

THE NATIONAL CAVE AND KARST RESEARCH INSTITUTE: AMERICAN SPELEOLOGY'S REMARKABLE OPPORTUNITY

PENELOPE BOSTON¹

*Director, Cave and Karst Studies Program, Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences,
New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, Socorro, NM 87801 USA*

Oceanography has Woods Hole and Scripps. Astronomy has Arecibo, JPL, the Hubble and Chandra orbital observatories, the VLA, and several other national research laboratories. The atmospheric sciences have NCAR. Physics and chemistry have the Stanford Linear Accelerator, Los Alamos, Savannah River, and numerous other major facilities. The development of federally funded, internationally recognized research centers available to researchers from a wide spectrum of institutions has been a rite of passage for scientific disciplines in the United States. Now it is speleology's turn to "come of age" scientifically as the National Cave and Karst Research Institute (NCKRI) enters its "gearing up" phase. Cave and karst scientists, and practitioners of its numerous sub-disciplines have an unparalleled opportunity to participate in the development of this important new entity within our community.

Currently, the National Cave and Karst Research Institute comprises a triad of primary partners. By congressional mandate, the National Park Service has the lead in establishing the Institute and the current Director is an NPS employee. The Park Service has provided 49% of this year's operating funds. The State of New Mexico has provided the remaining (51%) operating funds through another primary partner, the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology (NMT) in Socorro, New Mexico. NMT has two full-time employees affiliated with the Institute, a graduate student working on a cave-related thesis, and several additional graduate students who will begin cave related dissertation projects later this year.

This year, our third primary partner, the City of Carlsbad, NM, has promised \$1.3 million towards the headquarters building to be located in that municipality. The State of New Mexico has encumbered \$1 million towards the project. Next year's NM State budget promises another \$350 thousand towards the building fund. Of the funds already committed for the Institute's building (total \$4.65 million), 43% (\$2 million) are federal funds. Unlike most of the federally funded research institutes mentioned above, NCKRI derives less than half its current funding from the federal coffers. In fact, its enabling act (see back cover) *requires* that Park Service funding NOT exceed 50%. This is a unique situation. Thus, it will be up to the caving community to help generate non-federal funds to ensure the growth of this resource.

As building design starts this month, the Institute looks to all of our colleagues to join in creating the long-term vision.



Many questions remain unanswered and will benefit from the pro-active involvement of experienced cave and karst researchers, educators, and land managers. Will the Institute be a site with facilities for scientists to work during sabbaticals and academic breaks? Will the Institute have working scientists on its own staff? Will the Institute initiate and run its own education programs? Or, will it only assist established programs? How might it interact with the variety of established professional groups in our discipline, including municipal governments, private consulting firms, regional water authorities, and other entities? As we develop our long-term vision of the Institute, we will have to mold the administrative structure to the tasks we envision. The legislation calls for the research institute to be "jointly administered" by the NPS and another entity. Who will be that entity and where will the balance of power lie? Will NCKRI follow the model of many DOE labs (e.g., Los Alamos, Sandia, Argonne, Ames, etc.) and be run by a single university with federal oversight? Or, will our community put together a coalition (e.g., UCAR/NCAR, NOAO/Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy, Inc.) to work with the Park Service? Each of these potential choices will have profound effects on the kind of institute NCKRI becomes.

The long-term vision, building design, and the administrative structure will mostly be decided this coming year. We will best serve our science, the caves, and our community by working together to create the strongest and best institute we can devise to serve all our varied needs.

¹Former NSS Liaison to NCKRI