

Why We Clean Our Caving Gear

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As many of you know from attending meetings, I always announce we should all be cleaning our gear between trips. I don't usually go into details of why and how in the meeting, so the newsletter seems a good place for everyone's reference.

So: why should we clean our gear? Simply put, it's a matter of conservation. Every cave has its own specific ecosystem (on both the large and microbial scales), and there is a lot of stuff in the mud that could potentially be disruptive to delicate caves if brought in from somewhere else. Just as people are requested to clean their boats to keep from spreading mussels and other invasive species, it's a good idea to start every trip with a clean set of gear. That way, any mud or dirt that you spread around the cave is local to that cave.

The second reason for cleaning our gear is to be proactive with respect to White Nose Syndrome (WNS) decontamination protocols. WNS is a disease affecting bats that has been slowly spreading West since its first detection in 2006. WNS has been killing hibernating bats by the millions. While it has never been proven that humans have any connection to the spread of WNS, government agencies and private landowners have enacted the WNS decon protocols to attempt to eliminate the human possibility of spreading the fungus (*Pseudogymnoascus destructans* – Pd) from one cave to the next. The full details about WNS and the decontamination protocols can be found on the NSS website at www.caves.org/WNS.

Guidelines for cleaning gear are pretty simple, so here goes:

- Gear cleaning should be performed if you're leaving one caving area for another.
 - If you can walk from one cave to another (like in the Ain't BW area), it's not necessary at this point to clean between tips.
- After your trip, store the dirty stuff separately from the clean stuff.
 - Putting your muddy gear into a tub filled with unused clean gear makes the whole tub 'dirty' again. Trash bags are a great way to keep your muddy gear separate (and your driver's vehicle clean!).
- The first step to cleaning is to remove all of the accumulated mud, hosing off in the yard is fine.
- Anything that can be submerged in water (bathtub) should be soaked for 20 minutes at 55 deg C (131 deg F)
 - The straight "hot" water in most homes is hotter than 55C and should be sufficient for this step
 - Soft goods include boots, kneepads, harnesses, packs, webbing, rope, and
 - The hardware associated with vertical gear can also be soaked
 - Items should be fully submerged, so it is usually necessary to put something heavy on top like boots and kneepads to keep them underwater
- After the hot soak, rinse everything in clean water and allow to fully dry

- I use cheap plastic shoe trees from Amazon to keep my boots from shrinking
- Anything that shouldn't be submerged (headlamps, carabiners, cameras, delicate survey instruments) can be cleaned with Clorox wipes
- Regular clothing (Shirts, pants, socks, bandanas) can be washed using Woolite detergent on the HOT cycle
- Your cave tub should be wiped down with a Clorox wipe before putting clean stuff inside

So that's it! There's nothing particularly onerous in there other than the gear soaking, which can usually be accomplished in a bathtub, or outdoor bin. These protocols haven't been updated since April of 2016, so if anything changes, I'll keep you posted.

See you underground.