**The International Union of Speleology:**

**Yesterday, Today, and the Next Four Years**

**Dr. George Veni**

**UIS President**

**(\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ translation kindly provided by \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_)**

The International Union of Speleology (properly abbreviated “UIS”) is essentially the United Nations (UN) of all interests related to caves. Like the UN, the UIS is comprised of member countries which currently total 53. As the newly elected President of the UIS, this is my first of a series of annual articles to keep cavers in the member countries informed about the UIS, its plans and programs, and how we can all work together to raise the level of speleology internationally.

First the basics. The UIS member countries assign delegates to represent them at the General Assembly meetings where the business of the UIS occurs. In most countries, there is only one national speleological organization and it selects the delegate. In countries with multiple national organizations, those organizations collaborate and select the delegate. In either case, the delegates represent all cave interests in their countries and not an organization.

The General Assembly meets every four years at the International Congress of Speleology, which is hosted by a member country. Each General Assembly makes decisions to set the general course of the UIS for the next four years. One of those decisions is to elect a new Bureau, which conducts the daily business of the UIS and brings forward new programs and actions to better achieve the UIS’ goals

*to promote fellowship between people in all countries who are interested in caves, karst, and related features and terrains, to develop and promote all aspects of speleology (scientific, technical, cultural, sporting, social, and economic), and* [to advance] *the protection and management of the world’s speleological and karst heritage in ways conducive to sustainable development in all locations where caves or speleological activities occur* (UIS Statutes).

Each Bureau member must be from a different country and each does different jobs for the UIS. The jobs of the officers (President, Secretary General, two Vice Presidents, and Treasurer) are defined in the Internal Regulations. The remaining Bureau members, seven Adjunct Secretaries, are given the flexibility to take responsibility for jobs that fits their skills and interests, or to meet special needs of the UIS at the time.

The current Bureau, which was elected at the International Congress in Australia in July 2017, is:

* Dr. George Veni, President (USA)
* Dr. Fadi Nader, Secretary General (Lebanon)
* Zdeněk Motyčka, Vice President of Administration (Czech Republic)
* Efrain Mercado, Vice President of Operations (Puerto Rico)
* Dr. Nadja Zupan Hajna, Treasurer (Slovenia),

and Adjunct Secretaries:

* Bernard Chirol (France)
* Nivaldo Colzato (Brazil)
* Dr. Mladen Garašic (Croatia)
* Satoshi Goto (Japan)
* Gyula Hegedus (Hungary)
* Dr. Tim Moulds (Australia), and
* Bärbel Vogel (Germany).

You are welcome to contact us at any time. You’ll find our contact information, that of your national delegate, all of our guiding documents, plus much more on the UIS website: [www.uis-speleo.org](http://www.uis-speleo.org).

Now let’s answer the question most people have. What does the UIS do for me?

Have you ever been to an International Congress of Speleology? My first was in 1981 and it truly changed my life. It showed me all of the possibilities speleology offered from the recreational to the scientific. The UIS congress connected me to cavers around the world, opportunities for expeditions, and to my future professors. Most importantly, it generated an excitement in me for all things speleological that still happily pushes me forward even today. And this is not just my story. Many other cavers have enjoyed similar experiences. The next International Congress of Speleology will be held in Lyon, France, in 2021. Look for information about it on the UIS website in the coming months.

The best way for cavers to get involved with and benefit from the UIS is to join one or more of its commissions. Commissions are specialty groups that focus on a particular speleological topic. There are commissions dedicated to recreational caving, such as the Cave Rescue and Techniques and Materials commissions. Other commissions are highly scientific, such as Cave Biology and Karst Hydrology and Speleogenesis. Most commissions bring recreational cavers and scientists together, such as Pseudokarst and Volcanic Caves. The UIS has 22 commissions covering nearly all aspects of speleology. To get involved, just find the commissions on the UIS website, [www.uis-speleo.org](http://www.uis-speleo.org#_blank), and contact the officers to join. There is no cost, and active, excited, participants are most welcome. The Bureau provides the commissions up to 2,000 euros each year upon request to help them meet their goals.

When you visit the UIS website, look around you will find a lot of resources, opportunities, and information. The links to the commissions’ websites will connect you with a lot of specialized news and information. The Karst Information Portal is a UIS project, in partnership with other organizations, and is a free on-line library of all things related to caves. If your club’s newsletter is not currently posted on the Portal, consider posting it to share your results with the rest of the speleological world. The UIS’ *International Journal of Speleology* is among the world’s most important outlets for scientific information on caves. Order a copy of *Fifty Years of the UIS, 1965-2015*, written by UIS past-President José Ayrton Labegalini, to learn the history of the UIS and much about modern speleology. Read the new issues of the *UIS Bulletin* to learn details about what the UIS is doing now and to get ideas on how you can be involved.

