



Caving

A policy statement and guidelines on caving prepared by the Youth Groups Liaison Committee of the National Speleological Society and the Boy Scouts of America



BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA®



Important Things to Know

Cavers live by this creed:
*Take nothing but pictures,
Leave nothing but footprints,
Kill nothing but time.*

Safety-conscious cavers always:

- Wear a helmet with a chinstrap
- Have a headlamp on the helmet
- Have two other working lights in their pack as backups
- Wear protective clothing and gloves

I. General Caving Policy

Caving can be a hazardous activity when the proper equipment, skills, and judgment are not used. Trips that are led by adults inexperienced in caving and trips containing large numbers of people compound the hazards already inherent in the activity and create a potentially dangerous situation.

- A. All caving, other than simple novice activities, should be limited to adults and young people 14 and older—members of Venturing crews or Learning for Life Explorer posts, and older Scouts in troops and teams. “Simple novice activities” means commercially operated cave excursions.
- B. Units (teams, troops, crew, posts) that include cave visits in their program, whether for one trip or many, must adhere to the two-deep leadership policy of the Boy Scouts of America (two registered adult leaders, or one adult and a parent of a youth member, one of whom must be 21 or older). These leaders must be responsible, mature adults who are constantly present with the group. One cave trip leader must be qualified through caving experience and must be thoroughly versed in all established safety practices, conservation measures, and courtesy to cave owners.

- C. In conformity with the BSA policy on the use of wilderness areas, all caving groups should be limited to eight to 10 people and two-deep leadership as required by the Boy Scouts of America for all trips or outings. Caving activities for larger groups should not be conducted. Each group should be organized to function independently, i.e., plan its own trips on different dates, provide its own transportation and food, and function as a separate and distinct group. The only exception to these rules may be trips to certain commercial caves where special provisions are made to furnish proper supervision by professional guides.

Note: Caving trips have been incorporated in the BSA's Wilderness Use Policy, with a cross reference to these guidelines. Copies of the wilderness area policy statement are available from Outdoor Programs, S250, Boy Scouts of America, 1325 West Walnut Hill Lane, Irving, Texas, 75015-2079. Find the policy online at www.scouting.org/filestore/pdf/20-121.pdf.

- D. Any Venturing crew wishing to learn about cave rescue work or pursue that activity as a specialty must do so under the sponsorship and supervision of an adult cave rescue group affiliated with the National Speleological Society.
- E. All Scout groups are required to have an approved tour plan for all trips. Cave activities are included under that plan.
- F. The leaders and the individual members of the group must understand these basic practices and policies of caving, which are approved by the Boy Scouts of America and the National Speleological Society. In addition to understanding these tenets, every participant in a caving trip must agree, without reservation, to follow all of the specific guidelines contained in the remainder of this publication.

II. Cave Safety

- A. Any cave trip must include a fully qualified leader or adult assistants qualified to handle all problems that might arise. These leaders should have had experience as active participants in a competent caving group. They must realistically evaluate their own knowledge and experience and must never attempt to lead their group into a situation that is beyond their capability or the capability of any member of the group. The overall capability and pace of a caving group is always that of the least able member of that group, and no member of the group should ever be encouraged or permitted to attempt a potentially dangerous act that is beyond their ability solely because the remainder of the group has the necessary ability.
- The leaders must thoroughly comprehend that overwhelming difficulties may easily result from the problems of fatigue, improper or faulty equipment, emotional problems, physical limitations, or excessive eagerness or exuberance in members of the group. Additionally, they must realize that all of these individual problems are often interrelated and that the occurrence of any one of them can easily create a situation that will lead to or accentuate any or all of the others.
 - The leaders must constantly remember that any obstacle overcome on the way into the cave will also have to be overcome on the way out, when the group is tired, when the initial enthusiasm of some of the group may have decreased, and when their alertness and physical abilities, as well as those of their group, are at the lowest.
 - The leaders must have adequate first-aid training and ability, and a comprehensive knowledge of the practices to follow in the event of an accident. Wilderness First Aid training is recommended for at least one member of the group.
 - The leaders must keep their group together at all times.



