

# WNS depresses cavers, leaves others puzzled

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Perhaps no group of people has been more affected by the sudden appearance of white nose syndrome than people who like to visit, explore and admire caves: After all, bats are the symbol of their national organization.

“It’s depressing; it’s affecting the morale of cavers,” said Peter Quick, of Jaffrey, who is a longtime spelunker, to give the field its technical term.

New Hampshire’s spelunking community is pretty small because of our geology. Caves are caused by water eating away soft rock, and our granite isn’t a very soft rock.

New Hampshire only has talus caves, which are openings that exist among piled-up boulders on mountain slopes. These are pretty small and uninteresting by caving standards, so being a New Hampshire spelunker is like being a Rhode Island mountain climber – you have to leave the state to do much in your hobby.

The arrival of WNS has added a new complication: The fungus can apparently be spread from cave to cave on shoes, equipment, even people’s hair – many people

believe it was brought to the U.S. accidentally by cavers returning from Europe, where it has long existed. Spelunkers are being asked to go through an extensive decontamination process, washing items in bleach and Woolite, which appears to remove the fungus.

Particularly down in West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee, the best caving areas in the eastern U.S. and where WNS is only just beginning to arrive, spelunkers are being hit hard.

“Lots of regional caving events have been canceled,” said Peter Youngbaer, of the Vermont Cavers Association.

Decontamination stations are now the norm for many groups, and many caves that were once open to exploration are now gated and forbidden.

So little is known about WNS, however, that some biologists would prefer that nobody go into caves at all unless absolutely necessary.

A group called the Center for Biological Diversity, for example, has petitioned the federal government to completely close all bat-inhabited mines and caves on federal land.

The situation is complicated

because WNS is also spread by the bats themselves. In fact, their habits are perfect for spreading WNS: Huge numbers of bats of different species gather together in caves each winter, passing disease back and forth, and then fly in all directions when warm weather hits, carrying disease with them.

It’s not clear how much of the spread of WNS in the U.S. is caused by people, if any. As a result, spelunkers aren’t always enthusiastic about attempts to limit caving, thinking that it’s too little, too late.

“The fungus is pretty much endemic – you can’t spread it here, because it’s everywhere,” said Quick. “There’s a sense of bad inevitability about this thing.”

And, he notes, clamping down on organized spelunking won’t affect the many people who wander into mines and talus caves on a whim and who are unlikely to decontaminate themselves afterwards.

“I get e-mails from people occasionally saying I thought I’d go check on the bats – and I say ‘No, don’t go!’ ” said New Hampshire wildlife biologist Emily Brunkhurst. “We’re asking people just to stay out of caves, all mines, until we know what’s going on.”