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**Guidance for National Speleological Society Preserves During COVID-19
Pandemic: A Message from Julie Schenck-Brown and Tom Griffin, NSS Preserve
& Acquisitions Chairs and Kat Crispin, Administrative VP**

NSS Headquarters, Huntsville, AL

Greetings NSS Members and Visitors of our Preserves,

We hope you and your families are safe and healthy. As we realize that many of you are expecting guidance for access to the NSS Preserves during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been actively monitoring the situation and have looked to other cave conservancies to evaluate their strategies and plans, as we all work together to ensure conservation and access to caves. Thus, we are issuing this official decree that has been developed through consultation with the CDC Guidelines, the management practices of other cave conservancies, and our NSS Preserve Managers. Please understand that this decree is not static, and we will issue updates as we obtain additional data and updates on the pandemic.

Our NSS Preserves offer a place of respite and solitude for our members and the public, however, we realize that much of the public is turning to outdoor recreation while other social outlets are closed. To complicate

matters, mandates for self-quarantine and social distancing are not being implemented in the same way across the country. Our focus is on the safety of our NSS Preserve Managers, as well as the cavers and visitors who enjoy the recreation and respite offered at our 17 NSS Preserves. Thus, we welcome suggestions and comments to manage access to our NSS Preserves during the pandemic.

Currently, we are not closing all NSS Preserves, but do ask that cavers limit visits to the surface if the NSS Preserve allows hiking and to follow social distancing guidelines. If cavers and visitors are encountered and not following social distancing, please be kind and compassionate. In addition, if you do want to visit a cave on an NSS Preserve, we ask that you contact the NSS Preserve Manager and limit groups to 5 cavers total. The NSS Preserve Managers have the right to refuse access to the NSS Preserve they manage, based on the mandates issued for their area, but they are following universal precautions when making this decision. And please remember that health care resources, including rescue personnel are extremely busy and supplies are in short demand, thus a rescue may not be attended to promptly and will impact our already strained health care system.

Other considerations and special mandates:

- If an NSS Preserve has research being conducted above or below ground, the principle researchers have been asked to contact the NSS Preserve Management team immediately, so we can discuss how this research will proceed. This does not indicate a blanket closure; however, we need to improve communication related to research at NSS Preserves and want to have a better understanding of how these projects will proceed especially considering the closure of colleges and universities.
- The NSS New River Cave Nature Preserve in Virginia is currently closed based on recommendations from the VPI Grotto and the Blacksburg Rescue/Cave Rescue Unit who have both requested a hold on caving and other potentially dangerous recreational activities. The NSS Preserve Managers expect the NSS New River Cave Preserve will be closed until May 1st, or as late as May 15th when most of the remaining students will be leaving the area.
- Mc Fail's Cave at the NSS McFail's Cave Nature Preserve in New York is closed, as per the existing regulation, during the bat hibernating season (October 1st to April 30th). The NSS Preserve Managers will evaluate near early May if an extension of the closure is appropriate.
- The NSS Richard Blenz Nature Preserve in Indiana has limited group sizes for Buckner Cave to no more than 5 people and has encouraged people to visit only in household groups, and to practice physical distance per CDC and State guidelines. The Preserve Management team is also encouraging people to ride to the cave only in household groups.
- The Schoharie Cabin at the NSS James Gage Nature Preserve in New York is closed at this time for visitors, as we do not want to burden our NSS Preserve Managers with the extra duties of disinfecting this environment. This decision is tempered by the fact that the number of people affected in the Empire State grows at an alarming rate and the facility will not allow adequate social distancing in a closed environment.
- Camping at NSS Preserves is also not permitted at this time based on social distance guidelines and numerous state mandates to avoid groups of 10 or more.

Our thoughts are with our fellow cavers as the number of people affected in the United States and the world grows at an alarming rate. We realize that many of our NSS members, as well as our NSS Preserve Managers have family and friends affected by this pandemic and have relations that extend beyond our borders.

Take care of yourselves, stay safe, and thank-you for your support of the NSS.

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The National Speleological Society With more than 7,000 members and 250 grottos (chapters), the National Speleological Society is the largest organization in the world working every day to further the exploration, study, and protection of caves and their environments, and foster fellowship among cavers.

For over 70 years, the National Speleological Society has promoted safe and responsible caving practices, effective cave and karst management, speleology, and conservation. Our members are bound together by their love of caves and caving and their desire to learn about the underground wilderness and protect it for future generations.

NSS membership offers worldwide caver camaraderie and networking opportunities and access to information about discoveries and developments in caving, speleology, equipment, and techniques through our publications, annual conventions, grottos and other internal organizations, and NSS-sponsored projects, expeditions, and surveys.