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Youth Group Caving

Information for Youth Group Leaders and Parents

Prepared by the Youth Groups Liaison Committee
of the National Speleological Society
and NSS members

Introduction

Why go caving?

Caving can be a great activity for well-prepared youth groups. Many people enter commercial caves, but how many can say they have explored a cave while crawling through mud and wearing helmets? A well-run cave trip teaches youth skills in teamwork, organization, safety, preparation, decision-making, ethics, and conservation. Caving trips have inspired youth to study more science and math in order to learn about caves. As a youth becomes an adult, he will remember the remarkable eco-systems within the cave environments and, as a result, may conduct his life in ways that reflects his role as a steward of our environment.

A properly planned caving trip can be fun, safe and educational. However, there are some factors of which you, as a youth group leader or parent, should be aware. This brochure will explain some of the considerations taken in preparing a safe and enjoyable cave trip.

Dangers and risks of caving

Caving is inherently dangerous. However, when taking the proper precautions caving is really no more dangerous than similar activities above ground such as rock climbing, rappelling, or hiking. Sometimes accidents occur even during extremely well-run caving trips, however, common sense tells us that inexperienced or unsafe cave guides increase the risk of injury or death. Few cave trips result in injury, or the death of a participant, but these do happen. As with any activity, the likelihood of an accident decreases with the increase of caving knowledge and trip preparation.

An injury that would be relatively minor above ground, such as a sprained ankle or broken arm, can prevent a caver from exiting the cave under his own power. In this case, a rescue effort that takes many hours and the specialized assistance of cave rescue teams would probably be necessary. A more serious

injury, such as a broken leg, almost always requires cave rescue team assistance. It may take several hours for the rescue team to arrive at the cave entrance, and many more hours to reach, treat, and carry the victim from the cave. Proper medical attention may not be available for many hours, and possibly for days.

There is a chance of contracting certain diseases in caves. Histoplasmosis, a fungal disease that may cause permanent damage, is one of the primary concerns. The likelihood of contracting diseases varies from region to region, and from cave to cave. Ask your cave guide if he is aware of diseases associated with the cave selected. Consult your doctor about any questions you may have.

Guide quality

Not all cavers who guide caving trips are safe and responsible cavers, and safe cavers may lack the experience, character, or skills needed to guide youth groups.

Ask the following questions of potential cave guides:

- How often have you led youth groups into caves?
- What groups and in which caves?
- Can you give references?
- How often have you been in the selected cave?
- What are the characteristics of the cave, such as temperature, water, mud, exposure (potential for falls), accessibility, obstacles and hazards?
- What caving equipment do the participants need to supply?
- What, if any, caving equipment is supplied?
- Can a trip be arranged only for the youth group leaders prior to the trip with the youth?

Cave for pay

"Cave-for-pay" refers to guides and businesses that accept money, tips, or other forms of payment for guiding people into caves or for the use of equipment. Some cave-for-pay businesses are safely and professionally conducted. Some are not.

Doubts about your guide

If you believe your cave guides are suggesting that the trip be conducted in a way that contradicts safe caving guidelines, find other guides. Trust your intuition, and err on the side of safety. There have been cases of both volunteer and cave-for-pay guides who have conducted unsafe trips, some of which ended in injury and even death. For insight into the elements of responsible caving, read the NSS brochure *A Guide to Responsible Caving* and share it with other youth group leaders and youth.

Before the cave trip

Do your research

Know the national youth group organization and local council regulations concerning caving trips. Local or regional organization regulations cannot weaken their national regulations. Ensure that your guides know, understand, and follow the all the regulations.

Read the following brochures, which are available on the NSS website.

- *A Guide to Responsible Caving*
- *Youth Group Caving: Legal Issues and General Information for the Experienced Caver*
- *Fragile Underground*

Also available on the NSS Youth Groups Web site are an orientation outline, an equipment checklist, and a discussion of basic caving equipment.

These brochures do not contain all the information required to conduct a safe cave trip, nor will they substitute for the experience gained from years of caving and guiding youth groups. However, they offer the novice caver a basic understanding of safe and responsible caver conduct.

Consider a show cave

"Show caves" usually have assistance features, such as lighting, sidewalks, handrails, and guides that make visiting caves easy for everyone. There are several advantages to taking a group to a show cave for their first caving experience. For example:

- An excursion to a show cave often involves less expense and preparation than visiting a "wild" cave, which has no assistance features.
- Show caves contain far more spectacular cave formations than are seen on novice trips.
- A trip to a show cave may help determine who is susceptible to claustrophobia and who is truly interested in, and has the maturity for, a wild caving trip.

Some show caves offer "wild cave tours" and programs for youth groups that want to have a more adventurous caving experience. The NSS Youth Groups web site contains a list of show caves that offer these activities. Visit a show cave before approaching and NSS grotto about leading a wild caving trip for you. This may help convince them that your group is willing to make a commitment to learning about caves and acting responsibly.

Ask for grotto help

Contact a local chapter of the NSS, called a grotto, at least three months before your trip, and ask for help in planning and conducting a cave trip. Many grottos will require a cave orientation talk at one of your meetings prior to taking youth on a cave trip. Some grottos do not take youth groups caving. Many have been inundated over the years with requests from youth groups, and some have had poor experiences with the groups. If the grotto is not

willing to take your group caving, contact another grotto or the NSS Youth Groups Liaison Committee for suggestions

Selecting the cave

Assist the cave guides in planning a caving trip that is suitable for your group. The cave guides should be familiar with the cave's passages and environment.

