

# Conservancies and show caves in partnership; a case study of the evolution of a relationship

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In the late 1980s the staff of the National Speleological Society (NSS) Fiftieth Anniversary Convention approached Howe Caverns, New York State's major show cave located between Albany and Cooperstown in upstate New York, to see if the convention Howdy Party could be held on the property. By the late 1980s Howe had welcomed nearly 12 million visitors, at about 200,000 per year, for its first 60 years of operation. Howe Caverns is a linear cave which still supports the creating underground stream, running the entire length of the cave along the tour path. Upon visiting the cave we found that the staff did not see the cave as the cavers did. The cave had large pockets of moss and signatures of modern visitors were apparent wherever the trail was close enough to the wall for someone to write in pencil or lipstick. There were pockets of coins in pools and on ledges. It was not that the managers and guides did not care, they just were not attuned to seeing that this was not the way a cave should look.

The local cavers and volunteers who were working on the NSS Convention visited Howe several nights between that first visit and the very successful Howdy Party on July 1, 1991. Buckets of coins were removed from the river and mud shelves, moss was brushed from the walls using bristle brushes and dilute bleach solutions. Wire brushes had to be used to remove the signatures. Although this was rough on the cave, it was better than leaving it as it had been because that encouraged more graffiti. The managerial staff was pleased with the result. This started a relationship that has developed and flourished to this day.

For many years after the '91 convention, Howe Caverns hosted a winter Helderburg Hudson Grotto meeting and clean up at Howe in January. The local cavers (at first) and then many of the region's cavers would gather for a pot luck supper in the Caverns restaurant (which was closed in the winter) and then go down in to the cave to continue the work started in 1989. Projects including removing

old cement and wiring cables, cleaning moss from high surfaces, and cleaning coins and gum out of the river made the cave look better every year. This became so successful that this year the event will have to be limited to local grotto members as there is just not that much to do.

The relationship has been most apparent between the Northeastern Cave Conservancy Inc. (NCC) and the current management of Howe Caverns. When the NCC decided to purchase a woodland with several caves and many sinkholes just north and up dip of Howe Caverns the management of the Cave donated \$500 to the purchase of the land.

As we all know, conservation has become more "mainstream" in the last few years. Howe Caverns offers their visitors photos of their family and friends in the cave. Howe Caverns has taken conservation to heart by changing their photo studio from a chemical run studio in the cave to a color photo copy and digital color studio on the surface. They also have stopped encouraging visitors to throw coins in the river on a formation known as "the turtle". It was suggested that a coin drop be placed on the walkway near "the turtle". Guides now include a message of conservation and explain why it is not appropriate to throw coins in the stream; and they suggest that if people want to throw coins, they throw them in the coin drop and contribute to the Northeastern Cave Conservancy Inc. This process has netted approximately \$1300 a year for two years in a row. The cave stays cleaner, metals are not added to the water table and the NCC has a large part of their annual expenses covered by the coin drop.

Every year Howe Caverns has a special event on Earth Day weekend. The Northeastern Cave Conservancy Inc. has a table and shows cave cleanup videos, has a photographic exhibit and talks to visitors. This exposure to the general public is very valuable to a small land trust.

In 2004 Karst Waters Institute wanted to honor Art Palmer for his work in the field of Karst. Howe Caverns jumped at the chance of having many of the country's top karst scientists visit the cave and have a dinner party to honor a local scientist. Not only did they work hard to provide a locally prepared, fine meal at a very reasonable price, they also provided free local beer for the evening. The ambiance of looking out over the Schoharie Valley while enjoying a very special evening was memorable for the visitors.

The Caverns has donated money, time and creative energy while the conservancy has worked to promote the education of the staff and develop more scientific guide presentations. Recently the NCC sponsored the National Cave and Karst Management Symposium. Members of the conservancy were determined to make this one of the best meetings of this type ever. Howe Caverns came on board three years before the event and when the staff was planning an all day field trip, Howe encouraged us to finish the trip at the show cave with an early evening event. The management provided food, wine and beer as well as trips through the cave for 100 people, all gratis. They also had staff attend the session during the week and learn from cave managers nationwide.

The relationship has become an integral part of cave conservation in the region. The staff and members of both organisations have a full understanding of each others' role and treat each other with respect and appreciation. The Tour Manager at Howe Caverns has served as an elected volunteer member of the NCC Board. The relationship continues to develop and has been the impetus for another show cave in the region to follow suit. Recently Natural Stone Bridge and Caves in the Adirondack Mountains has invited cavers for a

variety of events and has placed a coin drop box on their property for the NCC. Cavers led by Thom Engel have been mapping the property for the last several years and his geological study of the property won an award at the NSS convention.

The ongoing relationship between the cave and conservancy has expanded the awareness of both organisations. A show cave, after all is a managed natural feature. Developed and commercially run tourist caves often manage and protect larger areas of cave and karst as well as serve as a public face for the underground world. Increasingly show caves can see conservation activities as a part of their natural function. And conservancies can see that working with show caves serves their mission in valuable ways.

Of significant importance to a conservancy/show cave relationship, like any relationship, is commitment and dedication by both organisations. There must be the recognition of purpose and understanding of the mutual benefits. It is recommended that at least one key person from each organisation volunteer or be appointed to serve as liaison and contact with the other organisation. Successful relationships are dependent on regular contact and communication. Experience shows that this type of structure places personal responsibility and enhances the flow of regular communications.

So, what does this mean to your conservancy? The caving community is a finite community. To expand our vision and to protect more caves and karst we must find ways to go beyond that community in both fund raising and for general support. Working with a show cave to teach cave conservation to the general public brings the public and the cave conservation community together for a cause and both benefit.