Fort Stanton Cave explorers win international award
Years of exploration, outstanding discoveries and mapping by FCSCP recognized internationally

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The Fort Stanton Cave Study Project team was winner of the 2013 prize in exploration at the week-long 16th International Congress of Speleology in Brno, Czech Republic.

Fort Stanton Cave is part of the Fort Stanton-Snowy River National Conservation Area, a 25,000-acre area managed by the federal Bureau of Land Management's Roswell Field Office. The NCA was established in 2009, to conserve and enhance the unique and nationally important historic, cultural, scientific, archaeological, paleontological, natural, and educational subterranean cave resources of the Fort Stanton-Snowy River cave system.

"This is indeed an honor and a tribute to all the hard work that all the participants have put into the Fort Stanton Cave Study Project in the last few years and since work started at the cave 50 years ago," said Steve Pearman, the project director of the FCSCP. "Everyone who has contributed in any way should be proud of this achievement, and merits a Thank You!" from myself and from all of the directors of the FCSCP.

FCSCP President John Corcoran added, "The spirit of this project is volunteerism in support of the Bureau of Land Management, The Conservation Lands Foundation, The National Forest Service, the wonders of an incredible natural resource, and long-lasting fellowship and dedication of covers and researchers.

Various members of the FCSCP have been exploring the cave system for more than 40 years, taking Fort Stanton Cave from a well-known popular recreational cave to a world-class, scientifically extraordinary 26.3 mile system. Fort Stanton Cave now ranks 20th in the United States and 75th in the world in terms of length. For comparison, Carlsbad Caverns offers about 30.9 miles of surveyed passage.

The FCSCP board member and U.S. national delegate, John Moses, accepted the award on behalf of the team. Other Fort Stanton project participants present were asked to stand and be recognized. A plaque with the team’s names, the FCSCP, and BLM Roswell Field Office was placed on the stage.

The selection committee commented that, "Excellent exploration is conducted with excellent science and follows top standards for cave protection. The Fort Stanton Cave Study Project stands as a shining example for all members of UIS to follow."

Sanchez noted, "The key element and purpose in the award is not only that of a spectacular cave setting which Fort Stanton Cave has, but the project management is the major factor and accounts for over 60 percent of the selection decision." It’s true that the FCSCP has been "the most well-organized group of truly dedicated volunteers, and look forward to many more monument discoveries of this unique natural resource. The Fort Stanton Cave and the Snowy River passage area provide a rare opportunity to discover the public and private passages and karst forms in the area, and that is why we have been their efforts."

Jim Goodwin, the BLM’s national caver and caving resource specialist, said the ongoing discoveries and survey at Fort Stanton Cave are "one of the great exploration stories in the Bureau of Land Management. With the continuing exploration of the Snowy River Passage, the cave is now the longest surveyed in the agency and future surveys will be adding additional length. Wonderful through the darks. The end is not in sight."

The international congress meets every four years in different parts of the world. Sanchez said, the 2009 conference was staged in Texas, and previous to that, France, Greece, Spain, and China were other nations used for the conference of internationally known scientists and cavers. Australia will be the next site in 2017.

Citing the most significant cave exploration projects that occurred between the 15th ICS in 2009 and this year’s 16th, the honorable mentions included the famous Hang Son Doong Cave project in Vietnam, the world’s largest cave passage, and the Ksho Basin, Mexico underwater cave, the fourth longest underwater cave in the world, Gester, Spain.

"It is to be imagined that Fort Stanton Cave will be in this league even 10 years ago is just an unbelievable example of what is possible in project and cave can mean for the dedicated volunteers who for months on end get the historic surveying and mapping as well as bringing back underground photographs and samples for further analysis," she said, reflecting the pride of the members of the nonprofit study and exploration group. "There are thousands of caves in the world but very few can live up to the level of recognition Fort Stanton Cave.

Located on the Fort Stanton-Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area and affiliated with the National Conservation Lands Foundation, an organization that supports 28 million acres of incredibly diverse public lands, Fort Stanton Cave presents unique blends of decorated passages, unexploited leads, and scientific discoveries that beg the mind, Sanchez said.

Besides Pearman of Las Cruces, Corcoran of Albuquerque and Sanchez from the historic settlement of Lincoln, FCSCP board members include Vice President and Assistant Project Director Wayne Walker of Las Cruces and Treasurer and webmaster Pete Lindsey of Roswell; Secretary Lee Skinner, Albuquerque; and Natural Resources Manager John Moses of El Paso. They heard the news late last Saturday afternoon, Sanchez said.

Currently, 26 miles of passages have been mapped in the cave, including formations such as Snowy River passage, the longest continuous calcite formation discovered at 11 miles and growing, Sanchez said.

"Other stalactites, stalagmites, helicites, unique and delicate aragonite crystal formations, red velvet formations of yellow flowstone covering many feet over passage walls and leads and some very recent finds fill the recently discovered previously unknown regions of this spectacular underground resource," she added.

"For more than four decades the dedicated group of volunteers and cavers rendezvous in Lincoln County at their field headquarters near Fort Stanton for three annual field expeditions," she said.

"About 200 volunteers from all parts of the United States have helped with documenting cave history, geology, biology and hydrology. The Strong and Light team members are among the most experienced and capable in the world."

For more information contact the FCSCP at: http://www.fcscp.org