Public Relations: An Essential Element in Cave Conservation

Jay R. Jorden

What if you cleaned up a cave and no one noticed? All those hours spent with a toothbrush and spray bottle, scrubbing mud off soiled formations and picking lint out of crevices. The sore elbows and knees from seemingly endless scouring of tenacious, multicolored graffiti spray painted across flowstone. Flagging trails in the pristine, unmapped section of the cave only to find a muddy footprint on the next trip where some careless explorer had stepped away from the designated zone to snap a photo. Picking up beer cans and broken bottles inside the entrance. Patiently and painstakingly reassembling a stalagmite smashed into small calcite fragments by an earlier adventurer who had rushed through the cave in a time when the need to preserve its beauty was not even on the radar screen.

After a hard day of restoration, you may find little sympathy from some of your friends who’ve been off enjoying themselves exploring in a new cave. They gently kid you with comments like, “Why would you want to work that hard for free?”

Visitors to your cave club just want to go caving and may need some prodding to go on a restoration trip. The officers don’t see the need for having a conservation chairman. “Why do we need that level of bureaucracy?” they ask. Sometimes, the prospect of having everyone else care as much as you do about cave conservation can be a distant dream, indeed.

That’s where public relations (PR) with its many powerful tools enters the picture.

What is Public Relations?

Abraham Lincoln once remarked: “Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed.”

The need for effective public relations is often unstated, but nevertheless crucial. In a one-sentence definition, PR attempts through a variety of methods to put the organization’s best foot forward and shape positive public opinion, regardless of the circumstances.

That entails more than a passive approach to publicity—not only cooperating with the media in providing information, but also reaching out with a conservation message in the hope of generating publicity. In this regard, PR is considered the long-term program of molding public sentiment, with publicity more precisely being the nuts-and-bolts, day-to-day methods of helping to achieve goals.

The definition adopted by the Public Relations Society of America in 1988 is widely accepted: “Public relations helps an organization and its
publics adapt mutually to each other.”

By this point, the question of “publicity or no publicity” should have been answered. A truism in media relations is that if reporters get no cooperation from the primary contact on a story, they will make telephone calls and follow all leads until they get it anyway. Often, that comes at the expense of the primary contact who has defaulted on the obligation to provide details and misses the opportunity to help mold the message.

The idea is that if a reporter can’t get the story from you, he or she will get it from someone else—who may not be your friend or may not agree with your goals and objectives. Weighing in after the fact to try to straighten out the misconceptions or inaccuracies is either impossible or ineffective. So if someone in your conservation group says matter-of-factly, “I don’t talk to the press and you shouldn’t either,” resist that suggestion because it is detrimental in the long run.

An example of this dynamic is in organized cave exploration and conservation groups. For many years, the stated policy of such organizations has been to avoid generating interest in caving among individuals who had no preexisting desire to pursue the activity. The reason has been that caves are nonrenewable resources and population pressure can adversely affect them.

However, after someone has independently developed an interest either through books, television, or other media, the National Speleological Society (NSS) and other groups want to be the source for educating and training that person in proper technique, safety, conservation, and equipment. It’s a fine line to walk, and one which involves a certain amount of outreach.

A network of NSS internal organizations scattered around the country and even in some international venues provides this passive public relations approach to outreach. It involves some media relations, but no deliberate program of publicity. Outdoor-oriented groups in other activities would likely view this approach as “hiding one’s light under a bushel basket,” in contrast to their more aggressive outreach programs for gaining membership.

Nonetheless, successful case studies in cave conservation abound. They include the discovery and subsequent preservation at Arizona’s Kartchner Caverns and at Lechuguilla Cave on Carlsbad Caverns National Park in New Mexico; efforts by Austin, Texas-based Bat Conservation International to change public perception; and the largely unrecognized work by thousands of other conservationists around the world to ensure that nonrenewable cave resources, including biological, geological, and cultural are available for generations to come.

