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2 MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR CAVES OF THE

3 WATER SINKS KARST PRESERVE

4

5 **1. INTRODUCTION**

6 The Butler Cave Conservation Society (BCCS) manages caver access to the caves of the Water Sinks
7 Karst Preserve, in agreement with its current owners. The Water Sinks is a significant and unique karst
8 feature located in Burnsville Cove, Highland County, Virginia. This plan is applicable to the caves and
9 their access as shown in the attached map, as well as the subsurface passages accessed from that
10 area. The BCCS reviews applications and grants permits to access the areas of the property within
11 these boundaries.

12 **2. PURPOSE OF A MANAGEMENT PLAN**

13 The purpose of this Plan is to provide for access management to the cave and karst resources of the
14 Water Sinks. It provides recommended conduct for recreational and project caving consistent with the
15 BCCS's and National Speleological Society's commitment to cave conservation and preservation.

16 The plan should provide for at least some degree of education to the caving community and other users
17 regarding the reasons for responsible caving and cave conservation.

18 The plan provides a method to monitor the effectiveness in furthering conservation of the caves of the
19 Water Sinks property.

20 The plan should be amended to account for changing conditions after careful consideration and analysis
21 of the proposed changes. Amendments must be approved by the owners and the BCCS.

22 **3. ASSUMPTION OF RISK STATEMENT**

23 Cave exploration and hiking on karst terrain may involve risk or injury, even death from various
24 hazards, both obvious and obscure, including, but not limited to, slippery and uneven ground, open
25 pits, injury by acts of other people, falling, being struck by falling objects, becoming lost, the presence
26 or sudden appearance of water, and hypothermia. All cave visitors will abide by the normally accepted
27 rules of safe and conservation minded caving, including those outlined by the National Speleological
28 Society. Additionally a Waiver of Claims form must be completed for each visitor before a visitation
29 permit will be issued. See appendices for waiver of claims form.

30 All permitted activities shall be in compliance with the [Virginia Cave Protection Act §10.1-1008](#), which
31 provides for limited liability for landowners and their agents for recreational and scientific caving for
32 which no fee has been collected.

33 **4. ACCESS POLICY**

34 Contact watersinks@butlercave.org for the most up-to-date information on access, conditions, and
35 permits.

36 **Commercial or illegal activity is prohibited on the property.**
37 **At least one Adult for every five minors is required while on the preserve.**

38
39 **Parking**

40 Parking will be at the Owl Meadow parking area. Access to all caves will be by foot-travel from this area.
41 Future plans include signage to better identify the location of Owl Meadow Lane. For special
42 circumstances, parking in other areas may be permitted with special arrangements by the BCCS.

43 **Permit System**

44 **Permits, including Waiver of Claims, must be completed before leaving the Owl Meadow parking area to**
45 **access the caves and trails.**

46 Helictite and Subway Cave require advance notice to obtain permission and access.

47 Water Sinks Cave, Owl Cave, and Surface Only permits can be obtained through advanced permit
48 submission or onsite at the kiosk.

49 A more detailed description is included in Appendix 1.

50 Permits consist of a waiver to be collected before leaving the Owl Meadow Parking area to access the
51 trails and caves, a permit number to be displayed on the dashboard of vehicle(s), and a permit number
52 to be taken along with the group while on the property.

53 The caves on the property are each unique in their challenges and sensitivity, and therefore benefit
54 different access policies.

55 **Helictite Cave** - Helictite Cave is generally the most difficult and sensitive cave on the property. It will
56 remain gated and locked. All access will require permits issued by the Water Sinks management team.
57 Permits should be requested at least two weeks before the requested trip. Group size should be limited
58 to 8 persons per permit. The trip leader must be an experienced caver (minimum 10 wild cave trips),
59 with membership in the BCCS, WVACS, PSC, GVKS, the NSS or an NSS internal organization required.
60 One (1) permit will be available per day. Any cave modification or collection will require special
61 permission from the Helictite Cave management team.

