



**Union Internationale  
de Spéléologie**

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# **Code of Ethics for Cave Exploration, and Science in Foreign Countries**

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Accepted by the International Union of Speleology (UIS)

at the General Assembly at the

**12<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Speleology (*La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, 1997*)**

Modified by the General Assembly at the

**13<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Speleology (*Brasilia, Brazil, 2001*),**

and the

**16<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Speleology (*Brno, Czech Republic, 2013*)**



## SUMMARY

### A: General caving in your own country

- *When dealing with caves, keep the main focus strictly on the cave and its contents.*
- *Minimum impact (“traceless travel”) should be the underlying principle.*

### B: Caving Expeditions to Foreign Countries

- *UIS supports the international activities of speleological societies, caving groups and karst scientists.*
- *Diplomacy and common sense must be practised.*
- *Search for local collaboration and permission before leaving your country.*
- *During the expedition follow local laws and customs.*
- *After the expedition, send copies of all printed material to the participating caving clubs and the national speleological organisation and/or the UIS national delegate, and acknowledge assistance received in all expedition publications.*
- *Respect for the work of other groups and individuals.*

### C: Future Development of Show Caves

- *Show caves should be developed in a sustainable fashion.*
- *Show cave interpretation should focus on education rather than entertainment.*
- *Cavers and cave scientists should help to maintain the quality of show caves.*

### D: Adventure, Geo- and Eco- Tourism

- *Adventure travel and ecotourism must be traceless and sustainable.*
- *Competitions should not be held in caves.*

### E: Scientific Sampling

- *Sampling should only be undertaken by well qualified experts (or their trained assistants) for their own research.*
- *Samples and specimens should be neither purchased nor sold.*
- *Local practice should be followed for permission.*
- *Results of research should be passed to international data repositories.*

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to serve as a first step in the development of a new international code of ethics for caving and cave conservation. UIS cannot enforce rules on its members, nor can it be responsible for illegal expeditions. This code is intended as a forceful recommendation that describes an ideal scenario for individual member countries to implement with - if absolutely necessary - appropriate adjustments that take account of particular circumstances in their countries. The aim of the code is to ensure respectful practices when visiting caves and in relating to other people who deal with them.

**It is the consensus of the Bureau of the UIS (2008) that:**

***Caves and karst features, as well as many other underground cavities, are extremely valuable, vulnerable and irreplaceable. These sites are repositories for aesthetics and a vast range of scientific information that is not available elsewhere.***

Caves may be regarded as “time-machines.” Their pristine

and timeless atmosphere is immediately obvious to any visitor. Caves are a limited resource with close to zero carrying capacity. Recent developments in cave microbiology and trace element geochemistry have established and emphasized the uniqueness and vulnerability of the cave environment. The international community of cavers, scientists and the general public all have a duty to pass on this unspoiled cave legacy to future generations. ***We want future generations to be able to experience the same untouched and aesthetic atmosphere as we do in our caves today. The owners of our caves are those who are not yet born, as well as the present generation.***

The caving community is international and consists of individuals with a wide range of backgrounds. Whether a layman, caver, or scientist, all share a keen interest in their caves and have often invested immense personal resources into their exploration and cave stewardship. Such efforts deserve great respect when dealing with speleologists from different regions and nations.

**Therefore, the UIS Code of Ethics covers**

- general caving in your own country;
- caving expeditions to foreign countries;
- future development of show caves;
- adventure and geo- and eco-tourism;
- scientific sampling.

The code is organized in paragraphs of short explanatory text with examples

### A: General caving in your own country

Every country should develop its own Code of Ethics, but something along the following lines is recommended:

**§ 1. When dealing with caves, keep the main focus strictly on the cave and its contents.**

This is the most basic and simplest rule for maintaining the state of a cave. If, on the contrary, the focus is on something other than the cave, such as financial gain, personal objectives, rescue, etc., then the cave will suffer. Visiting a cave is like borrowing a book at the library; it must be returned in the same state as you received it - you don't tear out pages, write comments, or leave stains on it.

**§ 2. Minimum impact (“traceless travel”) should be the underlying principle.**

One should try to avoid leaving footprints, even on sediment floors, and must avoid smearing and spreading sediments over rocks and speleothems. As the caving community grows faster than the number of known caves, the statement “leave nothing but footprints” is no longer sufficient. One should also acknowledge that microbial cross-contamination within and of caves may become the most serious (and invisible) threat to the cave environment in the future. The only permanent marks that may be acceptable are modest survey stations and other reference points for mapping and scientific investigations.

