

November 2013

Evaluating the Status of Cave Wilderness

National Cave and Karst Research Institute

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/kip_articles

Recommended Citation

National Cave and Karst Research Institute, "Evaluating the Status of Cave Wilderness" (2013). *KIP Articles*. 1715.

https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/kip_articles/1715

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the KIP Research Publications at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in KIP Articles by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.

EVALUATING THE STATUS OF CAVE WILDERNESS

Patricia E. Seiser

NSS 28650 FE
1106 Tracy Place
Carlsbad, NM, 88220, USA
cavewench@outlook.com

Abstract

In 1964 the United States government passed landmark legislation creating a National Wilderness Preservation System to preserve and protect natural landscapes for primitive use. Despite four attempts to create a Cave Wilderness designation, two by the Cave Research Foundation, one by the National Speleological Society and one by a unit within the National Park Service system, no Wilderness designation has been made to protect and preserve a specific cave, region within a cave or a karst region. The question remains: if and when will the US declare a cave or portion of a cave/cave system as Wilderness? Two federal acts and one pending bill are considered significant cave related legislation that may lead the way to an eventual Cave Wilderness designation.

Introduction

The 1964 Wilderness Act was eight years, eighteen public hearings and over 60 drafts in the making. This landmark legislation recognized the need to preserve and protect wild lands of America. It created a land use designation called Wilderness. Input was received from numerous organizations, agencies and private citizens via reports and testimonies. The National Speleological Society (NSS) and the Cave Research Foundation (CRF) submitted reports and testified during hearings advocating caves as Wilderness.

Ultimately the legislation did not define which ecosystems would or would not be considered as suitable for Wilderness designation; instead it used the all-encompassing terms of land and landscape. As such, caves were not specifically mentioned nor excluded as wilderness areas. However, it should be noted that these terms are typically applied to surface environments and not places such as oceans and caves.

Efforts to gain Cave Wilderness status for Mammoth Cave, Mammoth Cave National Park, Kentucky occurred in 1967 and 1971. An attempt was made in 1972 to create a Karst Wilderness of the Guadalupe

Escarpment in New Mexico and Texas. This would have included caves located in both Carlsbad Caverns National Park, New Mexico and the region that would become Guadalupe Mountains National Park, Texas. All three attempts for Cave or Karst Wilderness designation failed (Seiser 2003). In all three cases the proposed cave/karst wilderness was predicated on the 1964 definition of Wilderness.

Since the 1964 Wilderness Act our idea of a federally defined Wilderness has also changed, expanded as evidenced by the 1975 Eastern Wilderness Act, and the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). It would seem that with changing ideas of how Wilderness is defined it might be possible to have a congressionally legislated Cave Wilderness.

In 1988, Carlsbad Caverns National Park submitted a proposal for Lechuguilla Cave, a cave located beneath surface Wilderness, to be designated Cave Wilderness. If successful, the designation would have added another dimension to the idea of wilderness – that of an ever expanding wilderness based on new exploration. Unfortunately, the National Park Service did not support the proposed designation. One consequence of the proposal was the establishment of official NPS policy that caves having all entrances within a Wilderness area will be managed as wilderness (Kerbo, 2002).

The one item that is common to all Wilderness Acts is that they create Wilderness as a surface environment. Whether or not that was the intent of the original proposed legislation is not the question. It is a potential problem in terms of how the physical side of wilderness is perceived. Relevant questions include: What is meant by Cave Wilderness? And, what is the intent of such a designation?

Defining Cave Wilderness

It is perhaps easier to first define what Cave Wilderness is not than it is to define what it is. Cave Wilderness is not a federally designated Wilderness containing caves. There

are a variety of such wilderness areas. Caves within these areas are considered wilderness caves. However, some of these wilderness caves may lack wilderness qualities; nor can they provide a wilderness experience. For example, some caves located within a wilderness may be too small to provide the sense of isolation and remoteness essential to a wilderness experience, and others may have excessive impact due to human usage and visitation (Seiser 2003).

Current National Park Service policy is that all caves found within a wilderness be managed as wilderness. The benefits of such a policy includes: blocking attempts to commercialize such caves wherein access can be obtained via natural or man-made entrances outside the designated Wilderness boundaries. However, these wilderness caves are not protected by congressional legislation and policy can change, allowing for access from beyond the wilderness boundary. Policy changes can result in management decisions that could easily change the wilderness nature of the cave.

