

Bologna, 1st october 2024

To whom it may concern

The Italian Speleological Society is writing to express his strong support for the resolution to protect the gypsum karst landscape in the southern Harz region, as outlined by the Verband der deutschen Höhlen- und Karstforscher e.V. (German Speleological Federation).

The gypsum karst landscape of the southern Harz is a unique and invaluable natural area, extending over approximately 100 km and encompassing parts of Lower Saxony, Thuringia, and Saxony-Anhalt. In this region there are 16 "Natura 2000" areas, the only sulfate karst biosphere reserve in the world, the Südharz Karst Landscape Biosphere Reserve.

We are deeply concerned about the proposed exploratory drilling by the gypsum company Knauf in the Natura 2000 area 'Buntsandstein- und Gipskarstlandschaft near Questenberg. The approval of such activities threatens to irreversibly damage this exceptional landscape, which is characterized by its unique geological formations, rich biodiversity, and significant ecological value.

The southern Harz gypsum karst is not only a geological marvel but also a critical habitat for numerous species, including several bat species such as the *Barbastella barbastellus*, *Myotis brandtii*, *Myotis mystacinus*, and *Myotis myotis*, as well as amphibians like the fire salamander (*Salamandra salamandra*). The area also supports rare plant species such as the creeping gypsophila (*Gypsophila repens*) and the slender cotton grass (*Eriophorum gracile*), which is threatened with extinction across Europe.

The potential destruction of this landscape would result in the loss of its unique **bio- and geotopes**, including caves, springs, and underground flow paths, which are impossible to restore once destroyed. This would not only be a loss for Germany, but for the global community, as the southern Harz gypsum karst is an outstanding candidate for World Heritage Site designation.

We urge the state of Saxony-Anhalt to recognize its responsibility to protect this internationally significant landscape. We call on the state to reject any new mining projects

in the gypsum karst of the southern Harz and to promote sustainable and climate-friendly alternatives to gypsum mining. Protecting this area is not only crucial for preserving its natural heritage but also for supporting the region's potential as a tourist destination.

The Italian Speleological Society, the official representative body for many cavers and caving groups in Italy, stands in solidarity with the German Speleological Federation and other environmental organizations in opposing the planned exploratory drilling and any future mining activities in this precious landscape.

Sincerely,

Sergio Orsini



President

Italian Speleological Society