episode concerned an incident where a caver lost rappel control in Moses Tomb, Alabama. The re-enactment was well-done, entertaining, and not excessively melodramatic. But I was left with a message that "disasters happen." Never mind why. Safety is boring. Concentrate on the drama of the saviors. Don't be safe, be saved.

It seems to me that *Rescue 911* would be a great place to demonstrate the tenets of caving. Be prepared. Plan ahead. Practice. Clean your lamp. Leave a note. Carry a garbage bag in your helmet. If in doubt, belay. Tie a knot on the end of the rope. Take care of yourself. Rescue is the last resort. As cavers we train, study, analyze, and read *American Caving Accidents*, because we are interested in everything that happens *before* dialing 911.

The other episode that I watched concerned a cave diving accident in Florida, and I must say it was quite impressive. NSS member and highly-experienced cave diver Woody Jasper 'starred' in the re-enactment. Woody was attending a company picnic one summer day when someone rushed up and announced that some divers were overdue at an adjacent spring. Woody ran to his truck, got his gear on, and saved 2 out of the 3 divers who were unconscious in an airbell. This episode was much more analytical and had a real message. It is a perfect example of *directed publicity* (discussed below): targeting a specific population (in this case open-water divers) with a very strong message about a hazard (diving in caves without proper training and equipment).

Television is a powerful media, and the results can be good, neutral or bad where caving is concerned. Even in the best cases, I am concerned about how these program are perceived by cave owners, not to mention their insurance agents. The big problem, of course, is this: If we don't help film, will the producers find someone else and/or kill themselves trying? What a dilemma...

The Costs and Benefits of Publicity

Let's examine the costs and benefits of publicity about caves, then do the same for a specific result of publicity: *growth* in the number of people going into caves, both those that join the NSS and those that do not.

First, publicity. Here I will define publicity as actions that increase awareness of caves, the identities and activities of cavers, and the NSS. In tone, publicity can be vary from objective to sensational. The effects of publicity can be positive, neutral or negative, they can influence small or large numbers of people, and these people may be of particular groups: urban dwellers, rural landowners, etc.

Caving revolves around cave owners...

Photos by author



A cave owner is briefed on new discoveries in the extensive cave underlying her land



A cave owner supervises as a caver maps a very small cave under his farm lane (photo by J. Wetterling)

A cave owner (left) explains how cavers should enter a complex of caves and karst windows so that his farming activities are not disrupted



The range of publicity effects that occur is highly dependent on the subject of that publicity. For example, some defend publicity about caves by pointing to the recent success that Bat Conservation International (BCI) has had in changing the public image of bats. The line of thought seems to be this: bats live in caves, publicity has been good for bats, so let's publicize caves and it will be good for them too. This overlooks the simple fact that bats can probably never receive 'too much' favorable publicity, and caves certainly can. Interest in bats can be almost infinite with nothing but positive effects, except perhaps if batwatching became such a rage that it began to affect them. This is clearly not the case with caves because they are fragile places that people go to and walk around in with big boots.

Publicity looks different depending on where you stand. Lately, some cavers have been standing more in the glare of quartz iodine television lights than the diffuse glow of acetylene. The microphone moves in, and what do we hear? "Cavers believe..." "The NSS is..." "We think that..."

I have come to call this *cavercentrism*, the implicit belief that the world of caving revolves around cavers. On the contrary. Our little society revolves around the property, desires, responsibilities, fears, and beliefs of others--cave owners and managers. Although public lands are a special case, many of the concerns of their managers

are the same as the private landowners that own the vast majority of the caves (around 90%⁷) in this country.

It seems to me that a handful of cavers have lost touch with what it means to be a cave owner, or even a rural landowner. Most of us go caving only with the blessing of these generous people. Let's look at caving from their point of view. Here are some examples of what a typical cave owner thinks about caving publicity:

- more of those cavers will be coming around now - what about parking, traffic, and bothering the neighbors?
- the local kids will want to go in the cave
- the older kids will party and throw trash in the cave
- the fences, gates and roads will need work even if everyone is careful
- we'll have even more people to worry about in hunting season
- they'll muddy up my water supply
- Why do we live out here? Because we love the peace and quiet.
- what does this do to my property insurance rates?
- what if somebody gets hurt?
- what if I get sued?

