

Lincoln National Forest, Guadalupe Ranger District, Cave Permit System

*Ransom Turner
Guadalupe Ranger District
Lincoln National Forest
Carlsbad, New Mexico, USA
rturner01@fs.fed.us*

Abstract

The Lincoln National Forest implemented a closure order in 1972 restricting cave access to those with a permit. Over the years the permitting process has evolved to provide enhanced protection for cave resources while still allowing recreational use of most of the Guadalupe Ranger District caves. Following policy and direction set in the Forest Service Manual, Lincoln National Forest Plan, Federal Cave Resources Protection Act, and Lincoln National Forest Cave Ecosystem Management Direction, Lincoln National Forest caves are managed as nonrenewable resources to maintain their geological, scenic, educational, cultural, biological, hydrological, paleontological, and recreational values. Caves have been assigned management classifications based on potential impact to the cave ecosystem by visitors. Management classifications range from Class 1 to Class 6. Class 1 defines a cave as being highly developed, and Class 2, 3, and 4 being undeveloped. Class 5 and 6 are caves closed to recreational use. Management Class 2 caves may be visited with a guide or approved trip leader. To allow more people to visit Management Class 2 caves; a Trip Leader program has been developed. Cavers become approved Trip Leaders when they participate in restoration projects within a certain cave, or they complete in cave Trip Leader training. A Cave Steward program is also being initiated. Cave Stewards work under Volunteer Agreements and receive in depth training to protect cave resources while leading visitors on recreational trips.

Summary

To provide protection for the caves, the Lincoln National Forest implemented a closure order in 1972 restricting cave access to only those with a permit. Jerry Trout, who is now the United States Forest Service National Cave Coordinator, was instrumental in implementing this far-sighted managerial action. The Guadalupe Ranger District has been managing a cave permit system for 29 years. Over the years the permitting process has evolved to provide enhanced protection for cave resources while still allowing recreational use of many caves on the Guadalupe Ranger District of the Lincoln National Forest.

Following policy and direction set in the Forest Service Manual; Lincoln National Forest Plan, approved September 1986; the Federal Cave Resources Protection Act of 1988; and Lincoln National Forest Cave Ecosystem Management Direction, approved February 1995, the Lincoln National Forest caves are managed

as nonrenewable resources to maintain their geological, scenic, educational, cultural, biological, hydrological, paleontological, and recreational values.

The Lincoln National Forest has taken extensive measures to protect cave resources. These measures range from withdrawing approximately 27,300 acres from oil and gas drilling and mineral exploration to creating and distributing cave conservation pamphlets and videos. Guided interpretive tours are provided in some caves. The educational value of these tours plays a significant role in the conservation of all non-renewable cave resources. Individual caves receive some protection through the permit system, and 23 of the caves are gated.

The Guadalupe Ranger District has developed a dynamic management system to try to meet the demands of a diverse group of users while protecting complex cave ecosystems. Caves have been assigned management classifications based on potential impact by visitors to cave ecosystems. Management classifica-

tions range from Class 1 to Class 6. Class 1 defines a cave as being highly developed, and Class 2, 3, and 4 being undeveloped. Class 5 and 6 caves are closed to recreational use.

Currently, there are no Class 1 caves on the Lincoln National Forest. Management Class 2 caves contain sensitive natural and/or cultural resources and require a guide or an approved trip leader to supervise all trips into these caves. Class 3 caves may be visited without a guide because the resources within these caves are less easily impacted than Class 2 caves and they can be enjoyed without incurring significant alteration if groups are conscientious and conservation minded. Class 4 caves are closed pending further evaluation. Class 5 caves are closed to general use because they contain biological, archaeological, paleontological, or other resources of special scientific value that would be easily altered even by careful use of the cave. Class 6 caves are closed to all use (except minimal administrative entries), because they contain extremely hazardous passages, very fragile resources, threatened or endangered species, or they are being preserved for future scientific study. Some of the larger, more complex caves have been divided into areas and assigned more than one management classification. Some caves are assigned seasonal Management Class 6 for threatened or endangered species protection.

