

Cavers present study project to U.S. Sen. Heinrich

Groundbreaking research, discoveries made in Snowy River Cave

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U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, (D-NM), visited Lincoln County on Saturday to talk flooding with officials, set aside his evening to hole up with Fort Stanton cavers and learn more about the ever-growing Snowy River Cave.

Scientists of various disciplines, ranging from nuclear science to archeo-biology and all things between and aside, along with a selection of speliophiles with years of experience in the cave explained the diverse research being conducted in the unique and relatively young cave formation - whether it's determining the area's climate thousands of years ago or identifying unique bacterium for possible commercial applications or even offering a preview of Snowy River from the digital world.

Heinrich also happens to have had caving experience, and with his engineering background was able to better understand the complicated world of caving and scientific research that goes hand in hand with Bureau of Land Management requirements, posing several questions to researchers concerning the cave's geological background and natural residents.

Beginning the presentation, Project Director Steve Peerman gave an overview of the cave study project, complete with stunning photographs and reports regarding the last two expeditions' discoveries, which have shown that Snowy River now exceeds 12 miles and the total network of cave passages now adds up to more than 25 miles with untold lengths yet to be explored.

Dr. Penny Boston of New Mexico Tech, and Dr. Diana Northrup from the University of New Mexico presented short Power Point presentations concerning their research on microbes and DNA projects, highlighting numerous microbes previously unknown to science, as well as a tantalizing possibility as to why Snowy River bats, as well as the bats throughout most of the county, could prove resistant to White Nose Syndrome. Through her work on the cave's unique microbial colonies, the researchers additionally identified manganese-fixing bacterium on the cave walls that could provide the beginning of alternative water treatment measures.

Dr. Ron Lipinski of Sandia National Labs also presented his prototype educational Caver Quest simulation, a labor of love from Lipinski and students who stitched together thousands of digital images of the cave's interior into a nigh-on seamless digital recreation of the cave that will eventually offer a glimpse of the natural wonder to internet users the world over, as they pilot their avatar through educational quizzes that unlock more "levels" within the cave. Lipinski reiterated that the work still is quite a ways from completion, as tens of thousands of additional photos need to be taken to complete the monumental simulation, which is the first effort of its kind.

New discoveries, revealed in stunning photographs by caving staff, also showcased the unusual and world class formations that are proving that Fort Stanton Cave has become one of the most important caves in the world with numerous challenges to cavers and to the world of science.

The senator, along with BLM officials, departed with a brain full of new information on the cave and a promise that he would return another time for a tour. Cavers and researchers left with the hope that the newest U.S. senator understood the full importance of the county's natural resource. For more information, contact Lynda A. Sanchez at 575 653-4821 or Project Director Steve Peerman at gypcaver@comcast.net, or fscsp.org



Erik LeDuc/Ruidoso News U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich glances through a brochure overview of the Snowy River cave. (null)



Erik LeDuc/Ruidoso News Fort Stanton Cave Study Project Leader Steve Peerman points out where the most recent caving expedition was mapping, a hike of more than 11 miles underground. (null)