This is what I mean by variable effects of publicity. What looks wonderful from one perspective may look quite different from another. It is because of cavercentrism and hubris that in analyzing the costs and benefits of publicity, I will consider them separately for: (1) caves and their owners; (2) the general public; and (3) last of all, cavers and the NSS.

Costs of Publicity

We begin with cave owners. Let me tell a little story. It was a Tuesday morning on a farm in West Virginia. I was talking to a man that owns 3,000 acres of land, including several caves and a lot of limestone on the ridge flanks. For some time I have been patiently negotiating with this man to recheck his caves and do a little walking of the limestone contact. Today I'm saying all the right things: exploration, mapping, conservation, good behavior, the safety of caving...

Wait a minute, says a son listening closely. He goes into the farmhouse for a moment, returns, and hands me the newspaper. And suddenly I am up to date on the national news: there has been an accident in Lechuguilla. The good things that have and will come out of publicity on this incident (including Emily, thank goodness) are for naught here--this cave owner has become aware of caving accidents and he has little difficulty in imagining how one could affect his life and livelihood. We turn the conversation to farming, and there it stays for the remainder of my visit.

The Lechuguilla rescue definitely falls into the 'media event' category. It went beyond the control of cavers very quickly. I am not criticizing those that subsequently decided to cooperate and try to direct the inevitable publicity in a positive direction. Lechuguilla, a well-protected cave on public lands, may not be affected negatively. But further afield?

There is something that all people that let others go into caves under their control share: optimism. "Sure, go on in...," they say, whether in a Texas drawl or a Massachusetts accent. "And don't get hurt!," they add with a smile. You have to admire these people in the legal climate of late 20th century USA. But they watch TV and

they read the newspaper. Their beliefs and concerns can change.

I know one family that still talks about the ruts that the firetrucks left in their fields, a full 15 years after the last cave rescue. And I do mean the *Last Cave Rescue*, because if you should mention the possibility of entering their cave a very noticeable chill falls over the conversation. This chill has drifted down the valley, blanketing other landowners in apprehension. They remember the helicopters. It had to be on the news, you see. Trying to ridgework in this area is a very depressing experience. Perhaps my grandchildren will.

So, here is what publicity can mean for the caves and their owners (Table 1): (1) an increase in interest and visitation from outsiders; (2) an increase in attention by local people; (3) a corresponding increase in the potential for accidents, both above and below ground; (4) resulting concerns of legal liability; (5) possible increases in property insurance rates, or even refusal of coverage.

Table 1: Benefits And Costs Of Publicity

POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF PUBLICITY		POTENTIAL COSTS OF PUBLICITY			
Caves & Owners	The Public	Cavers & the NSS	Caves & Owners	The Public	Cavers & the NSS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - visitors may be more considerate - visitors may better understand risks and seek training, be discouraged from trying - change in behaviors affecting caves, e.g dumping - in rare cases, landowners may desire publicity even for wild caves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - exposure to proper techniques and values - greater knowledge of the natural world - awareness of the NSS and resources available - entertainment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - support for agenda - opportunities to assist - positive image of cavers as competent and concerned - better image as explorers & researchers as opposed to pure adventurers - possibility of more sponsorship for expeditions, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increase in interest, visitation by outsiders accompanied by increased damage and accident potential - increase in interest, visitation by locals - insurance and liability problems - increased anxiety, warranted or not 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - misinformation, exaggeration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - grandstanding, and resulting resentment, distrust of fellow cavers - misinformed public - increase in accident and rescue potential - landowner unease - negative image as daredevils

For the public, publicity can result in some exposure to misinformation, theatrics, etc.

The costs of publicity for cavers are mostly the same problems as for landowners: loss of access due to incidents with inconsiderate cave visitors and more cave rescues. There is one additional problem for caving. It arises from grandstanding and/or 'media scooping' on the part of some cavers. The result can be serious resentment on

the part of others. 'Scooping' has long been a problem in organized caving; one person or group does the work, and someone else gets the reward and/or the publicity. Tom Kaye recently discussed how an entire grotto has been in decline for a decade because of this situation.⁸ A couple of cavers barged into others' projects, wrote them up as their own, and became 'famous' in the grotto. The costs of this behavior came later. Those slighted quietly turned secretive, and the grotto lost the company and talents of their most productive members.