Management classification is a dynamic tool. As new information is gained about a particular cave, it may lead to reclassification. For example, a species gaining threatened or endangered status may require that a cave it uses as habitat be moved from a Management Class 3 to Management Class 6. In the last couple of years, volunteers have provided inventory information for several caves and subsequently these caves have been moved from Class 4 to Class 3. When monitoring shows that visitor impacts are so acute that a cave has to be withdrawn from the recreational permit system while restoration is done, the cave management classification is temporarily changed to Class 4. In January of 1996 Wonderland, Black, Hidden, Pink Dragon, Three Fingers, Virgin, and Hell Below Caves were withdrawn from the recreational permit system and reclassified from Management Class 3 to Management Class 4.

On the Guadalupe Ranger District, as of this writing, there are 108 caves listed as significant in accordance with the Federal Cave Resources Protection Act of 1988. Most caves in the Guadalupe Mountains require managed access. These caves contain irreplaceable works of art created hundreds and thousands of years ago.

Currently, there are eight Management Class 2 caves. Two of these, the Second Parallel of Cottonwood and Cave Tree Cave, require a Forest Service guide. To allow more people to visit Management Class 2 caves, a Trip Leader program was initiated in January 1995. The other six Management Class 2 caves may be visited with a Trip Leader who has been approved for that cave.

Cavers become approved Trip Leaders when they complete in-cave Trip Leader training. Restoration work counts as training in Hell Below Cave. Trip Leaders may obtain permits, within the allowable monthly limit, to visit caves they are approved as Trip Leader for.

Twenty-four of the caves on the Guadalupe Ranger District are Management Class 3 caves, and 14 of these are available, via permit, for people requesting caves to visit. Directions in the form of step logs are available to most of these caves. The other Management Class 3 caves are not popular with the majority of permit seekers, because they require extensive hiking over rugged terrain and the cave may appear rather bland and only be a few hundred feet long.

There are 68 Management Class 4 caves. Many of these may become Management Class 3 caves, but it is unlikely they will receive much visitation due to their remote locations, small sizes, and lack of speleothems.

There are seven Management Class 5 caves identified thus far on the Guadalupe Ranger District. These caves contain sensitive biological, archaeological, paleontological, and geological resources of special scientific value. Examples of these resources are pristine microbiological communities, human fossils, and Pleistocene animal skeletons.

In the Management Class 6 category there is only one cave closed yearlong. This is to protect a maternity colony of Townsend's big eared bats (*Corynorhinus townsendii*), and to protect the public from exposure to histoplasmosis. There are five other caves, or areas within a large cave, that have seasonal closures to protect hibernating bats, maternity colonies, or a threatened or endangered species.

The permitting process is managed on a first come first served basis. Reservations are typically taken by telephone in the Guadalupe Ranger District office. Cave permit reservations may also be made via U.S. Mail, e-mail, or in person. Each cave open for recreational use has a limited number of permits available each month, usually three. After these visits have been reserved, no additional reservations are taken for that cave for that month. Reservations are taken anywhere from the day of the re-

requested visit to three months in advance of the current month.

For most caves only one permit per day is issued with a maximum of six people per permit. The exception is for work trips, where larger numbers of people will have beneficial outcomes on the cave resource that is, large groups of cavers doing restoration. A few of the larger caves like Cottonwood and Gunsight that are not as easily impacted by visitors may have more than one permit issued per day with the stipulation that no more than six people are in the cave at any one time.

The Trip Leader concept was implemented for some of the caves on the Guadalupe Ranger District, because they were being destroyed as a result of unacceptable impacts. The first cave to require a Trip Leader was Pink Panther Cave. One particular room in Pink Panther Cave had a floor covered in heligmites. Over the years, as more and more people found this room, multiple trails began to develop through the heligmites. In the early 1990s concerned cavers brought this to the attention of the USDA-Forest Service and it was obvious that a new approach had to be taken to prevent such a delicate resource from being destroyed. Rather than take the easy route and close the cave to everyone, a Trip Leader program was developed and implemented.

To become a Trip Leader to Pink Panther Cave a training trip is scheduled with a Guadalupe Ranger District Cave Specialist or Technician. Then after successfully completing one in-cave training trip the person's name is added to the Pink Panther Cave Trip Leader List and they can obtain permits and visit the cave anytime in the future (provided that a permit is available the month they request it).

As a result of active cave management utilizing tools such as the Trip Leader program, unacceptable impacts to Pink Panther Cave have been reduced. On a monitoring trip to Pink Panther Cave in the mid 1990s, when other caves were found to be suffering from unacceptable impacts, Pink Panther Cave was found to be in about the same condition as it was when first converted to a Trip Leader cave.

