

The Evolution of the Colorado Cave Survey

BY CARL BERN

Background

The Colorado Cave Survey has a long and venerable history of advocating for caves and cavers in Colorado. Formed around 1970, the CCS has served as the official voice of the organized caving community in the state on political issues and has functioned as the liaison between cavers and land-managing agencies. In this role, the organization has been a success. Among its many accomplishments, the CCS joined the opposition to the development of the Adam's Rib ski resort, which would have negatively impacted caves and karst. It has managed access to Groaning Cave for the Forest Service and helped steer logging away from sensitive caves. In the recent past, the CCS has been able to restore access to LaSunder Cave, and agreed to help manage access to Fly and Marble Caves. The CCS has given the organized caving community in Colorado the clout and credibility to do things that individual cavers or grottos could not. It has also provided a place for controversial issues to be discussed, and decisions to be made in a democratic fashion.

All of these accomplishments and many and others, fall within the first three goals of the CCS, as laid out in its Philosophy and Operation document:

- Support and credibility
- Cooperation, coordination, and communication
- Fair and objective management policies
- Management of the Cave Survey Files

The fourth goal of the CCS that has not been completely realized. During the early history of the CCS, cavers contributed ridgewalking reports, survey data, and cave maps to the Cave Survey Files. Since then, the files have fallen on hard times. Portions have been stolen, censored, or lost depending on which stories you believe. In recent years, the files have been ignored or forgotten. The reasons for this state of affairs seem to be a lack of trust, fostered by a rich tradition of secrecy in western caving. Cavers do not trust the general public, and sometimes trust other cavers even less. Be it a pretty cave or a hot

lead, there are plenty of stories about what can happen when the information gets out. Perhaps the ultimate cautionary tale is of how information from the CCS files ended up published in the book, *Caves of Colorado*. Cavers have learned that if you give cave data to someone else (like the CCS) you lose control over what happens to it. The alternative is to keep it to yourself. In the absence of trust in the CCS, and in anyone who might gain access to the files, Colorado cavers have opted not to contribute to the files.

The current state of affairs seems a shame for a number of reasons. First, cavers continue ridgewalking and surveying Colorado caves, but there is no permanent archive for the data they collect. As a result, that data, and all of the hours of work it represents, are vulnerable to being lost when these cavers disappear from the scene. Even now, the same caves are being rediscovered and resurveyed. Do we still want to be doing that decades from now? Re-exploration and re-survey of caves also adds unnecessarily to caver traffic and impact on an irreplaceable resource.

Second, the lack of information on what has already been done actually inhibits new work. Each generation wants to make their contribution, to find something new. The question is: what's been done already? Without some way of learning what has already been discovered, it is hard to know if you are the first or the hundredth caver to walk a particular cliff line. The result is that some will not even bother. Cavers have told me that they will not ridgewalk on the cave-rich White River Plateau for exactly those reasons. Centralizing our knowledge of caves and karst in Colorado would overcome that issue, and enhance our understanding of cave development in the state. That understanding would support those interested Colorado caves from a scientific perspective, and increase the potential of finding significant new caves in the state.

Finally, it is hard to protect what you do not know is there. On a regular basis, the CCS learns of some kind of proposed land-use that could potentially impact caves. Each time, the CCS has to ask active cavers if they

know of any caves in the area. This slows the ability to respond in situations where time might be crucial. It raises the chances that the CCS might fail in its responsibility to advocate for caves and cavers. It is also a challenge to the credibility of the CCS when an individual or agency seeks our knowledge and expertise and gets the response: give us a few days to ask around. As the pressures of development and recreation increase, the CCS needs to be an effective advocate on cave issues.

The idea

With these issues in mind, one of the most prolific ridgewalkers in the state started asking me when the CCS was going to step up and become a real cave survey. Doug Medville had seen first-hand the benefits of having organized cave surveys in Virginia, West Virginia, and Hawaii. I had also caved in the Virginias, and this was an idea that excited me, but I could not see how to get started. A mentality of 'this is how it has always been' and 'Colorado is not ready for something like this' seemed like huge obstacles. Establishing the CCS as true central repository for cave information would involve changes to the culture of Colorado caving. It would be a slow process.

Other changes seem to happen out of the blue. Months after my conversation with Doug, the newly-formed Colorado Western Slope Grotto (WSG) elected Broomfield caver Dan Castellari as their representative to the CCS. Because of Dan's history with posting cave locations as geocaches and on the caves4all website, many cavers were outraged and called for the CCS to reject him. At first I hoped to simply help resolve the crisis in a way that would allow Dan, the elected WSG representative, to serve, but also reassure cavers that the very essence of the CCS was not at risk. Then I saw that this might also present an opportunity for the CCS to evolve into a real cave survey.

If one of the major objections to Dan Castellari being elected to the CCS was the fear that he would learn new cave locations from the files and post them on the internet, then why not secure that information? Managing access to the files would also start to convince cavers that information was secure. If the files were secure, it might be

worth contributing to them and building them up along the lines of a real cave survey.

This was the thinking that led me to propose an amendment to the CCS constitution. The idea was to control access to the files in an organized fashion, and require that people requesting access sign a document stating they will not publish the cave locations. In retrospect, linking the two issues muddled the waters around both of them. Despite that, the amendment passed and is now part of the CCS constitution. Through this article, and conversations with cavers across the state, I hope to explain the changes underway in the CCS, and where we might go in the future.

