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# THE FORT STANTON CAVE STUDY PROJECT: A MODEL FOR AGENCY – CAVER PARTNERSHIP IN CAVE MANAGEMENT

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## **Abstract**

The Fort Stanton Cave Study Project and the Roswell Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management have been working together to manage Fort Stanton Cave for over 40 years. This successful partnership is a shining example of resource managers and resource users collaborating to the mutual benefit of both. There are several specific aspects to this partnership which could be regarded as a model for other user groups and agencies who need or want to enter into a cooperative relationship.

## **Introduction**

The Fort Stanton Cave Study Project (FSCSP) was formally organized as a 501.c.3 non-profit in March of 2010. However, its story, and how it came to be an integral partner with the Roswell Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) begins much earlier. In 1970, the BLM recognized the need to put a gate on Fort Stanton Cave after the discovery of two new pristine passages in the cave in 1969 – Lincoln Caverns and Bat Cave Extension. However, BLM did not have anyone who knew how to do it, nor even where the best place to put the gate was. However, Don Sawyer, technically a recreation planner, but regarded as the first cave specialist for the BLM, did know that there was a group of cavers who spent a lot of time in the cave and asked for help. That group of cavers of the Southwestern Region of the National Speleological Society included the folks who are now the driving force behind the FSCSP. In May of 1970 the main gate of Fort Stanton Cave was installed with materials provided by the BLM and labor provided by the cavers (Figure 1). And so it began.

The FSCSP has been loosely organized since that 1970 event and has become more organized as time has gone on. A key event in the FSCSP and Fort Stanton Cave history was the discovery of the Snowy River passage on September 1, 2001. The continued management of this amazing passage required a cooperative effort between

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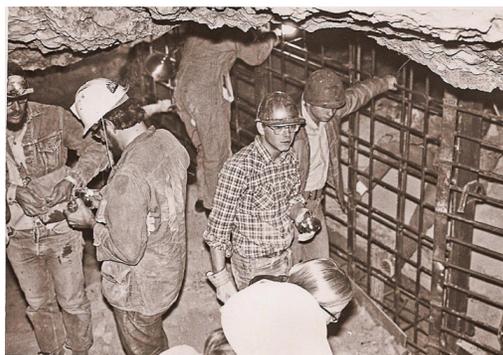
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the BLM and the cavers in the FSCSP in a fashion that had not been present before. The BLM and FSCSP worked closely together to seek the designation of the area around Fort Stanton Cave as the Fort Stanton – Snowy River National Conservation Area (Figure 2).

The FSCSP now counts over 200 volunteer participants and conducts three, week long expeditions each year at Fort Stanton Cave. There are several specific aspects of the processes and procedures used which illustrate the partnership that exists between the FSCSP and BLM.

## **Essential Elements of the FSCSP – BLM Partnership**

1. The FSCSP is a 501.c.3 incorporated non-profit. This provides an organizational structure and a legal point of reference for the relationship between the BLM and the FSCSP. Without formal incorporation, it is difficult for the BLM to enter into legal agreements with the organization.
2. The FSCSP has a specific person (the Project Director) designated to interact with the BLM. This person acts as a point of contact for all communication between the FSCSP and the BLM, so there is no confusion about who the BLM must talk to regarding any issues that develop.
3. The BLM has a specific person (the Roswell Field Office cave specialist) who interacts with the



**Figure 1.** Main Gate project in 1970.



**Figure 2.** In July 2005, in connection with the effort to designate the Fort Stanton-Snowy River National Conservation area, FSCSP Board President John Corcoran describes the unique aspects of Fort Stanton Cave to NM Senator Pete Domenici (sitting) while BLM Pecos District Manager Doug Burger (right) looks on.

FSCSP. This also provides for less confusion with any communication issues.

4. The FSCSP has no membership criteria. Any interested person is invited and allowed to participate (Figure 3). Participants are able to be involved in any activity of the organization up to the limits of their abilities and experience. There is no requirement for participants to be a member of any other caving organization. This provides a non-discriminatory foundation that enhances the ability of a governmental organization (BLM) to recognize the FSCSP.
5. The New Mexico BLM has a Cave Management Team (CMT), which provides for expert review



**Figure 3.** FSCSP volunteers along with local high school students and BLM Cave Specialist on a work trip in the cave hauling materials to Don Sawyer Memorial Hall.

of activities conducted or planned in BLM caves in New Mexico. The CMT recommends to the BLM Roswell Field Office Manager which of the activities proposed by the FSCSP should be approved. This allows for a peer-to-peer communication of caving issues between the FSCSP and the Cave Management Team.

