

Harwoods Hole and Starlight Cave guidelines

Abel Tasman National Park

A number of search and rescue callouts to Harwoods Hole have been required because of inexperienced or poorly prepared groups. These guidelines indicate the minimal requirements for this trip so it can be done with reasonable safety. They are not a detailed explanation of how to do it.

HARWOODS HOLE IS NOT A SUITABLE PLACE TO LEARN CAVING TECHNIQUE

- Everyone attempting the trip must have some prior vertical caving experience.
- Everyone must be capable of ascending the rope, should the need arise.
- Everyone must be capable of dealing with problems that might occur while on the rope.
- Use correct equipment. Rock climbing ropes and descenders are not suitable.
- All parties should include someone who knows the way through the cave or an experienced caver capable of route finding.
- The exit cave is cold, wet and strenuous and takes a minimum of 2 hours.

Length of trip

- Experienced cavers, well-equipped, in small groups, who are familiar with the rigging and the cave take a minimum of 9 hours from the car park to complete the trip. Inexperienced or large groups will take considerably longer.

Weather

Do not enter Harwoods Hole after heavy rain, or if rain is forecast:

- The cave system at the bottom of Harwoods Hole floods and can become impassable during and after heavy rain. The trip is much more difficult when water levels are high.
- There is an active slip site near the top that may drop large rocks down the hole in heavy rainfall.

Temperature

- The cave is cold! The temperature in Harwoods is between 6 and 8 degrees, even in summer.
- You can be standing still for long periods of time (for instance, waiting for the remainder of the group to descend). Unprepared people often get very cold in Harwoods.
- You can get wet. Wear clothes that keep you warm when wet, and have a spare set.

Communication

- The shaft is large and echoing. You may not be able to communicate effectively. Consider using radios.

The abseil

Use a 200 metre static line. Climbing ropes are not suitable:

- Inspect your rope carefully for damage before use, including before its first use.

The rope must be rigged to avoid rub points:

- A rub point can cause rope wear, which could lead to rope failure if the rope is ascended.
- The re-belay point (approx 30 metres down) must be rigged.
- Because of rope stretch, rope protectors are not suitable.

Everyone must be equipped for, and capable of, ascending the rope if the need arises:

- Everyone must have ascenders, and be familiar with their use.
- Prussiks are not adequate.
- Everyone must wear the ascenders, and have them ready for use, as they descend.
- HARWOODS HOLE IS NOT THE PLACE TO LEARN SINGLE ROPE TECHNIQUES!



- You must be able to deal with any problem which may occur while on the rope (such as the descender jamming or needing to be adjusted). You must be adept at transferring from the descender onto ascenders and back again.

This is a serious abseil and friction is a significant issue:

- Friction is high at the top. You may have to feed the rope through the descender.
- Friction is low near the bottom and can lead to excessive speed.
- You must be experienced at abseiling on a single rope, and be familiar with techniques for controlling your speed.
- Ensure your descender does not overheat; this can severely damage the rope.
- Rock-climbing belay/abseil devices are not suitable as they overheat easily. Also, many do not provide adequate friction on a single rope. Use a caving descender such as a “rack”.

The first person down should apply a bottom belay to the rope (to slow any out-of-control abseilers). They must stand well clear of the landing rock out of range of any falling debris.

Exiting through Starlight Cave

Conditions:

- The cave is wet and gets more difficult near the end.
- Less experienced cavers may want a wetsuit.
- The cave is reasonably tight in places and in parts involves climbing.
- The trip is reasonably arduous. A good level of fitness is required.
- Make sure you have adequate equipment, clothing and lighting.

Route through the cave:

- In places, the route is not obvious and several parties have gotten lost (requiring rescuing).
- All parties should include someone who knows the way through the cave or an experienced caver capable of route-finding.
- There are small markers at a few places: at the climb up to the squeeze, at “Shortie’s Terror” and the climb up to the Starlight entrance. However these may not be sufficient for inexperienced parties to find their way through.

There are several fixed ropes in the cave. These can become damaged when the stream floods:

- All ropes and rigging should be checked before use.

- The local caving club occasionally checks and replaces these ropes but no responsibility is accepted for maintaining them in a usable state.
- All parties should carry a 20m length of rope for their own use in the cave system.

Carry all human waste out of the cave with you.

Leaving the cave - the walk back up the hill

- The rockfall outside the Starlight entrance is unstable. Make sure you are in a safe place when you eat your lunch and get changed.
- Get directions for the route from the cave exit back up the hill. Parties have gotten lost.
- The route up the hill is very rough, has minimal marking and is prone to slips and tree fall.
- The route up the hill is much easier in daylight so start early.

Search and Rescue

- Leave your intentions (names of members in your party, your intended return time and vehicle registration) with someone reliable who knows the callout procedure.
- A log book has been placed in a container as you exit Starlight Cave. Sign out when you leave the cave. This will help rescuers know whether to look in the bush or in the cave.
- If you need to call emergency services, WRITE DOWN key points of your message and THEN make the call. Make clear the difference between information that is known fact and that which is supposition. This will ensure an appropriate search and rescue response.

Further information

Your local caving group is a useful contact point if you need more information. See www.nsg.org.nz for more information. Take care and enjoy your trip!

DOC Golden Bay Area Office
62 Commercial Street, Takaka 7110
Ph: (03) 525 8026
Fax: (03) 546 8444

Email: goldenbayao@doc.govt.nz

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