

# THE CAVE CONSERVATIONIST

February 2009

Volume 28, Issue 1

## ***The Cave Conservation and Management Section of the NSS***

### **This Issue: All Short Scoops**

The November 15, 2009 issue of *The Star* (South Africa) reported that the Cradle of Humankind, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, could be in danger due to water pollution. The *Star* cited an unnamed "karst expert" who asserted that acid drainage from now-closed gold mines flows into the dolomite quartz of the area, destroying rare cave minerals and fossils. The expert added that the karst system also faces contamination from radionuclides, sewage, and heavy metals. The environment manager of the Cradle of Humankind says the acid draining problem would cost billions to fix, and that the primary difficulty is that the karst is like a big sponge.

On November 19, 2008, the *New Mexico Business Weekly* wrote that Cabinet Secretary Joanna Prukop, the head of the state's Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department had imposed a six-month moratorium on any new brine well applications for geologically sensitive areas. The Secretary ordered the state Oil Conservation Division to work with the federal Environmental Protection Agency, technical experts, other states, and oil and gas industry experts to investigate causes of recent brine well collapses. Oil and gas operators use brine wells to obtain salty water needed for drilling. They fill the holes with water and leave it there until it becomes salty, after which they pump it out to use in drilling operations. The moratorium stemmed from two collapses of brine wells, including one that created a sinkhole 400 feet in diameter.

On November 20, 2008, Florida's Governor Crist approved the purchase of 54.74 acres of

land bordering the Natural Bridge Historic State Park, about 10 miles south of Tallahassee. According to the *Environment News Service* of Nov. 20, the purchase is designed to protect Natural Bridge Springs, one of Florida's "First Magnitude Springs" that discharge more than 100 cubic feet of water per second. The transaction is part of the Florida First Magnitude Springs project, which has an objective of acquiring 14,018 acres and now has 7,844 acres remaining. The project is part of a larger Florida Forever program, a 10-year, \$3 billion land-buying initiative (originally established in 1999) intended to conserve environmentally sensitive land, restore water resources, and preserve important cultural and historical sites. The Natural Bridge Springs site contains sink holes, natural bridges, and cave systems. It includes a river that flows underground for a quarter-mile after dropping into a sinkhole.

Plans to build a cement factory in Central Java led to demonstrations for and against the proposal, according to the December 4, 2008 issue of *The Jakarta Post*. Opponents claimed that the factory could result in severe pollution in the area's karst lands, and that the environmental analysis of the plan had ignored this risk. An analysis team from the Environmental Studies center of a Javan university said the factory would not damage the environment as long as the developers took proper precautions, including mapping the underground streams. At a hearing with the provincial legislative council, the head of the Central Java Environmental Board said

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## Short Scoops

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that mining is considered friendly to the environment as long as it is conducted 20 meters above the spring areas.

Hundreds of villagers in southern China evacuated the city of Guangzhou after a sinkhole opened up, reported *Asiaone.com.sg* on December 20, 2008. One building collapsed, 11 were "cracked," and 61 others were being monitored for possible safety problems, although the cave-in itself left an opening only three meters wide. An initial investigation found that the sinkhole formed after pilings from a real estate project weakened a limestone cave. The damage occurred gradually, allowing residents time to evacuate, and there were no casualties.

The *Gazette* (Colorado Springs) wrote on December 29, 2008 that local history buff David Hughes wants the city to unseal the Garden of the Gods, a cave that has been closed off for decades. Jacob Spaulding claimed to have discovered the cave in 1848, a group searching for gold used it as a refuge from a thunderstorm in 1858, and a number of early pioneers carved their names in the cave. Somehow knowledge of the cave got lost until 1935, when a Civilian Conservation Corps crew followed a lead from a local resident, who said he remembered the cave from his youth. As the crew removed dirt from the cave, a chunk of rock from the ceiling narrowly missed the diggers, and the city park board ordered the entrance sealed with steel and concrete. While Hughes has asked the city repeatedly to reopen the cave, the city sees no pressing need, since it lacks the resources needed to study the area properly and the continued closure of the cave keeps it preserved for now.

The Yampa Ranger District of Steamboat Springs Colorado plans to install a wind

turbine in a trial to see how wind-generated power can work in harmony with the natural environment. The *Steamboat Pilot & Today* reported on December 29, 2008 that the turbine will at first glance resemble a 50-foot-tall barrel, but actually will be formed of twin spirals, or a double-helix of scooped-out turbines. The GUS turbine is touted as posing less danger to bats than conventional designs, with bats better able to echolocate on the drum shape of the GUS than they are on spinning blades.

