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PETITION FOR PROTECTION OF CAVE CONTENTS

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In 2010 a petition for a better protection of cave contents was addressed to the European Union by several speleological federations. The petition was supported by major nature protection NGOs and handed over to the EU Commissioner of Environment. Its aim was to stop the trade, import and export of cave contents. The European Union did not implement these demands but referred it to national legislation.

1. Introduction

Due to growing tourism in the wild caves of Europe, the need for cave protection is constantly growing. One of the problems arising following touristic impacts is the damage and loss of cave contents. Therefore, in 2008 a written declaration on the protection of caves as a cultural, natural and environmental heritage lapsed in the European Parliament.

To bring cave protection again into better effect, a petition to stop the trade of speleothems was born in 2010.

Verband der deutschen Höhlen- und Karstforscher e.V. (VdHK, German Speleological Federation) had the chance to accompany a group of German NGOs in a meeting with EU Commissioner of Environment Janez Poto nik. European Speleological Federation ESE supported the petition and emailed the first draft to its members. After an intensive discussion, the following petition was passed.

2. Petition Text

Petition to Stop Trade, Import and Export of Cave Contents

Regarding Article 3 (b) and (l) of the Treaty establishing the European Community and the UNESCO Convention (concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage), we, the signatory organisations, petition to stop the trade, import and export of cave contents.

Analogous to the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, there is an urgent need for a convention on the nonliving heritage of the world. This includes, among others, cave contents.

Caves and karst areas are often transboundary regions, but the legal framework dealing with caves and cave protection varies greatly within the EU member states. The EU Habitats Directive mentions only bats but no other cave fauna. The EU Groundwater Directive does not take karst phenomena like high flow rates and low filtration capacity into account. With the ongoing climatic change and the expected water shortage in certain regions the importance of karst aquifers will increase even more. Up to now, there is still a profound lack of concern and protection for caves and karst in the European Community.

Caves belong to the most fragile ecosystems in the world. They are also archives of geological history, evolution, climate and culture. To be meaningful, the protection of caves has to include the protection of cave contents – otherwise it would only be the protection of the cover of a book without its pages.

Cave contents include speleothems, sediments, fossils and archaeological findings. Speleothems are defined as any natural mineral formation or deposit occurring in natural caves, including but not limited to stalactites, stalagmites, helictites, gypsum flowers, flowstones, crystals, draperies or rimstones.

Caves from which speleothems have been removed lose in value and beauty. This is seen in many showcases and reduces the value of tourist regions of member states. Extracting and trading the unique formations of caves causes not only the loss of aesthetic and emotional value, but invaluable scientific information like palaeoclimatic data is lost as well.

Figure 1. Speleothems in the Riesenberghöhle, Lower Saxony, Germany. Photo Stefan Meyer
Fossils and subfossils are often found in caves and their uncontrolled removal is not only a loss to scientific research but can also lead to significant damages of the cave and its content.

Generally, all member states have laws dealing with archaeological discoveries. However, archaeological sites inside caves are usually not readily visible. Experts are needed to detect and evaluate sites prior to their uncovering. Even minimal changes in sensitive sections of a cave can lead to the total destruction of unique archaeological sites.

Removal of speleothems, fossils, sediments and archaeological findings for scientific investigations must always be reduced to a minimum, in order to avoid an excessive depletion of the natural cave features. Decisions require careful considerations by specialist researchers and advice from experienced cave and karst experts. If research on a speleothem or fossil will likely result in the destruction of a sampling site, then the choice should be to abstain from the study.

To ensure the protection of cave contents, the following demands have to be implemented:

a) Speleothems or fragments of these (even if already broken), fossils, sediments or archaeological findings must not be extracted from caves, except for cases mentioned under c).

b) Trade, import and export of cave content has to be prohibited.

c) Scientific sampling has to be restricted to the absolutely necessary minimum. Scientific benefits have to be maximized through consultation with cave experts.

3. Support

Every speleological federation of Europe was asked to be involved. Many cavers contributed and the final version was signed by 25 national and 6 international organisations.

Furthermore letters of support arrived from Paolo Fori, Full Professor of Geomorphology at the University of Bologna, Director of the Italian Institute of Speleology and Past President of the International Union of Speleology, and Dr. Jean Clottes Fox, President of the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations (IFRAO).

International speleological organisations signed the declaration: the Commission on Cave Protection and the Commission on Volcanic Caves of the International Union of Speleology (UIS) and the International Show Caves Association (ISCA). The International Symposium on Subterranean Biology has boosted the petition, 54 participants from all over the world signed it.

4. Outcome

As Slovenian EU Commissioner Janez Potocnik was already aware about cave protection we had a good start. But other topics like the Soil Directive were discussed at that time and minimised our political impact. We gained support also from the International Union for Conservation of Nature and inside the European Commission. Although the petition was rejected, it was important to launch the campaign and the resulting discussions were fruitful.

5. Perspective

In the United States of America the trade of speleothems is forbidden since 1988. Speleology should pay attention to current EU politics and intervene for cave topics. The Flora-Fauna-Habitats (FFH) directive/Natura 2000 as well as the Water Framework Directive are partly dealing with caves and karst. Therefore, also the EU Working Group C Groundwater could be used as a chance to set up cave protection in the process of legislation.

Acknowledgments

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References

www.cavedeclaration.eu
www.vdhk.de

Figure 2. Human fossil honey. Bronze Age, Lichtensteinhöhle (Rotakfmöhle), Lower Saxony, Germany. Photo Landkreis Osterode am Harz.