



*Mega Mania is a complex of passages, which extends over 15 kilometres. It is now the fourth-largest cave system in New Zealand, surpassed only by the massive cave systems in Mount Owen and Mount Arthur in Kahurangi National Park. Most other New Zealand cave systems similar to Mega Mania have suffered irreversible damage as a result of poor management and disrespectful use by cavers. The discovery of Mega Mania has perhaps given us one last opportunity to properly preserve a cave system in its original state.*

to start photographing sensitive areas in the cave and record exactly how they are now. The plan is to return in the future, perhaps in about 10 years and redo the photographs. Then, once the two results are compared, DoC will get an accurate picture of what impact people are having on the cave system. Our other task was to mark out 'sacrificial' paths through delicate areas. To mark the routes we used red flagging tape and pegged it down with rocks. We also removed many of the fixed ropes in the cave, which have been in Mega Mania since its discovery.

The trip really made me realize the importance of this cave. When we originally explored and mapped out the labyrinth we took little time to really look around. Mega Mania is slowly becoming recognized as a nationally important cave system. Unfortunately the cave is also becoming more popular and its isolated location,

which has formerly discouraged people from visiting, has become public knowledge. Mega Mania will perhaps be the last great cave system discovered in New Zealand and is still very close to its original state. This has given us a good opportunity to preserve a cave system properly.

Cavers have now begun working toward gaining formal protection for Mega Mania. DoC is also taking a more active role in managing other valuable West Coast caves. For instance, photo monitoring has been carried out in most major cave systems in the Paparoa National Park, south of Westport.

Over the last few years the popularity of caving on the West Coast has soared. Many different recreational groups are using our underground resources. There has never been a better time for DoC to become more involved in the management of West Coast cave systems and, together with local

## Fragile Caves

**M**ega Mania is a particularly fragile cave system. People should not attempt to visit the system without a lot of caving experience, according to Neil Silverwood who contributes this article. There are many other cave systems in New Zealand, which are less prone to damage, he says.

Mega Mania is also a particularly 'technical' cave and requires much rope work.

'If you are interested in learning to cave or want information on caving its worth joining a club. There are good caving clubs throughout New Zealand,' he says.

Neil Silverwood began caving 12-13 years ago on the West Coast of the South Island. During the last seven years he has been involved in the exploration of several new cave systems.

'Exploring Mega Mania was perhaps the highlight of my caving career,' he says. 'The exploration was incredibly rewarding.'

'As an exploration caver I have had a rare opportunity to see caves in their pristine original states. Often I have watched these same cave systems slowly deteriorate as their locations become known and they become popular places to visit. I have always had a strong interest in cave conservation and learnt early on how best to attempt to properly preserve new cave passages.'

cavers, we should be able preserve our precious underground resources.

NEIL SILVERWOOD is conservation coordinator for the New Zealand Speleological Society.

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