

CAVES GUIDES WORKSHOP AND ACKMA AGM: MAY 2016 ROCKHAMPTON, QUEENSLAND

Steve Bourne

Ann Augusteyn, owner of the only privately owned show cave in Australia, welcomed a group of about 40 to the Caves Guides' School. This was an outstanding attendance made up of mostly cave guides, but also some ACKMA members who came early for the AGM and participated in most of the workshop.

Andy Spate announced at the start of the workshop that Capricorn Caves is the best show cave operation in Australia. I asked Andy later what Capricorn Caves has and does for him to rate it as Australia's best. He pointed out Capricorn Caves has won tourism awards at every level; regional, state and national awards, so is highly rated by the tourism industry. Ann's team comprises a good balance of long term experienced staff and a great group of young enthusiastic guides. Well trained staff and a low staff turnover creates a "family" which delivers great experiences, working towards a common goal of making every visitor's time at Capricorn as enjoyable as possible. The third reason Andy gave is the attention to detail. In each cabin, the welcome pack is extensive and truly makes you feel like the business cares about you. I quietly observed how staff greeted visitors (guests), delivered tours and the all important maintenance. Each visitor was greeted with a smile and hello each time their path crossed with a staff member. And as the business is privately owned, it is not constrained by bureaucracy with capital works and operational matters. It has been a 25 year journey to develop the site to where it is, but clearly investment has been carefully considered and targeted to achieve the best results. By the end of the week, I had to agree with Andy - Capricorn Caves is doing a whole lot of things really, really well.

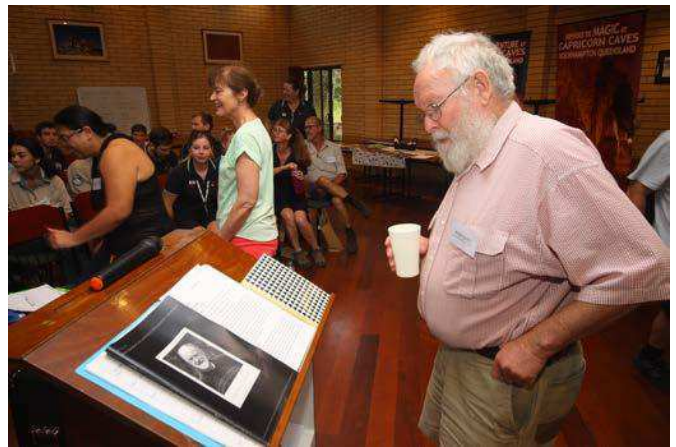
All guides introduced themselves and in their responses to Ann's question, "What do you hope to get out of the workshop", we heard a variety of objectives. Experience ranged from Barry Richard's half century of guiding and Andy Spate's even longer association with caves (since 1953) to some with less than 12 month's experience. The level of passion was high, a strong desire to learn, meet new people and leave the workshop a better guide.

Andy Spate provided a tribute to Elery Hamilton Smith and his role in establishing ACKMA and his work to improve the quality of cave guiding, followed by a minute's silence. Many of the younger guides had never met Elery and some had not heard of him, and the spare copies of ACKMA journal no. 100, the Elery tribute edition were quickly snapped up. The real work then got underway to develop the "Cave Guide's Toolbox".

Cathie Plowman and John Pastorelli led an activity which took guides out of their comfort zone, exploring new techniques and developing the toolbox. Pairs of guides led each other on short tours of the area outside the lodge, without sight and then without sight or sound. I was partnered with Mark Essenhugh, who works for Savannah Guides as a trainer. I quickly learnt that Mark is an expert interpreter who squeezed a green ant onto my tongue and followed that up by placing kangaroo dung in my hands and squeezing them while I was "blind". It was good fun, and also a great reminder that a cave tour can be much more if all senses are used.

John used his sporting background to great effect, encouraging guides to do the "one percenters", a favourite term of sporting coaches to incrementally improve your performance.

The group was asked "What does a good guide do and have?" The collective responses in brief were: Drawing on experience,



A moment of reflection: Andy Spate and the 100th edition of the ACKMA journal- the Elery edition - after delivering his tribute to Elery Hamilton-Smith

knowledge, "parking technology", welcome people, be a host, understanding, include whole family, silence and darkness, "just imagine", experience, use other senses, dealing with people not numbers, party tricks, enthusiasm, passion, use your "guide face", be the best you can possibly be, be open to new information,

Some work was undertaken around the questions, *Are guides meeting the expectations of visitors? How do I determine what the visitor's expectations are?*

This led to a very interesting activity defining the types of visitors to show caves, and then in groups, looking at what makes a "wow" or "grrr" tour. Each group then presented either their good or poor "tour" as a short skit. This resulted in some hilarious presentations and some very useful discussion. The activity could easily be delivered as part of a training program at a cave site. For me, it really had guides thinking about how they go about their work and targeting their tour for their



No wonder it is challenging to deliver a cave tour to satisfy everyone within the group. These are the group types and reasons for visiting caves identified in the workshop

group. Of course the challenge remains that each group is invariably a mixture of visitors.

