

SUI's Conservation and Access policy

adopted by the Union on 28 October 1990

1. INTRODUCTION

This policy document deals with two separate but related issues, namely conservation and access. It is not possible to secure unrestricted access nor prevent all damage. A compromise must be found. Hence, the two issues are here considered together.

Caves are part of the natural environment and should be treated with respect. They are a depository of archaeological material, a living space for many species, a sedimentary record of past climates and environments. Primarily, they are the product of natural karstic processes of erosion that have created a unique collection of features and structures which cavers are privileged to see. From the obvious and dramatic - stalactites, stalagmites, curtains, gour pools, pot holes - to the subtle and less obvious but equally important - sediments, scallops, passage forms - caves are the reason we go caving. Their importance therefore transcends these activities and in any conflict, the cave must take precedence. In short, conservation is more important than access. Goodwill is the best policy of all. This has usually been sufficient in Ireland where pressure of numbers is low. As pressures increase, problems will inevitably occur. The first reaction of cavers to any problems should be to seek the restoration of goodwill and the voluntary protection of the cave and the access thereto. Inevitably this cannot always succeed and other measures will have to be considered. This document seeks to set the ground rules for such action; an agreed approach that will be generally acceptable to cavers; and hopefully avoid the often virulent rows that have broken out in other countries when controversial solutions have been attempted. It does not purport to cover the scientific aspects of speleology but rather the activity of caving and the issues that arise from it. This document will be subject to review.

2. CONSERVATION ISSUES

2.1 CAVE DWELLING SPECIES

The best known cave dwelling species are bats. They are an endangered species with legal protection in Ireland (North and South). They are particularly vulnerable when hibernating (October to April). They should not be disturbed, especially during these months. SUI will support reasonable measures taken for their protection, including legislation and the use of gates and access restriction on sensitive sites. Other cave dwelling species - insects, worms, fish etc. - are also at risk and are just as important as the better known bats. Little is known about the fragile ecology of caves, especially in Ireland and the varied flora and fauna that constitute it. Cavers should treat them with respect and SUI will support reasonable measures taken for their protection.

2.2 CAVE SEDIMENTS

Cave sediments are one of the most important features of the cave environment. Older sediments are of particular interest. Preserved underground, they are protected from normal surface processes and hold a rich and irreplaceable store of information - sedimentological, biological, and archaeological - for the scientist. The greatest threat to such sediments is the caver himself. Persons should not damage, throw about, trample on or otherwise interfere with sediments. When sediments must be

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walked on, damage should be kept to a minimum. SUI accepts and encourages the identification and protection of important sites by appropriate means. The existing legal restrictions on the excavation of archaeological deposits must be upheld.

2.3. CAVE DIGGING

Cave digging - i.e. the excavation of materials in an attempt to find new passage - is a legitimate part of caving and has greatly extended our knowledge of caves. Given the precedence of conservation over access, it will on occasion be ruled out especially where the sediments or formations blocking a passage are of scientific or other value. Digging should also be avoided where it is simply opening an easy alternative to an existing route. It is reasonable to seek to bypass a sump or open a through trip, but the benefits of the dig should always be weighed against the damage and alterations caused by it. Abandoned dig sites should be cleared of all introduced materials and equipment and left as unspoilt as possible. They must be made safe/secure from animals. In all cases the onus is on the digger and, if in doubt, he should seek expert advice.

2.4 CAVE FORMATIONS

Calcite formations - stalactites, stalagmites, columns, curtains, straws, gour pools etc. - are the most obvious and the most delicate of cave features. Their delicacy makes them highly vulnerable and their loss would detract greatly from Irish caves. They should never be willfully damaged or broken. They should never be removed from caves - whether attached or already broken - except for valid scientific purposes. Well decorated, constricted passages are the most vulnerable and should be avoided by large groups and beginners. In extreme cases, SUI will investigate formal methods of protection including gating, taping, leadership systems etc. Other formations - scallops, passage forms, rock structures etc. - are generally less vulnerable. Again, willfull damage is unacceptable.

2.5. SHOW CAVES

The limited development of show caves at suitable sites is acceptable as a means to introduce the public to caves. They provide an opportunity to inform and to educate. As such, developers should present a cave as it is and not as they or the public think it should be. Works should be tasteful, sympathetic to the cave environment, designed to show the cave as close as possible to its natural wild state with the minimum of alterations and the maximum of educational value.

2.6 COMMERCIAL AND ORGANISED CAVING

SUI recognises that problems and pressures can arise from the use of caves by large organised groups such as commercial bodies, outdoor education centres, school groups, scouts etc. SUI will endeavour to identify these problems and seek their solution.