In the mid 1990s the USDA-Forest Service was finding evidence of egregious unacceptable impacts to other caves on the Guadalupe Ranger District. Like Pink Panther, some of these were gated caves suggesting that some people with permits were going off trail, breaking speleothems, and taking souvenirs. As a result, in January of 1996 Wonderland, Black, Hidden, Pink Dragon, Three Fingers, Virgin, and Hell Below Caves were withdrawn from the recreational permit system and reclassified from Management Class 3 to Management Class 4 while

restoration, trail delineation, and enhanced monitoring strategies were completed. Cavers volunteered hundreds of hours and within three years Hidden, Black, and Hell Below were returned to the recreational permit system.

Hell Below Cave was withdrawn from the recreational cave permit system in August of 1986 through August of 1988 while restoration work was done. By January of 1996, Hell Below Cave had received so much unacceptable damage that it required being withdrawn from the recreational permit system again. Unethical visitors had kicked rock-lined trails into disarray, trampled flagging, disregarded conservation messages written on flagging, and tracked mud across flowstone and other speleothems that had been restored. There was photo documentation of speleothems (cave pearls) having been removed from the cave.

Concerned cavers suggested that Hell Below become a Trip Leader cave once the restoration was completed this time. The first time Hell Below was closed for restoration in the late 1980s cavers recommended that access to Hell Below be restricted to only those who helped with restoration. The cavers contended that people who worked to restore the cave would take care of the cave and the USDA-Forest Service would not have to close it again. This suggestion was not implemented in the 1980s because management felt that it would restrict access for too many people.

It was decided that persons who participated in at least three restoration trips would qualify as Trip Leaders. Cavers may also become Trip Leaders for Hell Below Cave through training trips with a USDA-Forest Service Cave Resource Specialist, USDA-Forest Service Cave Resource Technician, or approved Interagency Hell Below Cave Trip Leader Trainer. A combination of three restoration or training trips also qualify a person to be a Trip Leader.

Requiring an approved Trip Leader to accompany all groups into Hell Below Cave since it was reopened for recreational visitation in August 1999 has proven to be an effective way of protecting the resource while still allowing recreational visitation. In contrast, Hidden Cave reopened as Management Class 3 in November 1998. Anyone requesting a permit was issued one, and now monitoring trips are documenting unacceptable impacts in the form of muddy footprints across recently restored areas and speleothem breakage.

We remain very supportive of expanding our Trip Leader certification program. Cavers interested in becoming Trip Leaders can schedule Trip Leader training with the Guadalupe Ranger District, or participate in

restoration projects. The last weekend of every month the High Guads Restoration Project works in the Guadalupe Ranger District caves on a variety of management tasks including restoration. We encourage interested volunteers to participate. A tremendous amount of restoration work has been done by the Project.

In 2000, 24 recreational permits were available for Hell Below Cave. Twenty-one permits were reserved and 11 were not used. Percentage wise this is similar to permits used and not used for Hidden Cave in 2000. Approximately half of the permits were used for both caves—Hell Below 48%, Hidden 56%. Compared to the all of the Management Class 3 caves listed in the cave calendar, a higher percentage of available visits were used for Hell Below, a Management Class 2 cave.

For the six caves that require a qualified Trip Leader, we currently have 30 Trip Leaders. Some of these cavers have received training and/or have done the restoration work and are qualified as Trip Leaders for more than one cave. Essentially there are 60 Trip Leaders listed

for the six caves. Of the 30 Trip Leaders, 10 of these, 33%, are from New Mexico, and seven of these 10 are from the Carlsbad area. The other 20 Trip Leaders, 67%, are from other states including Texas, Arizona, Colorado, Oklahoma, California, and Maine. To provide access for even more visitors, options like a Cave Steward Program are being explored. As we continue the fine-tuning of the permitting process, we welcome your comments and suggestions.

We are proud of our long-standing permit process and believe it is one of the most proactive in the country. We are also proud of the partnership we continue to forge with the caving community. This partnership has resulted in hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of volunteer contributions toward the conservation and protection of caves on the Guadalupe Ranger District. In 1999 this partnership resulted in the National Speleological Society being recognized by the Chief of the USDA-Forrest Service and receiving a national group volunteer award.