

Guest column: Sad days as bats are lost to flooding

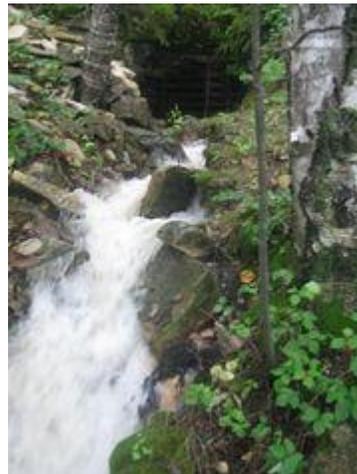
Brian Kleist, Wisconsin Speleological Society 1:54 p.m. CST November 3, 2014

We have seen these tragedies many times. A coastline that is battered by a tsunami, lives lost with many more injured. Or homes on a hillside, washed away with the mudslides after a period of prolonged or sudden rain. In both cases, these natural disasters show the power of water, and the post effects are quite disruptive. The leftover debris and sediment inside the dwellings that survive must be removed, if we are to ever inhabit them again.

Here in east central Wisconsin, just below our feet, are homes for creatures that prefer the darkness and the benefits that the cave environments can offer them. The caves here in this part of the state have seen their own natural disaster thousands of years ago. They were filled in almost completely with sediment deposition from multiple receding glacial visits to the state. If you were a bat or other cave inhabitant living here, you would have a very difficult time surviving in a cave almost completely filled to the ceiling with sediment. Flooding and predation will make for a very short lifespan in these low ceiling caves.

As most of you have heard by now, we have tragically lost a "significant" number of bats in Horseshoe Bay Cave due to flooding. The incident was reported in the Sept. 20 Door County Advocate.

This repeated killing of large populations of bats is completely avoidable. I can't even feel mad about the situation, just extremely disappointed and saddened, carrying a very heavy heart. At the June 20 Door County Board meeting, Wisconsin Speleological Society (WSS) Chairman Kasey Fiske specifically stated that bats will become trapped and die when flooding occurs. How true do his words of warning ring today? And, what about the springtails and other cave inhabitants that are being washed out of the cave? The existing management plan is set up almost exclusively for scientific study. How can you study something that is periodically being washed out of the cave with mortality rates being excessive?



Water spills from the entrance to Horseshoe Bay Cave in September after heavy rains pummeled Door County. Photo by county Parks Director Erik Aleson. (Photo: Submitted)

This is one of the many reasons why we have said repeatedly that restoration of the cave is necessary to have any kind of management plan for Horseshoe Bay Cave. The sediment must be dug out in order to protect all aspects of our precious underground natural resource. The composition of a 400-page manuscript with boasts of scientific proof is not necessary, when common sense should prevail. We have provided written documents via email, as well as hard copy documents on a better management plan. It is obvious with the current flooding deaths, and the historical flooding that has occurred repeatable in the past, that the current management plan drastically fails to protect the bat populations and other living inhabitants of the cave.

If you haven't read our stand on the cave development needs for the cave, I would encourage you to take a look at them on our website at www.wisconsinincaves.org. Click on the Horseshoe Bay Cave link and you will find everything you need to there. For those of you who are concerned about the direction of the Door County resident's park, please feel free to sign the online petition and post any comments on the petition that you might have.

It has been said that Horseshoe Bay Cave is unique to Wisconsin. However, this cave is no different than two neighboring county caves in which the WSS has been working for over 30 years. The WSS has been safely restoring the caves for the benefit of human access and to better protect the cave inhabitants and their environment. These neighboring county caves also flood from heavy rains, becoming underground water outlets. The only difference between Horseshoe Bay Cave and the two neighboring county caves is we (WSS) do protect those bats and other cave inhabitants by "providing" an avenue for the water to escape when high volumes of water occur.

By restoring the caves, we not only are increasing bat numbers, by creating habitat volume and space, but we also protect the bats from being drowned in high water flooding events. As has been said before, the DNR even started to perform bat counts which show a significant increase in bat populations as the caves are expanded. And again common sense will tell you if you provide more natural habitat, the population will increase. It is the basic premise in any good wildlife management plan. The current cave management plan dictates the complete opposite, by the same people that want to see the populations increase.

And, what about the scientific devices in the caves that were destroyed by the water? Are the taxpayers to assume that they should pay for the replacement or repair of the very expensive equipment every time the cave floods?

Something else of concern to us was stated at the prior Airport and Parks Committee Meeting regarding Horseshoe Bay Cave. Bill Schuster said there was no determined minimum age requirement to accessing Horseshoe Bay Cave. I have researched the requirements for taking tours into wild caves, which are undeveloped caves. Horseshoe Bay Cave is an undeveloped cave. First of all, Most caves that offer wild cave tours also offer regular tours for the majority of the people because they are accessible to people for standing height. Minimum age for wild cave tours is seldom 10, sometimes 12, and more often 16. I have heard that as many as 12 people will be visiting Horseshoe Bay Cave at one time. Other caves that offer wild cave tours keep the total numbers much smaller. I have seen them as low as 4 but never more than 10. Please keep in mind, the unexcavated current passage is small with an uneven floor filled with large breakdown rock people need to maneuver up, over and around in a crawling position. We have already seen the unsuccessfulness the current plan offers the bats. Please do not let this type of cave touring option be offered to the general public who will be visiting the cave. Can you imagine trying to extract an injured visitor who's 300 feet into the cave with 11 people behind them, with only 2½ to 3 feet of head room?

Also, I have heard mention of steps going up to the cave entrance. Steps are not necessary with the grade that is there, and steps would not make it ADA compliant. I have been in contact with Ken Keeley, landscape architect with the Department of Natural Resources, Bureau of Facilities and Lands. Ken has done work at High Cliff

State Park, Devils Lake State Park, Mirror Lake, and many more. Ken said he would be happy to offer his services when he is going through the area next time. I would also offer any help with the trail development with my outdoor recreation natural resource and landscape construction background. Visit Ken on LinkedIn and I encourage you to take advantage of his expertise.

As a reminder, please consider the generous offer the WSS made at the June 24 Door County Board meeting where I said the WSS would donate \$2,000 if the existing gate were extended 3 feet to the bedrock floor. With the stipulation that all the sediment in front of the gate as well as 75 feet behind the gate were removed. This is the areas of the cave the county owns where access for the public should be available, as soon as possible.

As was stated to the Door County Board June 24, 90 percent of the people are signing the hard copy of the petition. It is clear what Door County residents and visitors want for this county park. They want a park that is accessible to the majority, a park that is safe for the cave inhabitants, safe for the fragile cave formations, and safe for the visitors to the cave.

Bryan Kleist is vice chairman of the Wisconsin Speleological Society.