

Expert criticizes cave protest action

Deputies arrest Earth First! activist

By Joe Vargo

American-Statesman Staff

A world-renowned cave expert on Tuesday blasted members of an environmental group for holing up in several caves in northwest Travis County, calling the action "absurd, counterproductive" and possibly threatening the animals the activists are trying to save.

"They've gone completely overboard," Dr. James Reddell said of the actions of Earth First!, the group which has been occupying the caves since early Monday.

"These actions have come as a shock to me," he said.

Travis County sheriff's deputies on Tuesday reported that one person occupying a cave was arrested for trespassing. Earth First! representatives say at least two other activists remained inside other caves, which they said have been occupied to keep them from being destroyed by development near RR 2222 and RR 620.

The group accused the owner of the property, Dr. Fred Purcell, of risking damage to the caves by allowing sewer lines, detention ponds and roadways to be built on the land, which is being developed as a shopping center.

Purcell has denied those charges, saying he is working with city officials and researchers to keep the caves intact.

Reddell, who has written about 100 articles on cave environments, said Purcell has been "totally cooperative" with himself and other University of Texas researchers who have explored and studied the caves.

Reddell and Earth First! representatives agree the caves, known as Tooth, Amber and Kretschmarr caves, are priceless biologically.

Tooth cave has five species of invertebrates found nowhere else on Earth, and Reddell said it has more "cave-adapted species than any other cave in Texas."

Reddell, who has edited a journal of Texas caves since 1961 and who discovered the caves two years later, said the presence of people inside may hurt the rare species.

"Those caves are small, and any time you have someone inside you change the temperature," said Red-

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**— James Reddell
authority on caves**

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Earth First! coordinator Barbara Dugelby defended the actions of the group. Deputies late Tuesday arrested Christi Stevens, 25, who occupied Tooth cave, for trespassing, a Class B misdemeanor. She remained in custody pending the filing of formal charges, officials said.

Dugelby said Earth First! wants the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to place the five species — two beetles, a spider, a "pseudo" scorpion and a "cave-adapted daddy long-legs" on its list of endangered species.

"We have been fighting this battle within the system for eight months," Dugelby said.

"There is no more talking to be done. People say we're intruding on these caves. We think construction and destruction are intruding on these caves," she said.

Dugelby said Earth First! members are not occupying the caves as a publicity stunt.

"If we were doing this for glory, we'd be out there holding banners," she said.

"But we're out there just sitting in these caves."