2.7 CAVERS DETRITUS

Materials should not be introduced to the underground environment. This applies especially to spent carbide, abandoned equipment, cans and other litter. Exceptions do exist of which the most obvious are rescue dumps, scientific equipment and fixed aids. The guiding policy is to leave the cave unaltered and only introduce materials where they can clearly be justified and are as inoffensive as possible. Location cairns

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and directional arrows are generally unacceptable. Graffiti should never be put on cave walls.

2.8. FIXED ARTIFICIAL AIDS

The most commonly used are bolts. These should be used sparingly avoiding any suggestion of proliferation. They should be well placed with safety and conservation in mind. Other artificial aids such as ropes, diving lines, guide lines in unstable boulder chokes, ladders, planks etc. should only be introduced when they are demonstrably necessary; where a natural alternative is not available; and where they will be useful - not to mention safe.

2.9. SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

This policy document cannot cover all the possible considerations on scientific research. Normal scientific codes of practise and legal requirements should be observed and the following general points should be noted: Cave sample removal for scientific study should comply with the following criteria;

1. It should be for original research rather than project based.
2. Where digging/breakage of materials is necessary the site should be chosen with great care to avoid damage to important sites or unique formations/deposits and should not result in unsightly remains. Exploration of an archaeological nature may only be conducted under the supervision of a licensed archaeologist.
3. Results of research should be made available to the caving community either by publication in an appropriate national caving journal or by providing the SUI library with an opportunity to make a copy from a thesis or specialist publication. Results should also be made available to the local community / landowner.

2.10. EXTERNAL THREATS

All the forgoing are internal threats. Caves may also be threatened by external activities of which the most significant are quarrying, refuse dumping , drainage works and agriculture. Quarrying has rarely been a problem in Ireland where limestone covers 40% of the country. When a cave of merit is threatened, SUI will oppose quarrying and propose the relocation of the quarry. Dumping in cave entrances is never justified and shall be strenuously opposed. Apart from the obvious irritation to the cave user, it is a potential hazard to water quality and public health. Such dumping is often due to ignorance of the caves and of karst hydrology. A convenient hole for one person's rubbish may drain directly to another's water supply. SUI will attempt to improve public knowledge of the impact and dangers associated with such dumping and will promote the clearance of entrances already fouled by such activity.

3. CONSERVATION MEASURES

3.1. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The greater the threat to a cave, the more restrictive the solutions become. Where ever possible, the least draconian measures should be taken. Three types of action are considered - education, voluntary restrictions and compulsory restrictions. All or any may be used to solve a specific problem but if education alone is sufficient then restrictions should not be considered and if voluntary restrictions are enough, compulsory ones need not be used.

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3.2. EDUCATION

SUI supports and assists in the education of all cave users, and of others, whose activities affect caves, to control damage caused purely by ignorance. Cavers should act at all times with respect for the cave. As the most involved group, their behaviour should set an example for others. Unacceptable activities include destruction of sediments or formations, littering of all kinds especially spent carbide, interference with flora and fauna, and damage to any special cave sites such as recognised sites of scientific interest. Other members of the public may damage caves through dumping, quarrying etc. The damage is rarely malicious. Education can solve the majority of the problems and SUI will seek to inform the public generally but also the more important groups such as landowners, farmers and those who live near caves.

3.3. VOLUNTARY RESTRICTIONS

A range of voluntary restrictions are possible, many of which may also be invoked in a compulsory format. These include restrictions on carbide, restrictions on beginners and limits to party size. All of these may be acceptable if suited to the situation. SUI will advise on caves that should be protected in such a fashion. For example, caves may be nominated by SUI (in consultation with interested groups such as Outdoor Education Centres), which are considered unsuitable for beginners due to underlying conservation problems. Members will be requested to abide by such advise. Another voluntary restriction is the use of tape to mark off areas that should not be entered. Such a system is most suited to heavily trafficked or very delicate sites. Again, should such areas be taped, members will be requested to respect that restriction.

3.4. COMPULSORY RESTRICTIONS

The key to such restrictions is gating. It is a draconian measure by virtue of which it is both effective and controversial. It has at times caused great offence in other countries. It should not be undertaken lightly; should not be introduced without the broad acceptance of cavers; and should not be introduced without a prearranged policy on access, keys and related issues e.g. leadership schemes. Where gates have been placed with the broad acceptance of the caving community, those opposed to their introduction must abide by the decision of the caving fraternity as a whole. There is unlikely ever to be unanimity on this issue, but the term "broad acceptance" should mean at least a two thirds majority of an AGM or EGM. The voluntary restrictions mentioned already - restrictions on carbide, on beginners, limits of party size and leadership schemes - can be combined with gating in a compulsory format. Normally, gating should be combined with some such pre-arranged system of access individually designed to suit a particular cave. Some caves may be gated to protect bat colonies. These are usually short caves of little interest to the caver but consultation should still precede such decisions.