62 **Subway Cave** - Subway Cave is generally suitable for most cavers. The culvert entrance will remain
63 gated and unlocked. All other entrances should be considered closed. All access will require permits
64 issued by the Water Sinks management team. Permits should be requested at least two weeks before
65 the requested trip. Group size should be limited to 8 persons per permit. The trip leader must be an

66 experienced caver (minimum 10 wild cave trips), with membership in the BCCS, WVACS, PSC, GVKS, the
67 NSS or an NSS internal organization required. One (1) permit will be available per day. Any cave
68 modification or collection will require special permission from the Water Sinks management team. **This**
69 **cave is subject to severe flooding and the weather must be carefully considered by anyone entering**
70 **the cave.**

71
72 **Water Sinks Cave** - Water Sinks Cave is generally suitable for almost anyone. It will remain in an open
73 state. All access will require permits which are issued online or onsite. The boardwalk section will be
74 available to surface permit holders. Any cave modification or collection will require special permission
75 from the Water Sink management team.

76
77 **Owl Cave** - Owl Cave is generally suitable for novice cavers. The main meadow entrance will remain in
78 an open state. All other entrances should be considered closed. All access will require permits which
79 are issued online or onsite. The entrance area within sight of daylight will be available to surface permit
80 holders. Group size should be limited to 15 persons. Any cave modification or collection will require
81 special permission from the Water Sinks management team.

82
83 **Minor Caves** -The Water Sinks Karst Area contains many small caves which are generally suitable for
84 novice cavers. They will remain in an open state. All access will require permits which are issued online
85 or onsite. Permits may be requested the same day as the trip. Any cave modification or collection will
86 require special permission from the Water Sink management team.

87
88 **Surface Only** - The property is open to surface visitation by permit from dawn to sunset by groups not
89 exceeding 15 persons. No hunting or collection is allowed. No caving is allowed except by permit.

90
91 **Expedited Permits** - Expedited permits may be approved in person by members of the management
92 committee. All other rules including those regarding parking, group sizes, modification of permits, and
93 prohibited activities are still applicable.

94

95 **5. CAVING CONDUCT**

96 These guidelines are derived from those published by the National Speleological Society (NSS) and the
97 Virginia Cave Law. They are to be considered as requirements for visitation to any of the caves on the
98 Water Sinks property.

99

- 100 • All visitors shall comply with the provisions of the Virginia Cave Law, Code of Virginia, § 10.1-1004 and
101 1005, including but not limited to:
- 102 • It is unlawful to break off, crack, carve upon, write, burn, or otherwise mark upon, remove, or
 - 103 in any manner destroy, disturb, deface, mar, or harm the surfaces of any cave or any natural

