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Biosphere council uniting region's green guardians

CAROLINE EGGERS ceggers@bgdailynews.com 58 min ago

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Since 1990, leaders in the region have been working together behind the scenes to protect southcentral Kentucky's natural landscape through the Mammoth Cave Biosphere Reserve Advisory Council.

The council meets several times a year to discuss environmental issues, progress and projects while fostering communication among experts on connecting conservation with economic development and cultural values throughout Mammoth Cave National Park and Edmonson, Hart, Barren, Metcalfe, Warren and Butler counties.

"It's a community-based organization, coming here together to protect the important resources that are within the biosphere itself. Mammoth Cave is only a small portion of that, 53,000 acres of a 900,000-acre biosphere," said Barclay Trimble, Mammoth Cave National Park superintendent.

On Thursday, representatives from Western Kentucky University, the Kentucky Division of Water, Barren River Area Development District and cave-adjacent communities met at the park's Snowball Room.

A bat also sat in on the meeting, periodically swooping through the unfazed guests.

Rick Toomey, the park's cave resource management specialist, offered a brief history of the Snowball Room, which is named for the sparkly white gypsum blistering from the ceiling.

Steve Bishop, a slave and one of the park's first guides, traveled underground from the cave's historic entrance to discover this special spot, which was later dubbed a dining room by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1935. People even used to cook fried chicken during gatherings in the space – a mold-accruing practice that has since been halted, according to Toomey.

Jay Nelson, an environmental scientist and vice chair of the biosphere council, announced plans to increase public outreach about the vulnerable biodiversity within the region. This could potentially include the creation of biosphere-labeled signs on major roads, similar to the signs indicating when someone is entering a watershed.

“People really just don't know what this is,” Nelson said.

Since 1971, the United Nations has designated 700 biospheres across the globe, and each biosphere tells a different story, according to Cliff McCree, the U.S. Biosphere Reserves Program coordinator and featured guest of the council meeting.



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“Biospheres are able to give people the means to thrive together sustainably,” he said. “We try to use science to protect these special places. If there’s any hope for saving the planet, it’s right here, with groups like this.”

To McCreedy, saving the planet often means addressing the smaller-scale issues within biospheres.

Before concluding the meeting, the council discussed the region’s most recent significant environmental issues: the gasoline release that impacted Lost River Cave and Hidden River Cave – which is still under investigation – and the approximately 17-mile fish kill in Clear Fork Creek and Gasper River that occurred as a result of runoff from a cattle feedlot in Logan County.

Regarding the fish kill, Nelson suggested that runoff from animal feedlots and bourbon industry byproducts have been an issue impacting the region particularly in the past decade.

“They contribute a ton to water quality issues,” Nelson said.

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Caroline Eggers

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