

THE TROUBLE WITH EXPEDITIONSBob Thrun
PSC 201

I seem to be the outstanding critic of the Simmons-Mingo Expedition. When I tried to make some criticism at a meeting, I was told to shut up. This is still a free country and dissenters have a right and, some say, a duty to dissent. If the project is vulnerable to criticism, it ought to be criticized. If not, what I say should make no difference.

I had thought that expeditions were going out of style. For most of American cavers, the C-3 expedition demonstrated the basic inefficiency of expeditions. After the C-3 expedition, most of the work in the Flint Ridge system was done by small "push" trips. In Europe, cave expeditions are losing popularity in favor of smaller, faster moving groups. Even Edmund Hillary has recently decried overlarge Mt. Everest expeditions.

The inherent problem with expeditions is their inefficiency. Project SIMMER proposes to do with 90 people what can best be done by a party of four. If I were given the task of setting up a project that employed a maximum of cavers and had a maximum of featherbedding, I would not conceive of a project as grandiose as Project SIMMER. There are many features that seem either unnecessary or excessive, such as the phone lines, relay camps, supply teams, and the exploration (as opposed to mapping) teams. I will defer the discussion of specific details to one of the planning meetings, mainly because the details have been related to me second-hand and may be distorted. The sheer number of people involved, however, make it impossible for the expedition to be anything but extremely inefficient.

Some perspective can be gained by comparison with the C-3 expedition, which, as far as I know, was the largest expedition in the history of American caving. The C-3 expedition had 64 people in a cave that had (at the time) 30 miles of mapped passage and, as we now know, the potential for several times that amount. The PSC proposes to employ over 90 people on an expedition into a cave that has 3-1/2 miles of mapped passage. We know that the water in Simmons-Mingo flows into My Cave. Simmons-Mingo runs in almost a straight line with no branching passages. The distance between the two caves is 1000 to 1500 feet, with the uncertainty being due to poor topographic maps.

The only American caving expeditions that were reasonably efficient were the Windy City Grotto expeditions in Wind Cave. There they had an ideal situation. The camp was in a multi-level maze, with plenty of unmapped passage a short distance from camp. A good part of their success was the simplicity of organization. Even there, it was not obvious that the expedition offered any advantage other than getting everything done within a short time period.

It was specifically claimed that the push trips have been unsuccessful. This depends on the definition of success. The push trips have extended the cave over 9000 feet (straight line distance) from the entrance and have not reached the end of the cave. If the expedition goes 100 or 1000 feet further and reaches the end, will it be successful while the pushes were not? The

last three trips deep into the cave were a 24-hour push and two camp-in trips. The 24-hour push mapped 1665 feet and the camp-ins mapped 357 and 981 feet. Judge for yourself how unsuccessful push trips can be. It is true that there have been some push trips that quit early, but the trouble seems to be more symptomatic of PSC projects than push trips.

I would leave people to their "picnic and clambake" and laugh at their folly except for one thing. The expedition is unnecessarily rough on the cave. I was on the initial trips through much of the cave. Even though much of the passage was undecorated rock and mud, it was unmarked rock and mud. I like the idea of there being some seldom visited caves. It bothers me not at all that the cave still goes on. Even if the expedition does not damage the formations and hauls out all its trash including shit (as did the Wind Cave expeditions) and phone wire, the cave will still look heavily traveled. The publicity resulting from the expedition will give the cave a reputation as a supremely challenging cave that will attract glory-seekers for years to come.

I consider the expedition to be a poor way to convert the club's great partying spirit to a project. The project seemed to jump from the vague talking stage to detailed plans rather suddenly. Or maybe nobody bothered to inform me of anything until the last newsletter. I had hoped that the Region representatives would have enough sense to turn the project down. Would any of them want such an expedition descending upon their pet project cave? A lot of work has already been put into the expedition, but it is not too late. Give it up as a bad idea and save a lot more work!

Postscript

I showed the Expedition publicity release and application to several cavers at the N.S.S. Convention without telling them my feelings about it. The most typical comment was: What do you need an expedition for?

It may be true that the necessary personnel for a "push" trip is not available within the PSC. However, some alternatives to an expedition seem not to have been considered. We could recruit only the necessary two or three cavers from outside the group rather than 50 or 100. A simple assault would be a good middle course between "push" and "expedition". If the amount of work that has already gone into the expedition preparation had gone instead into mapping the cave, the survey would be finished.

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