

# MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR CAVES OF THE WATER SINKS KARST PRESERVE

## *Changelog*

*V1 - 2023-03-24 - First Draft circulated for review by New Preserves Committee*

*V2 - 2023-04-11 - Committee Working Review Session*

*V3 - 2023-04-18 - Committee Draft Finalized, transmission letter drafted*

*V4 - 2023-04-24 - draft shared with BCCS Board of Directors for feedback*

*01 - 2023-05-19 - Draft Shared with Amy and Ryan Bridger*

*02 - 2023-07-25 - Minor revisions per Amy and Ryan Feedback*

*03 - 2023-07-25 - Incorporated Tony's email comments from 2023-08-01*

*04 - 2023-07-28 - added specific caver experience requirements*

*05 - 2023-10-05 - added best practice re: fall protection*

*06 - 2023-10-16 - Changed access policy to one group per day in keyed caves. Added Waivers back in*

*07 - 2023-11-14 - Version approved by BCCS Board of Directors*

*08 - 2024-09-17 - Streamlined permit process to eliminate Owl, WS, and Surface permits, including establishing an on-site register.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

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

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

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

This plan in no way limits the rights of the property owners to grant or deny access to their property including waiving any of the requirements specified in this plan.

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

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

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

### **3. ASSUMPTION OF RISK STATEMENT**

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

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

### **4. ACCESS POLICY**

Contact [watersinks@butlercave.org](mailto:watersinks@butlercave.org) for the most up-to-date information on access, conditions, and permits.

**Commercial or illegal activity is prohibited on the property.**

**At least one Adult for every five minors is required while on the preserve.**

#### **Parking**

Parking will be at the Owl Meadow parking area. Access to all caves will be by foot-travel from this area. For special circumstances, parking in other areas may be permitted with special arrangements by the BCCS.

#### **Permit System**

**A Waiver of Claims, must be completed by each and every person before leaving the Owl Meadow parking area.**

**All visitors must sign the register located at the kiosk in Owl Meadow. Trip leaders holding a permit can sign their whole group in by listing the name of each person on the trip.**

**Permit requests must be submitted electronically two weeks ahead of time and approved by the management committee for access to Subway Cave and Helictite Cave.**

Access to the surface trails, Owl Cave, Waterfall Cave, and Water Sinks Cave (the upper cave, not the Subway) requires both waivers of claims to be completed for each and every person. Each visitor's name must be entered into the onsite register, either by the trip leader or by each individual. No permit is required to visit these areas.

The caves on the property are each unique in their challenges and sensitivity, and therefore benefit different access policies. A more detailed description of the caves is included in Appendix 1.

**Helictite Cave** - Helictite Cave is generally the most difficult and sensitive cave on the property. It will remain gated and locked. All access will require filing of waivers of claims and permits issued by the Water Sinks management team. Permits should be requested at least two weeks before the requested trip. Group size is limited to 8 persons per permit. The trip leader must be an experienced caver (minimum 10 wild cave trips), with membership in the BCCS, WVACS, PSC, GVKS, the NSS or an NSS internal organization required. One (1) permit will be available per day. Any cave modification or collection will require special permission from the Helictite Cave management team. Each visitor's name must be entered into the onsite register, either by the trip leader or by each individual.

**Subway Cave** - Subway Cave is generally suitable for most cavers. The culvert entrance will remain gated and unlocked. All other entrances should be considered closed. All access will require filing of waivers of claims and permits issued by the Water Sinks management team. Permits should be requested at least two weeks before the requested trip. Group size is limited to 8 persons per permit. The trip leader must be an experienced caver (minimum 10 wild cave trips), with membership in the BCCS, WVACS, PSC, GVKS, the NSS or an NSS internal organization required. One (1) permit will be available per day. Any cave modification or collection will require special permission from the Water Sinks management team. **This cave is subject to severe flooding and the weather must be carefully considered by anyone entering the cave.** Each visitor's name must be entered into the onsite register, either by the trip leader or by each individual.

**Water Sinks Cave** - Water Sinks Cave is generally suitable for almost anyone. It will remain in an open state. All access will require filing of waivers of claims, no additional permit is required. Group size is limited to 15 persons. Any cave modification or collection will require special permission from the Water Sink management team. Each visitor's name must be entered into the onsite register, either by the trip leader or by each individual.

**Owl Cave** - Owl Cave is generally suitable for novice cavers. Group size is limited to 15 persons. Any cave modification or collection requires special permission from the Water Sinks management team. Each visitor's name must be entered into the onsite register, either by the trip leader or by each individual.

**Waterfall Cave** - Owl Cave is generally suitable for novice cavers. Group size is limited to 15 persons. Each visitor's name must be entered into the onsite register, either by the trip leader or by each individual.

**Minor Caves** -The Water Sinks Karst Area contains a number of minor caves that may or may not be suitable for all cavers. All access will require filing of waivers of claims and permits issued by the Water Sinks management team. Permits should be requested at least two weeks before the requested trip. Group size is limited to 8 persons per permit.

**Surface Only** - The property is open to surface visitation from dawn to sunset by groups not exceeding 15 persons. No hunting or collection is allowed. No caving is allowed except by permit. Visitors must sign the onsite register.

