

Caving Safety Tips

Cave exploring is becoming increasingly popular as an activity for people around the world. The challenge and excitement of the underground world has lured adventurers since the dawn of time.

In some areas, however, heavy caver traffic has led to destruction of cave formations and cave-dwelling animals. Landowners have refused permission to enter their caves because of the rude and thoughtless actions of some cavers. Serious or fatal accidents have occurred when inexperienced, poorly prepared groups of cavers have failed to observe safety rules.

To protect the caves, cavers, and cave owners, the National Speleological Society (NSS) offers this information to the members, leaders, and parents of youth groups who are interested in cave exploring.

All participants should be healthy, well fed, and rested before the trip. The group should consist of from a minimum of three people. Large groups tend to be slow, noisy, and hard to control, and should split into two or more sections, each with one or more leaders, for the caving trip. Please remember fewer people will greatly reduce the impact of your trip in the cave.

#1 ALWAYS tell someone where you are going!

Leave word with a dependable person as to where you are going, who is in the group, what time you expect to return, and who to notify in case of emergency. Running, jumping, and horseplay have no place in cave exploring. The rescue of an injured, caver can be extremely difficult; don't take any chances of a sprain or fracture.

#2 NEVER go caving alone!

One or more knowledgeable adults with caving experience should lead beginner groups caving. The NSS can supply the name of its closest chapter, or grotto, which may be able to provide a trip leader. In any case, the leader's decisions on all matters should be followed during the cave trip. The cave should be suitable to the group, taking into account the capabilities of the slowest, youngest, or least experienced member. Members should not be encouraged or allowed to over extend their abilities or to attempt more than they feel confident in doing.

#3 ALWAYS wear a helmet and carry 3 sources of light!

Proper equipment is extremely important. Each person in the caving group should wear gloves, sturdy shoes or boots, a jacket or coveralls, and some type of hard hat with a chin strap. Other clothing should be determined by the cave conditions, remembering that caves are often cool, damp, and muddy. Long hair should be tied back or tucked under the hard hat, if possible. Valuable watches and jewelry should be left at home. Car keys may be hidden near the car or near the cave entrance; if they are carried through the cave, pin them securely in a pocket or pack. A small pack with a belt or shoulder strap should be carried to hold waterproof snacks, drinking water in a plastic bottle, a plastic bag to hold trash, and several spare light sources with extra bulbs and batteries. How much equipment to take is determined by the type of cave and expected length of trip.

The main source of light should be a helmet mounted lamp. A gasoline or kerosene lantern can easily be broken and should not be carried in a cave.

#4 Be a courteous caver

Each person should bring a change of clothes and shoes to be left in the car for the ride home. A large plastic bag to hold your wet, muddy cave clothes and boots is a

good idea. The safety of the entire group can be jeopardized by a major injury to one member, and a serious accident often leads a landowner to restrict future access to his cave. A simple first aid kit should be carried in case of minor injuries.

In an unfamiliar cave, keep track of prominent features so that you can find your way out. If you need to, leave pieces of reflective tape to mark your way and remove them again as you leave the cave.

#5 Be careful!

Caves are often cold and damp, and hypothermia is a danger, especially on long trips or trips requiring wading or crawling in water. Try to dress for conditions to be met, stay as dry as possible, and leave the cave immediately if any member shows signs of hypothermia such as uncontrollable shivering, slurred speech, or loss of coordination.

Some caves flood rapidly in response to surface rainfall. Avoid stream passages in wet weather or if rain is predicted, and leave the cave or move to upper-level passages if the water begins to rise. Your youth organization may have some requirements as to parental permission, adult supervision, transportation, or other matters. Be sure that these requirements are met.

Vertical caving, where there are climbs or drops to be made, is an advanced skill which should be learned only after groups are very experienced in horizontal caving, and then proper instruction and equipment should be obtained. Never attempt climbs or drops without the proper knowledge and equipment. Ladders, ropes, and other equipment found in the cave should be considered unsafe, as they may be old or rotten. Never attempt to go up or down a rope hand-over-hand in a cave or pit.