One very important aspect of the UIS is that speleology is a subject where sport and technical specialists rely on each other. Sport cavers find, explore, and map caves. Their efforts make research possible for the scientists. The scientific results prove that caves have value and need to be managed properly. Educators teach the public and politicians about the importance of caves, which leads to the protection of caves and karst areas allowing more exploration—and thus the cycle repeats and grows.

The UIS has sponsored and partially funded expeditions and conferences, organized training and research programs, and provided assistance to show caves and governments to assure the best cave and karst management possible. During the International Congress in Australia last year, the UIS renewed its important Memorandum of Understanding with the International Show Caves Association. Since Australia, the Bureau has begun to develop other major scientific and political partnerships. In November 2017, the UIS was accepted as a United Nations Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)!

All of us on the UIS Bureau would rather go caving, but we are building these partnerships to make speleology better for everyone. These relationships create funding opportunities to support research, management, and education. Typically, less funding is available for exploration, which is why the UIS Bureau is now looking specifically at ways to raise money from other sources to support more expeditions and projects. Recently, the UIS helped secure funding from the European Union for a cave exploration, mapping, and research project in Cyprus. All aspects of speleology are important and connected, and the UIS does not neglect any of them.

By now you may wonder about the UIS’ plans for the future. In 2015, during the UIS’ 50th Anniversary Celebration, then-President Kyung Sik Woo made the declaration that the UIS will work to have UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) declare 2021 as the International Year of Caves and Karst. International years are major opportunities to educate the public worldwide about important topics, gain public and governmental support, and increase funds and opportunities for exploration, research, management or whatever else is needed.

Since 2015, the UIS Bureau has worked hard on the International Year. So far we have official letters of support from four countries (Belgium, Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia), eight international organizations, and 21 national organizations in 12 countries. Despite this progress, we need a country to make our proposal to UNESCO. Only UNESCO member countries can make proposals, not outside organizations. Several countries have considered submitting the proposal for us, but there are politics beyond what we do that also affect such decisions, so we are still waiting and developing new strategies to find support. For example, we may send the proposal to the UN instead of UNESCO. If you might have connections to ask your country for formal support or to propose the International Year of Caves and Karst, please let me know. The next UNESCO General Assembly meets in late 2019 and we hope to have a country to make the proposal then.

If our efforts on the International Year succeed, we will need all of the UIS member countries to organize events and activities in their countries to support speleology. If we do not succeed, it is even more important that we hold those activities in 2021 to prove the importance of caves and karst terrains to the general public and governments. Please begin to think about what events your organizations can develop. It would be excellent to have UNESCO or UN support, but if we don’t have their support we can still have an international year on our own. I will report later with ideas and specific requests so we can be prepared in either case.

As you think about what UIS can do for you, I encourage you to think about what you can do for the UIS. UIS is an organization of volunteers. When it succeeds, we all benefit. But that success is because speleologists worked together to make it possible. Of course I invite you to work directly with the UIS, but you also support the UIS when you help your local, regional, and national organizations. Together we can do much more than we can do alone.

I am constantly impressed at how cavers step forward to help with speleological training, cave protection, publications, research, and even organizing excellent international congresses such as we enjoyed last year in Sydney. And as a group, I find cavers the most adaptable and creative at solving problems. With your support, I have no doubt that the next four years will be the best yet for speleology, and thus the best to date for the UIS. If you have any ideas for the UIS or want to reach me with questions or to offer assistance, please feel free to contact me at gveni@nckri.org. I look forward to working with you and seeing the UIS and speleology grow.

-----------------------

Figures for this article (not all require captions):

DSC\_4657: UIS is incorporated in Slovenia, where it was created in 1965, and has its offices in the headquarters of the Karst Research Institute in Postojna.

UIS logo

UIS Bulletin cover

DSC\_8844: UIS past-President Dr. Julia James leads a trip through Australia’s Jenolan Caves for geologists from around the world during the 17th International Congress of Speleology.

UIS Bureau: UIS Bureau for 2017-2012, left to right: Efrain Mercado, Gyula Hegedus, Mladen Garašic, Zdeněk Motyčka, Satoshi Goto, George Veni, Nadja Zupan Hajna, Bärbel Vogel, Fadi Nader, Bernard Chirol, Nivaldo Colzato, Tim Moulds. Main photo courtesy of Mladen Garašic.