Likewise, during a cave rescue, the focus is naturally - and should be - on the victim and the transport logistics. This is the only situation where excessive trampling and wear may have to be accepted.

However, similar damage is sometimes unavoidable during rescue practice (training). Therefore, rescue practice should be restricted to only a few already damaged caves and never performed in newly discovered or otherwise pristine caves.

Every caving trip makes an impact and contributes to the eventual cumulative destruction of the cave. Ideally, all caving trips should aim to have some kind of return - apart from personal excitement - to make up for the damage inflicted, in the form of documentation (such as survey, photographs, scientific observations).

Knowledge is the most important legacy we can provide for others. Likewise, every caver must carry out their trash, etc.

## **B: Caving Expeditions to Foreign Countries**

Here we distinguish between visiting known caves (adventure caving) and exploring areas for new caves (expedition caving). The remarks that follow refer particularly to expeditions. The principle is **to realize that one is a guest in a foreign country and to behave appropriately, paying respect to the hosts and local people**. This responsibility is mutual, **both guests and hosts are expected to respectfully acknowledge (and cite in publications) previous work**.

### **§ 1. UIS supports the international activities of speleological societies, caving groups and karst scientists. International cave exploration is important for:**

- discovering new caves and extending the exploration of previously known caves;
- investigating their contents, for example, minerals, biota and archaeological and anthropological remains;
- distributing information on karst and caves throughout the world;
- enabling the exchange of safe caving practices;
- assisting in the protection and preservation of caves and karst.

However, visiting cavers must be aware that exploration for new caves by foreigners may not be welcome when local cavers are already exploring the same area or may want to preserve them for future generations.

### **§ 2. Diplomacy and common sense must be practised.**

To avoid misunderstandings by local people, government, and local and national caving organisations in the country where the proposed cave exploration or scientific investigation is to take place, the UIS has prepared the following recommendations:

#### **§ 2.1 Search for local collaboration before leaving your country.**

In many cases, it will be necessary to obtain prior official permission in the country to be visited. In addition, as a matter of courtesy it is necessary to inform one or more of the following: the national speleological organisation; the UIS national delegate; local caving club(s); and relevant individuals from whom cooperation is sought. **If adequate contact has not been made, then only a small reconnaissance visit is justified.**

Results of the expedition should be given to the host party and, in return, it is the hosts' responsibility to acknowledge any results of the expedition used in their future publications.

If possible, organisers should arrange joint expeditions with cavers from the country to be visited. The national speleological organisation will be familiar with the official requirements for visiting expeditions.

They will be well versed in the requirements for the lodging of expedition reports and published material, and in the regulations pertaining to the removal to other countries of any samples

collected by the expedition from the caves.

#### **§ 2.2 During the expedition follow local laws and customs.**

The expedition members must respect the laws of the country and local traditions, and understand that some caves may be sacred sites and have a religious and/or cultural significance; exploration and research studies in these caves may be restricted.

The expedition members should not damage either the karst or its caves. They should, where possible, educate and advise local communities in the protection and preservation of their karst, caves, and cave biota.

#### **§ 2.3 After the expedition.**

Samples from the caves and karst should only be collected during the expedition, if prior permission has been obtained, and should only be exported if that is expressly permitted.

As a courtesy, copies of all printed material produced by the expedition, together with the location and maps of the caves, should be sent to the participating caving clubs and the national speleological organisation and/or the UIS national delegate.

Assistance received from organisations within the country visited should be acknowledged in all expedition publications.

#### **§ 2.4 Respect for the work of other groups and individuals.**

Before undertaking an expedition to a foreign country, the visitor group should research previous work and/or current exploration by local or foreign cavers, in order not to interfere with current projects.

Credit for previous exploration should be given in expedition reports.

If several groups happen to be working in the same area, then the opportunity should be taken to learn from each other and to coordinate further work.

#### **§ 2.5 Addenda to the UIS Code of Ethics (accepted in Brasilia, Brazil, 2001)**

**§ 2.5a** The UIS urges all their Bureau members and national delegates, who know of any expedition being organised to a foreign country, to immediately contact and inform the national delegate of the target country.

**§ 2.5b** If a member of the UIS Bureau discovers a violation to its Code of Ethics regarding a foreign expedition, the Bureau member will contact the national delegate of the expedition's country of origin and suggest that the expedition findings and reports should not be accepted in their official publications, and also state that the reports will not be accepted in any UIS-sponsored publication or event.

**§ 2.5c** For expeditions organised by countries of high speleological development to countries of lower speleological development, the expedition group should do its best to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and to promote local speleological activity.