An appropriate trip for novices restricts travel to sections of a cave that are horizontal, very stable, heavily traveled, not excessively muddy or wet, and not ecologically sensitive. The trip planned should not require handlines, ladders, or other climbing equipment, and involve no climbs that place participants outside of the capable reach of spotters.

The more challenging and sensitive caves should be left for experienced youth who show a dedication and commitment to becoming good cavers. These youth should consider joining a grotto to learn more about caving.

Training and equipment requirements

Require the guides to conduct an orientation and preliminary equipment check before the trip. There may be additional training sessions to attend before embarking on the trip. These training sessions increase the safety of the caving group and their enjoyment of the trip. Establish a schedule for training sessions, and discuss all requirements. Neither the leaders nor the youths should skip these sessions. If the group is unwilling to attend these training sessions, then the group should limit its caving to wild cave tours in commercial caves.

Screen participants

One difficult child or adult can ruin a cave trip for everyone, so screen the participants so the trip can be safe and enjoyable for all, including the guides. Cavers belong to a small community, and word travels quickly. Earning a good reputation with the cavers may help ensure future trips for your and other youth groups. Some grottos no longer take youth groups caving because of bad experiences with poorly-behaved youth or adult leaders.

Another factor to consider is the health and endurance of each participant. Not all cave trips are suitable for people who have certain health problems, or physical disabilities, or who lack the endurance needed to cave safely. A participant who needs to turn back will probably end the trip for everyone. Ask your cave guide about the length of time you will be underground so that participants will know what to expect. A beginner trip should last no more than three or four hours.

Caver registration

Register the volunteer guides with your national organization. Advise these cave guides of the level of insurance coverage the organization may provide in case of an incident. Provide them with a copy of your organization's guide for outdoor activities, if available.

Designate a top cover

Select a responsible person to be your top cover. A top cover is a contact person who knows where the cave is, the names of those on the trip, and the estimated time of return. They also have emergency contact phone numbers for all participants, the local cave rescue organization, and the sheriff's office. The youth group leader should call the group's top cover by a specified time to confirm that the group has exited the cave safely. The cave guide and youth group leaders should discuss and agree what action the top cover should take if a call is not received by the specified time. Knowledgeable cave guides have more information about these procedures.

Medical problems

Inform your guides of the medical status of each member of the group, both of youth and adults, and any possible problems that may result. Some medical conditions are not acceptable on some cave trips. Anyone taking a medication that causes dizziness or drowsiness, or affects coordination or judgment should not go caving. Have participants bring medication they may need, such as inhalers, insulin, or sting kits. Follow any organization regulations and state laws for carrying and distributing medication. Be aware that, in case of incident, proper medical assistance may not be available for hours or, sometimes, even days.

In case of injury, it is generally recommended that youth groups not attempt self-rescue. In caves, minor injuries may quickly become life-threatening injuries. Injured people may go into shock, become less stable on their feet, or become more susceptible to hypothermia. Instead of putting the victim and other participants at further risk, call a cave rescue unit for assistance. Be aware that cell phones do not work in caves, and often do not work in mountainous areas.

Vertical caving and exposure

"Vertical caving" refers to caving trips that involve the use of climbing equipment. "Exposure" means that there is potential for falling off a trail or a climb, usually far enough to cause injury. Caving trips that involve exposure that places participants outside of the capable reach of spotters, or require the use of hand lines, ladders, cable ladders, and ropes are highly inappropriate for novice cavers. The improper use of equipment to assist climbing can be deadly. Do not use equipment encountered in a cave.

Safe vertical caving requires special equipment, extensive training, and practice within controlled conditions above ground. Some youth group organizations require specific certification in rappelling, climbing, and belaying skills before leading trips that require these techniques. Know your national and local council regulations about the use of hand lines, ropes, ladders, and other vertical equipment.

During the trip

Cave guide responsibilities

The cave guides are responsible for assistance in conducting orientations and equipment checks, determining the size and composition of the group, selecting the route, determining the duration of the caving trip, and guiding the youth group into and out of an appropriate cave. They may refuse to work with any group that does not meet their standards. They may end the trip at any time they deem necessary.

Youth group leader responsibility

The youth group leaders are responsible for conducting an orientation and equipment checks, determining the size and composition of the group, selecting the route, determining the duration of the caving trip, and guiding the youth group into and out of an appropriate cave. They are to ensure the participants and cave guides act in a safe and appropriate manner at all times. They should follow the instructions of the cave guides only if they feel the instructions conform to safe practices. Disciplining the youth, if necessary, is the responsibility of the youth group leaders, and not of the cave guides. The youth group leaders must also ensure the trip is led in a manner that conforms to the youth group standards. They may end the trip at any time they deem necessary. The safety of the group during the entire trip is the responsibility of the youth group leader, and not of the cave guides.

After the trip

Thank you notes

Send a letter of thanks to the grotto and to each of the cave guides. Send a copy of any trip reports to them, too. Cavers may also appreciate feedback on the trip and their participation.

Further cave exploration

If the youth want to become further involved in caving activities, they may offer to help the grotto with a cave conservation project. Contributing to cave preservation efforts will show that the group understands the value of caves and is willing to give something back for their caving experience. Additionally, youths may join the NSS and a grotto to learn more about caving, participate in the caving community, and to develop their skills.

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