Lechuguilla Cave is located beneath the Carlsbad Caverns Wilderness. The extent and extraordinary scientific value of this cave was unknown at the time the Wilderness designation was made. While it is being managed as a wilderness cave it lacks suitable protection of a congressional designation. The lack of a specific Wilderness designation also ignores the idea of Lechuguilla Cave as a national treasure.

Seiser's (2003) doctoral research on cavers and members of Carlsbad Caverns and Mammoth Cave National Parks gateway communities defined two critical elements relevant to the intent of a Cave Wilderness designation: First, it must protect and guarantee a wilderness experience. It is not the structure (shape or size) of the cave, but the experience that makes it a wilderness. It is important that people experience caves in a way that preserves them. The sense of isolation, as defined by solitude and remoteness, and the sense of self-sufficiency are important elements in a cave wilderness experience. Second, a wilderness designation must protect a cave's scientific values and resources (physical, biological, and other) for study now and in the future. Protection as a scientific resource should be a primary goal, seeking to preserve both current and future discovery opportunities. Recreational use would become a secondary goal. It should be noted that within caves, research and recreation often meet (Seiser 2003).

Seiser's (2003) research resulted in the following definition for Cave Wilderness: those cave and cave passages exhibiting exceptional scientific and cultural resources, and wilderness qualities. These sites display a high degree of wildness, in which the physical structure and ecological systems are largely unimpacted by humans, and in which there is a sense of remoteness from the ordinary activities and works of humans. It is further defined to mean those caves and cave passages in which stewardship shall protect the cave resources, its wilderness values, and future discoveries.

This definition of cave wilderness is not meant to negate the 1964 Wilderness Act, rather it expands our idea of what wilderness is and associates it with an environment not commonly visited by the public outside of a show cave environment.

Understanding what cave wilderness is (or should be) and what is the intent of such a congressional designation, leads to asking: Why do we need such a designation? It also leads to wondering why the designation has not occurred.

The Path to a Cave Wilderness Designation

Why has there not been a Cave Wilderness designation? It would be easy to say that trying to rigidly apply the 1964 Wilderness act to caves made it virtually impossible to achieve such a designation. However, the variety of Wilderness legislation since that original enactment suggests that wilderness advocates were able to successfully negotiate an expanded understanding of wilderness. I suggest rather that three factors have been involved: first, the use of the terms land and landscape, typically associated with surface environments; second, the lack of understanding of caves from a scientific aspect (the practical side of protection); and third, an even greater lack in understanding regarding the "romance of cave exploration". In the past such deficiency's made it very difficult for both land managers and legislators to support such a designation. It also made it difficult for wilderness advocates to effectively plead the case for cave wilderness.

Much has changed since the first initial attempts for cave wilderness. Since then, federal land managers responsible for the stewardship of agency caves have been increasingly selected from cave explorers educated

in various aspects of cave science and management. Also, there has been an increase in the number of natural history shows and movies on caves and cave exploration. These programs have changed the questionable image of cavers and replaced it with the image of serious explorers and cave scientists. It would be safe to say that we have a far better “cave educated” public and federal land managers than ever before.

How far have these changes taken us toward a Cave Wilderness designation? In the past twenty years, two federal acts should be viewed as significant legislation towards this end. In both cases the legislation was proposed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), an agency typically associated with leasing of rangeland and extraction of natural resources, not conservation. The first legislation, the 1993 Lechuguilla Cave Protection Act, protects unknown caves, then and now. This is the first time that a cave or cave passages were given congressionally mandated protection without an associated special designation. The second cave related legislation, the 2009 Omnibus Public Land Management Act, resulted in the establishment of the Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area (FSSRC NCA). This National Conservation Area was established to: “protect, conserve, and enhance the unique and nationally important historic, cultural, scientific, archaeological, natural, and educational subterranean cave resources of the Fort Stanton - Snowy River cave system” (BLM,2011).

Seiser (2013) evaluated the 2009 federal legislation creating the Fort Stanton – Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area as a potential step in the eventual creation of a designated Cave Wilderness, using criteria used in defining Cave Wilderness and values associated with a Cave Wilderness designation. As noted earlier, the FSSRC NCA was established to: protect, conserve, and enhance the unique and nationally important historic, cultural, scientific, archaeological, natural, and educational subsurface resources. These closely align to values associated with Cave Wilderness designation. The one significant value lacking is experiential; a value closely associated with any wilderness experience (Seiser, 2013).

