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Cave study project receives conservation award

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The Fort Stanton Cave Study Project received the first-ever Conversation Leadership Award from the Conservation Lands Foundation.

The award recognizes outstanding leadership to advance the protection of the National Conservation Lands through visionary, innovative and strategic projects.

The Fort Stanton Cave Study Project, located northeast of the historic Fort Stanton near Capitan works to enhance the understanding of the complex underground Fort Stanton Cave system by working closely with internationally recognized cave scientists in fields including biology, hydrology (water studies), geology, precision survey and cartography.

The work of the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project has lead to fascinating discoveries about the historic usage of the cave.

The project has documented historic signatures on cave walls indicating that soldiers were exploring the front part of the cave in the mid-19th century.

They have also found evidence of American Indians (Jornada Mogollon and Apache) exploring the cave before the soldiers.

"The work of the members and volunteers of the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project continues to reveal new scientific discoveries," said Scott Jones, Southwest Program director of the Conservation Lands Foundation. "Their work reminds us how much we still have to learn and why it is so important to protect critical areas like the Snowy River Cave and Fort Stanton in the National Conservation Lands."

Some of the discoveries from the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project's work include:

- A major extension to the cave discovered in 2001 as a result of the mapping and digging projects. This new passage led to the designation of the Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area in 2009, adding more than 25,000 acres to the National Conservation Lands in order to protect this important resource.

- The discovery in 2007, that Snowy River occasionally has clear water flowing through the passage in an underground stream. This is highly unusual for the normally dry caves in the semi-arid Southwest.

- Bat studies in the Fort Stanton Cave contribute to understanding White Nose Syndrome, first documented in 2007, which has caused massive bat die-offs in colder eastern caves.

While access to most of the new Snowy River discovery is limited to research and exploration teams, the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project established a website to provide the public with information about new discoveries. In addition, a Fort Stanton Museum exhibit was formally opened to the public in August 2010.

The National Conservation Lands, which includes the Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area, are the nation's newest, permanently protected collection of public lands - 27 million acres of nationally significant landscapes set aside for current and future generations because of their outstanding cultural, ecological and scientific importance.

The Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area has 60 miles of horseback, mountain biking, and hiking trails that wind through open meadows and canyons in the eastern foothills of the Sierra Blanca Mountains of south central New Mexico.

Beneath the rolling hills and mesas lies the Fort Stanton Cave, an extensive limestone cave in central New Mexico, which is the third-longest cave in the state.

For information on the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project, visit fscsp.org.