

# SELECTED KARST FEATURES OF THE CENTRAL VALLEY AND RIDGE PROVINCE, VIRGINIA

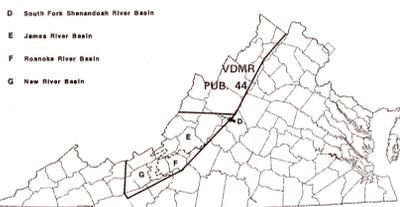
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COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA  
DEPARTMENT OF MINES, MINERALS AND ENERGY  
DIVISION OF MINERAL RESOURCES

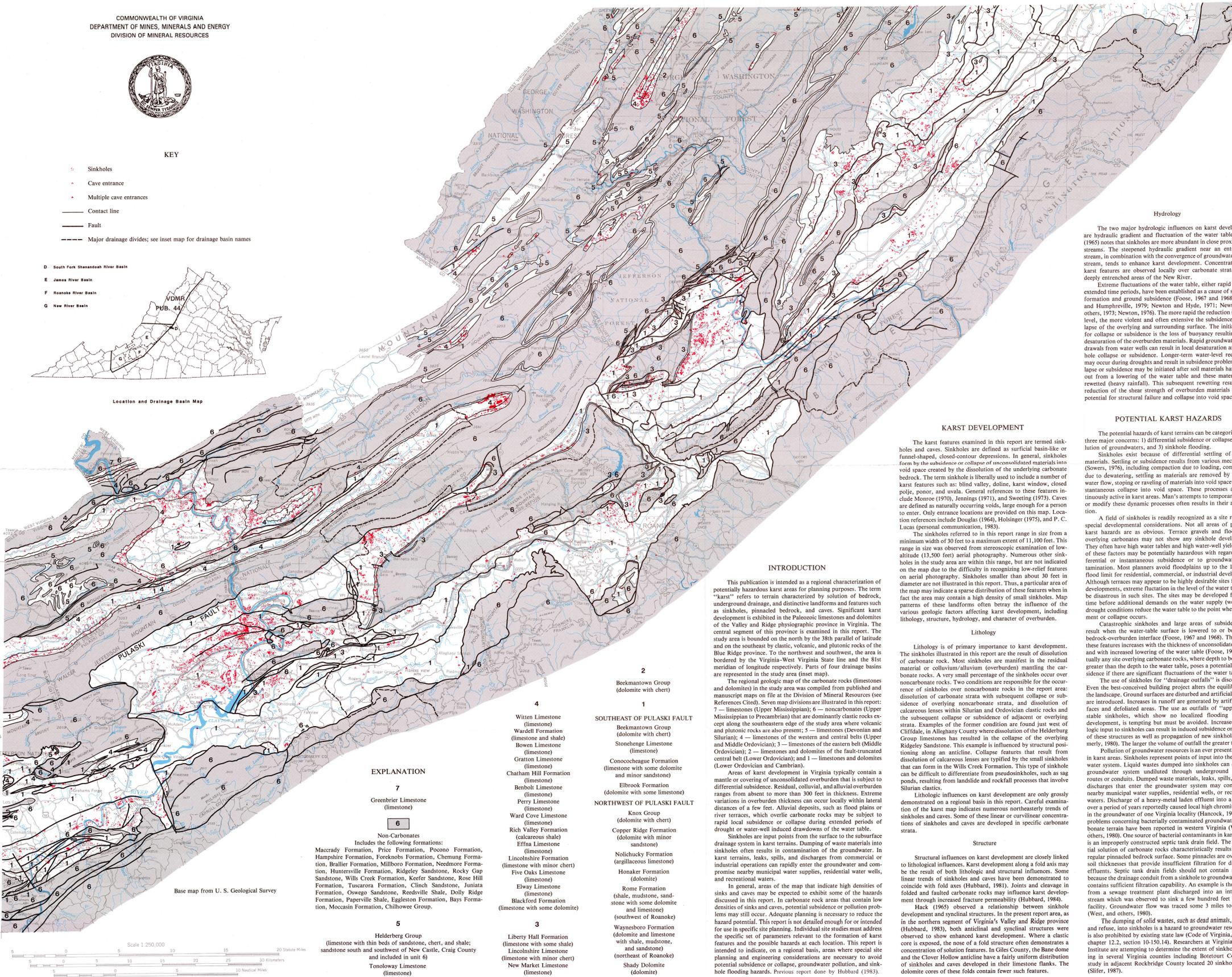


## KEY

- Sinkholes
- Cave entrance
- Multiple cave entrances
- Contact line
- Fault
- Major drainage divides; see inset map for drainage basin names



