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April 13, 2009

Dear SCCi member,

I am writing to share some important information with you about the SCCi's response to white-nose syndrome (WNS), and to ask for your help. WNS poses a serious threat to hibernating bats in caves throughout the southeastern U.S., including several that the SCCi owns or manages. The SCCi Board of Directors takes the WNS threat very seriously and continues to closely monitor the situation, work with our partners, and communicate with our members, and take steps that are consistent with our goals of cave conservation and protection.

The SCCi is acting to protect bats. The SCCi Board has recently taken precautionary action to help protect bats from WNS by temporarily closing several SCCi caves. We are working closely with specialists at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other partner organizations to make sure we are aware of all current WNS information. We will reopen our caves as soon as the Board determines that it is safe to do so.

As of April 10, 2009 the following caves have been closed:

- Anderson Cave and Fern Cave (Fern Sink Entrance and Surprise Pit) in Alabama;
- Fricks Cave in Georgia;
- Frenchman Knob Cave and Logsdon Cave in Kentucky; and
- Gourneck Cave, Hardins Cave, Holly Creek Cave, Rattling Cave, Sinking Cove Cave Preserve caves, Snail Shell Cave, South Pittsburg Pit, Swirl Canyon Cave and Wolf River Cave, in Tennessee.

The SCCi has a unique history and expertise at successfully balancing conservation and access interests. The board believes that our highest responsibility is to exercise sound stewardship of our caves and karst lands. This is our duty to the members and donors. While we recognize and sincerely regret that these closures may inconvenience those who would like visit these caves, we are very concerned by the possibility that visitors could inadvertently introduce WNS to SCCi caves and the bats that rely on them for critical habitat.

We need your help. As cavers, we all have a responsibility to help protect the fragile ecosystems in the caves that we enjoy visiting. The SCCi needs your help in three ways:

- **Please continue to support the SCCi financially.** In the current economic climate, SCCi needs the ongoing support of all of its members in order to continue its mission of acquiring, managing, and protecting caves. With your support, the SCCi protects and manages 63 caves, with more to come.
- **Please abide by all cave closures, and consider following the guidelines outlined in the USFWS Cave Advisory for other caves.** Be sure to check the USFWS and SCCi web sites regularly for updates.
- **Please share information about WNS.** If you have friends and colleagues who may visit caves but are not members of SCCi or other organized caving groups, please let them know about WNS and the need to take appropriate measures to avoid contributing to its spread.

We need your input. The SCCi board will be reviewing and discussing these actions at our upcoming quarterly board meeting and annual members' meeting, both of which will be held on May 16, 2009. I invite you to attend these meetings and share your comments and concerns. The meeting times and locations may be found at our web site, www.scci.org, as well as in a postcard being mailed to members this week.

Why we're concerned. While many of you have no doubt been following the WNS issue closely over the past year or more, I would like to share some background information that should help to explain why this situation is so serious to SCCi caves and the bats that depend on them for their survival.

- **WNS is lethal to hibernating bats.** According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, White-nose syndrome has killed an estimated 400,000 hibernating bats since it was first detected in New York state in late 2006. In affected caves and mines, WNS has decimated bat populations, with reported mortality rates in the range of 80 – 100%.
- **The cause of WNS is poorly understood.** Despite intensive research efforts over the past two years, scientists still don't know for sure what causes WNS. The most likely cause appears to be a white fungus found on the surface of bat tissue (hence the name). In January 2009, the U.S. Geological Survey reported that they had identified this fungus as a previously unreported species related to a group of fungi common in soils that are members of the genus *Geomyces*. Unfortunately, fungi are notoriously hard to kill, especially in their spore form, which can easily become airborne.
- **WNS is rapidly approaching the southeastern U.S.** After having steadily but slowly spread throughout New York and New England over the previous two winters, this winter WNS spread rapidly toward the south and west. In the past two months, WNS has been confirmed for the first time in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and most recently in several caves in West Virginia and Virginia. As of March 18, 2009, the southernmost cave known to be affected by WNS, Clover Hollow Cave in Giles County, Virginia, is only 120 miles north of the Tennessee border.
- **Cavers may be unintentionally contributing to the spread of WNS.** The bulk of available evidence points to bat-to-bat transmission as the primary method by which WNS is spreading. Earlier this year, however, WNS appeared in caves hundreds of miles beyond its previous southern extent, and was detected only in popular recreational caves, while surrounding, less visited caves remained unaffected. This new pattern suggests the possibility that cavers may be contributing unintentionally to the spread of WNS.
- **The stakes are high.** Caves in the southeastern U.S. represent critical habitat for at least two endangered bat species – the gray bat and the Indiana bat. Significant populations of these two endangered bat species are found in several SCCi caves, including over 1.5 million in Fern Cave alone. Given the high mortality rates associated with this condition, WNS has the potential to not only dramatically reduce bat populations, but also could lead to the extinction of these and other bat species.
- **The WNS situation is evolving rapidly.** On March 26, 2009, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is responsible for enforcing the terms of the Endangered Species Act, issued a Cave Advisory, in which they requested that cavers voluntarily suspend all caving activities in nine states, including the southeastern states of Virginia and West Virginia, known to be affected by WNS as well as in eight adjacent states, including the southeastern states of Kentucky and Tennessee. When visiting caves outside of these states, the Advisory requests that cavers use only gear or clothing that has not been used in a cave in any affected or adjacent state within the past twelve months.

To stay updated on the latest developments regarding SCCi caves, please check our web site at www.scci.org regularly. For more information on White Nose Syndrome, please visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service WNS page at www.fws.gov/northeast/white_nose.html, or the National Speleological Society's WNS page at www.caves.org/WNS/WNS_Info.htm.

Thank you again for your continued support of the mission of the SCCi.

Sincerely,



Brian S. Krebs
Chair, CEO, Southeastern Cave Conservancy Inc.