3.5. POSITIVE MEASURES

Apart from education, SUI will also become involved in positive measures to pre-empt and avert conservation problems. SUI will promote the use of one appropriate, robust site as a honeypot for large groups and beginners. This can be an effective system, diverting pressure away from delicate sites. On the principle that prevention is preferable to cure, such developments will be encouraged. Cavers should not take beginners to delicate or protected caves.

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3.6. LEGAL PROTECTION

A few sites have legal protection or official recognition. Possible designations include National Monuments, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (Northern Ireland), Areas of Scientific Interest (Rep. of Ireland), properties owned by official bodies and bat roosts protected under wildlife legislation. All such sites should be respected by cavers. The principle of legal protection - which has long been fought for - must be encouraged and defended by SUI. Sites that are in danger and can be suitably protected by such official involvement will be nominated by SUI and official protection sought.

4. ACCESS ISSUES

4.1. LANDOWNERS

In Ireland, access is usually freely available but there is no legal right of access save in a rare circumstance where a "right of way" exists. SUI will strive to protect rights of way where they exist, and to establish additional rights of way at designated sites. It is highly desirable that the generally good relationship that exists between landowners and cavers should be preserved. This is not always possible but cavers should do all in their power to maintain good relations by being polite and avoiding damage.

4.2. SHOWCAVES

Where no right of way exists, access will be possible only at the discretion of the owner. It is SUI's policy to be helpful and constructive in its dealings with sensitive show cave developments but it is asked that owners extend a similarly co-operative approach to access for cavers.

4.3. CLOSURE OF ENTRANCES

An entrance might occasionally be closed for conservation reasons. Otherwise SUI objects to the closure of entrances and will campaign against such closures subject to the importance of the entrance and the effect on the legitimate activities of others.

5. ACCESS MEASURES

5.1. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

As with conservation, the appropriate solution should involve the minimum of change, complexity and organisation. In the absence of a statutory right to cross land, it is best if the existing informal access arrangements can be preserved. Unlimited access to the general public is not desirable except in a small number of well managed show caves. Apart from issues of safety, such unlimited access may create severe problems of damage and vandalism by bringing into a cave - without experienced leaders - persons who are ignorant of caves and of the damage they can cause. For these reasons, signposting of entrances and the construction of paths to entrances is to be discouraged.

5.2. VOLUNTARY RESTRICTIONS

Voluntary restraint on access by members will solve many problems. SUI will nominate sensitive sites to be avoided by large groups, schools, outdoor pursuits centres, beginners etc where the pressure of such numbers is creating problems.

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Sites may be nominated to be avoided by all cavers at all times except for occasional trips with a specific purpose e.g. surveying. Cavers will be asked to observe such voluntary restrictions.

5.3. BEHAVIOUR OVERGROUND

As with conservation, the behaviour of cavers can ameliorate or exacerbate an access problem. Cavers should never give offence to landowners nor should they cause damage to field boundaries, crops, trees, animals etc. Fences and other protection around cave entrances should, above all else, never be damaged. Cavers should also strive to solve problems, improve relations with landowners and generally improve the quality of access.

5.4. NEGOTIATION

The first approach to any access problem is to improve relations with the owner, if at all possible. This may involve no more than establishing friendly contacts and listening to the owners point of view. It may involve concessions or offers of assistance, e.g. to repair fences. Whatever is involved, this is the preferable first course of action.

5.5. ACCESS AGREEMENTS

Written access agreements between SUI and cave owners, which do not involve payment, are an acceptable solution where they will solve a problem. They involve little more than a written version of the above.

5.6 GOODWILL PAYMENTS

The use of a system by which cavers make a nominal, non-profit making payment (i.e. goodwill payment) to a landowner to enter a cave has not yet occurred in Ireland. Existing unrestricted and free access is greatly valued and every effort will be made to protect it. Goodwill payments are certainly preferable to loss of access but before agreeing to the first use of such a system, SUI will carefully consider its wider implications on other sites.

5.7. RIGHTS OF WAY

This should rarely be proposed as a solution where they do not exist already. A right of way would only be appropriate at a site that is busy and important. As with paid access, consideration will first be given to the implications of such an agreement on other unrestricted sites.

5.8. PURCHASE OF CAVE / ACCESS ROUTE

The same points apply here as above. A very few special sites might be brought into public ownership, such as Pollnagollum, Co. Clare which is already the property of Clare County Council. Even in such cases, purchase is more likely to be prompted by the site's significance than by an access problem. At an important cave, where all else has failed, such a solution may be considered.