The Amendment

Those interested in reading the exact text of the amendment can find it on the CCS website:

(www.cavesurvey.coloradocaves.org/index.html). The real purpose of the amendment is to give the CCS some control over release of information that accumulates in the CCS files. The amendment does this via two components. First, access to the CCS files is now granted by a 2/3 vote of the CCS membership. Second, persons wishing to access the files must sign a confidentiality agreement stating that they will not publish or otherwise divulge cave locations they learn from the files to the public.

Much discussion has focused on the confidentiality agreement, but I think it is the less significant change. The requirement that access to the files be granted by a vote is what gives the CCS something it has never had before: a formalized procedure for granting or denying access to its files. Some cavers have told me that they are concerned that respected, long-time cavers will be denied access to the files. It is much more probable that those are the people who will have easiest access to the files. By putting access to a vote, the caving community (through the voting CCS membership) can screen out the people who are unknown or not trusted, and grant access to those who are known and trusted. Does granting that privilege by a vote make it political? Yes. However, any means of granting access to some people and not to others will be inherently political. Some cavers have suggested having one person in charge of managing the files and granting access to them. That would effectively make the CCS files the personal property and responsibility of a single person. Whatever the benefits of such a system, it relies heavily on identifying a single person who is trusted by everyone.

That seems like a hard system to promote in a state where cavers are spread far apart and politics are known to be thorny.

It is worth noting that access can be granted to either part or all of the CCS files. This means that the CCS can pick and choose which people to trust with which information. Because one could never come up with a set of rules to cover every situation, the whole system is based upon flexibility. Its success or failure will be determined by how the system is implemented.

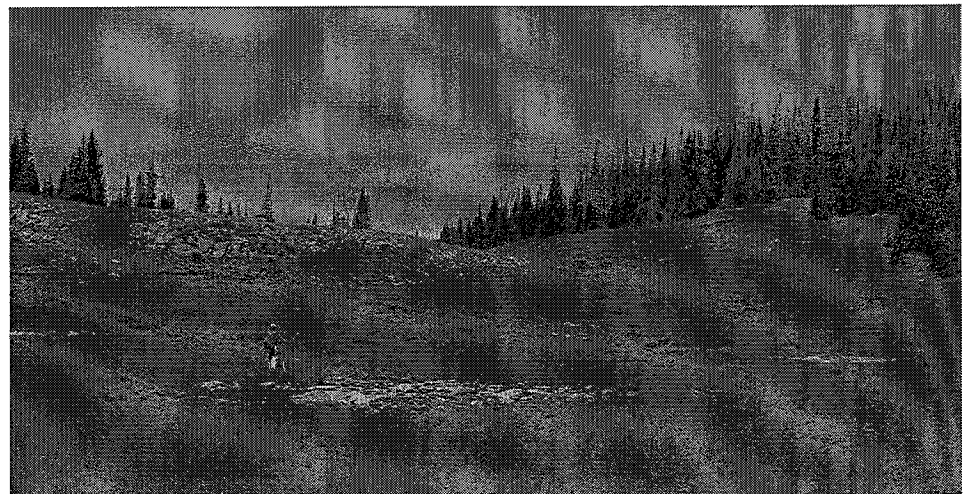
Many cavers have raised legitimate issues about the confidentiality agreement. The complaints are that it is too intimidating, that it will be difficult to implement, or that it would need to be drawn up by a lawyer to hold in a court of law. Unfortunately, the agreement needs to be intimidating. People who are granted access to the files must understand that responsibility comes with that privilege. Of course implementing and enforcing the agreement may be difficult. However, the real point of the agreement is to demonstrate that anyone with access to the files clearly understands that they are not free to publish cave locations any way they see fit. Finally, if votes to grant access to the files are conducted wisely, the confidentiality agreement should never have to be enforced, and concerns about its legal technicalities may never need to be put to the test.

Where do we go from here?

With a means for controlling the flow of information out of the files, the CCS can start to think about information going into the files, and how to organize it. I envision two components to the files. The first is the

existing, but currently neglected, paper files of reports, survey notes, and cave maps. The second is a database of cave data, including locations. Many cavers already maintain similar private databases. The difference with this one would be its central nature, the means to maintain it beyond the lifetimes of individuals, and an organized process of granting access to data. Such a database would complete the evolution of the CCS into a real cave survey. All data would be contributed voluntarily, and managed according to sensitivity. Data contributions will probably be slow at first, but if the project is developed well and trust is built, more data will follow.

The advantage of such a database is that it should stimulate more work in Colorado. Those looking for survey projects will be able to find unsurveyed caves. Those wanting to ridgeward will find overlooked outcrops of limestone. Cavers investing their time in such projects can also be confident that the data they collect will not disappear in a decade, because a permanent archive will exist. That archive will also be an invaluable tool for the CCS in trying to protect caves from the pressures of recreation and development. Exactly how this venture develops will depend on the cavers who get involved. If the issues mentioned here are of interest, I encourage you to be one of those cavers. To do so you can contact Carl Bern (cbern5@juno.com) or CCS Chair Stuart Marlatt (Stuart_Marlatt@comcast.net) or get involved with the CCS and attend its meetings. ■



An organized and indexed Colorado Cave Survey can be a valuable tool for cavers setting off to discover new caves, such as this September 2006 trip on the central White River Plateau karst.

Photograph by Richard Rhinehart.