- B.** All basic equipment such as clothing, boots, lights, and spare parts for the lights, hard hats, and food should be appropriate for the cave being visited. It is the responsibility of the leader to insure that all equipment is adequate and in good condition.
- The equipment and spares must never be makeshift or of questionable dependability. The highest standards developed by experienced cavers are to be met in all categories of equipment.
 - The use and repair of each item must be understood and demonstrated by the entire party before entering the cave.
 - Under no conditions should any member of the group be permitted to enter the cave if they do not have all of the required equipment in their possession. The sharing of any equipment, such as lights, between individuals must be prohibited.
- C.** Except for groups composed entirely of experienced cavers, the cave to be visited must not require the use of ropes, cables, ladders, or other climbing devices. The safe use of these aids requires extensive training and practice under controlled conditions above ground, never in a cave.
- D.** Natural and fabricated hazards such as mud slopes, loose rocks, pits, deep water, complex routes, old ropes, wooden ladders, and the possibility of flooding are all dangers to some degree and must be approached with care and judgment. If it appears that an accident may still occur in spite of preventive measures, that area must be avoided entirely.
- E.** The strength, endurance, and specific abilities of every member of the group must be evaluated in advance and nothing attempted that exceeds anyone's limitations. Climbing, crawling, and route finding are not necessarily inborn skills, and should be taught and tested before a cave trip is undertaken.

- F. Every person on a cave trip should be aware of the necessity to constantly observe the whereabouts and potential problems of other members of the group and be ready to provide any assistance necessary. The BSA buddy system must be used.
- G. Running, jumping, horseplay, and solo exploration must be prohibited—such foolhardy actions jeopardize not only the individual but also the entire group.
- H. 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. Leave the cave immediately if any member of the group shows signs of hypothermia such as uncontrollable shivering, slurred speech, or loss of coordination.
- I. Specific information about the caving trip must be left with a responsible person back home at time of departure. This should include location and length of time of trip, expected time of return, list of participants, and whom to contact for each trip member in case of emergency.
- J. A record of every cave trip will provide valuable assistance to new leaders and cavers alike. Full records of all caving accidents will provide the basis for a guide to the development of a safe caving program. A complete report of any accident, regardless of severity, should be sent to the Safety Committee of the National Speleological Society, 2813 Cave Avenue, Huntsville, AL 35810. Serious accidents should also be reported to the director of Health and Safety Team of the Boy Scouts of America.