A large-scale dairy proposed for land outside Warren, Illinois (population 1,500), has divided the town, according to the January 4, 2009 *Telegraph Herald* (Dubuque, IA). A.J. Bos, whose family owns two dairies in California, initially wanted to invest \$70 million in an operation that would hold about 10,000 cows. In the face of local opposition and lawsuits, Bos has reduced his planned stock to 4,500 cows. Some local residents, including one who is writing a chapter on karst for a book to be published by the Illinois State Geological survey, contend that the planned dairy rests atop karst land that would be prone to pollution from manure. Both Bos and the Illinois Department of Agriculture claim that the property has no karst, as shown by soil borings and rock corings. The dispute is expected to continue in court.

A monstrous sinkhole that once threatened to swallow Daisetta, a town about 60 miles northeast of Houston, still baffles experts, according to the January 5, 2009 *Houston Chronicle*. In early 2008, the ground a block from the high school and fire station collapsed, forming a crater the size of two football fields. The crater filled with water and turned into a 6.3 acre lake. Although

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## More Short Scoops

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there are two saltwater disposal wells within 250 feet of the crater, a new report by the Texas Railroad Commission found the link between the wells and the sinkhole “inconclusive.” Mechanical and sonar tests on pipes running down the wells did not find out any washed-out spots that might have connected to the sinkhole. However, debris filling the bottoms of the boreholes prevented complete inspection. Daisetta rests atop an underground salt dome encircled by old wells.

In a January 8, 2009 release, *Socialfunds.com* listed the accomplishments that the American Wind Energy Association had claimed for 2008. These included creation of the Bats and Wind Energy Cooperative, intended to study ways to reduce bat deaths during wind farm operations, and the American Wind Wildlife Foundation, created to facilitate timely and responsible deployment of wind energy while protecting wildlife and wildlife habitat.

The Wisconsin Public Service Commission (PSC) has agreed to work with Wisconsin Electric Power Co. on studies to determine whether to erect wind turbines on Lake Michigan, according to the Jan. 9, 2009 *Business Journal of Milwaukee* and the Jan. 15, 2009 *Journal Sentinel*. WEPCO, known locally by the brand We Energies, had offered to spend \$3 million on studies of wind speeds and of potential harm to birds and bats from lake-based wind turbines. Any project to generate wind power in the Great Lakes potentially might require changes in state, federal, and tribal law. Open questions at the moment include the costs to transmit power from off-shore turbines, as well as the expenses involved in building the turbines, and of maintaining them, especially in winter. WEPCO also has filed an application with the PSC for approval to build a 207-megawatt wind park about 45 miles north of Madison.

The Jan. 18, 2009 *Knoxville News Sentinel* reported that a rock shelter in Fentress County, Tennessee contains a painting of a dancing stick figure dating to the Mississippian Period, between A.D. 1000 and 1600. Cory Holliday, a cave specialist for the Tennessee chapter of The Nature Conservancy, discovered the painting while searching for caves on a 4,200 acre tract in the Cumberland Plateau purchased by the Conservancy in 2006. Jan Simek, a University of Tennessee anthropology professor who specializes in cave archaeology, confirmed with chemical tests that the painting contains no modern paint trace elements such as lead or zinc. The pictograph on the Nature Conservancy tract is unusual in that the figure was drawn in black, a color usually associated with death in the underworld. According to Simek, virtually all known examples of open-air pictographs in the southeast are painted red, the color of life in the upper world. Simek and his team have discovered prehistoric rock art inside 48 caves in Tennessee. Holliday already has explored 30 caves on the Nature Conservancy tract, and thinks that is just a fraction of what lies underground.

Seventeen people, two of them seriously injured, were rescued from Perak Cave Temple in Malaysia after a rock fall on January 11, 2009 destroyed the staircase leading to the peak of the limestone hill. *Thestar.com.my* reported on Jan. 12, 2009 that witnesses said the whole place began to shake, and falling boulders destroyed the path from the temple. After rescuers lowered the visitors down the back of the hill on ropes, a temple guard was believed to remain trapped inside. However, rescue operations were suspended pending arrival of police dogs due to instability of the limestone. Tens of thousands of people visit the temple annually to see the 200-odd paintings and calligraphy on its cave walls.

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## Even More Short Scoops

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On January 16, 2009, *WTOPnews.com* reported that the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation had awarded \$4.3 million in grants to help preserve 8,390 acres. The grants include \$150,500 to the Nature Conservancy for acquisition of a 140-acre addition to the Unthanks Cave in Lee County, to be transferred to the Commonwealth of Virginia later, as well as purchase by Virginia of easements within the George Washington National Forest, and an expansion of a corridor for the Appalachian Trail. The largest grant, \$800,000, will go to the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust to acquire Crow's Nest Natural Area Preserve. Each grant requires a matching sum.

