

## Greeting Greenhorns Underground

Mary Sue Socky, blue Ridge Grotto VA, on meeting strangers in a cave

A question has come up a few times after recent cave trips: “What should you say (or do) if you encounter another group in a cave who are obviously unprepared and may be in trouble if they proceed further into the cave?”

That’s a good question. The answer may vary, depending on the status and access of the cave. For example, in Goodwin’s or Catawba Murder Hole, which are extremely limited access caves, you should confront the group, tell them they are trespassing, then escort them out and notify the owner. Likewise for any group in any cave if they are breaking the cave laws! For the average sacrifice cave that everyone knows about, however, your tactics should be different.

First off, say “Hi there!, “Howdy!” (or whatever greeting you tend to use) and acknowledge their presence. A lot of inexperienced spelunkers are put off by all the high-tech suits and equipment we wear and lug around and consider cavers to be snobs. They are probably envious, but would never admit it. So saying something friendly can “break the ice” between the groups.

Second, find out something about them. “Where are you from?” or “Where are you headed?” are good ones, and the person who answers is usually the leader. (You might want to take the leader aside and point out that his or her group’s lack of helmets, proper footwear, etc. is dangerous and they should turn back. One-on-one talks tend to be more productive than confronting the entire group.)

Likewise, the spelunkers might be curious and have some questions about your gear and lights that can open the way for a good safety or conservation snippet, or an invite to the next grotto meeting.

However, one of the best ways I can think of to deter an unprepared group is with the phrase, “You do have the owner’s permission to be in here, don’t you?” as cavers, we always get owner permission before venturing underground. This question politely asks if the group knows they are trespassing. Who knows? They might be relatives or friends of the owner, and do have permission! Most unprepared groups tend to begin to exit after they talk with you. If you encounter a group who you suspect may not be honest, you can continue with “. . . yeah, Mr. Smith is a real nice guy,” when you know the owner is Mrs. Jones. The other group’s reply will confirm or disprove your suspicions.

Then what? If the unprepared spelunkers are still hell bent on continuing further, just say “Well, we gotta go. When we drop by the owner’s house on the way out, we’ll let him know you’re still in here.” Proper caver courtesy, proper landowner relations, and a lot of food for thought for a group of trespassers. Maybe your friendly conversation will cause them to cut their adventure short. Perhaps they may realize that there are better, safer ways to explore a cave. Maybe they will have a heart-to-heart talk with the owner and the local sheriff when they exit the cave. Hopefully we won’t be called back for a rescue.