- 104 material which may be found therein, whether attached or broken, including speleothems, and
105 speleogens, and sedimentary deposits.
- 106 • It is unlawful to break, force, tamper with, or otherwise disturb a lock, gate, door, or other
107 obstruction designed to control or prevent access to any cave.
 - 108 • It is unlawful to store, dump, litter, dispose of or otherwise place any refuse, garbage, dead
109 animals, sewage, or toxic substances harmful to cave life or humans, in any cave or sinkhole. It is
110 also unlawful to burn within a cave or sinkhole any material which produces any smoke or gas
111 which is harmful to any naturally occurring organism in any cave.
 - 112 • Each caver shall be equipped with the following personal equipment.
 - 113 • Helmet with an attached light. Carbide lamps are allowed, provided all spent carbide is
114 removed from the cave.
 - 115 • Three sources of light with extra batteries (and bulbs if not LED)
 - 116 • Sturdy footwear such as hiking boots with non-marring /non marking soles. Tennis shoes or
117 sandals are generally not appropriate.
 - 118 • Gloves
 - 119 • Tell somebody where you are going and tell them to expect a call from you at a specific time. The
120 Water Sinks Management Team will not be filling this role. Please remember that cell phone service is
121 not available within many miles of the preserve.
 - 122 • Carry a pee bottle and burrito kit. Remove all solid and liquid wastes from the cave, including all urine,
123 feces, spit, vomit, and other waste.
 - 124 • All equipment, including cave packs, vertical gear, boots, gloves, knee-pads, helmets, and lint-free
125 clothing should be freshly washed as necessary to comply with current White Nose Syndrome protocols,
126 and to avoid transfer of mud, dust, and microbes between cave environments.
 - 127 • Refer to WNS decontamination protocols at <https://caves.org/WNS/> or
128 <https://www.whitenosesyndrome.org>
 - 129 • Do not disturb bats, insects or other cave-dwelling creatures.
 - 130 • No smoking, vaping, or use of tobacco in caves.
 - 131 • No campfires in caves or near cave entrances. Camping in any Water Sinks property caves is not
132 allowed unless identified in each caver's permit.
 - 133 • No recreational drugs or alcohol while caving.
 - 134 • Stay on established trails and the most impacted pathways. Do not enter areas flagged or otherwise
135 identified as pristine areas, with muddy or dusty garments and gear. Check with cave managers for
136 specific requirements for individual such areas.
 - 137 • Follow any specific in cave instructions or signs, including those directing cavers to avoid areas or only
138 traverse them in a clean change of caving gear.
 - 139 • In all areas be aware of delicate features, and avoid using speleothems for hand and foot holds.
 - 140 • Maintain special care and control of movements when in fragile areas. Touch as little as possible.
141 Avoid leaning on walls, ceilings, or speleothems. Don't sit on formations. Look and avoid trampling floor
142 deposits.
 - 143 • Spot other cavers in fragile areas. Especially watch heads, backs, hands, feet, and packs. In areas of
144 low-hanging formations, ask spotters to watch. Remove helmet if necessary to safeguard fragile areas.
145 Move gently.

- 146 • Eat over your cave pack or other container, and otherwise avoid dropping crumbs, food particles, and
147 other debris. Carry out crumbs and debris. Crumbs and debris introduce foreign substances into the
148 cave that disrupt natural biological systems. Catch wax drips of candles on a suitable surface. Remove
149 discarded waste left by other cavers when possible.
- 150 • Perform all climbs or descents that require rope work or artificial supports of any kind only if you are
151 experienced and competent in safe techniques recognized by responsible cavers. Training is often
152 available by Grottoes (local chapters) of the National Speleological Society (NSS).
- 153 • It is a best practice to use fall protection on all climbs or descents that could result in significant
154 personal injury if a fall occurred, even if the climb or descent is easy enough that a fall is not likely to
155 occur. In the Water Sinks Cave Preserve the entrance climbdown into Subway Cave (rebar ladder rungs)
156 is one example. Less experienced cavers, and any caver requesting fall protection shall be provided a
157 belay. Fall protection shall be provided under the direct supervision of other cavers who are qualified in
158 fall protection techniques.
- 159 • Point out unsafe or damaging behavior. It's every caver's responsibility to ensure that cave
160 environments remain as pristine as possible and that every team member is safe and aware of
161 conservation ethics. It's okay to speak up and say, "Keep still, don't move, or stay away." Spot other
162 cavers on climbs.
- 163 • Take nothing from caves. Do not remove natural or historical items.
- 164 • Leave nothing in caves. Never leave your mark on cave walls. No graffiti. No signatures or drawings. No
165 trash. No waste. Leave no evidence of your visit.
- 166 • Cave safely ... Cave softly ... and leave no trace.
- 167 • Additional information on safe and conservation minded caving may be found at
168 https://caves.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Guide_to_Resp_Caving_2016.pdf
169

170 **6. USE CONFLICTS**

171 If biological, archaeological, or paleontological inventories reveal the presence of any endangered or
172 threatened species, or other sensitive cave resources which may be impacted by visitation, the cave
173 containing them may be closed for the period recommended by an appropriate cave specialist. Likewise
174 if cave access conflicts with human health concerns, the caves or sections within may be closed by the
175 managers.

