Karst Features and the Dissolution of Carbonate Rocks in Lawrence County

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Over a long period of time limestone, and to a lesser extent dolomite, will gradually dissolve in the presence of ground water that was derived from precipitation. Carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and from the soil is incorporated into the precipitation as it changes from atmospheric moisture to ground water. Ground water containing dissolved carbon dioxide forms a mild acid, which can slowly dissolve alkaline materials. The alkaline carbonate bedrock units are affected by this process when the slightly acidic ground water moves through the units and is neutralized by the carbonate. A portion of the carbonate unit is dissolved in this neutralization process thus increasing the size of the fracture in which the water is flowing. As this process continues through time larger openings, solution features, form in the rock allowing for increased ground-water flow.

Many types of solution features can result from this process, some subtle and others quite large. The most common features develop along preexisting fractures, joints, and bedding planes, which represent the initial flow path of the water through the rock. Over time, a variety of larger features can develop leading to cave systems with sinkholes and deep valleys as surface expressions.

The near-surface carbonate bedrock aquifers in the Mississippian carbonates contain a highly variable fracture pattern, which greatly affects ground-water flow through the bedrock. Fractured rock represents one of the most complex types of hydrogeologic systems known. While regional ground-water flow can be very predictable, local flow can be highly varied in terms of both quantity and direction. Consequently, determining the local direction of ground-water flow in fractured bedrock at the scale of a specific site may require elaborate instrumentation, monitoring, and dye tracing.

The dissolution of carbonate rocks results in karst topography and other karst features. These include closed depressions on the land surface (e.g., sinkholes and sinking streams), caves, and underground drainage channels or conduits, some of which are several feet in height and width. Karst areas are extremely vulnerable to contamination from point sources (e.g., spills, leaking underground storage tanks, and individual household septic systems) and broad area contamination (e.g., road salts, vehicle emissions, pesticides, and fertilizers). The karst features of subterranean conduits or streams are in many cases connected for great distances. These connected conduits create a potential for widespread contamination downstream of a contaminant source. In places the flow rates can be similar to surface streams, with some contaminants flowing through the system rapidly (especially after a rain or snow-melt event), while in other parts of the system contaminants may be trapped in pools, sediments, or minor fractures for much longer periods of time.

Much of the central portion of Lawrence County is within the Mitchell Plateau physiographic province. Karst development in this area occurs in Mississippian age limestones of the Blue River and Sanders Groups. Features such as caves, sinkholes, and springs are prevalent. Two well known examples of karst development include Twin and Donaldson Caves. Both are accessible at Spring Mill State Park.

The most extensive karst development in Lawrence County occurs in the outcrop area of the Blue River Group. This group consists primarily of thin-bedded carbonates of the Paoli, Ste. Genevieve, and St. Louis Formations. Many of the water well records on file at the Division of Water are located in the area where the Blue River Group outcrops. Formation descriptions in some of these wells suggest the presence of karst features. Drillers describe sequences of “clay and boulders,” “boulders and mud,” “caves,” “boulders and mud holes,” and “floating boulders.” Refer to the aquifer systems maps for locations of several wells describing such features.

Some of the larger karst features (sinkholes and sinking streams) in Lawrence County are shown on the map. These features are based on digital coverages from the Indiana Geological Survey and the U. S. Geological Survey (hypsography, or land surface contours). The closed depressions based upon hypsography coverage came from 1:24,000 scale topographic maps. The overwhelming majority of these depressions are associated with karst development.

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