

Tips for Building a Successful Grotto – Tom Spina in *Tidewaters Ooze*, Feb. 1993.

Why should anyone belong to the “organized caving community”? What do you actually get for your money? We know that dozens of unaffiliated people in the Tidewater area go caving. What can we offer them that they don’t already have? You don’t have to be a grotto member to go caving with a grotto member. You don’t have to belong to the grotto to come to the meetings. You don’t have to be a grotto member to join the NSS. Anyone, caver or not, can attend OTR. Anyone can attend a Virginia Region meeting. So what’s the deal?

I think this is where our problem lies. There is no reason to be a member of any kind of caving organization. At least not for the dozens of independent cavers in this area . . . and throughout the country. We need to make it worth their while to ally with us.

What is important to most of these people? I think the primary motivation will be going caving. There has been some talk of reprioritizing grotto spending perhaps cutting back newsletter funding in favor of increased spending on grotto functions. Personally I feel that a good newsletter is the backbone of a good organization. Attending a meeting is secondary. The newsletter will keep the membership in touch with club politics, club projects, club trips, plans, and finances. The newsletter can reach every member of the organization whether or not they are able to attend meetings or functions. The newsletter can tell members whom to contact for various activities and trips. The newsletter can serve as a valuable reference source for information on past trips, accomplishments, and numerous topics of general interest. No, a three or four-page newsletter is not a good idea. A fifteen or twenty-pager would be much more appropriate. It wasn’t too many years ago that the Tidewater newsletter was responsible for having increased the membership, simply because people wanted to get the newsletter. The increased exposure within the caving community adds credibility to the organization. People want to know—and a newsletter tells! The Region Record newsletter of the Virginia Region has increased Regional membership by nearly 50%! The Virginia Cellars newsletter for the Virginia Speological Survey has instigated a tremendous flurry of contributions to the VSS files.

Shifting our spending to “club functions” will only put a free meal in the stomachs of the current officers. As I see it, we need to capture the interest of local cavers.

This can be done only by getting them underground and communicating with them and ourselves. Then, and only then, can we have a successful “outing.” Many newcomers have come and most all of them have “went.” We haven’t managed to capture their interest. Eight or ten years ago the “old guard” would bring a prospective member into the fold and they did an awful lot of caving. It can happen again, but newcomers must be “taken under the wing.” This hasn’t been happening recently. Remember, if we don’t take a major interest in the newcomers they can’t possibly take any interest in us. All we’ve managed to do is create a society of inbreds by keeping to ourselves.

We should put together an “introduction to the grotto” packet, something that can be presented to prospective new members during the meeting. Publishing visitors’ names, addresses and telephone numbers in the next several issues of the newsletter would certainly help. And there must be a commitment on the part of the current membership to include prospective members in appropriate activities.

Occasional “get-togethers” would be a good idea. They would afford the membership, prospective members, and their guests to mingle, ask questions, look at slides, review maps, exchange opinions and ideas, and hopefully toss a rope up a tree for some vertical practice, exchange tips on photography and expound on some surveying and conservation projects.

I think some organized presentations and programs at the general meetings, advertised in advance, would draw more people and generate some interest. There’s been a fair amount of caving in the media lately but the Tidewater Grotto has not been in the limelight. Those interested in caving have been directed to Parks and Recreation Departments or Thrill Seeker Organizations rather than the Grotto. We need to make the public aware of us. It no longer serves the good of the Grotto or caving in general to hide from the public. What they can’t see can’t do us any good.

