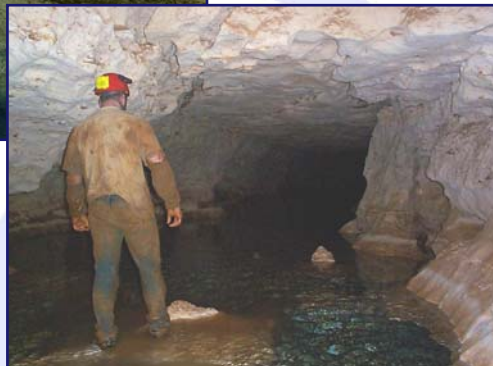


Fact Sheet

5 Karst - The Hidden Landscape



The Karst Conservancy
<http://www.karstconservancy.org>

Karst - The Hidden Landscape

Fact Sheet 5

The mission of The Karst Conservancy is to preserve the unique geological, hydrological, biological, cultural, and recreational resources associated with karst by permanently protecting karst lands in the United States.

Karst is a term geologists use to describe a landscape that is principally formed by the dissolving of bedrock and is characterized by caves, sinkholes, springs, and underground streams. Karst is a hollow terrain much like a piece of Swiss cheese coated with a thin layer of soil. These interconnected cavities can range in size from tiny cracks to stadium sized rooms.



Karst Is Invisible

Protecting karst presents many challenges, but the primary problem in karst conservation is that karst can't be seen from the surface. Most definitions of karst include a list of surface characteristics: sinkholes, disappearing streams, cave entrances, and large springs. While these are indeed indicators of karst regions, they are only surface expressions of the underground landscape. These surface characteristics hint at the vast systems of interconnected cracks, crevices, and conduits that lie below the ground.

It's difficult to convey the importance of protecting something that can't readily be seen. People view the forests or the mountains and recognize the beauty and value that these landscapes contain, but most people will never see the underground landscape - the subterranean streams, rivers, waterfalls, underground lakes, and canyons - and therefore cannot appreciate the conservation values of these features.

Ichetucknee Springs, a series of springs discharging 233 million gallons of crystal clear water a day, supply entirely all of the water for the Ichetucknee River in Central Florida. Much of the flow of the Ichetucknee Springs group may be water from Alligator Lake, Clay Hole Creek and Rose Creek. The flow of both creeks disappears into sinkholes 9 miles north of the springs and has been dye traced to the Ichetucknee. In ancient times, the river once flowed over the land, but as it cut down into the limestone, it was pirated underground. Though this part of the river is hidden from view, improper land use above it can still have a direct effect on the river below. The spring group and much of the river are protected by the State of Florida, but the entire river is only partly protected. Though the underground portion of the river cannot be seen, protecting the watershed above this hidden river is just as important for the overall health of the river system.

Karst Terrain Is Hollow

Karst is truly a 3-D landscape and the most common misunderstanding by people living in karst regions is that the bedrock is solid without voids. Most people have no clue that the ground they stand on is actually hollow. Some residents may know of a local cave or some may have heard about sinkholes in the area, but they are unaware of the true extent of the voids, cavities, and cave systems that have formed below the surface. Most people are unaware that they may be living on top of a huge cave chamber or that an underground river may run beneath their property.



The Karst Conservancy

The Karst Conservancy is a national level land trust dedicated to protecting karst. The Karst Conservancy is the only national, non-profit land conservation organization dedicated specifically to protecting karstlands. Working within the private sector using free market tools, we promote private conservation, a voluntary, non-confrontational approach to conserving natural resources. The Karst Conservancy protects important karst properties by directly acquiring them, holding conservation easements, and using other tools that permanently protect the land. For more information on the conservancy, visit our website at: <http://www.karstconservancy.org>

Many Caves Remain Undiscovered

Many cave entrances are either inaccessible by man or have yet to be found. Most of the obvious cave entrances were discovered over time, but many new cave systems are dug open every year. The entrance to Scott Hollow Cave in West Virginia was dug open in 1984. Prior to the digging there was no natural entrance. After studying the local geology, the discoverers determined that there should be a cave in the area and they located the most likely area to dig. They eventually dug into a vast cave system that has been explored to over 30 miles in length. The cave contains a large underground river that flows 400 feet beneath the surface and is the main drainage for the dry valley above.

Alabama has significant karst regions, primarily in the northeast corner of the state, and over 3,400 caves have been documented. It's estimated that the potential number of caves could be upwards of 40,000, so less than ten percent of all the potential caves have been found. Most of these cave systems will never be found, but they still exist and play an important role in the connection between the surface and the subsurface.

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