

« *Balbonne Cave* »



FSE, Euro Speleo Protection Label, 2024

**Wonderful aragonite:
protect, study and carefully show Balbonne cave (France)**

Summary

Comité Départemental de Spéléologie de l'Aude

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Balbonne cave, discovered in 2022, is a new jewel of the Montagne Noire, a mountain located at the southern end of the Massif Central, in France. The cave offers subterranean varied landscapes and zones extremely rich in concretions. We observe many types of aragonite concretions (fir-shaped, needle-shaped, coral-shaped, massive, floors, streams, tubes) and some of them are unique. Based on the European Speleological Charta for cave protection the protection needs are as follows: installation of a robust door fitted with bars to let the bats in and to avoid unwelcome intrusions; mandatory guided visits and, in vulnerable areas, marked paths; research activities to better understand and protect the cave. During the visits the guide ensures both the safety of visitors, the integrity of the geological heritage and an aesthetic and scientific discovery. By the end of 2024, the first steps of implementation of this overall protection, scientific and educational strategy will be completed.

The long term integrated ecological sustainability is based on three pillars: a robust physical protection and access regulations; an evidence-based scientific strategy to refine protection methods; a recognition of the project by nature protection policies and organizations.

To address this latter issue several actions are in progress. A detailed agreement will be signed by the stakeholders, landowners, cavers, municipality where the cave is located. The French Federation of Speleology is currently recognising the Balbonne cave as belonging to its conservatory of the underground milieu. The departmental speleological committee of Aude will also be recognised as an operational delegation of this conservatory. This will enable it to develop a protection strategy for all the remarkable caves in the department. Efforts are also in progress to have the Balbonne cave recognised as a protected area with regulatory protection status by the General Council of the Aude and the French State. Therefore numerous stakeholders are involved. To raise public and media awareness we use various channels both at local and national levels.

Balbonne cave is an experimental cave where we are continuously reviewing our activities to learn from this experience. The wider challenge is to implement a broader strategy for the protection of all the outstanding caves in the department of Aude. This will begin in early 2025.