

No cave country for old men
Susan Cocking Outdoor Blog
Miami Herald, December 17, 2007

As I was driving up to North Florida last Friday to cover a potential world record cave dive, I discussed it with a friend on cell phone. He seemed to think that Jarrod Jablonski and Casey McKinlay were out of their minds to dive 300 feet deep in a cave for 20 hours in order to prove there was a direct physical connection between a remote sink hole and a pristine, first-magnitude spring seven miles downstream.

"That's crazy," my friend said. "I would NEVER do anything like that. If I were going to do something just for the thrill, I'd go sky-diving."

I just shook my head as I pressed down on the gas pedal. He didn't get it, nor apparently, do many other people.

What Jarrod and Casey accomplished Sunday was way beyond thrilling. It actually was akin to walking on the moon.

By way of explanation, the two veteran Gainesville cave divers set a world record for the longest underwater traverse between two cave openings. The dive had been ten years in the making, with several preliminary explorations last summer setting the stage for the final push. It took a small platoon of volunteers, none paid, some coming from as far away as Sweden, the UK and Singapore to assist with set-up dives and shore logistics. And each one had to shell out thousands for airline tickets, lodging, dive equipment, and gas fills.

Every detail had been worked out well in advance, from how many scooters and spare tanks would be staged in the underwater cave, to each diver's individual bottom time and decompression, to who would deliver snacks to the explorers during their long decompression in a semi-dry underwater habitat. Observing all this was a lot like watching an elite commando unit preparing to assault an enemy beachhead. The mission was every bit as life threatening as battle, but the participants remained calm -- even nonchalant -- joking among themselves right up to the start of the dive.

There was about a five-hour time frame when Casey and Jarrod were to pass through the "point of no return" in the middle of traverse where no one would be able to save them if something went wrong. Those hours must have been very tense for the shore crew and support divers, although they were careful not to show it.

When Casey and Jarrod finally made it to their first decompression stop near the end of the historic traverse Saturday night, I could just feel the relief washing over the gathering.

The message, "They're back!" was relayed by cell phone from one shore crew to the other and by Trio to a host of fellow cave divers anxiously awaiting news from around the globe.

As I stood clad in a slicker in the rain watching support divers heading down to meet the explorers, someone asked me why there weren't more news media on hand to cover what is actually the equivalent of a space walk below the surface of the earth.

I told him, "Over the years, you apparently have made it look too easy. You are the victims of your own success. People don't realize how dangerous this really is. If they did, maybe more news media would show up."

It's a shame that it takes death or destruction to draw publicity for an exploration of one of Earth's last real frontiers. Expanding knowledge and awareness of a hidden, underground environment where Florida's lifeblood -- fresh water -- flows makes a lot more sense to me than jumping out of an airplane just for a thrill.