#6 Help save the caves

Although caves are formed in rock, they are not indestructible. They can easily be damaged by littering, vandalism, or even a careless footstep. Cave formations are quite fragile due to their crystalline structure. They grow very slowly over thousands of years, but can be destroyed in an instant. Be careful not to bump formations with your boots or hard hat. Even touching formations can discolor them, and the oil from your skin can disrupt the water film that allows them to form. Removing cave

formations, even those that may already have been broken must not be allowed. If you want a souvenir of your trip, bring your camera and record what you see!

If you are lucky enough to discover any Indian relics, fossils, or bones, notify the anthropology or science department of the nearest college or university, but don't disturb your find.

Cave creatures, from tiny insects to larger mammals, should not be disturbed. Bats, in particular, should not be disturbed or handled, as they are highly beneficial animals, eating many times their own weight in insects. They may also transmit rabies to humans through a bite or scratch.

Most caves are not well suited to overnight camping due to the lack of sanitation facilities and a clean water supply. To avoid filling the cave with smoke and disturbing the cave life, do not build fires in caves or near cave entrances.

Remember to leave the cave just as you found it. Remove all food scraps, trash, dead batteries, and used carbide that your group has brought in. If your youth group would like to get involved in a service project, you could clean trash out of a cave or use wire brushes to restore areas where names of recent visitors have been written on the rocks and walls. Local NSS grottos can usually provide further information about such projects.

#7 Caves have owners-Courtesy pays

Nearly all caves have interested owners upon whose hospitality cave visitors must depend. In eastern, southern, and Midwestern states, most caves are privately owned; generally by farmers. In western states, most caves are managed by various government agencies. But in all parts of the country, more and more caves have been closed to cavers because of the thoughtless actions of a few visitors. Such problems could be avoided if everyone would follow the rules of courteous caving:

Before the trip, find out who owns the cave and get permission to enter it. Ask the owner where to park your cars. Don't block roads, gates, or driveways. Walk through gates, if possible, instead of climbing fences. If you must climb a fence,

do so one at a time, close to a fence post. Be sure to leave gates exactly as you found them, either open or closed.

Don't disturb livestock, farm buildings and equipment, or newly plowed or planted fields. Walk single-file around the edge of a planted field, rather than across the middle of it.

Some cave entrances are blocked to keep livestock out of them. Be sure to block them behind you as you enter the cave and again as you are leaving.

Find out whether the cave is a water supply for the owner. If so, avoid muddying the water or disturbing pumps or pipes in the cave.

Tell the owner how long you expect to be in the cave, and then make sure you are out on time. Tell the owner that the group is out and thank him for allowing you to visit his cave. If it is late at night, make every effort to leave quietly without disturbing the owner and his family. Then send a thank-you note the next day.

If you change clothes after the trip, be sure you are out of sight of the owner and his neighbors.

Be sure to remove all litter from the cave and grounds. Used carbide, which contains poisonous impurities, should never be dumped in the cave, on the ground, or in streams or ponds.

Don't ask to visit the same popular cave too often, and don't come with large, noisy groups which are hard to control. Don't strain the owner's hospitality by asking to picnic, camp, or build fires on his property or in the cave.

The NSS is an organization devoted to the exploration, study, and conservation of caves. Throughout the country, local NSS chapters, or grottos, welcome those interested in caves to their meetings and field trips. Association with the NSS provides many benefits, especially for beginners, such as:

Interesting programs and activities.

The fellowship and know-how of experienced cavers.

Training programs in various aspects of caving.

Useful magazines, newsletters, and books on caves and caving.

Participation in cave exploration, study, conservation, and rescue projects.

Additional information on the NSS may be obtained at the website, or by writing to the National Speleological Society, Cave Avenue, Huntsville, Alabama 35810.

Be sure you understand the proper use and application of any First Aid supplies you carry. Don't waste time, space or energy carrying things you can't use or that may cause injury due to misuse. If possible, take a first aid course from an organization like the Red Cross.

Each person should take a personal First Aid Kit and a member of the group should have a larger more extensive First Aid Kit containing other supplies that should be readily available.

Disclaimer:

Caving can be a potentially hazardous activity. You could get hurt and/or killed. The material on this web site is provided to help you avoid that outcome, but there is no certainty that it will do so. Neither the author nor The Central Arizona Grotto is to be held liable for the use/misuse of any material on this website. Please use extreme caution when exercising these activities and get proper training and lots of practice before engaging in any of these activities to reduce the risk of possible injury.