

Cave Diving — Most Dangerous “Sport”?

From Sealog.

When you're swimming along under 90 feet of inky black water in a cave 200 feet underground, your best and only friend is a thin, $\frac{1}{8}$ th inch nylon safety line which is often the only means available of finding your way out again, says a man who has been exploring underwater and underground for 10 years.

“The water ahead may look crystal clear as you swim and explore for fossil bones or rarely seen living specimens such as blind, white crayfish and blind salamanders,” warns John Cooper, a teacher of biology who specialises in herpetology — the scientific study of amphibians and reptiles—“but as you kick around, the silt stirs up behind you. Without a safety line, you might turn to swim back to the surface only to be faced with inky water that leaves you totally confused,” and in an underground, underwater trap.

DANGEROUS SPECIALTY

Cave diving with the aid of scuba gear is a specialty practised by only about three dozen men in the U.S. Besides being highly dangerous it is physically exhausting. Most spelunkers, people who explore underground caves for a hobby, will assist the cave divers in entering the caves and exporing downward through the caverns in the earth but stop short at the underground lakes and rivers which are the cave diver's domain.

After descending into the darkness of a cave, hours of arduous labour can lie ahead before reaching the water. Vertical drops down rocky underground canyons must often be negotiated, and the diver must often crawl through narrow passages barely wide enough to admit him. All this must be done carrying his diving and safety equipment which includes a wet-suit, weight belt, face mask and snorkel, waterproof watch, underwater depth gauge, underwater light, reserve light, twin air tanks and his nylon safety line—400 feet long and paid out carefully from a reel on his wrist when the time comes.

Diving deep beneath the waters of lakes which are already deep beneath the earth is a job which really separates the men from the boys when it comes to scuba diving, with every danger magnified to frightening proportions.

ON YOUR OWN

Unlike deep-sea diving, the cave diver has no means of maintaining communication with his helpers on the surface because he is often too far from them after following the many twists and turns of narrow water-filled underground passages.

In case of trouble, open-water divers can simply pop to the surface—but not the cave diver, who would only find himself still trapped far underground and far from any aid. Often, there is no surface to pop up to because the cavern is completely filled with water and popping up would only mean being smashed against the rock at the cave's roof, while still completely under water.

Even the safety line offers little real safety, because it is not something with which a diver in trouble can be pulled back to the surface. All it can do is guide him back to his point of entry, but he must make the trip himself.

THE THREE “Cs”

For their own safety, cave divers rely on three things — caution, care and cool-headedness. Failure to observe any of these three “Cs” can lead to trouble fast.

“One experienced diver, for example, had worked his way through a labyrinth of underwater passages and entered a water-filled room when he reached the end of his line. It is believed that he sighted something across the room, perhaps a fossil, and decided to disconnect his line, swim a few yards for it, then return to the line.” He never returned, and the theory is that the swimming diver disturbed the sediment, turned the clear water to murky impenetrability, and he swam in the wrong direction finding, instead of his safety line, only death.

Stories of danger, injury and death are closely associated with cave diving. “You have to have as



● Grant Warren (a cave diver from the South Pacific Club.)

much air to go out on as you used to go in, if not more,” Cooper observes, “so it's important to check your time closely with an underwater watch and also to pay close attention to your depth gauge to determine how fast you can ascend.” Ascending too fast can bring on the crippling “bends.”

BAD EXAMPLES

The story is told of a young diver who came up from a considerable depth while holding his breath and ruptured his lungs. Another died when he took off his air tanks to squeeze through a narrow passageway. Apparently pushing the tanks through the hold ahead of him, he probably got wedged in the hole and, struggling to free himself, lost his grip on the tanks.

After exploring some 300 caves, Cooper admits that his worst fright proved to be a false alarm — and he's not at all sorry.

“I was in a cave at Blue Hole, Florida, at a depth of about 75 feet, in a pretty good sized passageway about 12 feet high and six feet across,” he recalls. “I was swimming along midway between the ceiling and the floor, about 150 or 200 feet from the entrance, when suddenly in the distance I saw big eyes shining and coming toward me. I dropped to the bottom of the passageway, keeping my light focused on the eyes.

Do you know what it was? A freshwater eel that appeared through my mask, which has a tendency to magnify, to be about 6 feet long. Farther on in the same cave I saw some big catfish, and a friend speared one that weighed over 30 pounds.”