Location and Drainage Basin Map



## KARST DEVELOPMENT

The karst features examined in this report are termed sinkholes and caves. Sinkholes are defined as surficial basin-like or funnel-shaped, closed-contour depressions. In general, sinkholes occur by the subsidence or collapse of unconsolidated materials into void space created by the dissolution of the underlying carbonate bedrock. The term sinkhole is liberally used to include a number of karst features such as blind valley, doline, karst window, closed slope, ponor, and avuls. General references to these features include Monroe (1970), Jennings (1971), and Sweeting (1973). Caves are defined as naturally occurring voids, large enough for a person to enter. Only entrance locations are provided on this map. Location references include Douglas (1964), Holsinger (1975), and P. C. Lucas (personal communication, 1983).

The regional geologic map of the carbonate rocks (limestones and dolomites) in the study area was compiled from published and manuscript maps on file at the Division of Mineral Resources (see References Cited). Seven map divisions are illustrated in this report: 7 — limestones (Upper Mississippian); 6 — noncarbonates (Upper Mississippian to Precambrian) that are dominantly clastic rocks except along the southeastern edge of the study area where volcanic and plutonic rocks are also present; 5 — limestones (Devonian and Silurian); 4 — limestones of the western and central belts (Upper and Middle Ordovician); 3 — limestones of the eastern belt (Middle Ordovician); 2 — limestones and dolomites of the fault-truncated central belt (Lower Ordovician); and 1 — limestones and dolomites (Lower Ordovician and Cambrian).

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Arches of karst development in Virginia typically contain a mantle or covering of unconsolidated overburden that is subject to differential subsidence. Residual, colluvial, and alluvial overburden ranges from absent to more than 300 feet in thickness. Extreme variations in overburden thickness can occur locally within lateral distances of a few feet. Alluvial deposits, such as flood plains or river terraces, which overlie carbonate rocks may be subject to rapid local subsidence or collapse during extended periods of drought or water-well induced drawdowns of the water table.

Sinkholes are input points from the surface to the subsurface drainage system in karst terrain. Dumping of waste materials into sinkholes often results in contamination of the groundwater. In karst terrain, leaks, spills, and discharges from commercial or industrial operations can rapidly enter the groundwater and compromise nearby municipal water supplies, residential water wells, and recreational waters.

In general, areas of the map that indicate high densities of sinks and caves may be expected to exhibit some of the hazards discussed in this report. In carbonate rock areas that contain low densities of sinks and caves, potential subsidence or pollution problems may still occur. Adequate planning is necessary to reduce the hazard potential. This report is not detailed enough for or intended for use in specific site planning. Individual site studies must address the specific set of parameters relevant to the formation of karst features and the possible hazards at each location. This report is intended to indicate, on a regional basis, areas where special site planning and engineering considerations are necessary to avoid potential subsidence or collapse, groundwater pollution, and sinkhole flooding hazards. Previous report done by Hubbard (1983).

Structural influences on karst development are closely linked to lithological influences. Karst development along a fold axis may be the result of both lithologic and structural influences. Some linear trends of sinkholes and caves have been demonstrated to coincide with fold axes (Hubbard, 1981). Joints and cleavage in folded and faulted carbonate rocks may influence karst development through increased fracture permeability (Hubbard, 1984). Hack (1965) observed a relationship between sinkhole development and synclinal structures. In the present report area, in the northern segment of Virginia's Valley and Ridge province, (Hubbard, 1983), both anticlinal and synclinal structures were observed to show enhanced karst development. Where a classic core is exposed, the nose of a fold structure often demonstrates a concentration of solution features. In Giles County, the Bone dome and the Clover Hollow anticline have a fairly uniform distribution of sinkholes and caves developed in their limestone flanks. The dolomite cores of these folds contain fewer such features.