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

## 5. CAVING CONDUCT

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

- All visitors shall comply with the provisions of the Virginia Cave Law, Code of Virginia, § 10.1-1004 and 1005, including but not limited to:
  - It is unlawful to break off, crack, carve upon, write, burn, or otherwise mark upon, remove, or in any manner destroy, disturb, deface, mar, or harm the surfaces of any cave or any natural material which may be found therein, whether attached or broken, including speleothems, and speleogens, and sedimentary deposits.
  - It is unlawful to break, force, tamper with, or otherwise disturb a lock, gate, door, or other obstruction designed to control or prevent access to any cave.
  - It is unlawful to store, dump, litter, dispose of or otherwise place any refuse, garbage, dead animals, sewage, or toxic substances harmful to cave life or humans, in any cave or sinkhole. It is also unlawful to burn within a cave or sinkhole any material which produces any smoke or gas which is harmful to any naturally occurring organism in any cave.
- Each caver shall be equipped with the following personal equipment.
  - Helmet with an attached light. Carbide lamps are allowed, provided all spent carbide is removed from the cave.
  - Three sources of light with extra batteries (and bulbs if not LED)

- Sturdy footwear such as hiking boots with non-marring /non marking soles. Tennis shoes or sandals are generally not appropriate.
- Gloves
- Tell somebody where you are going and tell them to expect a call from you at a specific time. The Water Sinks Management Team will not be filling this role. Please remember that cell phone service is not available within many miles of the preserve.
- Carry a pee bottle and burrito kit. Remove all solid and liquid wastes from the cave, including all urine, feces, spit, vomit, and other waste.
- All equipment, including cave packs, vertical gear, boots, gloves, knee-pads, helmets, and lint-free clothing should be freshly washed as necessary to comply with current White Nose Syndrome protocols, and to avoid transfer of mud, dust, and microbes between cave environments.
- Refer to WNS decontamination protocols at <https://caves.org/WNS/> or <https://www.whitenosesyndrome.org>
- Do not disturb bats, insects or other cave-dwelling creatures.
- No smoking, vaping, or use of tobacco in caves.
- No campfires in caves or near cave entrances. Camping in any Water Sinks property caves is not allowed unless identified in each caver's permit.
- No recreational drugs or alcohol while caving.
- Stay on established trails and the most impacted pathways. Do not enter areas flagged or otherwise identified as pristine areas, with muddy or dusty garments and gear. Check with cave managers for specific requirements for individual such areas.
- Follow any specific in cave instructions or signs, including those directing cavers to avoid areas or only traverse them in a clean change of caving gear.
- In all areas be aware of delicate features, and avoid using speleothems for hand and foot holds.
- Maintain special care and control of movements when in fragile areas. Touch as little as possible. Avoid leaning on walls, ceilings, or speleothems. Don't sit on formations. Look and avoid trampling floor deposits.
- Spot other cavers in fragile areas. Especially watch heads, backs, hands, feet, and packs. In areas of low-hanging formations, ask spotters to watch. Remove helmet if necessary to safeguard fragile areas. Move gently.
- Eat over your cave pack or other container, and otherwise avoid dropping crumbs, food particles, and other debris. Carry out crumbs and debris. Crumbs and debris introduce foreign substances into the cave that disrupt natural biological systems. Catch wax drips of candles on a suitable surface. Remove discarded waste left by other cavers when possible.
- Perform all climbs or descents that require rope work or artificial supports of any kind only if you are experienced and competent in safe techniques recognized by responsible cavers. Training is often available by Grottoes (local chapters) of the National Speleological Society (NSS).
- It is a best practice to use fall protection on all climbs or descents that could result in significant personal injury if a fall occurred, even if the climb or descent is easy enough that a fall is not likely to occur. In the Water Sinks Cave Preserve the entrance climbdown into Subway Cave (rebar ladder rungs) is one example. Less experienced cavers, and any caver requesting fall protection shall be provided a belay.

Fall protection shall be provided under the direct supervision of other cavers who are qualified in fall protection techniques.

- Point out unsafe or damaging behavior. It's every caver's responsibility to ensure that cave environments remain as pristine as possible and that every team member is safe and aware of conservation ethics. It's okay to speak up and say, "Keep still, don't move, or stay away." Spot other cavers on climbs.
- Take nothing from caves. Do not remove natural or historical items.
- Leave nothing in caves. Never leave your mark on cave walls. No graffiti. No signatures or drawings. No trash. No waste. Leave no evidence of your visit.
- Cave safely ... Cave softly ... and leave no trace.
- Additional information on safe and conservation minded caving may be found at [https://caves.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Guide\\_to\\_Resp\\_Caving\\_2016.pdf](https://caves.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Guide_to_Resp_Caving_2016.pdf)

## **6. USE CONFLICTS**

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

## **7. RESEARCH RULES**

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

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

## **8. EXPLORATION REPORTING**

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

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

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

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

## **10. PUBLICITY POLICY**

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

## **11. EDUCATION**

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

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

## **12. PRESERVE INSPECTIONS**

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

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

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

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

## **13. FUTURE PLANS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Kiosk - There is a temporary kiosk in the Owl Meadow parking area. There are future plans to update this to a more professional structure.
- Trail Maintenance - trails require routine maintenance.
- Appropriate signage for access road, parking, and trail access.





## **Appendix 1 - UNDERGROUND RESOURCES**

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

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

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

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

### **Minor Caves**

Waterfall Cave - 110-ft of passage

Bridge to Nowhere Cave - 64-ft of passage - closed due to instability.

Dragon Hammer Cave - 76-ft of passage





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

### Appendix 3 - PRESERVE MAP