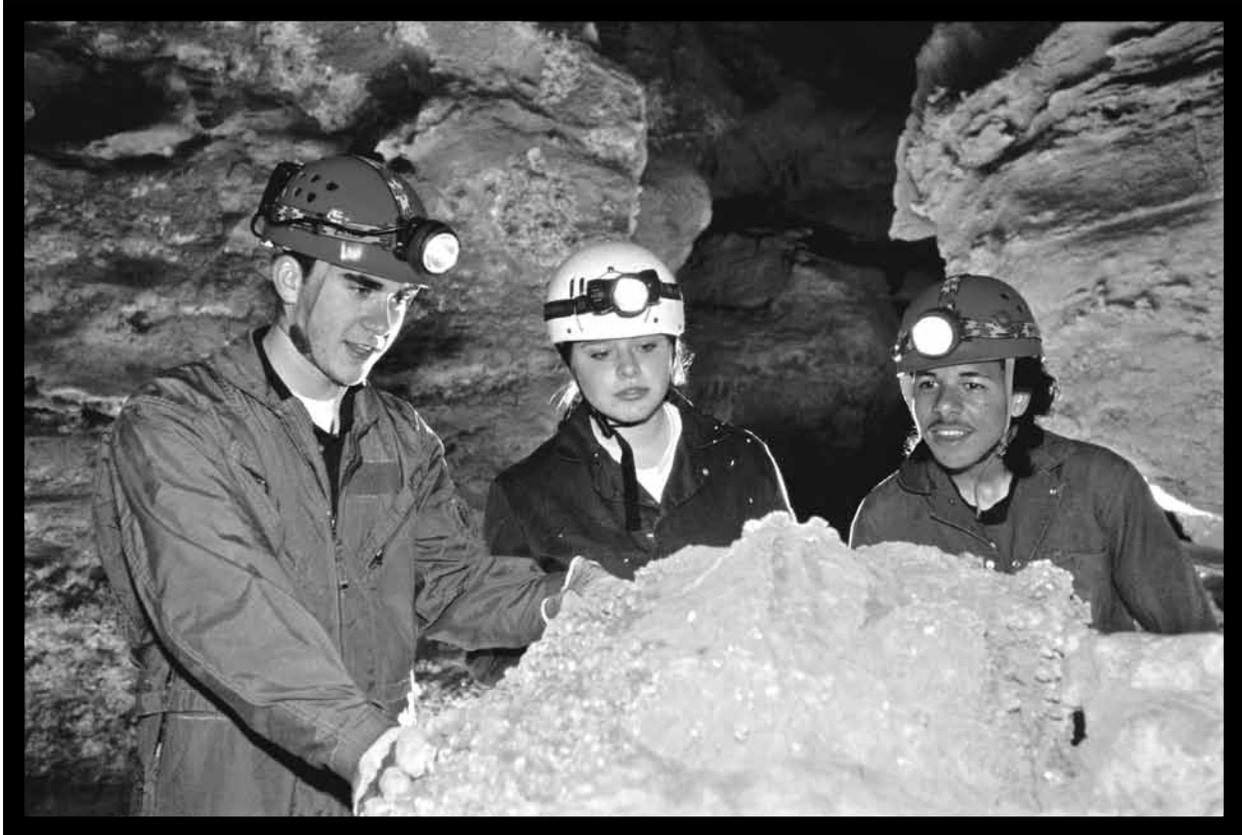
III. Cave Conservation

In spite of the fact that most cave features are made of rock, many of them are, in reality, fragile. Once they are gone or damaged they can never be recovered, nor can they be replaced with anything else. Every cave and its contents took tens or even hundreds of thousands of years to form, and it can all be disfigured or completely destroyed

in one moment of carelessness. Carelessness is regrettable and must be guarded against at all times. Deliberate vandalism, on the other hand, is more than regrettable; it is literally a criminal act and must be forbidden. Every caver has an obligation to do his/her utmost to protect every cave he/she visits.

The necessary degree of protection is relatively easy to obtain, however, if everyone in the group agrees to adhere to the guidelines contained in the policy on the use of wilderness areas adopted by the Boy Scouts of America (see note under guideline C). Many of the specific points contained in that wilderness policy are directly applicable to caving, and, besides providing protection for the cave and its contents, adherence to these guidelines will result in a safer, more enjoyable, and more easily managed trip. Cavers should leave absolutely no trace of their visit behind when they leave the cave. This means that they must leave every natural thing in the cave exactly as it was before they entered; it means removing everything that they brought into the cave; and it means staying on the established trails through a passageway to avoid increasing the number of disfiguring paths.

- A. Cave formations and minerals of any kind must never be removed from the cave for any purpose. Caving trips should never include cave mineral or formation collections. They should rather substitute underground photography or artwork for displays and science fair projects.
- B. Never touch a cave formation. Both mud and the substances on a person's skin will permanently discolor formations. Some cave formations grow by means of complex chemical processes and, in addition to the discoloration, any deposit left on these formations from the contact can interfere with future growth. Some formations are extremely fragile and will require the caver to exercise great care in order to avoid damaging them. If it is impossible to pass by these formations without causing damage, then the group must give up seeing any part of the cave beyond that point. Damaging formations to gain access to additional areas of the cave is not an acceptable practice.



- C. Bats and all other forms of cave life must never be disturbed nor removed from the cave for any purpose. Many species of cave life are rare and have been brought to the verge of extinction by collectors and vandals. During the winter months, hibernating bats should never be disturbed. Awakened too often, they will use up their winter's store of fuel and die of starvation before summer. Most bats are extremely beneficial as insect eaters and should never be harmed. Some caves have been designated as special bat habitats and closed to entry for all or a part of each year.

White Nose Syndrome is killing many bats throughout the United States. Before going caving, contact local wildlife experts and ask about the presence of White Nose Syndrome.

- D. If the cavers should be fortunate enough to find animal bones or artifacts in a newly explored passage, they must be careful to avoid touching or disturbing those items in

any way. The best course is to take pictures of them, if possible, and immediately report the findings to competent authorities, such as a natural history museum, an archaeology association, or the nearest chapter (called a grotto) of the National Speleological Society. Many old bones and artifacts that have been in caves for extended periods of time will crumble when touched; if they are ever to be removed, it must be by professional methods. Even if they are in good shape, touching or moving them could destroy the scientific information they hold while in place.

- E. The caver must never write, mark, or paint on walls, ceilings, rocks, or formations of a cave. Some caves have had registers installed by caving groups and visiting cavers are invited to sign them to record their trip. Occasionally, it may be necessary to mark a confusing junction so that the correct passage may be found on the way out of the cave. For this purpose, cavers should carry surveyor's "flagging tape" with arrows drawn on them

or, a better choice, small strips of reflective tape cut into the shape of an arrow. In either case, the markers are placed in suitable locations as the group enters the cave. They all **must** be collected on the way out. Experienced cavers always follow the rule that—without exception—arrows placed in a cave always point to the exit, never in any other direction.

Using string to mark passages is not practical. In a small cave the marking of passageways is seldom necessary. A large cave would require a considerable amount of string and it isn't always possible to collect all of it on the way out, resulting in litter.