## Hydrology

The two major hydrologic influences on karst development are hydraulic gradient and fluctuation of the water table. Hack (1965) notes that sinkholes are more abundant in close proximity to streams. The steepened hydraulic gradient near an entrenched stream, in combination with the convergence of groundwater to the stream, tends to enhance karst development. Concentrations of karst features are observed locally over carbonate strata along deeply entrenched areas of the New River.

Extreme fluctuations of the water table, either rapid or over extended time periods, have been established as a cause of sinkhole formation and ground subsidence (Foose, 1967 and 1968; Foose and Humphreys, 1979; Newton and Hyde, 1971; Newton and others, 1973; Newton, 1976). The more rapid the reduction in water level, the more violent and often extensive the subsidence or collapse of the overlying and surrounding surface. The initial cause for collapse or subsidence is the loss of buoyancy resulting from desaturation of the overburden materials. Rapid groundwater withdrawals from water wells can result in local desaturation and sinkhole collapse or subsidence. Long-term water-level reductions can occur during droughts and result in subsidence problems. Collapse or subsidence may be initiated after soil materials have dried out from a lowering of the water table and these materials are rewetted (heavy rainfall). This subsequent rewetting results in a reduction of the shear strength of overburden materials and the potential for structural failure and collapse into void spaces.

## POTENTIAL KARST HAZARDS

The potential hazards of karst terrain can be categorized into three major concerns: 1) differential subsidence or collapse, 2) pollution of groundwaters, and 3) sinkhole flooding. Sinkholes exist because of differential settling of surface materials. Settling or subsidence results from various mechanisms (Sowers, 1976), including compaction due to loading, compaction due to dewatering, settling as materials are removed by groundwater flow, steeping or raveling of materials into void space, and instantaneous collapse into void space. These processes are continuously active in karst areas. Man's attempts to temporarily divert or modify these dynamic processes often results in their acceleration.

A field of sinkholes is readily recognized as a site requiring special development considerations. Not all areas of potential karst hazards are as obvious. Terrace gravels and floodplains overlying carbonates may not show any sinkhole development. They often have high water tables and high water-well yields. Both of these factors may be potentially hazardous with regard to differential or instantaneous subsidence or to groundwater contamination. Most planners avoid floodplains up to the 100-year flood limit for residential, commercial, or industrial development. Although terraces may appear to be highly desirable sites for these developments, extreme fluctuation in the level of the water table can be disastrous in such sites. The sites may be developed for some time before additional demands on the water supply (wells) and drought conditions reduce the water table to the point where settlement or collapse occurs.

Catastrophic sinkholes and large areas of subsidence can result when the water-table surface is lowered to or below the bedrock-overburden interface (Foose, 1967 and 1968). The size of these features increases with the thickness of unconsolidated debris and with increased lowering of the water table (Foose, 1968). Virtually any site overlying carbonate rocks, where depth to bedrock is greater than the depth to the water table, poses a potential for subsidence if there are significant fluctuations of the water table.

The use of sinkholes for "drainage outlets" is discouraged. Even the best-conceived building project alters the equilibrium of the landscape. Ground surfaces are disturbed and artificial surfaces are introduced. Increases in runoff are generated by artificial surfaces and defoliated areas. The use as outfalls of "apparently" stable sinkholes, which show no localized flooding prior to development, is tempting but should be avoided. Increased hydrologic input to sinkholes can result in induced subsidence or collapse of the karst map indicates numerous northeasterly trends of sinkholes resulting from landslide and rockfall processes that involve Silurian clastics.

Pollution of groundwater resources is an ever present problem in karst areas. Sinkholes represent points of input into the groundwater system. Liquid waste dumped into sinkholes can enter the groundwater system unfiltered through underground drainage routes or conduits. Dumped waste materials, leachings, spills, or other discharges that enter the groundwater system may compromise nearby municipal water supplies, residential wells, or recreational waters. Discharge of a heavy metal laden effluent for drainhold over a period of years reportedly caused local high chromium levels in the groundwater of one Virginia locality (Hancock, 1982). Two problems concerning bacterially contaminated groundwater in carbonate terrain have been reported in western Virginia (West and others, 1980). One source of bacterial contamination in karst terrain is an improperly constructed septic tank drain field. The differential solution of carbonate rocks characteristically results in an irregular pinnacled bedrock surface. Some pinnacles are overlain by soil thicknesses that provide insufficient filtration for drainhold effluents. Septic tank drain fields should not contain sinkholes because the drainage conduit from a sinkhole to groundwater rarely contains sufficient filtration capability. An example is the effluent from a sewage treatment plant discharged into an intermittent stream which was observed to sink a few hundred feet from the facility. Groundwater flow was traced some 3 miles to a spring (West, and others, 1980).

