

FROM THE EDITOR

The ACKMA AGM at Capricorn Caves, Rockhampton is fast approaching. I am booked and ready to go, and I hope many others are too. I especially hope that managers take advantage of the Caves Guides workshop planned by Ann Augusteyn and her team. I have been on a few caves tours in the past 12 months, both in Australia and overseas and the need for good guide training still remains. I was particularly disappointed in a tour I took at Sterkfontein Cave in the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site in South Africa. The tour started in excellent fashion above the ground explaining hominoid evolution using some props along the pathway, but once we reached the cave reverted to the old standard fantasy of elephants, gnomes, and various parts of the human anatomy. The tour concluded with an invitation to rub either the nose or hand of a sculpture of Robert Broom. One was for luck and one was for knowledge, but if you rubbed both neither would be granted. By the polish on poor Robert's nose, it seems most people chose to rub his large facial appendage.



*Guide with the Robert Broom sculpture,
Sterkfontein Cave.*

Photo: www.maropeng.co.za

Everywhere I travelled on my trip through South Africa, from the Cradle of Humankind, the Florisbad fossil site, the West Coast Fossil Park, through the Karoo and the museum in Cape Town, Robert Broom's name came up. All South Africans were surprised to learn that Broom started his career in fossils in Australia at Wombeyan Caves, New South Wales, and is perhaps best known for describing *Burramys parvus*, the Mountain Pygmy Possum from fossil material before it was found as a still extant species.

An interesting research project has started at Naracoorte. Student Emmi Scherlies is undertaking her PhD studies on *Miniopterus orianae bassanii*, the

Southern Bentwing Bat. Emmi is looking at population dynamics and survival rates of juveniles. She aims to inject passive integrated transponders (PIT tags) into 2000 bats; half this year and the balance in January 2017. The project pushes the limits of the technology and if successful, will give information on bat movements to and from Bat Cave, Naracoorte and survival rates of the species. This project is being supported by the ASF's conservation fund. I watched



*Emmi Scherlies (left) and volunteer Rose Thompson PIT
tagging bats.*

Photo: Steve Bourne

the process one evening and admire the dedication of a bat researcher who needs to work all night when the bats are active. The tagging required 3 weekends with each night of tagging finishing as the sun was about to rise. Terry Reardon and I took a series of in flight photos of these bats about 10 years ago, and the images are used everywhere (even on Slovenian stamps - see ACKMA Journal no. 97). We took some new images one evening, one of which appears below.



Southern Bentwing Bat

Photo: Steve Bourne and Terry Reardon

A workshop was held very recently at Naracoorte regarding a new Cave Access Policy. Manager Deborah Carden and Executive Officer Amy Macken circulated the proposed new system which will replace the current cave classification system based on the Worboys model introduced through ACKMA many years ago. I had reservations of what is essentially a user based system, but after the workshop, which increased my understanding of how it will be used, I think it will be a useful system. A working group has been established to continue the work and classify caves which have been added to the park. Further reports on this project will appear in the journal in the future.