Public relations can be tough to get a handle on. In one respect, PR is so pervasive that it’s like the air we breathe. What we say in a group setting, what we write in our newsletters, and who we try to enlist in our efforts to influence opinion are all part of the practice. How we conduct ourselves in the public domain influences how others perceive our activities.

Several questions need to be answered, including when to publicize cave conservation efforts and, if so, whether the effort will be passive or aggressive.

Cavers and others must be motivated to join the cause, to help complete important tasks, and to continue involvement when burnout approaches or other competing interests surface. It is important that cave conservationists vigorously advocate their worth, both to the volunteers who are perhaps
their best allies and to members of the general public, whose support is greatly needed. Support must be earned in the highly competitive public arena where a wide range of causes and interests vie for sentiment and where the demands on leisure time have never been greater.

Through publicity, cave conservationists can attempt to create favorable public opinion. They can inform the general public of their goals and objectives, activities, and problems.

Every organization—and every cause—has PR problems, although they may not be immediately identified as such. For organized caving and cave conservation, the noncaving public’s challenge in perceiving the work of conservationists and spelaeologists must be met. To many, cavers are those who go “crawling around in holes in the ground.”

In one part of Mexico, cavers have had to convince local residents that they are not worshipping the devil in the pits they descend. And why save bats? That’s a fair question from someone who might believe that bats inherently have rabies, fly into big hairdos, or suck human blood.

Competing interests are an issue for public relations practice. Within the organized caving community, issues of cave and bat conservation compete with exploration, the value of sport caving, cave ownership, and others. Through all of these, the National Speleological Society and other nonprofits have the task of motivating their own members and volunteers to identify and handle the important work before them.

A broader goal of PR for the volunteer, nonprofit realm in which cave conservation resides is to make people want to join the cause, donate their time, and provide financial and other resources needed to carry on the work. Cave conservationists working through nonprofits and organizations financed through public appeals must maintain a climate of high acceptance so that as needs grow and increased budgets are required, more funds can be acquired.

**The PR Toolkit**

The basic toolkit of public relations includes the following attitudes, actions, and tangible tools:

- Ambition and determination to influence public opinion in a favorable way about the conservation group and its causes.
- Access to phone directories and media lists such as *Editor and Publisher International Yearbook*.
- Business cards, introductory letter, or other means of helping to legitimize and document conservation purposes.
- Camera or access to a photographer.
- Computer and access to the Internet.
- Telephone.
- Conservation-related brochures, either in stock and available from the National Speleological Society, 2813 Cave Avenue, Huntsville, Alabama 35810-4431. Access some brochures through the NSS Web site <http://www.caves.org/brochure>. Or tailor your own brochures to specific needs, such as cave gating.
- A message, or position statement, distilling the goals and objectives of the conservation group.
- Background sheet or *backgrounder* summarizing the conservation group’s position statement and the message it is trying to convey to the

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**Figure 3.** Norma Yolanda Rosales de Santos, Presidente Municipal of Bustamante, Nuevo Leon, Mexico, is interviewed by a Monterrey television crew at a banquet in honor of La Gruta del Palmito restoration project participants in September 2001.

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In proactive public relations it's advantageous for conservationists to develop working relationships with media representatives.

Figure 4. Television journalist and helicopter pilot, Bob Martin, reports for CBS and KRQE News13 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He does it all—flies the chopper, handles the lights and audio, shoots the video, and reports on camera—a perfect solution for conservation-directed media coverage in caves. For his influential story on science and conservation, there was one journalist, one belt of batteries for a video light, and three cavers.

public, including press contact(s) and other pertinent, boilerplate (standardized text) information on the organization and its members.  
- Audiovisual aids, such as a PowerPoint® presentation, analog or digital slide shows, videos, pictorial manuals, Web site, and so on, to help deliver the conservation group's message.  
- Lists of those who can serve as volunteer publicists in the conservation organization.

Community Relations
For cave conservationists and members of conservation task forces in the NSS and other related organizations, a great initial challenge exists. Volunteers reside in many different communities where conservation is not a major element of life. Here, an extensive community relations program is needed to make residents aware of the organization's existence and conservation goals. It's a good idea to have regional representatives who should pursue these tasks:

- Answer fully and knowledgeably any questions from local media representatives.  
- Periodically weigh community attitudes toward cave conservation.  
- Listen to and evaluate any community demands upon conservationists.  
- Equip themselves to execute positive programs designed to interpret concepts to the community.

This provides a firm base from which any private or public disputes with community residents can be resolved fairly and efficiently. Officers and principals of conservation groups who are willing to become involved should be encouraged to speak out on public issues or participate in social developments.

Press Relations
In proactive public relations, it is advantageous for conservationists to have their press contacts develop working relationships with media representatives. There should be continuing formal and informal exchange of information between the organization and the media.

For these high-profile contacts, it's good to know and be known by editors and writers, who then feel free to call and ask for background on controversies and issues. Without this background, in emergency situations, writers and editors who lack a perspective on the organization's work end up writing only as accurately as they can from a limited vantage.

Generally, a strong relationship of trust between writer and source leads to quality news and information. However, a strong media relations program as described here requires the staffing and depth to answer immediately and well all inquiries from major press sources.

When a conservationist is approached by a news reporter or representative of a media organization, the goal is to refer that person to the designated press officer or contact for the group. The press officer ideally should have some experience with the media. If none is available and the reporter is on deadline, here are some guidelines:

- Treat the reporter at least as
well as someone who is interested in joining the conservation group. Writers are in a position to help the cause with their work product. Even in those rare occasions where a reporter might plan for some reason to write a critical article about conservation, if treated with personal courtesy, he or she may end up with material that is less damaging—the reporter is likely to write more negatively if treated curtly or boorishly.

- If the query is by telephone, it is proper to ask for name, affiliation, and telephone number and then answer questions if no press officer has been designated. If the position exists, take a message and get the press officer to make the callback.

Ground Rules for Press Officers

- Ask for a business card from the reporter to verify affiliation.
- Request information on the scope of the article on which the writer is working.
- If not personally familiar with the publication or news outlet, ask the writer for details, including readership or viewership.
- Deal in concrete, truthful answers. Good writers will cross-check facts.
- If you can’t answer a question, say so and offer to follow up later after researching it.
- Remember what is said to the writer. That information is used for later follow-up with the reporter.
- Ask for copies of the clips, if dealing with a print journalist, or videotape when dealing with broadcast representatives.

Fundamentals of Good Press Relations

- The people on the front lines of media contact in the conservation organization must be convinced that reporters are not out to use them. Reporters have a basic responsibility to be accurate, fair, and impartial—to present readers or viewers with a well-rounded, enlightening report.
- Define a clear message and stay on it with all comments.
- Dealings with the working press should be handled as if the media contact fully intends to continue cooperating for years to come.
- After establishing ground rules, shoot straight with reporters and you will be treated in kind.
- Print and on-air deadlines must be respected. Time is always a factor in editorial material. A wire service that once had the motto of “a deadline every minute” has in the technologically advanced new millennium refined that to “a deadline every millisecond.” When writers call the NSS headquarters in Huntsville, Alabama, for information, they are usually working on a deadline. Television and radio representatives have critical deadlines, such as early-morning “drive time.” Good PR meets these deadlines.
- Good writing in news releases is essential. There is much to be said for uncomplicated thought, simply stated. Beware of badly written, self-serving press releases.
- Try for imagination and freshness. Hold a press conference in a cave

Figure 5. A chopper hop to the cave’s parking lot, three cavers, and one journalist—this was a terrific low-impact way to create a cave conservation message for television. Pictured are Diana Northup, Bob Martin, Val Hildreth-Werker, and Jim Werker on Mckittrick Hill in New Mexico. (A fun caver note: We placed the cave permit on the windshield of the helicopter before we entered the cave.)
or at an entrance? It might be a possibility.
- Also, avoid overestimating the impact of one little news story in one newspaper or in one region, or *quid pro quo* stories—those written in exchange for advertising, as in special sections. To change attitudes in a dramatic way, nationwide media exposure is required.
- There's no such thing as a free lunch—or free publicity. For nonprofits and volunteer conservationists, that means donated time and plenty of legwork to prepare releases, make the telephone calls, set up interviews, and follow up.

The end result of good PR is good publicity, channeled through the media at all levels—print and electronic.

**History**

The study of public relations has a long and distinguished history. Edward L. Bernays traces public relations from the beginning of time: "Men first communicated by signals, then by speech, then by writing. After writing, various types of mechanical devices were developed for conveying fact, thought, and meaning. Whenever and wherever there were such developments, they were also employed to express and mold opinion."

Bernays traces the course of PR from this origin in the Dark Ages, through the early American colonies of the 1600s, and finally through the "public be damned" philosophy of the latter part of the 19th century to the "public be informed" philosophy of the early 20th century. He believes that modern PR saw its inception between 1919 and 1929, and that between 1929 and 1941 it became an accepted and acknowledged part of the general business practice.

Bernays, in *The Engineering of Consent*, published in 1956, said: "Public relations is the attempt, by information, persuasion, and adjustment, to engineer public support for an activity, cause, movement or institution."

Perhaps the best cave-related case for PR is exemplified by bat conservation efforts. The early Romans believed bats to be creatures from the nether realms. The flying mammals were depicted in early drawings as inhabiting the underworld. They were threatening creatures, rumored to have supernatural powers, to be feared—and sometimes killed.

Now, of course, we know differently. But changing attitudes took years of slow, painstaking efforts by caver advocates and NSS members like Merlin Tuttle, founder of Bat Conservation International, to inform and educate the public. Through magazines, television, and other means, Tuttle and others have helped the public realize that bats have a beneficial place in ecology by eating many insects and pollinating many species of plants during nightly flights.

In retrospect, when using Bernays' definition of public relations as a guide, such efforts have been successful in engineering public support in the ongoing fight to save bats and their habitat.

**Publics**

The issue of publics is an important one for public relations work—picking the right strategies and
methods are crucial to success. Publics are both external and internal—different strategies and methods are used to reach and influence them.

Organized caving members, boards of directors, staff, contributors, and internal organizations make up many of the internal constituencies which must be served through publications, Web sites, benefits of dues-paying membership, and so on.

On the outside, the picture becomes more complicated. The list of outside publics may include related groups such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science, community groups, government, and legislators.

Primary publics must be identified and programs developed for each. As an example, legislative and governmental publics are especially important to cave conservationists. They are increasingly affected by legislation regarding state and national parks and public lands, as well as hearings and decrees by legislative committees and state, federal, and local regulatory agencies. Aggressive public relations can be useful—efforts by the NSS were largely responsible for procuring the passage of the Federal Cave Resources Protection Act.

Vulnerable indeed is a group that does not seek out an able, sensitive listening post in Washington. Conservationists need to get advance signals of legislative matters that affect them. The purpose of public relations here is to give governmental representatives a frame of reference for evaluating and guiding their Washington activities. In state capitals, help in lobbying is crucial.

Usually, success in governmental public relations requires a series of activities that may extend through many months:

- Fact finding
- Interpretation of governmental actions to officers of the conservation group
- Counseling on management practices in light of developments
- Interpretation of conservationists’ actions to legislators
- Advocacy of a position
- Using legislative connections as a springboard
- Support for action with government

Cave conservation has many parallels with the practice of environmental public relations. The general public in the United States only became aware of needs in the natural environment in the early 1960s and 1970s, although some forward-thinking people were concerned as far back as the 1940s, when the NSS was formed.

The emergence of an environmental ethic in this country as well as passage of far-reaching federal and state legislation and local laws protecting wildlife, governing air and water pollution, solid waste disposal, noise, land use, and hazardous substances have had an enormous impact on the activities of business and industry.

The parallels in cave conservation are numerous and include many broad environmental conservation concerns:

- Land use
- Habitat
- Vandalism
- Herbicides and pesticides
- Solid waste disposal
- Water contamination
- Other pollution issues

Audiences include governmental officials, scientific and academic groups,
Audiences include governmental officials, scientific and academic groups, citizens’ groups, specialized and general media, community leaders, and managers of companies. Printed booklets, films, and slide presentations usually are effective in telling an organization’s environmental accomplishments to a general audience.

However, for scientists, governmental bodies, teachers, and environmentalists, many organizations rely on face-to-face meetings in small group settings or formal presentations at seminars and symposia. In those situations, information conveyed must be complete enough for a scientist to process. The door should be left open for two-way communication.

Besides seminars, symposia, and other scientific meetings, other forms of communication with the scientific community are through direct mail to well-targeted groups, articles in the semiprofessional press, personal visits to selected leaders, publication of materials in appropriate professional journals, letters to journal editors, and advertisements in such journals.

In dealing with the environmental press, strive to know the editor of the publication you’ve targeted and the work he or she has done. Be well-versed in the subject at hand and identify news angles that can help market the message you want to convey.

**Steps for Environmental PR**

- Marshal all of the available facts on the situation and prepare a *PR environmental inventory*.
- Establish an early-warning system so that the organization is not caught by surprise with restrictive legislation or other adverse developments.
- Prepare *position papers* (easy-to-use, in-depth background material) on all sides of the environmental issues.
- Establish and cultivate contacts with governmental, academic, environmental, and scientific groups.
- Set up a procedure to answer criticism immediately and forcefully.
- Explain and promote the positive environmental actions of the cave conservation group through every means available.

**Establish Credibility**

To establish the organization’s reputation for credibility in environmental issues, successful communicators must adhere to the following guidelines:

- Demand strict accuracy in all materials for dissemination.
- Keep attuned to major developments in the conservation arena.
- Collect, analyze, and interpret available facts.
- Prepare environmental policy statements and other informational materials on matters projected to involve public attention.
- Prepare to challenge sensationalized attacks.
- Call on experts for help and assistance in communicating technical stories.
- Keep conservation support groups informed of environmental programs and plans.

**Nuts-and-Bolts Methods**

There are many ways to publicize cave conservation efforts and work toward influencing public opinion. Treatment of the subject here is not meant to be exhaustive.

**Annual or Biennial Reports**

Even 501(c)3 not-for-profit corporations, such as the NSS, produce reports containing financial information, mission statements, and summaries of activities for designated periods. They are used to target information for grant writing purposes as well as for legislative constituencies and other
groups.

Audiovisual Tools
Slide shows, videos, and PowerPoint presentations are effective in communicating the cave conservation message with strong visual impact and clarity.

Backgrounders
The Society’s Public Relations Committee uses a four-page background sheet in communications with journalists, prospective book authors, and others who contact it for information. Such backgrounders succinctly state the organization’s purpose, history, organization, policies, activities, and services.

Brochures and Pamphlets
The National Speleological Society prints several four-color brochures that promote conservation of cave resources. Titles include Fragile Underground, Bats, and Lava Tubes. These brochures provide details on protecting nonrenewable cave resources and cave-dwelling animals. Guide to Responsible Caving is an NSS booklet designed to introduce people to conscientious caving practices. Brochures, pamphlets, and other related materials are distributed on request by the NSS office and can also be downloaded from the Society’s Web site at <http://www.caves.org/>.

Displays and Bulletin Boards
At meetings of related conservation groups, seminars, and other gatherings, static displays can be a useful way of carrying the organization’s message. Photos of recent activities with accompanying captions, news releases, newspaper clippings, brief articles, and other information can be placed on upright multimedia boards.

A table-top, museum-quality display about the NSS is available for events. Plan to pay shipping costs, and find information about display availability on the NSS Web site <http://www.caves.org/> under conservation, or contact the NSS Office in Huntsville, Alabama.

News Releases
Preferably one page, these dispatches are prepared for faxing, mailing, or e-mailing to newspapers, radio and television stations, wire services, and other media outlets. A good release addresses the traditional Five Ws and H of journalism: Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How.

Preferably, the lead or first paragraph of the release will include the majority of these five. Writing releases is a craft, since it is likely the most efficient and cost-effective way for a conservation group to get its message out in wide distribution.

For maximum effect, it’s best to identify a news angle or peg for an assignment desk. Think of it as trying to give an editor a reason why he or she should assign the release to a reporter for follow-up calls and potential development of an article or broadcast piece. A news release is always followed with telephone calls to complete the pitch and offer to provide more information.

Newsletters and House Publications
As simple as a front-and-back memorandum or as lavish as a glossy magazine, newsletters are important workhorses in PR. Publicity committees often launch campaigns within their pages. But newsletters should be more than mere propaganda vehicles. Journalistic standards such as impartiality—getting both sides of an argument—and fairness should not stop at the newsletter editor’s door. Exhibiting such traits lends publications
Bat Stamp Series Issued by USPS

The United States Postal Service is issuing some very attractive American Bat stamps, featuring photographs from a National Speleological Society member.

The pane of 20 stamps consists of four different stamp designs featuring photographs of bats found in the continental United States: the red bat, the pallid bat, the spotted bat and the leaf-nosed bat. The photographs on the stamps and on the selvage were all taken by Dr. Merlin D. Tuttle, NSS Member #13020HM, of Bat Conservation International, Inc., based in Austin, Texas. The bats were released unharmed after being photographed.

Tom Lera, the NSS administrative vice president and a supporter in getting these stamps approved will be on hand for the ceremony at the Congress Avenue Bridge, which shelters a bat colony. More than 2,000 people were also expected to celebrate Austin’s famous winged mammals at the sixth annual, “Freetail-Free-For-All,” sponsored by Bat Conservation International to raise awareness about the city’s unique urban wildlife and to help inspire young conservationists.

The Huntsville, Alabama-based Society is the nation’s largest caving organization, composed of more than 12,000 members in more than 150 grottos or local chapters.

The Society, founded in 1941, promotes conservation and safe exploration through training programs. The NSS motto states, “Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints, kill nothing but time.”
more credibility.

**Policies**

A written PR policy statement formalizes the conservation campaign’s goals and objectives. Along with a policy statement for internal distribution, it is useful to develop such a document for public consumption.

The internal communication serves as a compass to keep the group’s publicists on track with a unified message—the external policy is a distillation of that desired message. One example of an external statement is the NSS conservation policy:

*Caves have unique scientific, recreational, and scenic values. These values are endangered by both carelessness and intentional vandalism. These values, once gone, cannot be recovered. The responsibility for protecting caves must be assumed by those who study and enjoy them.*

Accordingly, the intention of the Society is to work for the preservation of caves with a realistic policy supported by effective programs for: the encouragement of self-discipline among cavers; education and research concerning the causes and prevention of cave damage; and special projects, including cooperation with other groups similarly dedicated to the conservation of natural areas...

The policy continues, urging every NSS member to take personal responsibility for communicating the cave conservation ethic to all cave users. (See page 253 for complete text of NSS Conservation Policy; also see NSS Preservation Policy, page 254.)

**Speakers’ Bureaus**

Structured services for providing speakers on request can provide conservation volunteers another forum for discussing their views.

Conservation PR plans should contain a statement of the strategies envisioned in achieving organizational objectives. Effectiveness of publicity efforts can be hard to measure. Returns often cannot be related to raw numbers in terms of dollars spent or volunteer caver hours expended. Instead, the measure must be related to organizational objectives, especially those evolving to address the public’s mood in terms of conservation awareness. Since public trends and moods are changeable, PR must be alert, flexible, and responsive to such challenges.

**Additional Reading**


Geocaching and Caves: Finding a Common Ground
Hazel A. Barton

The sport of geocaching is an example of a Public Relations opportunity for the caving community. Geocaching is an orienteering sport. The participants use GPS (global-positioning system) units to find a specific location where a cache has been hidden. Individuals, who collectively call themselves geocachers, have placed these caches in over 150 countries, including the U.S.

The geocachers post the location coordinates of their caches on geocaching Web sites. Examples of Web sites include: <http://www.geocaching.com>; <http://www.navicache.com>; <http://www.keenpeople.com>; <http://www.terracachers.org>. Other geocachers then use their GPSs to find the cache, usually a small plastic container or ammo can, which contains some kind of reward. The person who finds the cache may take one of these rewards, provided they replace it with an item of their own (hence the often eclectic “rewards”). They then sign the register and post comments about the cache on the Web site.

Geocaching has thousands of active participants all over the world. Geocachers pride themselves on how many locations they have found, or how many interesting geocaches they’ve placed. They have a motto that encourages participants to act in a conservation-minded manner—Cache in, trash out.

NSS Geocaching Committee
Since the inception of the NSS Geocaching Committee (a subcommittee of the NSS Conservation Committee), the aim has been to address the problem of placing geocaches in sensitive and potentially dangerous caves, and to prevent the posting of sensitive cave locations on the Web. We are using the same technique that cavers traditionally use to help preserve cave environments—education and outreach.

Geocaching is a rapidly growing sport, practiced by many outdoor enthusiasts and conservation-minded individuals. Many of these people simply lack an understanding of cave environments—they don’t know the inherent risks and the delicate nature of cave ecosystems. The intent of many cachers is to share their excitement of caves by placing caches—not to deliberately damage caves or provoke cavers. It is important that we remain objective, and not get angry at anyone who expresses an interest in caves (remember, all cavers started out as noncavers).

We must continue to help geocachers understand the delicate and sensitive nature of caves. Many cavers take geocachers caving and explain why some cave environments do not constitute a good caching environment.

Equally important are the efforts to identify caves that may be conducive to caching, and to encourage the creation of virtual caches, which do not require placement of a permanent cache. We are also suggesting that geocachers use multi-caches for caves, which prevent the placing of actual cave locations on the Web. Indeed, many cavers who are becoming geocachers are working at the grassroots level to help educate other geocachers.

Despite all these positives, there have unfortunately been some negatives along the way. Tensions can get high regarding the placement of geocaches in caves, and the knee-jerk reaction of “not in our caves” does nothing to calm the situation or help cavers understand our concerns.

In one case, out of vengeance against cavers who removed or destroyed caches, one cacher began placing caches in as many caves as he could find. This resulted in the placing of over a dozen cave locations on the Web, even going as far as to name one cache “Vengeance Cache.” Luckily cooler heads prevailed and the cacher graciously removed these caches and the Web locations.

Cavers need to try and be accommodating to this new sport, just as others were to the growing sport of caving in the U.S. Geocachers are becoming organized and participation is increasing. In some areas, we will be forced to play in the sand pit together, so now is a good a time to start figuring out how.

At the initiation of the geocaching community, a caching “ombudsman” was created to mediate between cavers and cachers when cache-cache issues arise. The ombudsman can be contacted at <geocaching-issues@cavescience.com>. Members of the NSS Geocaching Committee are fulfilling this mediating role. In the future, we would like to generate a list of caver/cacher contacts in every state. The caver contacts will help educate geocachers interested in caves about safe caving and protecting cave environments.