The dumping of solid wastes, such as dead animals, garbage, and refuse, into sinkholes is a hazard to groundwater resources. It is also prohibited by existing state law (Code of Virginia, Title 10, chapter 12, section 10-150.14). A researcher at Virginia Military Institute are attempting to determine the extent of sinkhole dumping in several Virginia counties including Botetourt County. A study in adjacent Rockbridge County located 20 sinkhole dumps (Slifer, 1987).

## Structure

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Flooding problems in karst terrain can result from two main conditions: the plugging of natural drains during construction and increases in runoff due to artificial surfaces. Inadequate silt control during construction can cause the plugging of sinkholes by sediment-laden runoff. The accompanying restriction of subsurface drainage results in increased subsurface infiltration and increased surface runoff, ponding or flooding. Flooding in karst terrain can also result from the increased runoff generated by residential, commercial, or industrial surfaces. The increased runoff from roads, parking lots, and structures is significant. Much precipitation that would have percolated directly into the ground surface is rapidly introduced into surface and subsurface (by increased drainage into sinkholes) drainage networks. Increases in runoff have been reported to range from 48 percent for areas of suburban housing to 153 percent or more for industrial or commercial areas (Aley and Thomson, 1981). Such increases in runoff can quickly exceed the drainage capacity of the inputs to the subsurface systems and result in ponding and flooding. Sinkhole flooding of this type has been reported in the Fairlawn area of Pulaski County (West and others, 1980). In several cases, excessive runoff can overwhelm the capacity of natural subsurface drainage systems, causing water to back up and flood sinkholes up-system from the initial problem area (Crawford, 1981). At least one example of an overwhelmed natural subsurface drainage conduit is known from Virginia. A stream of water estimated with a peak flow of 50,000 gallons per minute was observed flowing from a normally dry sinkhole. Peak flow from the sinkhole occurred after surface-stream flow peaked from the November, 1985 major-storm event (D. W. Slifer, 1988, personal communication). Local residents reported similar phenomenon occurred during the 1969 Camille storm event. The input points to this natural conduit system are unknown, but do not appear to have been impacted by man.

## PSEUDOKARST FEATURES

Two types of pseudokarst "sinkholes" have posed identification problems in this study area (Hubbard, 1984). Sinkhole-like features have been identified in landslides and rockfalls of Silurian sandstones in Giles and Montgomery counties (Schultz, personal communication, 1984 and Schultz, 1986). These features are sag ponds or the result of debris damming. One of these, Mountain Lake, is an impressive natural lake in Giles County. This lake, 0.54 x 0.2 miles in size, was apparently formed by debris-damming of a high stream valley (Sharp, 1933; Parker and others, 1975).

A second type of sinkhole-like feature is the result of the mining of lead-zinc ores in the latter 1800s (Cass, 1894) and iron ores (Watson, 1951) until about 1913. Residual areas from the Shady Dolomite were removed by an open-cut technique of mining whereby limestone pinnacles were exhumed. After years of erosion, these excavations in Wythe and Pulaski counties resemble sinkholes with exposed carbonate pinnacles.

## CAVE RESOURCES

Ninety-six percent of Virginia's known caves are located on privately owned land and are not open to public use without restriction of the owner. A number of these caves have further restrictions placed on visitation related to the protection of threatened and endangered species habitats, protection of water resources, and archaeological, biological, paleontological, and other scientific studies. Virginia's caves are protected by the Virginia Cave Protection Act (Code of Virginia 10-150.11 et seq.). For further information regarding cave resources, please contact the Virginia Division of Mineral Resources in Charlottesville, or the Virginia Cave Board, 1100 Washington Building, Capitol Square, Richmond, Virginia 23219.

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PUBLICATION 83  
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