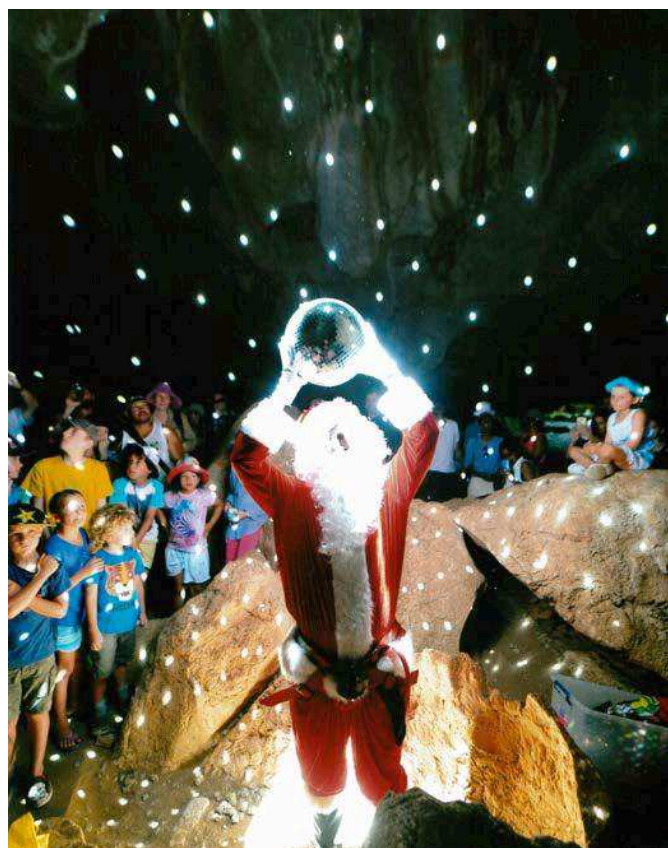
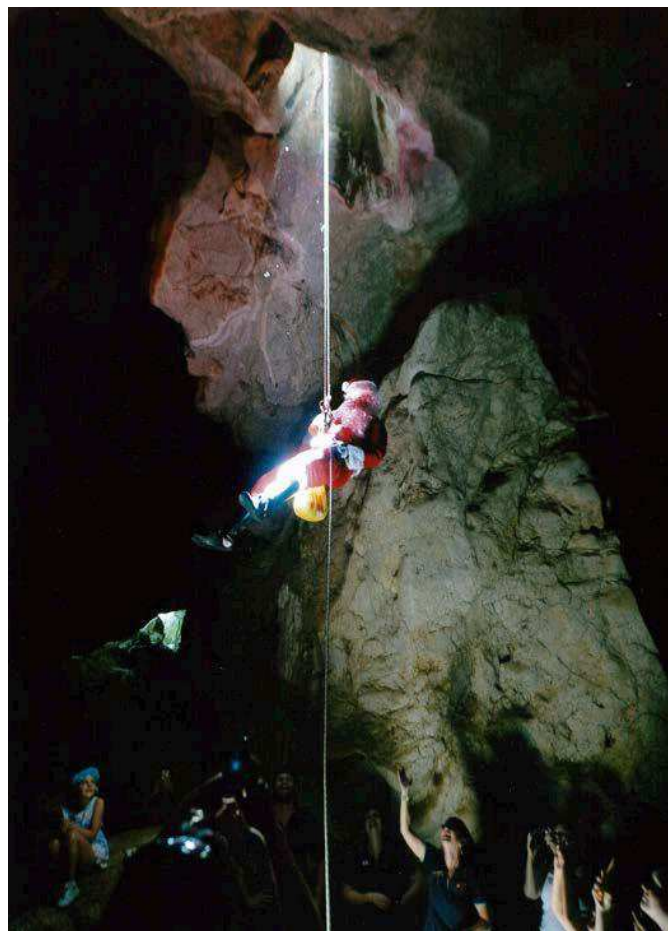
While on Naracoorte, some good news on the funding front. The seven year planning process which has produced the Visitor Strategy, Brand Strategy and Interpretation Framework and a Master Plan has the park in a good position to attract funding. The park has gained \$1.2M from the Tourism Destination Driver Infrastructure Fund, a joint Australian and state governments initiative. Deborah Carden reports that the projects that will be delivered are the upgrade of the Caves Loop walk to a standard that provides for wheelchair access and viewing platforms at cave entrances, and the upgrade of the car park at Victoria Fossil Cave. A quick search found that Kelly Hill Caves on Kangaroo Island also attracted funding for a walking trail while in Western Australia, the Augusta Margaret River Tourism Association, which operates Jewel, Lake and Mammoth Caves, received funds for its lighthouse project. Queensland funding from this initiative has gone to strategic industry projects such as WiFi capacity for information centres and capacity building. I haven't been able to locate what other states have allocated their funds to and would be very interested to receive articles on successful cave projects.