176

177 **7. RESEARCH RULES**

178 For the purposes of this plan, research is defined as any project conducted for the purposes of science
179 which may or may not be in connection to a professional or academic institution. Of particular concern
180 is any project which involves the taking or leaving of physical material for the purposes of sample
181 collection.

182 All research carried out on the Water Sinks Karst area must be approved by the owners and the Water
183 Sinks Management Team with input from the BCCS Science Committee. A report must be submitted to
184 the BCCS and the owners upon completion.

185 **8. EXPLORATION REPORTING**

186 Trip reports should be filed with the BCCS for any project trip occurring within the preserve, especially
187 any trip which results in the discovery of previously unknown cave passages or resources.
188 Any survey data collected within the preserve shall be shared with the BCCS and the owners.

189 **9. CONSIDERATIONS FOR DIVING AND CAVE MODIFICATION**

190 Special permission and a signed waiver of claims will be required for any diving in any of the caves. All
191 dive trips must be approved by the Water Sinks management team in advance. All cave divers must
192 have cave diver certification issued by a recognized certification agency.

193
194 Any cave or surface modification projects (including digging, bolting or drilling) will have to be
195 approved by the Water Sinks management team. Persons proposing a modification project shall submit
196 a plan to the managers detailing how they plan to modify the site and remediate their impacts. The
197 Water Sinks management team must get approval from the property owners before any proposed
198 surface modification project may be approved.

199 **10. PUBLICITY POLICY**

200 In order to protect sensitive resources, we ask that you do not publicize the caves in magazines,
201 newspapers, social media, or websites of general circulation. Cavers are encouraged to submit trip and
202 science reports to caving-specific publications like *The BCCS Newsletter*, grotto newsletters, and the *NSS*
203 *News*.

204 **11. EDUCATION**

205 All applicants for cave permits will be required to read and agree to the rules of conduct as well as being
206 directed to the caving education resources of the BCCS and NSS.

207 In addition to digital resources the BCCS has constructed a kiosk at Owl Meadow. One of the primary
208 purposes of this kiosk is to educate the property's visitors.

209 **12. PRESERVE INSPECTIONS**

210 The Preserve Management team will ensure regular inspections of the parking, entrances, cave
211 entrances, roadways, and the preserve at large.

212 Limited inspections of some of the cave areas and passages will also be conducted, but due to the vast
213 areas and lengths of passages must be random and limited in scope.

214 Users will be encouraged to report any changes or concerns noticed on permitted trips.

215 The Property owners will be provided with regular reports by the preserve management team
216 summarizing preserve usage.

217 **13. FUTURE PLANS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

218 ● Kiosk - There is a temporary kiosk in the Owl Meadow parking area. There are future plans to
219 update this to a more professional structure.

220 ● Trail Maintenance - trails require routine maintenance.

221 ● Appropriate signage for access road, parking, and trail access.

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226 **Appendix 1 - UNDERGROUND RESOURCES**

227 **Helictite Cave** - The entrance to Helictite is in a small steep sided sink with a gated culvert leading into
228 the cave. The entrance leads immediately to a crawlway decorated with well preserved helictite
229 formations and then opens into more spacious passages. Overall, the system contains over seven miles
230 of surveyed passage, much of it preserved in a near pristine state. Most of the cave comprises a
231 network-maze of canyons, with many short pits and crawls. The Canyon Maze portion of the cave is
232 seldom visited and contains numerous spectacular speleothems. The other primary portion of the cave
233 is known as the Streamway, which contains a large passage that is a remnant of the paleo-drainage for
234 much of the Burnsville Cove. This portion of the cave receives almost all of the cave's traffic. Despite this
235 fact, the path has been well marked and followed and as a result, this portion of the cave also remains
236 well preserved. The cave contains numerous leads with promise of significant new discoveries, as well as
237 many unique features with scientific, aesthetic, and recreational value.

