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Record is set for cave diving  
BY SUSAN COCKING

They set a world cave-diving record Sunday and nobody died, nor even got hurt.

Gainesville underwater explorers Casey McKinlay and Jarrod Jablonski dived 300 feet beneath the earth's surface Saturday afternoon at a remote woodland hole in the ground called Turner Sink, south of Tallahassee. Using underwater scooters, rebreathers and multiple scuba tanks, they traveled seven miles south to emerge Sunday morning at Wakulla Springs.

It is believed to be the world's longest underwater traverse between two cave entrances.

The divers spent 13 hours underwater -- seven traveling and mapping passages and 13 hours decompressing. The event required more than 30 volunteer divers and shore crew who are members of the nonprofit, North Florida-based Woodville Karst Plain Project (WKPP) -- some from as far away as Sweden and Singapore.

A crowd of about 50 -- including park staff, media, volunteers and visitors -- greeted McKinlay and Jablonski when they surfaced at Wakulla Springs State Park at about 9:30 a.m. Sunday.

"You guys have multiplied since we left Turner," Jablonski said.

McKinlay teased park manager Sandy Cook that they had dodged the park's entry fee.

"Hey Sandy!" he called. ``Do we have to pay our four dollars?"

Then the gathering adjourned to a park pavilion for pizza and soft drinks.

The record dive -- more than a decade in the works -- was fraught with hazards -- mostly downplayed by McKinlay, 39, Jablonski, 38, and their helpers.

To set up the exploration, a team of three divers Saturday morning stationed extra scooters and scuba tanks 6,500 feet from the spring entrance at Wakulla. This dive required about eight hours of decompression, during which a note was relayed to the surface notifying McKinlay and Jablonski they were good to go.

Then the two explorers, wearing dry suits against the spring's 70-degree chill and loaded down with about 700 pounds of redundant life-support equipment, entered Turner Sink about 1:20 p.m.

#### EXPECT UNEXPECTED

"We try to plan for common failures," McKinlay said before the dive. ``We'll eventually run into something that surprises us and we'll have to improvise."

Added Jablonski: ``You can't get help."

Through previous exploratory dives last summer, they knew they would reach what they called a "point of no return" -- a long, narrow tunnel beginning about 13,000 feet from the Turner entrance where no one would be able to reach them if they got in trouble.

Noted McKinlay: ``There have been more people on the surface of the moon than have been in that part of the cave."

One of their scooters malfunctioned, but they had plenty of back-up, so they left it in the cave and kept going, enjoying the dive.

"A hell of a ride," McKinlay said. ``From about 13,000 feet downstream to about 16,000 feet, that blew me away. There was a wall that was like scooting next to a skyscraper. You couldn't see the ceiling. There were rocks the size of school buses."

While the explorers spent oblivious hours underwater, surface crews at both ends were enduring lightning, thunder and gusty winds spawned by a strong cold front. But no one would leave his or her post while the divers were in the water.

When McKinlay and Jablonski arrived in Wakulla Springs to begin their decompression, they were greeted by a team of support divers who exchanged their equipment and rotated in and out to hang with them during the long night and into the morning.

Wakulla shore manager Todd Leonard stayed up all night, keeping his Trio dry so he could track the divers' schedules.

"Our plans became greatly simplified when we knew they were here and how late they would be surfacing," Leonard said, trying not to sound relieved.

## RECORD NOT GOAL

According to McKinlay and Jablonski, the world record actually was an aside to their real mission -- which was to prove the link between Turner Sink and Wakulla Springs.

"An understanding of how groundwater travels beneath the surface allows us to assess land use practices," Jablonski said.

In other words, raw sewage discharged from a ruptured pipe or diesel fuel spilled from a tanker truck in Tallahassee likely will end up in Wakulla Springs, one of Florida's last pristine sources of fresh water.

With that key link established, the WKPP might begin to shift its focus south to connect the Wakulla cave system with the Gulf of Mexico, some 8 ½ miles away.

Said Cook, the park manager, retiring after 15 years at Wakulla Springs: ``It's exciting. They put in a lot of work, a lot of money spent, and a lot of years for it to come to fruition."

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Casey McKinlay, and Jarrod Jablonski dive 300 feet beneath the earth's surface.