Colorado caver Louise Hose makes the point as follows:⁹

"Acts of publicity may be a violation of trust. I think that hard-working cavers are likely to react in one of two ways: (1) We hoard the knowledge of our caves, no longer willing to share with the 'community of cavers' for fear of the cave being exploited by 'Johnny Come Latelays' who make the fame and fortune and leave 'our' cave in distress, or, (2) We jump on the bandwagon and seek out the publicity first: "After all, I've done more than ____ and he's getting all the publicity!" Suddenly, the nobility of protecting the caves can be rationalized away.

I think a point that needs to be made is that any person exploiting a cave should be a person with a considerable investment in *that* cave. It may be through ownership, it may be through exploration and documentation."

As Louise points out, publicity can raise issues of credit and responsibility that may be lying dormant in the caving community. Hell hath no fury like a caver scooped. As an explorer, it seems to me that if someone gets recognition alongside Golondrinas, it should be T.R. Evans, whose boot was the first to touch bottom. He and his companions are the heroes, not some Hollywood goofball and a well-paid guide who showed him the entrance.

Benefits of Publicity

This all sounds pretty grim, but happily there are many benefits of publicity as well (see Table 1). For the caves and their owners, visitors may be more considerate, careful and prepared. Owners or nearby residents may become aware of their own undesirable behavior: entrance and sinkhole dumping, groundwater contamination, etc. Owners may learn of organizations, at both the national and local level, that can often provide advice and assistance on cave management (e.g. cleanups, community education, liability releases, gating, etc.)

For the public, there is the potential to become involved in organized caving, to realize that there is a whole community of people out there that love caves. And safety education is a benefit often invoked by cavers to justify publicity. I have some difficulty accepting this argument fully. The problem is that the safety message is always a small part of the overall message: try caving. So the result is something like, "Try this wonderful, exciting activity, and do it safely" as opposed to more typical safety education like "Tomorrow you have to drive to work. Wear your seatbelt please." One is just a safety message, the other is recruitment with a little safety added. Is the cost (more people going into caves) worth the benefit (possibly more safety consciousness among those people)?

For cavers and the NSS, there is support for our agenda. This is the Big Reason that cavers that support widespread publicity point to. As Mike Taylor¹⁰ says: "The only way cavers can expect support from the general public is to educate that public." True. Caves do face what have been called *external threats* : practices and plans that will severely impact or destroy caves like quarrying, solid and liquid waste disposal, stormwater runoff, major industrial and military installations, logging, mining, etc. It is often crucial to have public support in saving externally threatened caves. But there are other ways to get this support besides mass media publicity. Typically, if the caves are threatened then other natural resources are also. Mass media publicity on a national

scale can have the unfortunate side-effect of increasing *internal threats* to caves: the "overuse or misuse of caves." ¹¹ Overuse is the key word. I am going to make the case that internal threats to caves, in the form of overuse, result from traffic, which results from population, which results in large part from unselective publicity.

