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Education about caves: Teaching the unteachable?

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Education is a key objective of the caving community. What can we teach? And what will be learned?

A story about caving and teaching comes to mind... We sat in the station wagon in the shopping center and we waited. Around us rose the grandeur of the Canadian Rockies, reducing the asphalt and shopping carts to a speck. An instant on the timeline of mountains and caves. Chad glanced at his watch. We waited. "I do believe my customers are no-shows," sighed Chad. I offered to pay, repressing a grin. Chad looked offended. He slipped the wagon into gear. "Let's go caving," he said.

Backpacks on, we labored up the canyon, cutting deep into limestone. Behind us unfolded the glacial valley that had gouged into the ancient cave system, draining it. I was disappointed that the customers had dropped out. I had wanted to observe this enterprise up close. How, I wondered, do you take a normal person from a parking lot through an alpine cave and back again—without turning them into a caver? "Oh, it's not too hard," said Chad. "On the phone, I ask them if they own a pair of hiking boots. If they don't, I suggest other diversions. If they do, we talk more. Most of them work out fine." Chad had discovered a simple rule of thumb: if you are outdoorsy, you can do it.

Cave interests and caving behavior

People don't have to be taught to find caves interesting, even fascinating. Caves have the primal pull of symbols: mystery, refuge, lair. It's an easy jump to practical value: caves as peculiar water supplies and reliable pollution conduits. Don't gum up nature's works. If cavers can get kids to go home and tell their parents to stop dumping in sinkholes, we have done good. The next level of education is caves as intrinsically valuable: as habitats, repositories, islands of wilderness in a sea of culture and technology. But for the tiny percentage of people who actually visit wild caves, there is another level of enlightenment: behavior.

Behavior is how people act and do not act. Behavior costs. It's not just, "*They* should not quarry that cave," it is *I* have to do things. *Moi?* Yes, you. Follow the rules. Stay on the trail. Carry out your trash. Balance instead of trudge. But some reply, in behaviors if not words, like this: *Not me, I'm busy. I want to take this photo. I am an artiste in his domain. Move just a little to the right. Yes, on that flowstone. Everybody else can be careful. I am in pursuit of Art.*

Behavior also means *not* doing things: Don't take a shortcut. Don't drop your crumbs all over the place. Don't go off the trail. Don't use the formations for balance. And, don't do these things when your companions are looking the other way.

The canyon widened slightly and the fossil entrance yawned under a cliff. On the ground was a lump that looked out of place. The lump awoke, taking the form of a British soldier. The soldier was looking at Chad rather grumpily. “Decided I don’t rather like caves. Me mates are in there with your man.” Silence ensued. I wondered if there would be ribbing in pubs for decades hence.

We climbed up to the entrance. “We’ve become part of their overseas training programme,” said Chad, indicating the lump with his chin. “Quite steady business, actually.” Across the entrance was a large steel gate, welded into ceiling and floor. I fingered the precise cuts of the carborundum saws. The door lay nearby, cast aside. I could see where the gate had been repaired and rewelded, but finally the landowning company had given up. When people want in, they get in. Chad had helped to design and build the gate. This struck me as ironic.

Suited up, we descended the stone corridor, like entering a walk-in refrigerator. The walls glistened with condensation and seepage. The floor was shards of thin rock, cobbles, a bit of mud, breakdown. No flagged trails through delicate crystals here. This cave resisted wear and tear better than most.

Ahead we heard the quiet ringing of a cable ladder. A few minutes travel and we came to the top of a drop. There sat Chad’s partner, busily belaying a customer up the ladder. They had gotten wet and were moving fast, steam venting from their suits. There was time for grins and greetings, and they moved out. Cave conquered. Mission accomplished.

We went deeper, Chad pointing out the geology and morphology of this drained resurgence. I asked Chad how he conveyed conservation concerns and rules to his clients. He gave me an outline, and all the right stuff was included. I was confident that, having taught in universities, he would do an excellent job of education in the time available.

But later I wondered. Isn’t education much more than knowing facts? In caving, isn’t knowing what you *should do* (behavior) more important than knowing what you *can do* (knowledge)? Where does individual behavior come from when no one else is watching? Consider a cave behavior that recently occurred in the southwestern US.

They had lots of information and knowledge

A person or persons became knowledgeable about caving techniques. They arranged their equipment. They contacted a federal lands manager. They read information on cave protection and their responsibilities. They signed an agreement. They obtained keys. They parked in designated areas. They passed through a fence and a gate worthy of bullion. They legally entered a cave under federal and state protection, locking said fence and gate behind them. They proceeded skillfully and knowledgeably through the cave for about one hour. And at this point they carefully did an extraordinary thing.

