

What Can the IO Committee Do For Your Grotto?

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Curt Harler has authored a piece that was published in the *Cleve-O-Grotto News* (Vol. 53, No. 5&6, Sept.-Dec., 2007, p.37) where he asks “What does the NSS do for the Cleveland Grotto?”

As Chair of the Internal Organizations Committee, I feel obligated to try to answer his question – at least from my perspective. Because I wear two hats (besides IO Chair, I’m also active in my grotto), I too have often asked, “What more can the NSS do for IOs? Or more specifically, “What more can the IO Committee do for IOs? My short answer is this. Probably very little more than we are already doing. I can already hear the moans. But before they get too loud, you should visit the IO web site (www.caves.org/committee/i-o/) to understand what we are already doing. In order to understand my short answer, I will take you back to the early days when the Society was being formed. For this I refer to *Caving in America*, the fifty-year history of the NSS, edited by Paul H. Damon, Jr.

Back in 1941, Bill Stephenson, the founder of the NSS, said that the NSS needed members who didn’t ask what they would get out of being a member, but rather it needed members whose “sole interest is what they can put into the society”. Years later a US president told us the same thing about our country.

Bill Stephenson recognized that we cavers are an independent lot. We usually don’t like a lot of rules and obligations. He worked for the federal government, so he understood that with benefits, come strings. He knew that the NSS needed a strong individual membership base. (When you look at the list of benefits for being a member of the NSS, most accrue to individuals.) He also knew that all caving is local and that it was important that NSS members have a local home. There were already examples of successful national organizations with their structure of local chapters. So why not pattern the NSS on these other organizations? Recognizing the independent nature of cavers, he settled on chapters that would be free to determine their own

organizational structure and fiscal policies. Even with their independence, he thought chapters should have some guidance from the national group. Some simple rules were laid down. Chapters could not engage in activities that would be detrimental to speleology, conservation, and safety. And, they had to abide by the policies of the NSS.

Later other internal organizations besides chapters were authorized, namely Regions, Sections, and Surveys. And these organizations were given the same independence - and were bound by the same obligations.

Even though these local chapters were independent they had “godparent” NSS to link them together as cavers, thus they could easily stay in touch, trade ideas and methods, trumpet their accomplishments, teach and learn, and partner with others on projects that benefited the whole caving community.

The reason this all works and that the local groups join and remain chapters of the NSS is to share in this pride of being a part of something larger. As long as this “something larger” is serving the needs of the group – and its individual members, the system is working.

Because they are independent, each individual IO decides how it wants to be governed. As the Society grew, the NSS added the stipulation that all persons on the governing boards of IOs must be NSS members. The other obligation that was added caused more work for IOs – that they must submit an annual report to the Society.

I don’t think that the stipulation for board members and officers to be NSS members has placed an undue burden on IOs. Even in the case of Student Grottos, some have eased that burden by funding the NSS membership fee for those students that are elected to office.

The obligation to submit an IO Annual Report, is another matter. When it was first established, the annual report served two purposes. It allowed the

NSS to collect information for the *NSS Members Manual* and it allowed the NSS to determine whether IOs were active or had become inactive. With the advent of the Internet Age, we could display online the information provided in the IO Annual Report. More about this later.

As Chair of the IO Committee, my philosophy is to look at the obligations that IOs have toward the NSS, and to make those obligations easier to accomplish.

I'll explain what I think is my small part in helping the system work.

I originally volunteered to serve on the IO Committee, because I wanted to make the task of submitting the Annual Report much less tedious. With tutoring from Evelyn Bradshaw, and excellent help from Eric McMaster, we placed the IO database online and made it possible for IOs to update their data at any time. The NSS Board of Governors working with the IO Committee also eliminated unnecessary requirements from the annual report. These two efforts had a number of benefits.

First, it saved the NSS money. Second, it gave the IOs empowerment over their data. Third, it allowed us to place the IO portion of the NSS Members Manual online, thus allowing access to IO information universally and in real-time. (No more waiting a whole year to learn the latest IO information.) And fourth, it meant that submitting the Annual Report was no longer a tedious chore. If IOs update their records throughout the year as changes occur in the IO, submitting the Annual Report is as simple as logging in, and clicking on "Submit".

Two other accomplishments I should mention. First, we created a web page for the IO Committee at <http://www.cave.org/committee/i-o/>. Second, we created an IO Manual which we placed on the site. We did this because we perceived a need to bring together in one place things that IOs need to know in order to function effectively.

In his piece, Curt Harler also expressed a desire for the NSS to explain in simpler terms just what grants are available for IOs. Currently, all formal NSS Grants are listed on the NSS Web site "Grants" page, accessed from the home page. I plan on adding a link from the online IO Manual.

I will note that IOs are the worker ants doing the work of the NSS. IOs strengthen the NSS and do much of the work to help it accomplish its goals. They are the network for spreading information, encouraging cave exploration, and enabling fellowship. Perhaps most importantly, IOs help caves and cavers by sharing ideas and developments on caving safety and techniques, conservation, landowner relations, and speleology.

IOs do this freely, their direction and strength coming from their members. There is no big brother NSS cracking a whip saying they must do it. Since there are very few obligations that the NSS requires of IOs, there are not many opportunities for the IO Committee to make those obligations easier to fulfill. That doesn't mean we aren't looking. Since my experience and training was in data processing, as IO Chair I have concentrated my efforts in that area. Perhaps it is time for me to expand my thinking. The IO Committee is listening. I call upon everyone to suggest areas of improvement.