## **C: Future Development of Show Caves**

*(See also the Memorandum of Understanding between the International Show Caves Association and UIS).*

Development of a show cave implies a total change of the

local cave environment, as it will be literally transformed into a transport belt for many tourists and leave unavoidable on-going impact. Despite that, show cave development may be an effective way of conserving a cave from uncontrolled “wild” caving and can result in effective conservation of undeveloped sections of the cave off the tourist route.

Show caves also relieve stress on other vulnerable caves in the vicinity. In addition, show caves have an important role in conveying ideas concerning the cave environment and natural sciences, and may assist in the recruitment of new speleologists.

Scientific sampling should be performed in show caves if possible, as it deflects impact from equivalent wild caves and the resulting information can be conveyed effectively to the general public.

### § 1. Sustainable show cave development.

The prescriptions and guidelines of the International Show Caves Association, as endorsed by the UIS, should be used to guide development of show caves. The principle should be to utilise removable installations, such as suspended plastic or stainless steel walkways, in preference to more permanent materials such as concrete. High efficiency lighting should be employed, and every effort must be made to conceal cables without damaging the cave. It is essential that the development and subsequent use have absolutely minimum impact on the natural environment of the cave. The principles of sustainable development should be followed.

### § 2. Show cave interpretation should focus on education rather than entertainment.

Show caves have great potential for conveying knowledge and stimulating interest in the natural sciences and in the relationship between caves and human activity. Development of show caves should involve collaboration with speleologists in order to ensure minimum impact and maximum utilization of the cave’s educational potential.

### § 3. Cavers and cave scientists should help to maintain the quality of show caves.

The results of research and exploration in the cave and its vicinity should be popularized and made available to show cave management, perhaps on a consulting basis.

## D: Adventure, Geo- and Eco-Tourism

### § 1. Adventure travel and ecotourism must be traceless and sustainable.

Damage caused by adventure tourism and commercial recreation reduces the legacy bequeathed to future generations. To minimise impact, party size must be restricted, especially in low energy and small caves - less so in river caves - and groups must be controlled by guides who are aware of cave conservation values. **Conservation of the cave environment must take precedence over all economic considerations.**

### § 2. Competitions should not be held in caves.

Although caving is a sport and has elements of performance, and training is necessary for safety, competitions of any sort are inappropriate in caves, because heavy physical use damages their natural values. Damaging caves in the name of sport is totally unjustified.

## E: Scientific Sampling

The UIS is aware that excessive scientific sampling is occurring

within caves and that it is accelerating globally. Likewise, trading in specimens from caves, such as speleothems and fossils, is also occurring.

### § 1. Sampling should only be undertaken by well qualified experts (or their trained assistants) for their own research.

Sampling of rare specimens should be minimized and preferably done in quarries and show caves.

### § 2. Samples and specimens should be neither purchased nor sold.

Trading and private ownership of material from caves should be disapproved of. Such material should be kept in the cave or in a museum. Fossils or specimens in private custody cannot be scientifically studied and published, as this requires that the specimen is available as reference material.

### § 3. Local practice should be followed for permission.

Individual countries may have different rules for scientific sampling and, as with caving, local laws must be respected.

### § 4. Results of research should be passed to international data repositories.

In order to minimize duplicate and unnecessary sampling, research results should be freely available. Analysed samples and specimens must be deposited in a museum or other place where it is curated and made available for other researchers.

### § 5. Specific comments.

#### *Living organisms*

Cave environments are extreme and subterranean organisms may be correspondingly fragile, vulnerable, and often only present in very low numbers. Thus sampling must be well considered and should generally only be undertaken by well-qualified experts for their own research.

#### *Speleothems*

Is someone’s transient career more important than an ancient, still-growing in situ speleothem? The irreplaceability of growing and fossil speleothems must be appreciated. The removal of a growing speleothem from a cave means its “life” is ended, as is its value for future appreciation. Speleothems should not be bought (we must not create a market), and without knowledge of the sample’s stratigraphic context its scientific value is much reduced.

#### *Sediments*

Sediments in a cave form the habitat of many organisms and contain records of past environmental history. Like any other cave deposit, they should be treated with respect and not be trampled or sampled indiscriminately.

#### *Archaeological, fossil, and sub-fossil deposits*

These deposits are irreplaceable and of great value to science, and so should only be excavated by qualified professionals after having first obtained official permission. Excavations should remove only a fraction of the deposit of interest to ensure that a major portion is left untouched for future work.