



Beneath the Forest

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Cave Conservation at a Landscape Scale

Jason Corbett

Western Subterranean Program Coordinator
Bat Conservation International

Four national forests are actively engaged in a collaborative, landscape-scale initiative designed to restore fire-adapted ecosystems in the Southwestern Region. Those forests are the Kaibab, Coconino, Apache-Sitgreaves, and Tonto. Together with a diverse group of stakeholders, the four forests are working to jointly plan and carry out landscape-scale restoration of ponderosa pine forests in northern Arizona.

The overall goal of the Four Forest Restoration Initiative (4FRI) is to create restoration approaches that will provide for fuels reduction, forest health, and wildlife and plant diversity, at no cost to the Government. A key objective is accomplishing this while creating sustainable ecosystems and industries in the long term. Appropriately scaled businesses will likely play a key role in the effort by harvesting, processing, and selling wood products. The restoration-based work opportunities are expected to create several jobs across northern Arizona. With such a large landscape-level restoration, this project encompasses a huge variety of natural resources, one of which is caves. These four forests contain a large number of caves, many of which are home to unique, fragile resources. Several of these caves have very little natural overburden and lack surface protection from logging vehicles or other heavy equipment.



4FRI Wildlife Biologist Bill Noble peering over the precipice during the survey of a lava tube for management purposes of this cave which is included in the restoration area.

Image: Jason Corbett

During the course of a project planning meeting, 4FRI wildlife biologist Bill Noble penned a note in the margin of his notebook, “ask Jason about caves.” Not too long after that meeting, Noble contacted me, the Western Subterranean Program Coordinator for Bat Conservation International (BCI), about how caves could be protected during this initiative. Noble and I collaboratively worked together to figure out a cost- and time-effective strategy for protecting the hundred-plus caves in the 988,000 acres of project area.

The politics of cave management in many parts of the country can be delicate, and Arizona is no exception. Working together, BCI and the Forest Service arranged a management meeting with local cavers interested in long-term cave resource protection. The meeting was held on the cavers “home turf” and the group visited a particularly sensitive cave feature on one of the national forests. Everyone settled in for a meeting that lasted more than 1.5 hours in one of the cave’s great rooms discussing the various project options for cave management.

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2011 National Cave and Karst Management Symposium

Johanna Kovarik

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Nine Forest Service employees demonstrated their dedication to cave and karst resources management by attending the National Cave and Karst Management Symposium in October in Midway, UT. Because of travel restrictions, many of the employees drove personal vehicles and camped in local campgrounds or applied for and received scholarships covering registration and lodging for the entire week.

Forest Service presentations at the symposium included overviews of alpine karst management, in line with the theme of this year's symposium, as well as detailed information on new cave and karst management plans. Jason Walz, Lincoln National Forest, brought and assembled a booth in the sponsor area that included information on National Forest System cave and karst management and several Forest Service promotional items, as well as information specific to the Lincoln.

Cindy Sandeno, national cave and karst coordinator and ecologist, also attended and led a meeting of all Forest Service personnel in attendance. Items discussed included caving job hazard analysis (JHA) and Occupational Safety and Health Administration issues with cave work, as well as future goals for the national cave and karst program in the Forest Service.

Forest Service personnel were able to meet and network with professionals from nongovernment organizations as well as their peers in the National Park Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Presentations on White Nose Syndrome were particularly relevant to current issues for Forest Service personnel.

Field trips during the conference included a trip to Logan Canyon, located on the Cache National Forest (of the Wasatch-Cache-Uinta National Forest), led by local U.S. Geological Survey hydrologist Larry Spangler. Participants could also attend pre- and post-conference field trips to local caves located on national forests in the area, including Neff's Canyon Cave. During these trips, participants learned a great deal about the interesting work occurring to map and delineate karst systems in the area by volunteers as well as employees of State and Federal agencies. It is hoped that future issues of "Beneath the Forest" will highlight the great work occurring in cave and karst resources in Utah. A thank you from all Forest Service participants goes to those who organized and made this conference possible. ■

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I served as a discussion moderator, while Noble spearheaded an exceptionally skillful round of negotiations and represented the Forest Service's interests in responsible cave protection and management. Eventually, both sides arrived at an agreement for data handling and project management. The meeting was adjourned so that the real work of on-the-ground cave conservation could begin.

This process highlights how meaningful professional relationships can dramatically help project success. For a project of this scope and scale, it was imperative to have positive working relationships with local cavers to ensure success. ■