The significance of the Fort Stanton – Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area lies in the establishment of a designation for the protection of scientifically notable

caves. The legislation mandated management priority for cave resources, regulating appropriate surface usage as a secondary priority.

At the time of this writing a bill has been introduced in the United States Senate entitled “Oregon Caves Revitalization Act of 2013.” The legislation includes a Scenic River designation for the subterranean River Styx that flows through Oregon Caves National Monument, located near Cave Junctions, Oregon. This designation would be the first time the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act will have been specifically applied to a waterway flowing through a cave. The passage of such legislation would be one more indication that cave resources are being recognized as significant and deserving of special protection.

Conclusions

It appears that we are on the way toward one day establishing congressionally designated Cave Wilderness. The question is under which agency will occur the first Cave Wilderness. The National Park Service has a long history of protecting outstanding cave resources. A scenic river designation for one of its cave rivers would appear to be a step toward considering one of its caves worthy of a Cave Wilderness designation. It would not be unreasonable to assume that the first designated Cave Wilderness would be for a cave under NPS stewardship. However, the Bureau of Land Management has had legislation recognizing that caves are of national interest. The first addressed the need to protect unknown caves and the second recognized the significance of a specific region within a cave. The BLM is commonly associated with grazing, mining and petroleum extraction. Yet the two cave protection acts support its mandate to protect our natural resources. It is hard not to wonder if they will manage the first federally designated Cave Wilderness.

Why do we need a Cave Wilderness designation? In the United States, who we are as a country is strongly tied to the land, to nature and to its exploration. Our National Parks, Monuments and Forests and other protected natural areas are our greatest national treasure. To designate a natural site as Wilderness is the highest recognition we can give to one of our national treasures. Such a designation brings greater understanding of our link to the natural world around us. If we wish to achieve greater understanding of and increased respect for caves and all they have to offer, then we need to push for a designated Cave Wilderness.

2014 marks the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act. It would, indeed be a sign that we have expanded the definition of and deepened our appreciation for Wilderness by seeing a cave or portion of a cave designated Wilderness.

Cave Wilderness is not an intuitive concept. Understanding the associated values is critical to understanding the idea of Cave Wilderness. So too is an understanding of the intentions of the designation. The objectives delineate Cave Wilderness stewardship goals without placing specific restrictions or requirements on how they are to be achieved, thus allowing each designated site to be managed as appropriate to protect the values and resources for which it was designated (Seiser and Schuett, 2006).

References

- Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980: Public Law 96-487.
- Eastern Wilderness Areas Act (1975): Public Law 93-622.
- Kerbo, R., 2002, Conservation and protection of caves and karst in the national parks, in Proceedings of the U.S. Geological Survey Karst Interest Group, Shepherdstown, WV: U.S. Geological Survey, p. 11-12.
- Lechuguilla Cave Protection Act of 1993: Public Law 103-169, 103rd Congress, S. 1, December 2, 1993.
- National Park Service, 1974, Draft environmental statement for the master plan and wilderness study for Mammoth Cave National Park, released on 24 April 1974.
- National Speleological Society, 1967, A Wilderness Proposal for Mammoth Cave National Park, Kentucky.
- Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009: Public Law 111-11, H.R. 146, 11th Congress S.22, March 30, 2009.
- Oregon Caves Revitalization Act of 2013: Senate bill S. 354.
- Seiser, P. E., 2003, Dark Wilderness: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Idea of Cave Wilderness. [Ph.D. dissertation]: Morgantown, West Virginia University.
- Seiser, P.E., 2013, The Status of Cave Wilderness in the United States of America: Proceedings of the International Congress of Speleology 2013, Brno Czech Republic (in press).
- Seiser, P. E. and Schuett, M. A., 2006, Defining the Concept of Cave Wilderness and Its Designated Values: International Journal of Wilderness, v. 12, no. 2, p. 8-16.
- US Bureau of Land Management, 2011, Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area Draft Resource Management Plan/Environmental Assessment. DOI-BLM-NM-P010-2010-149-EA. Roswell, New Mexico.
- Wilderness Act of 1964: Public Law 88-577.