



LETTER:

UNESCO PROCLAIMS THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF CAVES
AND KARST: A MILESTONE IN GLOBAL RECOGNITIONNadja ZUPAN HAJNA^{1,2}

The proclamation of **13 September** as the **International Day of Caves and Karst (IDCK)** by the UNESCO General Conference in Samarkand on 12 November 2025 represents a historic achievement for the international cave and karst community. The initiative, submitted by the Republic of Slovenia following the proposal of the International Union of Speleology (UIS), was developed through close cooperation with the Slovenian National Commission for UNESCO, the Republic of Slovenia Ministry of Natural Resources and Spatial Planning, the Permanent Delegation of Slovenia to UNESCO, and the Karst Research Institute ZRC SAZU in Postojna.

The 2025 proclamation is the culmination of a multi-year scientific, diplomatic, and community-driven process. The foundations of the initiative emerged during the **International Year of Caves and Karst 2021–2022**, when more than a thousand global activities demonstrated the scientific, educational, and societal importance of caves and karst. This momentum highlighted the need for a permanent international observance that would institutionalise the progress achieved during that two-year campaign.

Following this global mobilisation, the UIS, headquartered in Postojna since 1965, prepared the first formal proposal for UNESCO. The initiative steadily gained international support as scientific organisations, universities, protected-area administrations, Indigenous representatives, and more than 150 global partners endorsed the concept of an international day dedicated to subter-



anean landscapes. Slovenia formally assumed its leading role in 2025: the Government endorsed the proposal, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Spatial Planning coordinated the documentation, and the Permanent Delegation to UNESCO conducted the required diplomatic consultations with Member States. By the time the UNESCO Executive Board considered the proposal, it was co-sponsored by 59 countries—an

exceptional level of support within UNESCO procedures. As UIS President at the time, I led the preparation of the proposal, coordinated the scientific documentation and global endorsements, and worked closely with Slovenian and UNESCO institutions to ensure that the initiative advanced through all stages of the UNESCO procedure.

The path to proclamation required passing through UNESCO's established mechanisms:

- Preparation of the scientific and policy documentation, demonstrating the global importance and vulnerability of caves and karst, and the relevance of a dedicated observance to UNESCO's mission.
- Formal submission by the Republic of Slovenia, based on the UIS proposal.
- Review and endorsement by UNESCO programmes, including IGGP, MAB, and IHP, all of which identified clear scientific, environmental, and educational justifications for an international day.
- Discussion and recommendation by the UNESCO Executive Board (October 2025), where the proposal received substantial support.

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Received/Prejeto: 20. 11. 2025

- Adoption by the UNESCO General Conference in Samarkand on 12 November 2025.

A significant dimension of the proposal's success was the breadth of international support. The initiative received written endorsements from 17 major international organisations, including the International Science Council (ISC), IUCN's Geoheritage and Caves & Karst Specialist Groups, the International Association of Hydrologists (IAH) and its Karst Commission, the International Union for Quaternary Research (INQUA), the International Association of Geomorphologists (IAG), the International Union of Soil Sciences (IUSS), the International Society for Subterranean Biology (ISSB), ProGEO, the International Society for Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing (ISPRS), the CaveMAB Network, the UNESCO-affiliated International Research Centre on Karst (Guilin), and the UNESCO Chair on Geodiversity and Geoconservation. Their support reflects the growing global recognition of caves and karst as key scientific domains that intersect water resources, biodiversity, climate research, geoheritage, and sustainable development.

Endorsements from eight regional organisations—including the European Speleological Federation, the Geological Society of America Karst Division, the Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association, the European Federation of Geologists, and the European Environmental Bureau—further underscored the cross-disciplinary relevance of the initiative. Support was also provided by 39 UIS Member Countries and 95 national organisations and institutions, as well as by the Haida Nation of Canada, whose formal recognition as a sovereign Indigenous government in 2024 added an important cultural and ethical dimension to the proposal.

The selected date, **13 September**, carries symbolic meaning: it commemorates the day in 2021 when caves and karst were first formally presented at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. It does not overlap with any existing International or World Day and therefore ensures full visibility for subterranean landscapes.

Caves and karst are among Earth's most significant yet least understood environments (Zupan Hajna, 2025). They cover nearly one quarter of the global land surface

and provide drinking water to more than a billion people. They host unique subterranean biodiversity, preserve palaeoclimate archives, contain important archaeological and cultural heritage, and encompass aquifers that are crucial for climate resilience and water security.

Despite this importance, these landscapes are often overlooked in national environmental policies and global governance frameworks. The IDCK provides an annual mechanism to:

- Raise global awareness of the scientific, environmental, and cultural value of caves and karst; Promote research and monitoring, particularly on groundwater, biodiversity, geomorphology, and climate archives;
- Strengthen conservation, including responsible management of karst aquifers, fragile cave ecosystems, and subterranean heritage;
- Advance education and public engagement, building on the achievements of the International Year of Caves and Karst;
- Support international cooperation among scientists, local communities, Indigenous Peoples, protected-area managers, and policy makers.

Karst aquifers represent some of the world's most important natural water-supply systems, making the IDCK directly relevant to the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly **SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation)**. The international day therefore links speleological and karstological science to broader global sustainability agendas.

Beginning in 2026, the International Day of Caves and Karst will be celebrated annually on **13 September**. This observance provides a stable, internationally recognised platform to showcase research, strengthen conservation strategies, encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, and enhance the visibility of subterranean landscapes within environmental policy.

For UIS and the global karst community, the UNESCO proclamation represents both recognition and responsibility: recognition of decades of scientific and volunteer work, and responsibility to continue advancing the understanding and protection of Earth's subterranean environments.

REFERENCE

- Zupan Hajna, N., 2025. Caves and karst in global sustainability: The case for an international day. *Nature-based Solutions*, 100282. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nbsj.2025.100282>