

NATIONAL  
SPELEOLOGICAL  
SOCIETY, INC.



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DEDICATED TO THE EXPLORATION, STUDY, AND CONSERVATION OF CAVES

February 15, 2018

Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Zinke and Secretary Perdue,

Caves are a key American resource. Many are directly connected with groundwater resources that supply fresh water for human communities. They attract millions of tourist dollars and provide homes for insectivorous bats that save American farmers billions of dollars annually. Caves also contain whole ecosystems of microorganisms of potentially great biotechnological value.

The National Speleological Society (NSS) is by far the most knowledgeable and influential protector of these too often forgotten, but critically important resources. Many of America's most valuable caves were originally discovered and reported by our members. In fact, America's largest remaining population of endangered gray bats, in Fern Cave, Alabama, was discovered by NSS members and was purchased by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Under a management agreement with the Wheeler Wildlife Refuge, it was effectively managed and protected by NSS members for more than 20 years, because the Fish and Wildlife Service lacked funds to do so. In fact, largely due to caver collaboration, today there are millions more of this species than when its extinction was predicted in the early 1970's.

When a fungus-caused disease was accidentally introduced into North America, it was NSS members who discovered it in 2007. NSS members helped fund experts to attend the first national meeting to manage the crisis. We also volunteered countless hours in support of research and survey work.

Unfortunately, federal agencies have overreacted, often closing all caves to caver entry, even those not used by bats. They also canceled long-standing cooperative management agreements, resulting in great harm to key resources like Fern Cave, that were left unprotected and vandalized. At the same time, federal agencies have spent millions funding efforts to prevent WNS from spreading or to find a cure.

Despite these well intended efforts, WNS has rapidly spread from coast to coast. Bats can quickly move long distances, and available evidence indicates that bats, not humans, are accounting for its rapid movement. In fact, survey and research efforts in the bats' hibernation caves are causing far more harm than good. WNS kills bats by forcing them to wake up too often from hibernation, wasting limited fat reserves before spring. Yet winter surveys, and efforts to find a cure, are greatly increasing risk of bat mortality through additional arousals.



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Today, members of the National Speleological Society are deeply concerned that agencies are wasting millions in taxpayer dollars on efforts that are in fact often putting bats at even greater risk. Continuation of current emphasis will needlessly create new endangered species at a time when funds are desperately needed to help depleted, but resistant remnant bats recover.

After ten years, it is time to acknowledge that WNS is going to run its course. Even if a cure were found, the practical field applications present insurmountable logistical challenges and expenses. Further, it is simply unlikely that humans are a significant vector of WNS transmission, the only proven method to date being physical bat to bat contact, as demonstrated and published by the National Wildlife Health Center laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin.

In summary, blanket cave closures have proven ineffective and counterproductive. They have damaged long-standing collaboration with the NSS and threatened needless creation of additional endangered species, each of which could cost millions annually in endangered species enforcement and compliance. It is time to re-open America's caves. We are requesting that the Department of Interior and the Department of Agriculture revisit their current cave closure and decontamination policies and lift the ban on entry of federally owned caves not important to bats. Members of the National Speleological Society deplore current actions, but stand ready, once again to become part of the solution.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Geary M. Schindel in black ink.

Geary M. Schindel, P.G.  
President, National Speleological Society  
[President@caves.org](mailto:President@caves.org)

Handwritten signature of Peter Youngbaer in black ink.

Peter Youngbaer  
Chair of the Directorate, National Speleological Society  
[Youngbaer4@aol.com](mailto:Youngbaer4@aol.com)

Handwritten signature of Merlin D. Tuttle in black ink.

Dr. Merlin D. Tuttle  
Founder and Executive Director, Merlin Tuttle's Bat Conservation  
[merlintuttle@gmail.com](mailto:merlintuttle@gmail.com)



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary  
Washington, D.C. 20250

**APR 19 2018**

Mr. Peter Youngbaer  
Chair of the Directorate  
National Speleological Society  
6001 Pulaski Pike  
Huntsville, Alabama 35810

Dear Mr. Youngbaer:

Thank you for your letter of February 15, 2018, cosigned by your colleagues, to Secretary Ryan Zinke of the U.S. Department of the Interior and me, regarding cave closures, White Nose Syndrome, and bat conservation. I apologize for the delayed response.