6. The FSCSP plans its activities in and around Fort Stanton Cave well in advance. It conducts three, nine-day long expeditions throughout the year, generally in April, July, and October. Dates for the expeditions are generally decided during the previous year. This provides plenty of lead time for the BLM to plan for other activities around the expeditions.
7. The BLM provides a Field House for centralizing the activities of the FSCSP (Figure 4). While this may be a lucky happenstance of an unused building being available, it does indicate the commitment of the BLM to the partnership. This allows the FSCSP to conduct its expeditions in a much more comfortable and professional fashion. While the BLM provides the building, the FSCSP has undertaken a large part of the maintenance and upkeep for the building.
8. The FSCSP Project Director (in conjunction with the FSCSP board of directors and other researchers and volunteers) produces a comprehensive proposal for activities during its expeditions and presents it to the BLM's Cave Management team well in advance of the expedition. The proposals are detailed and justify the activities based upon current knowledge and interests of both the BLM and the FSCSP.



**Figure 4.** Field House leased by the BLM and used as an expedition headquarters by the FSCSP.

9. The FSCSP Project Director produces an Executive Summary of the activities conducted during an expedition and sends it to various BLM employees interested or involved in cave management (and all of the 200 or so participants of the FSCSP) in a timely fashion after the expedition. The Executive Summary is an illustrated review of what was accomplished during the expedition and keeps everyone in the loop.
10. It has been the pattern of the FSCSP to have a conference call with the FSCSP board of directors and various BLM employees (State Director, District Manager, Field Office Manager, National Cave Specialist, etc.) during the expedition to let these folks know about the progress of the expedition and any significant discoveries made. This provides for personal interaction with BLM management and the FSCSP leadership.
11. The FSCSP is a major contributor in the development of environmental assessments by the BLM regarding Fort Stanton Cave.
12. The FSCSP actively recruits experts in various arenas to assist in the development of, and/or conduct activities in and around Fort Stanton Cave. It also facilitates research activities of scientists by providing support personnel, guidance and coordination with other researchers. The FSCSP has relationships with researchers from all the major research institutes in New Mexico: the University of New Mexico, New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, and New Mexico State University.
13. The FSCSP has a website which is a repository for all the documents generated by the organization. The website provides a mechanism for communicating information about the project to the public and more sensitive information to scientists and resource managers through a private section. It is the go to resource for downloading specific FSCSP documents.
14. The FSCSP Project Director (again with assistance from others) produces a comprehensive report on the activities during each expedition. These documents contain trip reports by the various trip leaders, analysis of information collected during the expedition, results of surveys conducted (maps), and numerous photos of different activities that took place. This report is provided to the same folks as the Executive Summary. However, because of its size, it is typically downloaded from the FSCSP website, rather than e-mailed directly.
15. The FSCSP Project Director gives DVDs containing all the documents and photos collected during each expedition to the Roswell Cave Specialist for archiving by the BLM. All original data is available to the BLM.
16. For the last two years, the FSCSP has produced an Annual Report that summarizes the achievements of the project over the last calendar year. This document is sent to various individuals in the cooperating agencies (BLM and USFS) partner organizations, and major donors to the project.
17. The FSCSP has produced a brochure which describes the mission and activities of the project and also provides a mechanism for interested persons to make a tax deductible donation to the organization.
18. The FSCSP Project Director sends a newsletter, via e-mail, to the 200 or so participants to keep them informed about what is going on in the project and plans for the future. This keeps cavers involved and interested in the project and provides a conduit through which the BLM can communicate issues to the cavers as well.
19. The FSCSP provides financial support to cavers who actively participate in the project through the mechanism of a fuel reimbursement program, and also offers financial assistance to student researchers who pursue cave and karst research at Fort Stanton Cave. This not only enhances the abilities to have important work conducted in the cave, but increases the probability that important research will occur at the BLM managed resource.
20. The FSCSP conducts educational and other public outreach activities, such as presenting slide programs about Fort Stanton Cave at various public venues; submitting feature articles and information to the media regarding expedition findings; or conducting special events that enable the public to better understand the resource. The FSCSP also assists the BLM with the development of its own presentations about the cave, by submitting maps, photographs and scientific data. Volunteers within the FSCSP are developing a unique educational outreach tool, "*Caver Quest*" which is the topic of another paper in this NCKMS.
21. As an instrument of the partnership, the FSCSP has a group volunteer agreement with the BLM, which provides insurance coverage for the participants when involved in project activities.

The FSCSP also has an assistance agreement with the BLM providing for up to \$100,000 in financial support for the FSCSP over a period of 5 years, to be matched by the contribution of the same degree of volunteer hours. (In the first year of this agreement, the FSCSP will likely contribute more than the entire amount in volunteer hours.)

22. The FSCSP is also identified as a “Friends Group” with the Conservation Lands Foundation, helping to support the BLM’s management of the Fort Stanton – Snowy River National Conservation Area.
23. The FSCSP is affiliated with the National Speleological Society as an official project and with the National Cave and Karst Research Institute as a research partner. These affiliations provide a background against which the BLM can judge the FSCSP’s credibility as a valid partner.
24. The FSCSP actively pursues similar partnerships with other management agencies as the need arises. Recent explorations have revealed that part of Fort Stanton Cave lies under the Smokey Bear District of the Lincoln National Forest. The FSCSP has actively involved the USFS in the discussion of issues with regards to the management of the cave.

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