When people live in karst areas, they change its natural environment and processes. Important features, like caves, are destroyed. Priceless cultural heritage and unique underground ecosystems are lost. Pollutants from homes, factories, agriculture, and other activities and industries threaten valuable community water supplies.

Hundreds of caves are open to tourism around the world, many in World Heritage sites. About 150 million tourists visit caves each year, providing vital support to many national economies. Good tourism needs cave conservation and protection of natural processes, or the tourism value of the caves will be lost. Show caves can also teach people about the importance of caves and karst.

Caves and karst have always played a special role in human history, from the beginnings of human culture to the present day. Caves and cave sediments house archives of past life. The world’s most significant cultural and archaeological sites often are found in karst areas and caves.

The discovery and exploration of caves is important knowledge of the environment in which we live. Cave maps and studies let us see into the foundation of our world that is mostly hidden underground. Karst and cave protection laws must be based on scientific research to ensure the best possible measures for protection and pollution prevention, and for the best benefit to society.

The International Year of Caves and Karst (IYCK) is an initiative of the International Union of Speleology (UIS). The UIS is a non-profit organization dedicated to the exploration, study, and proper management of caves through international cooperation. www.iyck2021.org

The blue areas on the map show the world’s karst. For more information about this map, visit https://www.whymap.org/whymap/EN/Maps_Data/Wokam/wokam_node_en.html

The altitudes and water levels in karst areas can be highly variable. Caves are the best-known type of karst feature, but many other features exist - karren, dolines, poljes, blind valleys, intermittent lakes, sinking streams, large springs, subterranean rivers.

The Karst aquifers provide an estimated 13% of the world’s drinking water. They include the largest wells and springs on Earth. Water and pollutants can enter the underground in several ways, in dispersed form by rainfall through bare or covered karst surfaces, and by flooding in through large open holes. Once underground, the water moves freely through open karst conduits, where the rate of self-cleaning is very low or non-existent.

Caves and karst are home to many of the planet’s most diverse, important, and rare ecosystems. Cave ecosystems and geologic features are extremely sensitive to human activities and visits. Damage is often permanent. If repair is possible, it is usually difficult, expensive, and takes a long time.

KARST is a type of landscape that covers about 20% of the world’s land surface, with special surface, hydrological and underground features and phenomena.

CAVES are the best-known type of karst feature, but many other features exist - karren, dolines, poljes, blind valleys, intermittent lakes, sinking streams, large springs, subterranean rivers.

SPELEOLOGY is the scientific study and exploration of caves. They contain exceptional geological, biological, and cultural value, but are highly vulnerable to damage.