



Case Study of American Cave Conservation Association

Keys to Success



**Project
Description**



**Economic
Value**



**Challenges
& Advice**



Benefits



**Stewardship
Meaning**



The community of Horse Cave, Ky., was established around what is now known as Hidden River Cave because of the ready supply of clean water only 150 feet underground. Public tours of the cave began in 1916, and featured a dynamic underground river inhabited by numerous eyeless crayfish and southern blind fish and some of the largest domed rooms in Kentucky's caves, such as Sunset Dome, which has a floor space of five acres.

By 1943, Hidden River Cave was closed. Sinkholes upstream from the cave were being used as septic systems and dumping sites for every type of household and industrial waste.

By the mid-1970s, the cave had become an open sewer running underneath Horse Cave. Within the cave, a five-foot wall of rotting sewage clogged the passageway. The heavy metals, household/industrial contaminants and creamery wastes that reached the system depleted the underground

river's oxygen level, rendering it a dead zone. Gray strings of sewage bacteria and bloodworms covered the rocks in the once-clean underground river. The overpowering stench from the cave was evident a half-mile in all directions from the cave entrance.

In 1986, the American Cave Conservation Association (ACCA) relocated to Horse Cave to partner with the community to restore Hidden River Cave and establish the American Cave and Karst Museum. The ACCA is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the protection of caves, karstlands and groundwater.

In 2006, ACCA joined KY EXCEL, Kentucky's environmental leadership program, and one of its projects was to host university students willing to dedicate their weeklong spring/summer breaks to work on conservation projects in south-central Kentucky. In partnership with the county solid waste coordinators, ACCA identifies cleanup

“The support of KY EXCEL motivates and challenges us to be good stewards of Kentucky's natural resources.”

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sites and facilitates the removal of unsightly and dangerous debris and recyclables that threaten the karst habitat and regional drinking water.

\$ “Each Alternative Spring Break (ASB) team brings an average of 12 members to work for a week,” says Peggy A. Nims, ACCA Education Director and Volunteer Coordinator. “Usually, they work six hours a day for five days. At the federal volunteer hourly rate of \$22.50, this equates to over \$8,000 in in-kind donations. Intangible benefits include a cleaner environment, which is more attractive for possible investment and healthier for residents.”

City and county agencies supply equipment and dumpsters, while ACCA provides staff to facilitate the projects, supervise the teams



University of Michigan ASB students gathered trash in Hart County

and share cave ecology expertise.

? Though the area’s weather can often limit outside work, a big challenge is identifying viable projects to challenge the students and offer them a rewarding, meaningful experience.

Nims says that coordinating team schedules with community agencies and professionals is vital to the success of the project. Good communication and flexibility are key to meeting everyone’s needs.

+ “Together, ASB teams removed 6,500 pounds of household trash, discarded carpets, furniture, glass, cans, old tires and 3,500 pounds of recyclables from illegal roadside dumps and sinkholes,” says Nims. “Also, they spent many hours implementing erosion control measures and several other activities to benefit the community.”

Other projects include restoration of habitat, protection of karst ecosystems and water resources in the Upper Green River Watershed and promotion of cave conservation issues. Most of the students have never been to Kentucky or inside a cave and are



Boston University ASB students in Hart County with debris they collected

exposed to different cultural and social issues. They also learn about cave systems, develop leadership skills and teambuilding, identify community partners who share mutual goals and inspire others to become good stewards.

🌿 “The focus of ACCA projects is always stewardship of the land on which we live and the caves beneath our feet,” says Nims. “KY EXCEL motivates and challenges us to be good stewards of Kentucky’s natural resources and care about the environment.”

HELPFUL HINT: Instilling in others an appreciation of the environment creates a desire to protect the Earth’s natural resources.