ABSTRACT

Exploration, Science, and Society in Venezuela's Cave Landscape

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Geographic knowledge has played a key role in the formation of empires and nations. As maps and monuments, it has helped define imperial and national identities and territories. In the case of the Venezuelan cave landscape, however, it is not the state that performs its exploration or manages its knowledge, but a group of civilians—mostly friends among them, many not even career scientists. For over 40 years, the members of the Sociedad Venezolana de Espeleología (Venezuelan Speleological Society), have practiced speleology, or cave science, as an amateur pursuit. This has involved exploring, mapping, and cataloguing caves all over the country into a national registry that the group publishes. Once mapped, caverns become spaces for and objects of science, whether in geology, biology, or archeology.

Based on research carried out in 2007 and 2008, this dissertation examines the activities of the Venezuelan Speleological Society, from ethnographic and historical perspectives. By analyzing the relations between scientific practice, sociality, and landscape, I argue that the production of speleological knowledge must be considered in dialectic with the production of the Society itself. For most of its members, cave science primarily is about experience and relatedness: exploring and mapping caverns as a collective pursuit. It is in this context that the national speleological project is produced,
gains meaning, and is maintained over time. This highlights the importance of collective experience and relatedness, along with norms and trust, in scientific practice. Moreover, by going beyond the field and laboratories, this project exposes a broader, more intimate, and also more dynamic geography of science.

At the same time, understanding speleological practice begs appreciating caves’ intense symbolic and material qualities that come into being as humans traverse their passages. Representing caverns requires their exploration, since there is no technology that can accurately map them from the surface. This grants an anachronistic second life to exploration often dismissed as a thing of the past. Finally, in the case of Venezuela, speleological practice points to unexplored ways citizens may reconfigure and even challenge state-orchestrated relations between nature, nation, and their histories.