Current Best Practices
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This book presents cave conservation methods and philosophy from an assortment of speleologists and cave managers. In composing this work, the authors, reviewers, and editors have collaborated in refining the methods that are presented as current best conservation practices. The editors have sorted through techniques, evaluated concepts, and coordinated statements to present consensus and describe the current best practices in cave management, cave conservation, and cave restoration.

The first objective in cave conservation is to avoid creating new problems. First, do no harm—primum non nocere. Evaluate the situation from all angles and consult with trained speleologists before launching into any cave conservation effort. Before deciding how to change it, fix it, clean it, or remediate the conservation problem, be sure to explore approaches, research current management practices, and gather information about materials that are reasonably safe for long-term use in caves.

No two cave systems are alike and the demands for protection vary tremendously. Evaluate each cave individually and avoid becoming stymied in a cycle of standards. For any action in a cave, do no harm—and if that sometimes means doing nothing, or sometimes means returning to an old standard because the current best practice doesn’t fit a situation, go with the common sense solution that best protects the cave. For cave dilemmas, the demand for immediate protection of resources is often vitally important to long-term conservation.

Many cave systems are extremely sensitive to human impacts. As scientists and cavers learn more about underground environments, it is immensely clear how little is known. The body of knowledge in speleology is rapidly expanding with new information gleaned through advanced technologies.

Scientific disciplines are replete with topics for new spelean studies. As new scientific facts are integrated with cave management, improved best practices continually evolve.

There is one constant factor in cave conservation—mistakes lead to new methods. Many practices of the past are now rejected because of detrimental effects (Hamilton-Smith and others 1998). There is much to learn about the scientific mysteries of Earth’s subterranean systems—conservation practices are refined as new answers emerge.

The term best practice (or world’s best practice) is a standard buzzword for management. (See best management practices, page 34.) People are sometimes suspicious or contemptuous of the term (Spate and others 1998). However, for cave conservation, discussing standards based on the current best information is valid for two reasons.

First, adding the word current in front of best practice reminds us that improved methods are always on the horizon.

Second, the term inherently spawns the all-important process of questioning, “What are the current best conservation practices?” Thus, the phrase encourages research, evolution of ideas, and advances in methodology.

There is one constant factor in cave conservation—mistakes lead to new methods. Many practices of the past are now rejected because of detrimental effects.
Current best practice in cave conservation and management is not an end product, but rather a conscious process of defining and enhancing standards. The current best practices presented in this volume are principles intended as springboards for discussion. Best practices for protecting cave and karst resources are not prescriptions for all situations.

Cited References

Additional Reading on Cave and Karst Management
A comprehensive list of references concerning the development of cave and karst management is included in this volume. (See Appendix 3, Cave and Karst Management References. page 531.)