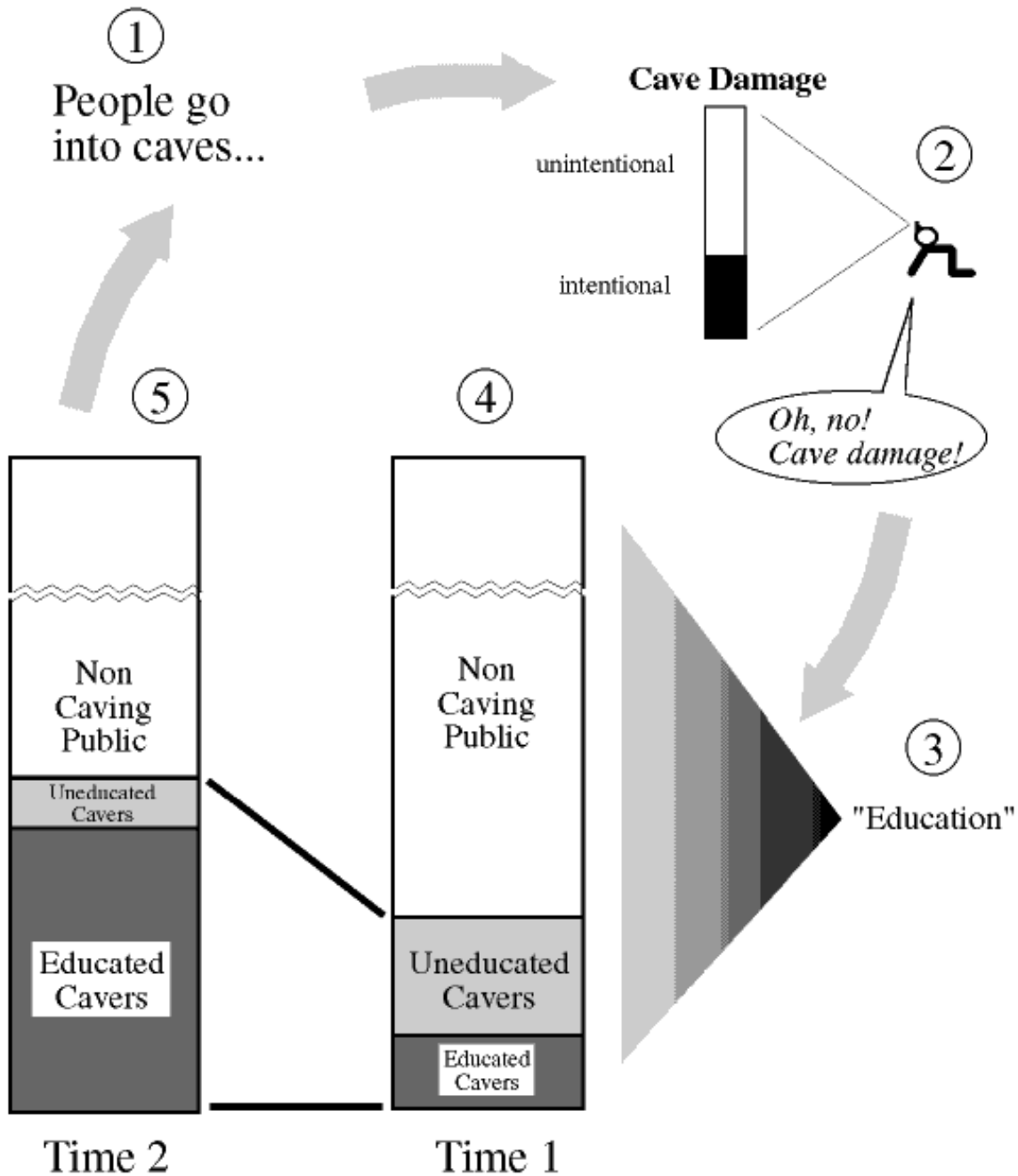
The Vicious Circle

Damage to caves is of two types: intentional and unintentional. Intentional damage is either malicious vandalism, or judicious modification in pursuit of more cave--they are distinguished by the intent of the person doing the damage.¹² Unintentional damage is a mistake, an accident. An unfortunate fact of cave visitation or *traffic*, is that unintentional damage occurs. "Whoops!" Crash, tinkle, tinkle. "Sorry!" The more traffic, the more unintentional damage. This law applies everywhere, although some caves are certainly more fragile than others and the time of 'self-repair' is variable. Where does traffic come from? A population of people that are interested in going caving.

I have gradually come to believe that organized cavers, by practicing 'education' in the form of mass media publicity, are doing something rather unexpected. We are unwittingly negating some of the effects of our 'education' by increasing the population of cave visitors, and thus traffic.

It works like this (see figure below): (1) people go caving; (2) cavers see the results--damage both intentional and unintentional; (3) we launch campaigns of Public Education in a shotgun or broadcast fashion; (4) this deluge of education falls on a population of around 250 million people at Time 1, some tiny fraction of whom are 'uneducated cavers,' and a still smaller fraction of whom are 'educated cavers'; (5) the result, at Time 2, is a resounding 'success.' Hooray! The percentage of 'educated cavers' is *much* higher. But something else has happened. Some part of that mass has said, "Wow! Caving. Let's go."

The Vicious Circle of Cave Damage



Can 'education' about caving lead to more cave damage? This model suggests that education through untargeted publicity will cause the number of people going into caves to increase. Even though these people are 'educated' they still cause unintentional damage to the caves they visit. This damage compels more publicity in the name of 'education' and the cycle repeats.

