

CAVE DIVING IS NOT FOR SPORTS DIVING

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Although the national average for sports diving accidents appears to be happily improving, we continue to be haunted by several serious local problems. One of the worst of these is freshwater cave diving - a type of highly specialized underwater exploration almost totally unique to the north central area of Florida.

Over 400 freshwater springs and sinkholes are known to exist in this inland section, of which 150 are being frequented regularly by scuba enthusiasts. The water flowing from these marvellous springs is a constant 72 degrees, absolutely pure, and crystal clear. Underwater visibility often exceeds 150 feet, offering a pleasurable, exhilarating dive experience. But these very same springs can prove to be death traps for they lead to a tremendously complex labyrinth of twisting tunnels, pitch black caves, and cathedral-size caverns - sometimes winding their way underground for thousands of feet.

In spite of their known perils and dozens of highly publicized horror stories of cave diving deaths, cave diving continues to grow in popularity. It is believed that more diving is now being done in springs than in all of Florida's coral reefs and the Florida Keys combined. During 1972, for example, an estimated 3000 scuba divers were visiting the Florida springs on any given weekend, totally 156,000 divers for the year. Dale Stone, owner of the Aqua Shack in Branford (heart of the Florida cave country) reports filling an average of 800 scuba tanks per day on normal weekends.

For most Florida divers, the springs and caves are convenient, dependable, and economical. They are situated within easy driving distance of home, remain perpetually clear and constant in temperature, and do not require a boat or costly entrance fee. Even though many cave diving regulars would prefer the beauty and excitement of a coral reef, they cannot afford the expense of a weekly plane ride to the Bahamas, not to mention the high cost of a resort hotel and diving facilities. And the coastal waters of Florida are becoming less and less appealing in the face of increased pollution, turbidity, and reef destruction. Echoing the sentiments of most Florida residents, one Gainesville diver simply explained, 'We dive the springs and caves because they're there. It's all we got.'

The rising popularity and increased publicity about the wonders of Florida cave diving has spread to neighbouring states. Much to the dismay of resident divers, they are finding themselves inundated by an avalanche of visiting divers from the north. The combined factors of a burgeoning sport disgorging tens-of-thousands of new certified divers ... the exploding popularity of diver/trave ... and improved roads to more isolated springs has created a situation which can only be described as 'The Great Dave Rush of the Seventies'.

The end result of this mad migration has proved disastrous. During the 11 years prior to 1972, scuba fatalities involving cave diving activities had been averaging 6.5 deaths per year. Both researchers and local instructors had been relieved to see this accident rate stabilize, in spite of the rising number of active divers. Then, in 1972, the accident rate zoomed to a record high of 20 cave diving deaths, three times the prior 11 year average!

Contained in this frightful statistic spiral are two rather spectacular triple-deaths and several cases of double-deaths. An even bigger shock is to learn that all 20 victims were certified sports divers or in the process of getting a C-card. And 80 per cent of the victims were from out-of-state.

According to Dave Desautels, chief investigator on cave diving accidents, the primary cause of 1972 accidents were: inadequate knowledge of cave diving technique and safety procedures; lack of proper cave diving equipment; and an obvious lack of mature diving judgement. Many of the victims had become lost in the maze of tunnels because they did not bring safety lines. Others had run out of air because they had no submersible tank gauge, or started into caves with a half empty tank on a second dive. But the saddest aspect of all is that practically all the victims had been warned not to go into the caves because of their obvious lack of experience and equipment. Incredibly, they disregarded the warnings of experienced shop owners, scuba instructors and local cave diving veterans. They also ignored warning signs posted at the springs by the National Association of Cave Divers (NACD), and in several instances, deliberately swam beyond underwater signs which marked the limit of safe cave diving.

It is no wonder then, that Florida resident divers, who are trained in the proper procedures of cave diving, are greatly alarmed by the influx of out-of-state visiting divers. The increased death rate has caused the closing of several favourite springs and has jeopardized many more. Talk has already circulated about limiting cave diving to Florida resident divers or possibly to certified cave divers only.

The crux of the problem seems to boil down to a matter of attitude and ignorance. Ill-prepared, untrained divers from up north appear totally unaware of the dangers of cave exploration. They cannot seem to accept the fact that cave diving is a highly specialized activity. Being a certified sports diver does not qualify a person for cave diving. Cave diving requires a special course of training, special equipment and extra safety precautions. Cave diving is far more perilous than reef diving, lake diving, or other forms of open water diving. The risk is double, for the cave diver is UNDERGROUND as well as underwater. In essence, Florida cave diving is not for sports divers unless they are willing to undergo training in this unique form of underwater exploration. Special training, special equipment, and special certification should be basic prerequisites for cave divers.