238 **Subway Cave** - The entrance to Subway cave is a vertically oriented large diameter culvert with
239 integrated ladder at the base of the main Water Sinks cliff face. The cave contains 2.7 miles of surveyed
240 passage. Much of this passage is a large diameter trunk which drains the Water Sinks during flood
241 events. In addition to the main passages, there are many side passages ranging from walking size to
242 narrow canyons and crawlways, which are seldom visited. Finally, a downclimb and short rappel lead to
243 a short section of lower level stream trunk passage. This passage contains the primary stream draining
244 Burnsville Cove and is a critical location for future exploration and hydrologic studies of the area.

245 **Water Sinks Cave** – Water Sinks Cave is about 2000-ft long. It has several entrances located in close
246 proximity to one another in the face of the main Water Sinks cliff. All of the entrances are large and
247 obvious and many have been modified with bridges and boardwalks to make accessing them easier.
248 These entrances lead to a network maze of walking passages which connect to one another. Again,
249 much of this passage has been modified with trail building to make trips into the entrance area a simple
250 stroll. In addition to this entrance area there are additional upper level passages requiring some
251 climbing and crawling to explore. These are seldom visited. Overall, Water Sinks Cave’s primary value is
252 in its ease of access. This cave makes a great demonstration cave for members of the non-caving public
253 and scientific populations.

254
255 **Owl Cave** - Owl Cave contains three entrances leading to about 3000-ft of passage. Two of these
256 entrances are located in sinkholes to the northeast of the Owl Cave Meadow. The primary access point
257 is an obvious walk-in portal facing the meadow, This leads to an interconnected maze of canyons,
258 walkways, and crawls which are generally easily explored. This cave contains many features typical of
259 caves in the area and is valuable aesthetically, scientifically, and recreationally.

260
261 **Minor Caves**

262 Bridge to Nowhere Cave - 64-ft of passage
263 Waterfall Cave - 110-ft of passage
264 Twisted Sister Cave - 30-ft of passage
265 Dragon Hammer Cave - 76-ft of passage

Appendix 2 - WAIVERS OF CLAIMS



Butler Cave Conservation Society, Inc.
Burnsville, Virginia

ADULT WAIVER OF CLAIMS

Whereas, the undersigned has requested permission to enter on the property and explore caves in Highland, Bath or other counties in Virginia, on property owned by the Butler Cave Conservation Society Inc. (BCCS), or owned by others and managed by the BCCS, acting as Agents for the owner(s).

And whereas, the property owners and the BCCS are reluctant to give consent because of the dangers involved, including falling, being struck by falling objects, becoming lost, other potential hazards both known and unknown, and the possibility of injury, disability or death to the undersigned.

Now, therefore, in consideration of the property owners and the BCCS granting consent to enter onto the premises, and to enter into the associated caves for recreational purposes, the undersigned represents, certifies, and agrees that:

- (1) the undersigned assumes all responsibility and all risks whatsoever associated with this potentially dangerous activity and neither the property owners nor the BCCS shall incur liability for any injury to any individual or property caused by any act of the undersigned or any third party, whether in-cave or on the surface, on property owned or managed by the BCCS, or on property owned by others on which the BCCS is authorized to organize cave exploration or related surface activities, and
- (2) should the undersigned, my heirs, representatives, or assignees institute any action against the property owners or the BCCS then I, my heirs, representatives, or assignees hereby agree to pay all costs of such action, including attorney fees incurred by the owners or the BCCS, and
- (3) the undersigned acknowledges that neither the property owners nor the BCCS owes to the undersigned a greater degree of care than is owed to a trespasser on the premises; and
- (4) the undersigned acknowledges that neither the property owner nor the BCCS charges for entering or using the premises, and any acts by the undersigned while on the premises, even if to the benefit of the premises, are voluntary and shall not constitute a charge; and
- (5) this waiver of claims shall remain in force until withdrawn by written instrument provided to the BCCS but shall not be deemed consent to enter the premises at any time other than those times expressly permitted by separate communication; and
- (6) this waiver of claims shall not supersede any laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Printed Name	Signature	Date
Email: _____	Phone #: _____	
Street Address	City	State
Emergency Contact: _____		Zip Code
		Phone #: _____