And they go caving. Some join the NSS. Many do not. There is traffic. Traffic causes unintentional damage. Then we come along and say, "Oh no! We need more education!" The vicious circle repeats, and grows.

			management		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - greater competition for finite cave resources - need for more intensive and restrictive cave management
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To the public, there is no particular benefit to growth of the NSS, unless it is increased opportunity to become aware of caving.

For the NSS, the benefits of growth are considerable. There will be more money for worthy projects, like the publications which we all enjoy and learn from. More members mean more talent to draw upon, e.g. people with expertise in the scientific, organizational, legal, and legislative realms.

The Costs of Growth

Organized, educated cavers still produce traffic in caves and on the surface. Caves have a certain 'carrying capacity,' and it is finite. We can all too easily love caves to death and their owners to despair.

Alabama caver Angela Morgan says it like this:¹⁴

"The way I see it, 100 'responsible' cavers caving 'responsibly' will probably trash a cave as much as a couple of vandals. It's a different kind of trashing, sure. A floor that used to be covered with delicate rimstone dams but is now covered with mud because hundreds of 'responsible' cavers walked across it may not be as obvious as spray painting on the walls, but it is damage, nonetheless. The occasional accidental breakage of a helictite by a 'careful' caver may not be as obvious as the sudden trashing of several helictite bushes by a vandal, but the ultimate result will be the same.

If the number of so-called 'responsible' cavers increases dramatically, the incidence of this type of damage will rise. The really sad part is that this insidious form of vandalism will not just be limited to the caves we call 'sacrificial caves' (in my area, these are the caves well-known by the general public, and to which most of the nerds go and do their vandalism); it will encompass *all* the caves, since these 'responsible' cavers will have access to such information.

The caves need heavy traffic even less than they need nerds. At least nerd-type vandalism is usually limited in scope as far as the number of caves it touches. Also, even though broken formations cannot typically be repaired at least spray-painting and garbage can be cleaned up. The damage done by an excessive number of cavers going though a cave *cannot* be cleaned up. Take Angel's Paradise in Ellison's Cave, for example. That area is suffering tremendously from the traffic of 'responsible' cavers it sees, *not* from ill-informed 'flashlight cavers' trashing it out. Does Angel's Paradise really need to see more 'responsible' cavers'? I think not. Does Helictite Heaven in Fern Cave need to see more 'responsible' cavers? I think not. These are two areas that I have seen once or twice but will never see again because I've realized that they don't need my traffic."

There is also the matter of surface traffic. How considerate are cavers when seen from a cave owner's

viewpoint? Let's go back to that West Virginia farmyard. My host said this: What if you had a nice house and yard in the city, and a bunch of old farmers came in and walked all over it, just setting up tents and climbing on your fence? How would you feel?

A terrible problem, I agreed, and we organized cavers are always reminding each other and our new members to be courteous to cave owners. We...

"It's that [name omitted] grotto," interjected the son, who had brought the newspaper.

I could say nothing, only nod respectfully. What an astonishing viewpoint, I thought. That grotto is one of the oldest in the NSS. Their members set new standards in cave exploration, mapping, geological work and water tracing in this area. What went wrong? Traffic.

What happened after the exploration, which required excellent cave owner relations so that the cavers could finish their projects? Visitation. And *ripple effect* cavers.

Rane Curl explains the ripple effect' as follows:¹⁵

"A responsible grotto takes new cavers caving, and instills safety and conservation messages (and even assume they are believed and followed). THEN some of those cavers take their friends, buddies or relatives caving, without the peer pressure of an organized group--and they forget to impart some of the lessons. THEN some of those friends, buddies or relatives do the same--and nearly everything is forgotten. All that is retained in the end is knowledge of the cave location, and you all know what happens then."

This litany of problems will always be with us. Only the size will change. I'm not saying that the NSS should stop growing, or that any of us should give up caving. What I am saying is that we should try to limit increases in these problems by keeping caving a low-profile activity.

Directed publicity

A low profile can be maintained with directed, targeted publicity aimed at those that are already caving or involved in activities that will probably expose them to caves at some point.

