

Plain language statement

Melbourne Veterinary School
Faculty of Science



Project: Fungal survey on caving equipment of Australian cavers ***“Fungal spore richness and diversity in Australian caves”***

Ms Anna Langguth (primary contact, PhD Candidate)

Tel: +61 0 424 102 396; email: a.langguth@unimelb.edu.au

A/Prof Jasmin Hufschmid (primary supervisor) email: huj@unimelb.edu.au

Introduction

We would like to invite you to participate in a project investigating fungal diversity within caves in south-eastern Australia.

This research aims to survey caves for the presence of the fungus *Pseudogymnoascus destructans*, which is not dangerous for humans, but may cause the deadly “White Nose Syndrome” in cave-dwelling microbats. While Australia is currently believed to be free of the disease, we are asking for your assistance to expand our surveillance efforts, enabling us to better protect native Australian cave-bats.

We are also investigating the vastly understudied diversity of fungi found within caves in south-eastern Australia and how spores may be carried from one cave to another.

What will I be asked to do?

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to collect up to three swabs from your caving equipment after cave visits you would normally undertake in your own time.

We will send you a sampling kit for the purpose of sample-collection, which will contain everything you need. To receive the sampling kit, you will be asked to provide a designated address where you would like the kit to be sent.

We will ask you to swab an area of approximately 10 cm² per sample, collecting separate swabs from shoes, caving suit/clothes and equipment. The swabs used are dry will not present a risk to any of your equipment. We will then ask you to fill out a short sample submission form which will come with the sampling kit, identifying the date and types of samples collected. In order to protect the location of lesser known, or environmentally sensitive caves, you will not need to provide exact spatial information that would allow others to access specific caves; rather, you will be able to provide more general information, such as state, general area, postcode or council/shire name. You will be able to submit as little as one, and as many as three samples.

After samples have been collected, we will then ask you to mail the samples back to us at The University of Melbourne. A pre-paid envelope will be provided to you for this purpose.

The overall time commitment for sample collection and preparation (labelling, swabbing, filling out the submission form) is estimated to be less than 5 minutes per sample (< 15 minutes total). While we

appreciate receiving samples as soon as possible after collection, you can mail them back to us at your earliest convenience (e.g. when you next pass by a mailbox).

In the unlikely event that *Pseudogymnoascus destructans* is found on one a sample, we will notify the local State / Territory Wildlife Health Australia (WHA) Coordinator who will then initiate further steps. If identification of the cave is not possible from the submission data provided (e.g. only postcode provided but multiple caves in the area), you may be contacted via email to confirm the cave's location.

What are the risks?

There are no health risks associated with this research. The risks associated with swabbing your clothes and equipment are no greater than those associated with your normal handling of these items.

What are the benefits?

By participating in this project, you will be supporting a larger Linkage project on the potential impacts of White Nose Syndrome in Australian cave-dwelling microbats (ARC Linkage project LP200100331, "Vulnerability of Australian bats to white-nose syndrome"). This project is supported by the Australian Research Council and involves The University of Melbourne, Western Sydney University, as well as collaborators at Zoos Victoria, Taronga Zoo and the Victorian Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. Our aim is to better classify the potential danger that the disease "White Nose Syndrome" caused by the fungus *Pseudogymnoascus destructans* may pose to our native microbats, which will enable targeted conservation measures.

This survey is the first large-scale survey for *P. destructans* undertaken since 2017 and will help us determine whether Australia is still free of the fungus and, if not, where it is currently found. Investigating the different types of fungi found in Australian caves will help us estimate how likely it is that fungal spores (including *P. destructans*) may be transferred between regions. This information will help us to formulate specific plans to stop the spread of *P. destructans*, if needed.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

University Policy determines what can be done with the information about you. We have a data management plan relating to this project, that adheres to the University's Human Research Ethics guidelines.

Data on the swabs you have collected will be retained intact for a period of at least five years from the date of any publication based upon them. All personal data related to swab samples will be anonymised for purposes of analyses. Only the primary researcher and their primary supervisor will have access to your data. Swab data will be transferred to the primary supervisor of this project if/when the doctoral researcher leaves the University.

Your signed consent form, which will include your address of choice for the sampling kit to be delivered to, will be kept separately and will be password-protected, with access only allowed to the primary contact and primary supervisor. Consent forms and addresses will be destroyed after this project has concluded (October 2025 at the latest).

What if I want to withdraw from the research?

Participation in this research is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied. Withdrawing from the research would have no effect on your relationship with any member of the Melbourne Veterinary School.

Who is funding this project?

Anna Langguth is supported by a stipend which is part of a larger Australian Research Council Linkage Project.

Where can I get further information?

If you have not understood any of this information, please contact Anna Langguth:

Tel: +61 0 424 102 396

Email: a.langguth@unimelb.edu.au

Who can I contact if I have any concerns about the project?

This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of The University of Melbourne. If you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of this research project that you do not wish to discuss with the research team, you should contact the Manager, Human Research Ethics, Office for Research Ethics and Integrity, University of Melbourne, VIC 3010 (Tel: +61 3 8344 2073; Fax: +61 3 9347 6739; email: HumanEthicsComplaints@unimelb.edu.au). All complaints will be treated confidentially. In any correspondence, please provide the name of the research team, or the name or ethics ID number of the research project.

How do I agree to participate?

If you wish to participate, please read and sign the consent form provided.