Anne Augusteyn from Capricorn Caves has provided images of their Christmas celebrations. This annual event, Solstice Santa, at the cave must be quite a spectacle.

Every December and early January, the sun's rays pierce the darkness of the Belfry Cavern through a natural vertical shaft at Capricorn Caves, Rockhampton, Queensland. This is due to the alignment of the sun and earth over the Tropic of Capricorn. This brilliant natural solstice light spectacle, enhanced by disco mirror balls and other props, attracts visitors from all over the world.

But in 2015 all props were eclipsed by the appearance of Santa abseiling the shaft on the longest day of the year, 22nd December. Children were spellbound as this truly had to be the real Santa chimneying down a shaft. What we do for media attention and promotion.

*Solstice Santa at Capricorn Caves, Rockhampton
Photo: Supplied by Anne Augusteyn*





*The John Brush carbide lamp collection
Photo: Steve Bourne*

About 12 months ago, I stayed with John Brush and Marjorie Coggan in their Canberra home, while I attended one of those conferences that seemed like a good idea at the time - Change Management. It was actually quite a reasonable few days and I really enjoyed the company of John and Marjorie. As you would expect, for those who know this great couple, they run a very tidy ship. I was shown John's carbide lamp collection and took photos with him protesting. I think I have waited long enough so he has forgotten I have the images so have published one here. It is an amazing collection with each lamp meticulously polished. I know there are other people out there with similar collections. Does your collection match John's? If so, please send me a photo and we can compare and honour the member with the best collection.

I have been communicating with Jenolan Caves management since the International Show Caves Association (ISCA) Congress in November 2014. Sandy McFeeters has resigned and Bob Conroy, the Trust Administrator has kindly provided me a copy of his summer report. Items that are of interest to ACKMA members include:

Trust Strategic Plan 2015-18

The Trust Strategic Plan has now been finalised following consultation with Trust staff. We are focussing on implementing that Plan to reinvigorate Jenolan Caves in

order to both improve our visitor services and to improve our environmental performance. A number of priority projects were identified in that Plan and have now commenced. More information is outlined below.

Divestment Process

As many of you would aware, Government has committed to rejuvenating Jenolan Caves at least cost and risk to the taxpayers of NSW. Several attempts at finding an external provider for the provision of visitor services at Jenolan Caves (ie outsourcing) have not been successful. The Minister and the Government have yet to determine a position on future approaches to the market. 2M Hospitality (Michael Meade and Barbara Maunsell) were contracted by NPWS on behalf of the interagency Divestment Steering Committee to provide specialist advice to inform the recommendations which will be considered by the Steering Committee and put to Government later this year.

Jenolan Karst Conservation Reserve Draft Plan of Management

The Jenolan Karst Conservation Reserve Draft Plan of Management is expected to be finalised and referred to the Minister for adoption in the next few months. The Trust has provided some comprehensive comments on the draft plan and is already implementing some of the high priority actions in close collaboration with the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

The divestment process is particularly interesting as it is clear many state conservation agencies managing caves and other revenue generating natural and cultural attractions are exploring the potential for private investment or operation of these attractions. South Australia released a Nature-based Tourism Strategy in 2014 with a strong focus on private investment, which has been further reinforced recently with another plan to open parks for private activities. Some ideas mooted include the establishment of mountain bike trails in some parks. Clearly, proposals will need to be carefully assessed to ensure values of parks are not compromised by newly permitted activities. We shouldn't be afraid of privately operated cave systems though. I once was but one of Australasia's most successful cave operations is Capricorn Caves, the site of the ACKMA AGM in May. See you there!

Coming Events	
2016: May 4-8	ACKMA Annual General Meeting and Cave Guides Workshop, Rockhampton, Queensland
2017: May	ACKMA Annual General Meeting, Auckland (tentative)
2017: 23-30 July	International Union of Speleology Congress, Penrith, NSW, Australia
2018: May	ACKMA Biannual Conference, Wombeyan Caves, New South Wales (tentative)