We agree caves are an American resource deserving of our protection. We recognize that closures affect people who enjoy caving and, therefore, do not make these decisions lightly and instead try to minimize the use of closures. Since we began closing caves to reduce the spread of White Nose Syndrome, we have learned a great deal about managing this disease. This has allowed the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service to reopen caves to cavers and the general public. For example, in the Forest Service's Southern Region, one cave closure order in place includes an exemption for your organization and allows entrance for mapping purposes. In addition, Indiana's Hoosier National Forest and National Forests across the Rocky Mountain Region have re-opened caves to recreational use.

You are correct that White Nose Syndrome has spread to the West Coast where two bats were found fatally ill or dead. The possibility of new disease epicenters emerging (beyond the range of bat movement) have highlighted concerns about the risk of human transmission. Despite this risk, none of the caves in the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Region or in the Pacific Southwest Region were closed. Decontamination stations were established and the National Speleological Society worked with the State and the Forest Service to help with important bat studies.

We appreciate your longstanding work supporting cave exploration and protection. We look forward to continuing to work with you on efforts to reduce the impacts of White Nose Syndrome, conserve bat populations, and provide access to this amazing resource.

Again, thank you for writing and your interest in National Forest activities. If you have any further questions, please contact Leslie Weldon, Deputy Chief of the National Forest System, at (202) 205-1523. A similar letter is being sent to your colleagues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sonny Perdue". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letter "S" being particularly large and stylized.

Sonny Perdue  
Secretary

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DEDICATED TO THE EXPLORATION, STUDY, AND CONSERVATION OF CAVES

May 9, 2018

Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

Thank you very much for your shared concern for balancing the needs of bats and cavers. We agree that much has been learned in recent years and would like to clarify our request, based on this new knowledge.

Here are our specific action points we would like to discuss with you or your staff:

- We request that all blanket cave closures be lifted, as well as treating any current or future closures on a cave-by-cave basis.

Blanket cave closures due to WNS have led to increased cave vandalism and cancelled management agreements with cavers in many areas of the United States.

- We request agencies in other parts of the country follow Montana's lead in developing similar cooperative agreements.

Cavers and agency personnel in Montana have pioneered agreements that have proven positive for agencies and cavers alike, though unusual in the USA. These agreements focused on pre-WNS baseline bat population research utilizing cooperative agreements where the cavers save agencies money by performing expensive fieldwork and protective actions. In the Southeast, the endangered gray bat's extinction was predicted in the 1970s. Yet, mostly due to caver volunteers who built gates and monitored and protected key sites like Fern Cave in Alabama, dramatic recovery has occurred, saving over a million dollars.

- We propose future efforts to help threatened bats should focus entirely on helping survivors repopulate, using the best science available.

Current evidence indicates that WNS cannot be stopped, cured, or even slowed by human intervention.

- We propose a meeting to consider expanding caver/agency collaboration, of the kind currently occurring in states such as Montana and Colorado and that have occurred in the past in the Southeast.



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This meeting would review the current state of research and other activities related to WNS with an eye toward expanding already successful policies, perhaps modeled after the one already working in Montana.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'G. M. Schindel'.

Geary M. Schindel, P.G.  
President, National Speleological Society  
[President@caves.org](mailto:President@caves.org)

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Peter Youngbaer  
Chair of the Directorate, National Speleological Society  
[Youngbaer4@aol.com](mailto:Youngbaer4@aol.com)

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Merlin D. Tuttle'.

Dr. Merlin D. Tuttle  
Founder and Executive Director, Merlin Tuttle's Bat Conservation  
[merlintuttle@gmail.com](mailto:merlintuttle@gmail.com)

cc. Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke