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**NATURAL RESOURCES COMMISSION****Information Bulletin #25 (Third Amendment)**

**Subject:** Caves and Karst Resource Management on Properties Owned or Leased by the Department of Natural Resources

**1. Purpose**

Caves and other karst resources on properties owned or leased by the Department of Natural Resources are experiencing increasing recreational use. Increased usage places pressure on karst resources and results in potential threats to public safety. The purpose of this information bulletin is to provide a uniform policy for the management of caves and karst resources located on Department of Natural Resources properties. The information bulletin is supportive of [312 IAC 8](#).

The policy is more particularly written to address these primary concerns of karst management as identified by a broad-based task force of users and managers:

- A. Resource identification.
- B. Resource protection.
- C. Cave and karst research.
- D. Recreational-user management.
- E. Education.
- F. Cave and karst administration.
- G. Safety and rescue.

**2. Development**

This information bulletin was developed over an 18-month period by the cave task force. The task force was made up of 15 individuals within and outside the Department. Included were representatives from the Indiana State Police, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (including the Division of State Parks and Reservoirs, Division of Nature Preserves, Division of Fish and Wildlife, Division of Forestry, Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology, and the Division of Law Enforcement), the Harrison County Hospital, the Indiana Karst Conservancy, the Bloomington Grotto, and the U.S. Forest Service. Subsequently, the task force met to develop a separate document, Caves and Karst Management Guidelines (November 16, 1998).

The cave task force developed this information bulletin to assist in the management and enhancement of cave and karst resources on properties owned by the Department. Included among these resources are geological, historical, archaeological, biological, recreational, and similar values. The developmental goal was to maintain these resources for public benefit while allowing the recreational use of caves.

**3. Definitions**

As used in this information bulletin:

"Caving" means the exploration of undeveloped or wild caves.

"Karst" means terrain, generally underlain by limestone, in which the topography is chiefly formed by the dissolving of rock, and is commonly characterized by closed depressions, underground drainage, and caves.

"Show cave" means any naturally occurring void, cavity, recess, or system of interconnected passages which occur beneath the surface of the earth or within a cliff or ledge that has been altered from its natural state for commercial viewing.

"Wild cave" means any naturally occurring void, cavity, recess, or system of interconnected passages which occur beneath the surface of the earth or within a cliff or ledge, whether or not it has an identifiable entrance. To be considered a "wild cave", the cave cannot have been significantly altered or enhanced from its natural state for commercial viewing. The term includes any natural pit, sinkhole, or other feature of a cave.

**4. Policy Statements**

The Natural Resources Commission approves the following policy statements to assist in cave and karst management on properties of the Department of Natural Resources:

A. Resource Identification: The Department shall develop a strategy to survey and identify significant karst features on properties owned or leased by the Department. To the extent allowed by law, the Department shall limit or restrict access to information regarding the location of wild caves and sensitive features in order to protect these resources.

B. Resource Protection:

1. Cave Entrance Alteration: The Department shall attempt to keep wild cave entrances in a natural state. The use of explosives or digging to modify entrances is prohibited except for emergencies such as cave rescues or critical management situations. Emergency actions shall be approved by the director of the Department or a designee of the director.

2. Posting and Signing: The Department shall not attract attention to the location of a wild cave entrance by posting signs or other markers, except for a show cave or for another specific management purposes. Signs prohibiting entry due to sensitive resources should be visible for a limited distance outside the entrance to a cave.

3. Cave Gating: Caves shall not be gated except to protect sensitive resources or if there is a history of injury or deaths resulting from open access to a particular cave. The decision to gate a cave shall be made through an interdisciplinary team assessment to prevent unwarranted or improperly designed gates.

4. Erosion and Pollution Control: Activities on properties owned or leased by the Department that cause direct subsurface impacts to cave passages and biota are prohibited without written approval of the Commission. These activities include drilling, excavation, mining, and similar activities. Surface and subsurface activities that may impact subsurface karst resources shall be appropriately designed and conducted to minimize impacts to karst systems.

5. Land Acquisition: The Department shall attempt to acquire private property from willing sellers if the property will enhance the protection of karst resources on properties owned or leased by the Department.

6. Protective Status Designation: The Department shall evaluate any area that includes an exceptional cave and consider the area for:

- (a) dedication as a nature preserve under [IC 14-31-1](#); or
- (b) another protective status;

where appropriate to protect a resource of statewide significance.

7. Destruction of Cave Resources: Except as authorized by an appropriate license, the destruction, removal, mutilation, or defacing of any cave resource is a violation of [312 IAC 8-2-10](#).

C. Karst and Cave Research: An individual conducting scientific research on property owned or licensed by the Department must obtain all applicable licenses. These licenses do not supersede any federal licenses needed to gather data on federally protected species. A research license from the administering division also serves as a caving license for a researcher.

D. Recreation and User Management:

1. Recreational Caving: Recreational caving is recognized as a legitimate use of cave resources.

2. Access to Wild Caves: Access to wild caves is authorized only by an annual or daily license. This restriction does not apply to guided cave tours or special events approved by the Department. Fees for licenses shall be prescribed or approved by the Commission.

3. Access to Caves with Significant Resources: Access to caves containing sensitive or especially significant resources, or to those posing significant safety hazards, shall be regulated at the discretion of the director of the Department or the director's designee.

4. Camping Prohibition: Camping and overnight stays in caves are prohibited without prior written approval from the property manager. This approval shall ordinarily be granted only for educational or scientific purposes.

5. Statutory Cave Protection: A person entering a cave must comply with [IC 35-43-1-3](#) (sometimes called the "Indiana State Cave Law").

E. Education:

The Department shall, to the extent practicable, provide license holders and the general public with information on the impacts of recreational use, cave ethics, safety requirements, and general karst and cave resource information.

F. Karst and Cave Administration:

1. Special Event Licenses: An organized caving event is subject to the licensing requirements of [312 IAC 8-2-15](#) for special events. A property manager may limit the size of a special event so as not to adversely affect a karst or cave resource.

2. Concessions: A person must not solicit or engage in business, either for-profit or not-for-profit, except pursuant to a written contract or vendor permit obtained pursuant to [312 IAC 8-2-14](#).

3. Volunteers and Donations: The Department shall actively pursue cooperative programs with individuals or groups wishing to volunteer services or donate funds or materials to improve and protect cave and karst resources.

G. Safety and Rescue:

1. Incident Commander: The property manager or the property manager's designee shall be the person in charge ("incident commander") for cave-related rescues.

2. Investigations: The Department's Division of Law Enforcement shall investigate each rescue to determine the cause of the accident or rescue.

3. Rescue Expense Reimbursement: A person may be required to provide reimbursement for the cost of materials, services, and labor used in a rescue where the person:

- (a) violated a statute or [312 IAC 8](#); or
- (b) caused or sustained injury through negligence.

The Department is not responsible for the incurred cost of other emergency service providers.

## 5. Temporary Closure and Reopening of Caves

In response to growing concern for bat populations in other states that were affected by White-nosed Syndrome (WNS), the Department closed public access to caves, sinkholes, tunnels, and abandoned mines on Department properties in 2009. The only exception to closure was Twin Caves at Spring Mill State Park.

The action, made in consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), was a proactive step to slow or stop the spread of this deadly fungus in Indiana. High population densities of bat species are found in southern Indiana, particularly the federally endangered Indiana bat. The Commission joined the Department in taking this action.

Despite the temporary closures, WNS was detected in Indiana in January 2011 during routine winter hibernacula surveys conducted by Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) bat biologists. Today, in 2016, WNS is widely distributed throughout much of the karst region in south-central Indiana and locally established within most of the state's major concentrations of important bat hibernacula. DFW biologists maintain an ongoing hibernacula monitoring program.

The first priority in managing karst and cave resources is the conservation and enhancement of those resources. However, the best way for new generations of Hoosiers to understand the significance of karst topography and cave ecosystems is to provide them with hands-on access to those features while operating within guidelines that will conserve those resources.

In 2014, in consultation with the USFWS and the DFW, Wolf Cave at McCormick's Creek State Park, which has no resident bat population, was reopened to the public. Also in 2014, a partnership between the Department and the Indiana Karst Conservancy opened designated caves at Spring Mill State Park and Cave River Valley to organized groups who obtained permits for summer tours. Those permits require the groups to complete WNS decontamination protocols recommended by the USFWS. Brough's Tunnel at Clifty Falls was reopened in 2015 during the months when bats are not hibernating.

In 2016, Wyandotte Caves will open for public tours on a limited basis, with expansion expected in 2017. Additional caves and karst features on Department properties may be evaluated for reopening in 2016 and beyond, based on factors such as their significance to bats and other cave biota, their value in providing education/learning experiences for youth, and the ability to comply with current WNS decontamination procedures and other concerns as appropriate.

Information related to the impact of WNS on caves across the country will be provided to cave visitors, and all who enter the caves will practice accepted WNS decontamination procedures. As caves are reopened, all applicable guidelines for resource identification, protection, research, recreational use, and management and administration remain in effect as originally established in this Information Bulletin #25.

## 6. History

This information bulletin was originally published in the Indiana Register on August 1, 1999, at 22 IR 3585. On November 14, 2006, the Commission reaffirmed the bulletin and made minor formatting changes ([20061213-IR-312060564NRA](#)). On September 22, 2009, the Commission amended this information bulletin to affirm the Department's temporary closure of caves on Department properties ([20090930-IR-312090794NRA](#)). On May 12, 2016, the Commission amended this bulletin to provide additional guidelines to address the reopening of certain caves on Department property.

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An [html](#) version of this document.