Locally-directed publicity can be tailored to local conditions, like cave owner exhaustion, availability of caves, etc. The problem with national level, mass media publicity is its insensitivity to local conditions. Where are the most magazine readers and television viewers? In densely populated areas. Where are the most cave problems? In cave areas within easy access of population centers. Would you like to find some really friendly cave owners? Take a map of US population, where dark is high density and light is low density. Now change the map legend so that dark means 'tend to be unfriendly,' light means 'tend to be friendly.' It's the same map.

What we as a Society need to recognize is the monumental difference between targeted, locally-directed publicity, and national-level wholesale publicity raining down on a population of 250 million potential cave visitors.

Locally-directed publicity is so effective because of feedback. If local caves are experiencing heavy traffic by cavers, publicity can be cut back. Or, it can be tailored to educating 'flashlight cavers.' If, on the other hand, there is a need for 'new blood' in the grotto, publicity and even recruitment efforts can be expanded. Another means of selective, local publicity is contacting people that have signed in to cave registers, like the NSS

visitation project.

What Can Cavers Do?

Assuming that you accept this argument for minimizing media attention to caves and caving, what can you do?

- Don't write *cave stories* or encourage media events. Recently I was talking to a caver just out of college. "I'd like to be a free-lance writer, but all I can think of writing about is caves," he said, "But then I'd have no friends..." "Good! Get a job!," I replied.

Don't try to turn your hobby into your livelihood. For skiers, it's OK. For cavers, it's not. Sweep streets, join the army, join the Peace Corps, go to grad school... but don't sell our caves. Get a job.

- Refuse to participate in mass publicity: put the future of caves and caving ahead of your ego and wallet. Let those that sell out wild caves for personal profit know what you think of them. Caver peer pressure can be effective.

- If you feel the urge to write about caves, do so in accounts or descriptions in caving publications. Choose to impress a small, highly-knowledgeable and appreciative group rather than a mass audience who will forget you as soon as they turn the page.

Write speleological descriptions. Integrate your writing with maps and photographs that put the cave in the mind of another caver. This is an art and science that takes a great deal of practice. Your efforts can aid others within the community in finding and pushing new caves. You can also perform an important service for scientists and protectors of natural resources at the state, local and federal level by helping them to understand the caves placed in their care.

- If a television station contacts you, you might try to dissuade them but it probably won't work. They will find someone to help them stage *Indiana Jones, Part 5*. Try to emphasize conservation and safety, but don't be surprised if you get overdubbed with the theme from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, as one well-meaning grotto did.

- Local newspapers tend to be a little better, especially if you get a skilled and conscientious writer. I have seen some articles recently where cavers obviously had excellent influence on content and tone. Since writers have a product to sell, content control usually starts with mouth control and refusing to be led into any 'exciting' quotes.

Conclusions

My major point in this commentary is that cavers should not be passive about portrayals of caves and caving in the mass media. We should recognize that caves are often literally or figuratively a 'commons' that we all maintain and benefit from. In some cases, an individual that sells out a wild cave for their own short-term personal gain is like a traitor that sells priceless national or trade secrets for a few dollars.

We should appreciate the differences between accounts and cave stories: lack of monetary incentive, small interested audience, review by peers, responsibility to group norms, emphasis on planning and safety. In the same way, local publicity is managed carefully by the caving community, rather than broadcast in an untargeted manner.

There are undoubtedly some readers that do not comprehend my viewpoint. I invite them to analyze my field data, such as it is, differently. Perhaps in their regions, owners of wild caves welcome publicity. I doubt it.

I would also remind skeptics of the pace of change in our trendy and litigious 'media nation.' Many cavers' beliefs and assumptions about access and traffic formed 10 to 20 years ago. Today they may be doing less caving and/or working more on established projects in specific areas. Before dismissing my anecdotes about cave owners and what they are thinking, these individuals should make sure that their own anecdotes are not obsolete.

I don't want to rain on the NSS parade, nor the star appearances of some of our members. But amid all the glory, we should examine where the parade is headed and what it will bring us, the caves and their caretakers. Where publicity is concerned, the key question must always be: Will this benefit cavers, or will it benefit caves and their caretakers?

My host in the West Virginia farmyard said one last thing: "You come on back and talk to me again. And don't bring too many with you." The son nodded.

* * *

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Notes

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