*The Boerne Star* (Texas) wrote on January 22, 2009, that feral cats pose a heightened hazard to human health because they are less likely to be vaccinated and more likely to come into contact with wildlife. According to a veterinarian from the Texas Department of State Health Services, anyone coming into contact with feral cats should be aware of the ongoing scarcity of the rabies vaccine. The shortage of vaccine has occurred because one of just two companies to manufacture it shut down during 2007 to revamp production. The second company, Novartis, cannot keep up with demand. For months, San Antonio has had only seven doses of rabies vaccine. Only those with laboratory-confirmed rabies bites automatically receive the vaccine, while other may apply directly to the manufacturer in a sort of appeals process.

A fruit grower in Queensland, Australia says that fruit bats have eaten most of the harvest from his orchard, and that he has even tried to scare them away by playing bagpipes. The *Herald Sun* of January 24, 2009 said that last

year the State Government banned orchardists from shooting fruit bats. The grower says the result was that a "veritable plague of bats" has reduced his harvest to only 1,757 kg of fruit instead of the average 16,478 kg. Primary Industries Minister Tim Mulherin has met with growers, and agreed to set up a working party to determine the best way of handling the problem using non-lethal means.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, testing has shown that a U.S. traveler who returned from Uganda back in January 2008 had been infected with the Marburg hemorrhagic fever virus. On January 30, 2009, CDC posted on its Public Health Matters blog at [CDC.gov](http://CDC.gov) that the patient had visited the famous bat-laden "python cave" in Queen Elizabeth Park in western Uganda. The patient developed illness four days after returning to the U.S., and recovered fully after being hospitalized. Initial testing of samples collected from the patient was equivocal, but more detailed testing confirmed that the patient had contracted Marburg. A Dutch tourist who had entered the same cave died of Marburg hemorrhagic fever in July 2008. CDC reports that both the Dutch and American visitors to the cave "likely acquired their infections as a result of contact with cave-dwelling fruit bats, which are capable of harboring Marburg virus." Multiple sites in Uganda are under active investigation by CDC's Special Pathogens Branch and a newly established disease center based in Uganda. CDC says that it still needs to investigate many aspects of the ecology of hemorrhagic fever viruses in wildlife, including bats, to better understand the transmission dynamics of these viruses in animals and humans.

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## **Still More Short Scoops** (continued from page 5)

In a February 10, 2009 news release, the Associated Press reported that the Bureau of Land Management is looking to tighten access to Bloomington Cave in Utah. The cave, southern Utah's largest, has at times been popular as a site for parties, and has been afflicted with graffiti, trash, and the remains of campfires. Before cleanup, it also contained thousands of feet of string used by visitors trying to navigate the cave's six levels. During 1952, officials dynamited Bloomington Cave shut because they were concerned it no longer was safe, but teenagers soon removed the rubble and reopened the cave. An information kiosk, placed by BLM near the cave's entrance, was damaged by a wildfire in 2006 and destroyed by vandals in 2008 before BLM replaced it. BLM has spent years on restoration work, including sandblasting of graffiti and removal of garbage. The proposed changes would include adding locked gates at the cave's two entrances, and limiting entry to those with permits, capped at fifty per day. Visitors also would be required to wear hard hats and carry reliable lighting. BLM officials hope that limiting visitors might lessen the pressure on the cave's Townsend's big-eared bats, whose numbers have been declining.

A February 26, 2009 press release from the Natural History Museum (London, U.K.) discussed new research suggesting that the European cave bear's extinction resulted from climate cooling and habitat loss around 27,500 years ago. Working with a colleague from the University of Vienna, Professor Anthony Stuart of the Museum used new radiocarbon dating techniques on cave bear fossil remains from sites across Europe to establish the timing of the bears' extinction. Professor Stuart contends that recent research refutes earlier suggestions that hunting by humans played a significant role in the decline of the cave bear. Further, studies of cave bear teeth and collagen indicate that the bears were largely vegetarian, unlike the omnivorous brown bear of today. Professor Stuart thinks that marked climate cooling caused a significant decline in the quality and quantity of plant life, and that cave bears ran out of food. Stuart notes that some large species previously thought to have become extinct at the end of the late Pleistocene, such as the woolly mammoth, moved to different areas and survived well into the later Holocene period. He therefore plans to continue investigating the possibility that cave bears, while gone from the Alpine region as of 27,500 years ago, continued to survive somewhere else.

***The Cave Conservationist* needs articles!!**

**Please write to [caveconservationist@gmail.com](mailto:caveconservationist@gmail.com)**

## The Cave Conservationist

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