

Fort Stanton Cave explorers win international award

Years of exploration, outstanding discoveries and mapping by FSCSP recognized internationally

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The Fort Stanton Cave Study Project team was named winner of the 2013 prize in exploration at the week-long 16th International Congress of Speleology in Brno, Czech Republic.

Fort Stanton Cave is part of the Fort Stanton-Snowy River National Conservation Area, a 25,080-acre area managed by the federal Bureau of Land Management's Roswell Field Office. The NCA was established in 2009, to conserve and enhance the unique and nationally important historic, cultural, scientific, archaeological, natural, and educational subterranean cave resources of the Fort Stanton-Snowy River cave system.

"This is indeed an honor and a tribute to all the hard work that all the participants have put into the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project in the last few years and since work started at the cave 50 years ago," said Steve Peerman, the project director of the FSCSP. "Everyone who has contributed in any way should be proud of this achievement and merits a 'Thank you!' from myself and from all the directors of the FSCSP."

FSCSP President John Corcoran added, "The spirit of this project is volunteerism in support of the Bureau of Land Management, The Conservation Lands Foundation, the National Forest Service, the wonders of an incredible natural resource, and long-lasting fellowship and dedication of cavers and researchers."

Various members of the FSCSP have

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been exploring the cave system for more than 40 years, taking Fort Stanton Cave from a well-known popular recreational cave, to a world-class, scientifically extraordinary 26.3 mile system. Fort Stanton Cave now ranks 20th in the United States and 76th in the world in terms of length. For comparison, Carlsbad Caverns offers about 30.9 miles of surveyed passage.

FSCSP board member and U.S. national delegate, John Moses, accepted the award on behalf of the team. Other Fort Stanton project participants present were asked to stand and be recognized. A plaque will be sent to the team, said Lynda Sanchez, FSCSP public outreach liaison.

The selection committee commented that, "Excellent exploration is conducted with excellent science and follows top standards for cave protection. The Fort Stanton Cave Study Project stands as a shining example for all members of UIS to follow."

Sanchez noted, "The key element and purpose in the award is not only that of a spectacular cave setting which Fort Stanton Cave has, but the project management is the major factor and accounts for over 60 percent of the selection guidelines."

Chuck Schmidt, BLM Roswell field manager, shared in the excitement. "I congratulate the FSCSP for the well-deserved award they received from the International Congress of Speleology," he said. "We are honored to partner with this group of truly dedicated volunteers, and look forward to many more monumental discoveries of this unique natural resource. The Fort Stanton Cave and the Snowy River passage have provided a rare opportunity to discover the awe of nature, and to learn about the wonders of natural processes that developed the cave. The efforts of the FSCSP have brought this information and knowledge to the world, and I am humbled by their efforts."

Jim Goodbar, the BLM's national senior cave and karst resource specialist, said the ongoing discoveries and survey at Fort Stanton Cave are "one of the great exploration stories in the Bureau of Land Management. With the continuing exploration of the Snowy River Passage, the cave is now the longest surveyed in the agency and future surveys will be adding additional length. Onward through the darkness. The end is not in sight."

The international congress meets every four years in different parts of the world, Sánchez said. The 2009 conference was staged in Texas, and previous to that France, Greece, Spain, and China were other nations used for the conference of internationally-known scientists and cavers. Australia will be the next site in 2017.

Citing the most significant cave exploration projects that occurred between the 15th ICS in 2009 and this year's 16th, the honorable mentions included the famous Hang Son Doong Cave project in Vietnam, the world's largest cave passage, and the K'oox Baal, Mexico underwater cave, the fourth longest underwater cave in the world, Sanchez said.

"To have imagined that Fort Stanton Cave would be in this league even 10 years ago is just an unbelievable example of what faith in a project and cave can mean for the dedicated volunteers who for more than four decades plunged ever onward surveying and mapping as well as bringing back unbelievable photographs and samples for further analysis," she said, reflecting the pride of the members of the nonprofit study and exploration group. "There are thousands of caves in the world but very few achieve this level of recognition."

Located on the Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area and affiliated with the National Conservation Lands Foundation, an organization that supports 28 million acres of incredibly diverse public lands, Fort Stanton Cave presents unique blends of decorated passages, unexplored leads, and scientific discoveries that boggle the mind, Sanchez said.

Besides Peerman of Las Cruces, Corcoran of Albuquerque and Sanchez from the historic settlement of Lincoln, FSCSP board members include Vice President and Assistant Project Director Wayne Walker of Las Cruces; Treasurer and webmaster Pete Lindsley of Placitas; Secretary Lee Skinner, Albuquerque; and Natural Resources Manager John Moses of El Paso. They heard the news late Saturday afternoon, Sanchez said.

Currently, 26 miles of passages have been mapped in the cave, including formations such as Snowy River passage, the longest continuous calcite formation discovered at 11 miles and growing, Sanchez said.

"Other stalactites, stalagmites, helictites, unique and delicate aragonite crystal formations, red velvet flowstone, lemon yellow flowstone cascading many feet over rough passage side walls and other unusual finds fill the recently discovered previously unknown regions of this spectacular underground resource," she said.

"For more than four decades the dedicated group of volunteers and cavers rendezvous in Lincoln County at their field headquarters near Fort Stanton for three annual field expeditions," she said.

"About 200 volunteers from all parts of the United States have helped with documenting cave history, geology, biology and hydrology. The Strong and Light team members are among the most experienced and physically capable men and women cavers in the country."



Courtesy Members of the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project, from left, Jennifer Foote, Andy Armstrong and Shawn Thomas, rest at a yellow flowstone formation during one of the cave surveying trips in the Midnight Creek passage of the Snowy River Complex, about 11 miles from the cave entrance. (null)