- F. Personal sanitation requirements should be met before entering the cave, and appropriate containers should be packed in and out of the cave in case of sanitation emergencies.
- G. Never leave used batteries in a cave, either. Pack out everything taken into a cave.
- H. Each caver should demonstrate personal interest in caves and appreciation for them by participating in, or even organizing, an occasional cave cleanup. The object is to remove trash left by thoughtless visitors, and to remove writing on walls through the use of water and stiff-bristled brushes. This makes an excellent group project and teaches the value of conservation and respect for the natural environment of caves.

IV. Courtesy to Cave Owners

All too often cavers forget that a cave belongs to the owner of the land above it, and that they must depend upon the goodwill of the owner, who usually has no interest in their activities. Cavers typically have nothing to offer the cave owner in return for hospitality and, in fact, quite often represent a problem for the owner in the event an accident occurs. In recent years, interest in caving has increased tremendously. Owners of popular caves are besieged every weekend by cavers seeking entrance, and the result has been that many cave owners are becoming alienated to cavers.

The owners of the land on which the entrance is located may exclude everyone from the cave if they wish, and the rudeness and thoughtlessness of some cavers has caused the owners of some popular caves to do just this. The following guidelines are important and should be understood and followed by all cavers.

- A. Every group planning to visit a cave must obtain the permission of the owner before entering the land. The best plan is for one or two of the leaders to visit the owner several days before the trip to obtain this permission, or they may initiate contact by letter or telephone. Some owners are reluctant, however, to give permission in writing by answering a letter, so this method may result in disappointment unless the group has had previous contact with the owner. If the group is certain that the owner will be present and permission will be granted, it is satisfactory to ask when they arrive for the trip. In this case, one or two members of the group should seek out the owner while the rest of the members wait. Do not assume that permission is automatic and begin unloading equipment and changing clothes during the waiting period. Always wait for the owner to give his or her approval. If you find that the owner cannot be located and you do not have prior permission for this specific trip, then you must go elsewhere.
- B. Do not continually go back to the same well-known caves. Heavy traffic causes damage to caves and puts a strain on caver-owner relations (commercial caves excepted).
- C. After obtaining permission to enter a cave, usually you must cross the owner's land to reach the cave. Remember that a farmer's income depends on his crops and livestock. Don't climb fences that may break under your weight. Always leave gates exactly as you find them, either open or closed. If the entrance to the cave is covered with boards or brush, make certain that it is replaced, even while the group is in the cave.

- D. Do not tease or chase livestock. Take special care not to startle flocks of poultry. They could run to one end of their enclosure and some of them might be killed or injured.
- E. Be conscious of and avoid any action that might disturb or inconvenience the owner. Keep noise to a minimum, especially late at night. Pick up all trash, even that left by previous visitors. Don't build a fire. You should never camp on the land unless the owner extends the invitation. Don't even ask. After you leave, there should be no sign of your visit remaining on the premises.
- F. Ask where it will be convenient to park your cars. Do not block lanes and driveways.
- G. If it's not late at night, stop on the way out and tell the owner that you are leaving. If it is late, leave a note. Remember that the owner's schedule, particularly if that person is a farmer, may not be the same as yours. If the home is dark, regardless of the hour, don't disturb anyone. In either case, thank the owner at the time of leaving. Sending a follow-up letter including, if possible, pictures taken in the cave, is also a good idea.
- H. When obtaining permission to enter a cave, never underestimate the length of time to be spent in the cave. If you specify an exit time to the owner, never fail to leave the cave within that time. Longer trips can be planned for the future. Missing an exit time causes unnecessary concern to the owner and, in extreme cases, needless efforts by law enforcement agencies and rescue teams.
- I. Many undeveloped caves are owned by various government entities, such as state park services, the National Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, etc. Many of these caves are gated and/or have strict access policies requiring permits to be secured in advance. Before undertaking a trip, find out what those policies are. When there, be sure to follow all rules.
- J. The NSS owns some caves and manages others through various internal organizations, designated preserves, and lease arrangements with owners. The NSS committee or person in charge of granting access will know these BSA policies and guidelines, and will expect you to be in compliance with them.
- K. Most states have some "show caves"—caves with commercially led tours and knowledgeable guides, complete with lights and easy paths and stairways. If members have no idea what a cave environment is like, the show cave is a good place for a group to start. Some of them will offer a special "wild" tour for groups who want a bit more of a crawling and muddy adventure. These commercial caves may have a different set of rules and standards that they have developed, and probably will charge modest fees.

These rules could condense to a simple statement: **Use common sense and treat the owner as you would like to be treated.** If caving is to continue in this country, cavers must do all they can to make themselves welcome at each cave they visit.

Those seriously interested in caves may affiliate with a local chapter of the National Speleological Society. Information about that organization is available from the National Speleological Society, 2813 Cave Avenue, Huntsville, AL 35810, or <http://www.caves.org>.