Oddly enough, it is often the northern scuba instructor who contributes to Florida's cave dilemma. Many of these instructors possess only a little more knowledge about Florida cave diving than their blissful students. They organize bus loads of freshly trained students for open water checkouts in the springs. Four of last year's victims drowned in caves during their final check out dives! In one case of a triple death, a New Jersey instructor led two other cave diving neophytes into a cavern where all three perished. None of the three had any previous cave diving training, nor were properly equipped for the dive. It is becoming increasingly obvious that many newly certified divers are being told they are fully qualified for any and all types of diving, even though the instructor doesn't have the faintest notion of what Florida cave diving is all about. No wonder these sports divers arrived in Florida's cave country with a chip on their shoulder. They've been told they know it all, so why the big fuss about these caves?

Still another interesting aspect which has surfaced from current cave diving accident studies is that 73 per cent of the fatalities involve teenage divers between the ages of 15 and 20. In one double death case at Peacock Slough, the divemaster expressly warned two 16 year old divers not to go into the cave. They were supposed to remain in the open area in the spring. Several hours later their bodies were recovered from a point some 400 feet back into the cave. This represents strong and damning evidence against the judgement capabilities of our younger divers. Lack of mature judgement, impulsiveness, thrill seeking, and childish disregard for safety regulations are all too fatal faults linked with teenage diving accidents. Are we teaching scuba diving to people too young to handle the sober responsibilities of caution, self-discipline, and programmings? Or is it possible that the Florida caves are more rfrequently dived by teenagers because of the low cost and easy access? Whatever the reason, it must be clearly understood that cave diving is definitely more perilous than other types of diving.

What is being done to combat the alarming rise in cave diving accidents? Quite a bit. Six years ago, a group of the top cave diving experts in Florida formed the National Association for Cave Diving. Spearheaded by Dave Desautels, Tom Mount and other veterans, the NACD has conducted cave diving accident research, recovered the victims involved in many of the accidents, conducted cave diving seminars, and developed a sound program for cave diving safety.

To date, the NACD has trained and certified 11 cave diving instructors. These men were already qualified sports diving instructors - NACD simply provided the specialized training in cave diving technique and safety. These 11 instructors, in turn, are now offering specialized training courses in cave diving that range from five weeks of intensified training (every Saturday and Sunday) to six

months on a slower, more spaced out series of classes. Florida cave diving courses include a minimum of 20 cave dives under every possible condition imaginable - silt dives, moderate cave penetration, deep caves, night dives, etc. A minimum of 12 hours classroom lecture is also required, but the major emphasis is placed on open water experience. Desautels explains, 'The only way to learn Florida cave diving safely is to dive those caves under the close supervision of an experienced, certified cave diving instructor. Cave diving cannot be learned in a classroom or swimming pool'.

NACD has explored and mapped most of the popular Florida Cave diving spots, and in the process evolved a completely new method and code for three-dimensional underwater mapping of intricate cave and tunnel labyrinths. The organization has also developed an official list of safety rules for cave diving, and a list of specialized equipment which they feel is mandatory for cave exploration. They have also posted warning signs around (and in) some of the more dangerous springs.

At present, the NACD is offering the following publications to divers all over the country:

Cave Diving Manual	\$3.25
Proceedings of the First Annual Seminar on Cave Diving	1.50
Mapping Underwater Caves	1.50
Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Seminar on Cave Diving	3.00
Safety Tips on Cave Diving	no charge

You can obtain any or all of the above publications by sending a check or money order to:

Jack Banbury
 Publications Chairman of NACD
 Institute of Marine Science
 10 Rickenbacker Causeway
 Miami, Fla. 33149.

And by the looks of the blissful 'certified' sports divers pouring in from the northern states, this cave diving material should be mandatory reading for every scuba instructor.

If you want to hear about the problems of cave diving first hand, you might be interested in attending the Sixth Annual Cave Diving Seminar, June 16 and 17, 1973, Lindenwood College, St Louis, Missouri. For further information on this important workshop, contact: NACD, 2900 NW 29th Ave, Gainesville, Florida 32601.

It's not impossible for a sports diver to become a safe cave diver.