Code of Virginia § 10.1-1008. Liability of owners and agents limited, sovereign immunity of Commonwealth not waived. Neither the owner of a cave nor his authorized agents acting within the scope of their authority are liable for injuries sustained by any person using the cave for recreational or scientific purposes if no charge has been made for the use of the cave, notwithstanding that an inquiry as to the experience or expertise of the individual seeking consent may have been made. Nothing in this section shall be construed to constitute a waiver of the sovereign immunity of the Commonwealth or any of its boards, departments, bureaus, or agencies. (Code of Virginia, 1979, c. 252, §10-150.18; 1988, c. 891.)



Butler Cave Conservation Society Inc

Burnsville, Virginia

PARENTAL WAIVER OF CLAIMS

Whereas, the undersigned are a minor child and the parent or legal guardian of said minor child, who have requested permission to enter on the property and explore caves in Highland, Bath or other counties in Virginia, on property owned by the Butler Cave Conservation Society Inc. (BCCS), or owned by others and managed by the BCCS acting as Agents for the owner(s).

And whereas, the property owners and the BCCS are reluctant to give consent because of the dangers involved, including falling, being struck by falling objects, becoming lost, other potential hazards both known and unknown, and the possibility of injury, disability or death to the undersigned.

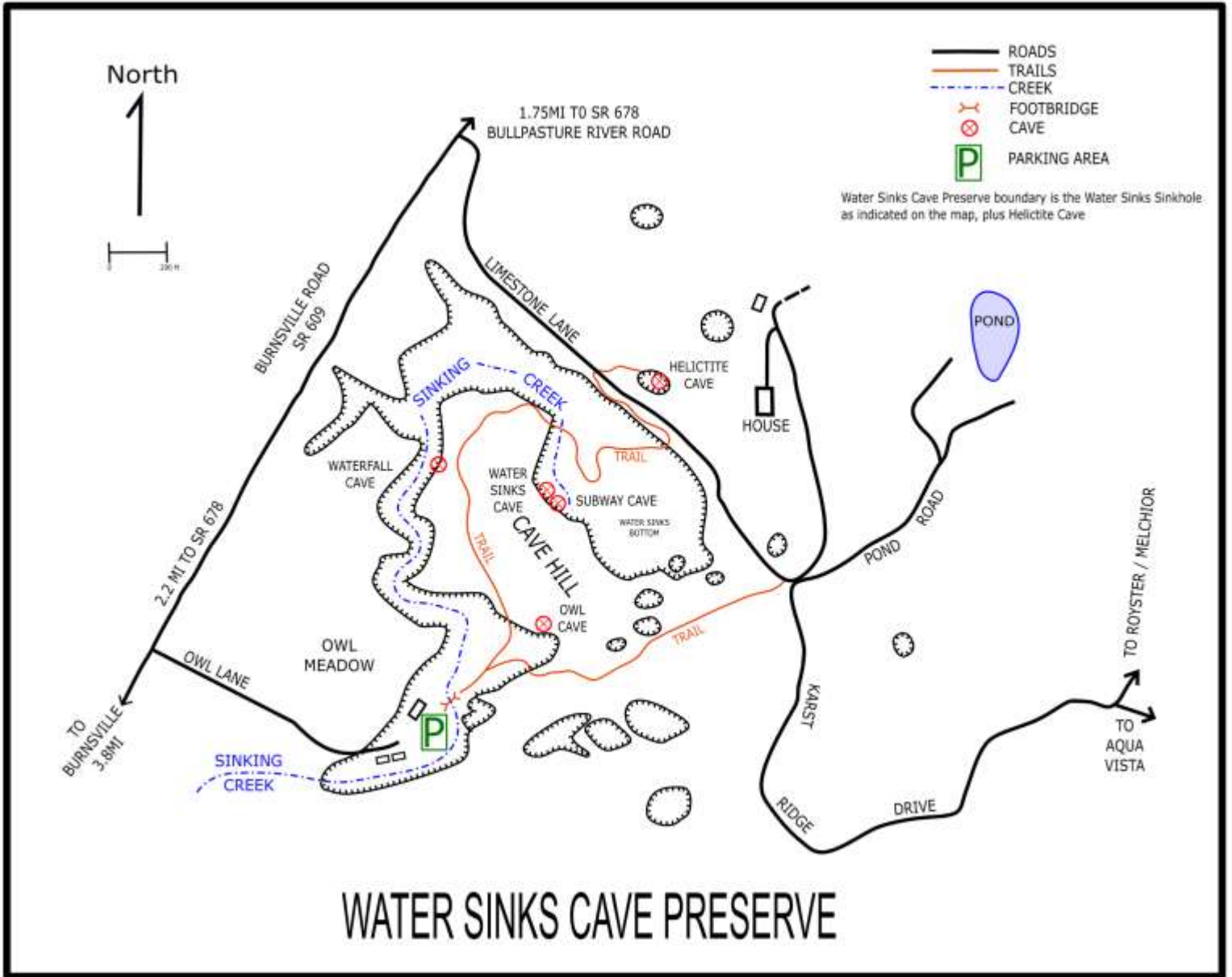
Now, therefore, in consideration of the property owners and the BCCS granting consent to enter onto the premises, and to enter into the associated caves for recreational purposes, the undersigned minor child and parent or legal guardian represents, certifies, and agrees that:

- (1) the undersigned assumes all responsibility and all risks whatsoever associated with this potentially dangerous activity, and neither the property owners nor the BCCS shall incur liability for any injury to any individual or property caused by any act of the undersigned or any third party, whether underground or on the surface, on property owned or managed by the BCCS, or on property on which the BCCS is authorized to organize cave exploration or related surface activities, and
- (2) should the undersigned, my heirs, representatives, or assignees institute any action against the property owners nor the BCCS then I, my heirs, representatives, or assignees hereby agree to pay all costs of such action, including attorney fees incurred by the property owners or the BCCS, and
- (3) the undersigned acknowledges that the BCCS does not owe to the undersigned a greater degree of care than is owed to a trespasser on the premises; and
- (4) the undersigned acknowledges that neither the property owners nor the BCCS charges for entering or using the premises, and any acts by the undersigned while on the premises, even if to the benefit of the premises, are voluntary and shall not constitute a charge; and
- (5) this waiver of claims shall remain in force until withdrawn by written instrument provided to the BCCS but shall not be deemed consent to enter the premises at any time other than those times expressly permitted by separate communication; and
- (6) this waiver of claims shall not supersede any laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Printed Name of Minor Child	Signature of Minor Child	Date of Birth	Date
Printed Name of Parent/Guardian	Signature	Date	
Email: _____		Phone #: _____	
Street Address	City	State	Zip Code
Emergency Contact: _____		Phone #: _____	

Code of Virginia § 10.1-1008. Liability of owners and agents limited, sovereign immunity of Commonwealth not waived. Neither the owner of a cave nor his authorized agents acting within the scope of their authority are liable for injuries sustained by any person using the cave for recreational or scientific purposes if no charge has been made for the use of the cave, notwithstanding that an inquiry as to the experience or expertise of the individual seeking consent may have been made. Nothing in this section shall be construed to constitute a waiver of the sovereign immunity of the Commonwealth or any of its boards, departments, bureaus, or agencies. (Code of Virginia, 1979, c. 252, §10-150.18; 1988, c. 891.)

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REVISION HISTORY

Version 1.00	Published 2024-01-19	As initially approved by the BCCS Board of Directors and the Landowners in November 2023.
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