



Approved leader guidelines for permit caves

Revised February 2024

The Approved Leader scheme is a process for providing access to NZSS members to caves administered by the Department of Conservation which have restricted access.

A list of the restricted access caves is appended to these guidelines.

History

The approved leader scheme began in Flower Cave at Puketiti, when NZSS collaborated with the Department of Conservation to establish a list of approved leaders to manage small groups in a highly vulnerable cave. The scheme used decreased degradation of the cave, and is the most effective way of managing the cave while still allowing recreational access.

A similar system, referred to as “grandparenting”, has been used in the South Island at Honeycomb Hill Cave. During the review and update of the West Coast Cave and Karst Operational Plan in 2018 the approved leader scheme was applied to four other West Coast caves for which permits are required.

Following this DoC instituted a policy that NZSS must provide a list of approved leaders for each cave in the scheme. The pool of leaders for each cave requiring a permit to visit is kept small (up to 12 leaders per cave).

Requirements

Approved trip leaders are experienced NZSS members who are familiar with the cave(s) they are approved to lead trips to, have a strong conservation ethic, and are conversant with the NZSS Minimum Impact Code. They must have previous leadership experience in other caves.

An approved leader is a caver who has been endorsed by the New Zealand Speleological Society to lead NZSS members in a particular permitted cave.

The six NZSS constituent groups nominate their own lists of approved leaders, who are specifically approved for each permitted cave. This is not a general list of trip leaders.

All approved leaders are expected to:

- Have extensive experience leading caving trips to other caves.
- Be familiar with the general area around the cave, and to have previously visited the cave at least twice.
- Be conservation minded and be conversant with the NZSS Minimum Impact Code.
- Adhere to the NZSS Cave Conservation Guidelines and any specific requirements when visiting the cave.
- Be of good standing with their clubs.
- Maintain a moderate level of caving activity.
- Be current (not previous) NZSS members.

Approval process

The list of approved leaders is updated every two years. The process is managed by the NZSS Conservation and Research Coordinator.

1: The NZSS Conservation and Research Coordinator sends an email to each club Secretary and President in July.

2: Clubs review their list of approved leaders who meet the criteria and can nominate from that list, those cavers expecting to take a group to a permitted cave over the time period, then forward their names within 6 weeks of receiving the notification email to the NZSS. Clubs should in the first instance ensure that no names are added to the requested list unless those cavers are intending a trip, as numbers are generally limited to 12 approved leaders per cave.

3: The NZSS council will review and give final approval for the list at the October Council meeting.

4: The revised list will be forwarded to the relevant DoC offices in November for the following two years.

As there are limited numbers of trip leaders for each cave, consider combining with another club that regularly takes trips to a specific cave.

Applying for a permit

Once approved as a trip leader, apply directly to the local DoC office managing the cave for a permit.

You will need to supply your full name, NZSS membership number, party members' names and NZSS numbers, and date(s) in the cave. Non NZSS members are NOT ALLOWED on permitted trips operated by an approved leader. (Metro Cave is an exception because this does not require an approved leader).

Before applying for a permit, familiarise yourself with the specific requirements for the cave you are visiting.

DoC may request information from the NZSS membership coordinator and the NZSS conservation coordinator during the permitting process to confirm NZSS membership.

Check the permit guidelines for accessing the cave, including gaining approval to cross private land (if necessary) BEFORE applying for a DoC permit.

Provide DoC and NZSS with any observations on damage to the cave. Support conservation efforts in the cave where possible.

Restricted access caves

Permits are required from DoC at the relevant office for the following caves:

Hollow Hill	Waitomo	DoC Te Kuiti office
Puketiti Flower Cave	Puketiti	DoC Te Kuiti office
Grand Canyon Cave	Puketiti	DoC Te Kuiti office
Council Cave	Pōhara	DoC Tākaka office
Honeycomb Hill Cave	Karamea	DoC Karamea office
Megamania/Beyond Words	Heaphy Valley	DoC Karamea office
Hollywood Cave	Charleston	DoC Westport office
Bamboo Cave	Charleston	DoC Westport office
The Metro (Te Ananui)	Charleston	DoC Westport office
Babylon Cave (beyond Ishtar Gate)	Fox River	DoC Westport office
Aurora Cave	Te Anau	DoC Te Anau office.

Different provisions including party size and the number of NZSS members apply to each cave.