

Leonard Springs Nature Park: A Karst Property Focusing on Conservation and Education

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Leonard Springs Nature Park*

Abstract

Leonard Springs Nature Park is an 85-acre park with an emphasis on karst conservation and education. It is managed by the City of Bloomington in cooperation with the Indiana Karst Conservancy. The park contains three small caves, two impressive springs, and numerous secondary springs and seeps. From the early through mid 1900s, the property served as the city's water source. Currently, the old reservoir and surrounding land are in the process of being reclaimed by nature after over a century of use by farmers, millers, and others. Since 1999, together with various other local caving organizations, numerous cleanups have taken place on the property and in its caves. Collaborations with them have gone so well that more long-lasting commitments are being developed, including memorandums of understanding. Additionally, a mile-long trail was designed which passes a shelter cave and its associated overlook, the reservoir-turned-wetlands, and other significant features. Now that most of the work on the park itself has been completed, focus is shifting to cave and karst education, including efforts with local schools, agencies, planners, developers, and realtors.

Summary

Leonard Springs Nature Park is an 85-acre park with an emphasis on karst conservation and education. It is managed by the City of Bloomington Parks and Recreation Department in cooperation with various other agencies, including the Indiana Karst Conservancy. Throughout its 180 feet of relief, the property contains three small caves, two large and impressive springs with their associated waterfalls, and various other secondary springs.

The land was originally purchased by the city in the early 1900s and dammed to serve as their third water source. Later, it became apparent that the reservoir was not able to hold as much water as was anticipated for the growing population due to it being located in a well-developed karst area of the Mitchell Plateau. Water shortages ensued and the nearby, growing Indiana University threatened to move out of town. Eventually, the city and Indiana University came to an agreement to build a subsequent reservoir in a non-karst area northeast of the developing city. Leonard Springs ceased being used as a reservoir in the mid 1940s. It remained abandoned until a transfer from the

Utilities Department to the Parks and Recreation Department took place in 1998.

Currently, the old reservoir and surrounding land are in the process of being reclaimed by nature after over a century of use by farmers, millers, and others.

Various grants were received and work began in the spring of 1999 to turn the once-abandoned property into a prosperous place for people to hike and appreciate the karst resource while at the same time preparing it as a karst education and outreach opportunity.

An emphasis has been placed on securing a sense of ownership in the park. Together with various other caving organizations such as the Ohio Valley Region, Bloomington Indiana Grotto, and Eastern Indiana Grotto, numerous cleanups have taken place on the property and in its caves as they had been used as trash dumps by nearby residents.

Once this process was accomplished to an acceptable level, a mile-long trail with a 100-stair steel walkway that brings one from the top of the reservoir to the bottom in order to reduce erosion was designed and added. It passes by the entrance to a shelter cave. In addition, numerous service-learning projects

have taken place in the park, including maintenance of the trail system and so on. Since this time, there seems to be more pride in the park and surrounding area. For the amount of use it receives, very little vandalism has taken place and overall, visitors respect the property. Some have even been observed cleaning up candy wrappers and the like out of the parking lot on their own initiative.

Along the trail, interpretive signs have been placed in strategic areas to enhance the learning experience:

At the entrance to the park – includes a brief history of the park, do's and don'ts . . .

Near the shelter cave entrance – includes cave formation and conservation information . . .

Along the wetlands – includes the importance of wetlands as filtering systems . . .

On top of the dam – includes a brief history of the reservoir and city politics.

While the above was taking place, various school groups and others came to visit and enjoy the park as an educational facility or outdoor lab. For example, Harmony School undertook a Hoosier Riverwatch program sponsored by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources at one of the main springs, Shirley Springs. This program includes testing the water quality at various times and reporting it to the state. Many others have come for tours and other educational opportunities at the park.

Now that the park is in its final stages of development, more emphasis is being placed on education and outreach. Lindberg is currently working on collaboration between the city and county to further the park's efforts as well as working on common interests in the surrounding area. With the city growing and expanding outward toward the western karst regions, this emphasis is quite timely. People are becoming more and more aware of the importance of its karst resources.

The word is getting out. Local press has been supportive as well, and the karst/groundwater model, which the Indiana Karst Conservancy purchased a couple of years ago with a \$500 NSS Conservation Committee grant, has been getting a real workout.

More education and outreach programs are in the process of being developed and refined, including those that emphasize Project Underground material and more work with school-aged children—public, private, and home-schooled children, 4-H, scouts, and so on. Of course, it's not limited to young people, those of all ages can benefit from these oppor-

tunities. For example, a septic system workshop is planned for the future and will include invitations to persons of other karst areas, a Storm Drain Marking Program is underway, as is a tour of the park by city and county planners as they continue their work on the growth policies plan. The City of Bloomington is being seen as a leader in karst conservation in the state of Indiana.

Thanks to the Bloomington Indiana Grotto, City of Bloomington, Eastern Indiana Grotto, Hoosier Hikers Council, Hoosier National Forest, Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Indiana Geological Survey, Indiana Karst Conservancy, Indiana University, Indiana University Spelunking Club, Monroe County Consolidated School Corporation, Monroe County Soil and Water Conservation District, Monroe County Solid Waste Management District, National Speleological Society, Ohio Valley Region, Project Underground, WonderLab, and all of the other fine organizations that have helped with the successful development of this important karst nature park.

Author

Kriste Lindberg has been an active member of the caving community since 1992. She was introduced to it while teaching for the Chicago Academy of Sciences. Having joined the Indiana Karst Conservancy in 1994, she has served on the board of directors since 1996, including two years as President. She is now focusing on developing their Education and Outreach Committee, of which she is Chairman. She has earned a BGS degree focusing on the earth and social sciences and an MSED. In addition, she serves as the Ohio Valley Region's Conservation Liaison, a Project Underground Facilitator as Indiana contact, and on the NSS Conservation Committee's national education team. She has been employed by the City of Bloomington as a coordinator for Leonard Springs Nature Park since its beginnings in 1999 and is currently working on collaboration between the city and other agencies, including the Monroe County Soil and Water Conservation District, focusing on education and outreach. She has written numerous articles for publication and has done presentations for grottos, schools, agencies, and conferences including the NCKMS 1999 where she presented a paper on "Recent Projects of the Indiana Karst Conservancy," which included a brief introduction to the developing Leonard Springs Nature Park.