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Open Letter

Natura 2000 is not enough to protect caves, karst and geoheritage

Dear Commissioner Sinkevičius,

Caves and karst areas are important and vulnerable ecosystems and unique geological sites. Both need protection. Natura 2000 focusses on fauna, flora and habitats including “caves not open to the public”. This is a great achievement for cave protection in Europe which should not be underestimated.

Caves harbour a multitude of species, some even endemic, which require the generally constant environmental conditions caves provide. Even small impacts can have detrimental and irreversible effects on the biodiversity of subterranean habitat.

In karst areas, caves offer natural access to groundwater systems, which is of great importance for the water supply of our civilization. Karst aquifers are the most vulnerable to contamination and transport pollutants like pesticides or microplastics large distances through complex flowpaths with effectively no filtration. Thresholds for groundwater protection need to be much higher than in other areas. The EU Groundwater Directive does not take this important issue into account.

The protection of caves as geological heritage and their contents include speleothems, sediments, fossils, etc., but is not regulated by any EU directive. It is not possible to restore caves or compensate them. They preserve important scientific data, for example on climate change from the past to present or on the evolution of mankind. For geological objects, a treaty similar to CITES is required to prohibit trade.

Caves are the link between biodiversity and geodiversity. Both are equally important. Geological protection has to be raised to the same level as for habitats and species. At the World Conservation Congress 2020, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) acknowledged this with its resolution 074.

Using the example of the gypsum karst in the German Harz, these different aspects can be briefly explained. The green gypsum karst landscape in the southern Harz is unique in the world due to its forestation. Important parts of the area in three federal states are protected by Natura 2000.

Nevertheless, there are currently major problems and threats:

There are no buffer zones to protected areas. Some gypsum quarries are immediately adjacent to Natura 2000 areas, which thus dry out and are damaged. In Lower Saxony, the state government plans to allow gypsum quarrying outside priority areas for regional planning in the future. In Saxony-Anhalt, there are no quarries so far as it is a biosphere reserve. Nevertheless, the gypsum industry wants to carry out exploratory drilling here, even within Natura 2000 areas.

Although gypsum is a perfect material for recycling, it is still cheaper to establish quarries and destroy landscape which leads to irreversible biodiversity loss and groundwater changes. The same is happening in gypsum areas everywhere.



Every cave is unique with its unique beauty, unique environment, unique scientific contents.

Once destroyed, no cave can be rebuilt.

We call on you, dear Commissioner, to take action to include geodiversity - include the “hole” world in EU protection policy.

We would be happy to work with you and your commission to provide comprehensive protection that is so desperately needed.

Nesselwang, 18th of May 2022

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Links to resolutions and important scientific research are available at

<https://www.vdhk.de/en/cavelife-app>