They mined crystals. Not just a little mine, out of the way. Eighteen mines, right off the flagged trail. The cavers who came in to count bats were horrified. Aghast. The caver who sent an outraged email to the caving community had, a couple of years before, been on national television showing the wonders of caves in the region. This struck me as ironic. Or more.

Cavers and the land manager are still trying to figure out who did it. Hard to say. The cave gets a lot of traffic. It's a community resource, you see. So where do you learn community standards of acceptable behavior? In a community.

Learning and procuring

Behavior that puts the needs of a cave ahead of the desires of people is hard to learn. It is not a matter of information or knowledge. It can't be taught, but it can be displayed. It depends on *belief* about who you are. It depends on *attitude* about your relationship towards a group of people and the caves you visit together.

Belief and attitude are rooted in identity. *Who you are* has a large influence on *what you believe*. Especially your priorities. You can learn facts in an afternoon, but you can't become a forest ranger, a veterinarian, a priest, or a caver in an afternoon. Identity develops in small, intense groups of peers and role models. In becoming a member of a community, the community changes you and over time you change it (to varying degrees). If you are truly a caver, then you may divide your life into two parts: Before Caving and Caving. You are not the same person that you were.

The caving community often fancies itself as a loose, casual place. But there are strict rules in some areas, whether you want to hear them or not. Peers and mentors *specialize* in telling their colleagues things that their colleagues do not want to hear. Especially during the caver apprenticeship period, when identity is forming and tests are being taken.

Sometimes the telling is in words, sometimes in a glance: That was stupid behavior. You need to do better. You are at risk of becoming a buffoon. You will check your locking carabiner before every drop or you will die. You will not produce crash-crash-tinkle sounds in crystal crawlways. We will flatrock you. We will then go outside and divide up your gear.

Tour guides provide a service for a fee, not a new identity for an apprentice. Service providers do not usually tell their customers things that their customers do not want to hear. There are no tests to pass. People must have fun, or they won't give you referrals. They won't even link to your website. So it is difficult to tell a client how to behave, and more difficult to push them to learn how to behave on their own. The implicit contract is, *take me don't change me*.

To understand outfitters and their clients, consider the 1996 deaths on Everest. These were people who had paid lots of money so they could pretend to be mountaineers. They

had not been tested and weeded out over years by the demanding mountains. And the perhaps more demanding mountaineering community. When the mountain administered a final exam, the tourists failed to make the right decisions. They held up their platinum credit cards in vain. At times, caves can administer final exams as well. But mostly, they just wear and tear.

Caving but not cavers

As control of information about caves and caving leaves the caving community, we hope that interested people will still come to us. If there is a movie about caves, then those interested in caving will come to the NSS, right? Undoubtedly, some will and we will benefit from their company. After all, we have brochures in the lobby. In the brochures is contact information.

But there is a message in the brochures that goes beyond information. The implicit message is “Join our community if you will and can.” Some will: the caving community will get some good apprentices, and distilling them will yield some excellent cavers. But many will reject this pitch. They want bragging rights, and before the credit card bill comes due. They want to *do* caves, not become new people with new behavior.

Joining is out of fashion. Witness the desperate and ridiculous recruiting slogan, *An Army of One*. Individualists seek information and services with no strings attached. Outfitters will recognize this “latent demand,” and they will start running those paying customers through caves. The marketing will expand, pursuing new customers with creative new messages.

A few customers will outgrow the guiding, buy their own gear on the Web, and strike off on their own. It’s a free country. They will do their own thing. They will be skilled, knowledgeable, and capable. But they will be cavers in *deed*, not cavers in *identity*. Some of them will even discover and create an alternative identity: miner.

What do they take home?

Back from the cave. I walked along Chad’s driveway fence. His stockroom. Nylon caving suits dried beneath the sun. Suits that had moved over and across wet stone for many cumulative hours. Like miles on an odometer, clicks on a turnstile. To me, caving suits have always been part of their owner’s identities. The unique patches like signatures, earned in tight spots. Glistening in caves, pulled from bulging trash bags, hung on farm fences to dry, steaming by the fieldhouse stove. It was odd to see such familiar things so identical and lifeless. Well worn, but not worn well?

Like rental skis, I thought. Machines for entertainment. Or shed like Halloween masks. What had the users taken home? Information and knowledge, undoubtedly. But identity and behavior? I wondered.

John Ganter has spent many an hour at the grotto table in the Student Union. And before the slide projector. It has raised some questions in his mind. He can be reached at jg@darkfrontier.us

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