David Morgans' presentation *Experience is Everything!* gave guides an overview of Australian tourism with a particular focus on Queensland. He showed the challenge for domestic tourism is huge as the holiday experience for Australians has changed quite markedly over the past six years. One of the drivers for this has been the value of the A\$ which has made outbound travel very affordable. This flows on to travellers gathering what David termed "transformative experiences" and the desire for "bragging rights". In thinking about his presentation, I realised that I probably fit the bracket of an Australian who takes overseas holidays with a lesser focus on visiting Australian attractions.

The challenge David put forward was to provide the experiences that people are after. A unique opportunity for Australia is Aboriginal stories woven into interpretation to enrich the offering at visitor attractions.

Three options were offered for the last session of the day; adventure caving, the Geo Tour or Cathedral Cave Tour. Most joined the Geo Tour. This tour is offered daily at Capricorn Caves and is usually a small group, not the 30 we had. Katherine was our guide who had the unenviable job of delivering the tour, quite a challenge to a group of fellow guides and a few ACKMA members thrown in as well. The tour starts with a presentation of geology of the region placing the Capricorn karst in context, with a screen presentation and hands on examples of fossils included in the local limestone. After the classroom session, the tour visits part of the cave and climbs the karst for spectacular 360° views of the landscape. We had a bonus with Scott Hocknull, palaeontologist with the Queensland Museum, on site. Scott met us in Colosseum Cave where he has an excavation site. He started the work at Capricorn in 2004 and has published several papers on his findings at Capricorn and nearby Mount Etna. The deposit is owl and ghost bat accumulated and incredibly rich. Owls have basically undertaken a biological survey over several hundred thousand years. I was also fascinated that Komodo Dragons are



Katherine Herring delivering the Geo Tour

really an Australian species. I have a long held desire to visit Komodo to see the dragons - maybe we should reintroduce them to Australia!

The tour is a good product offering increasing the diversity of experiences available at Capricorn and could be readily developed at other show caves. I am not sure about the tour name. Although it encapsulates the tour content, it may or may not help sell the tour to visitors.

After dinner, Ann Augusteyn took us on a tour of Cathedral Cave. The new lighting of the karst is sensational. John



*How good would it be to see Komodo Dragons back in Australia?
Some years ago I hosted a ranger from Komodo who gave me
this image. It is a favourite.*

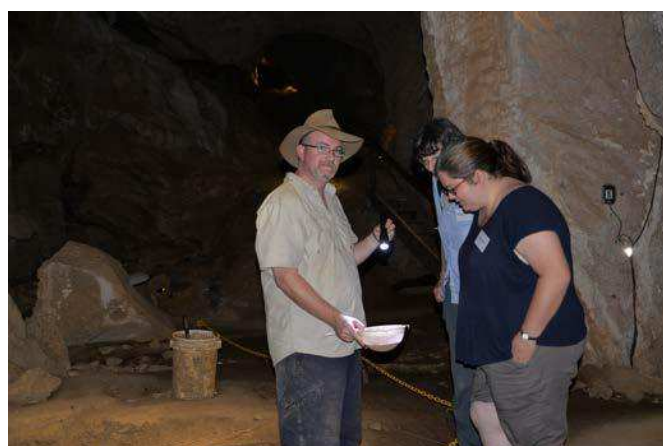
Pastorelli delivered the keynote address in the Cathedral Cave, another excellent presentation. Ann then gave the group the "sound and light" experience that is delivered as a part of the regular tour. It is very, very good.

Day two and Cathie and John led the group through a series of activities, once again working on developing the guide's toolbox. who will ever forget Cathy Buhck's "People are chocolate" presentation? Chocolate has not been the same since.

I took the opportunity for a short interview with David Morgans, to ask his thoughts on caves as visitor experiences and how these are viewed by the travelling public. David's role is Director, Destination Experience Development, Queensland Tourism, and has the clear insight into this subject in Queensland, and Australia.

Steve: *You have seen the passion amongst those who work in caves. Is there a passion for caves in those driving tourism industry in Queensland?*

David: *Caves are not high up in the tourism experiences in Queensland with the wealth of natural experience the state has. Jenolan Caves is a major experience in New South Wales, caves are a big thing in Western Australia, but not in Queensland. That said, Capricorn is a hero experience for the Rockhampton area and actively promoted by Queensland Tourism. The reason that Capricorn has such a high profile is because of the work of*



*Scott Hocknull showing fossils to Lisa Brooks and Regina Roach
(partially obscured) in Colosseum Cave
Photo: Ann Augusteyn*



Tim Davidson admiring the shawls in Resurrection Cave. Many of the Capricorn Caves' team, including Ann Augusteyn, were able to visit this cave for the first time over the weekend.

Photo: Ross Anderson

Ann and that it is privately owned. The privately owned cave allows for more innovation and generates passion amongst the staff. The level of autonomy that privately operated caves such as Capricorn has creates opportunities.

Governments shouldn't run what are essentially business enterprises. There is a concerted effort here though with National Park working hard with Queensland Tourism across three major visitor sites within National Parks to develop a stronger business model. They do have constraints that private businesses don't have which limits just how far they develop.

Steve: How do the travelling public view caves and what do you think are their expectations when they visit a cave?

David: For many people a cave visit is Jenolan and then when they see another cave offering it may stimulate their curiosity. A cave experience is about accessible adventure for many people, that sense of mystery. Caves are not the whole thing though, it's the package; the staff, the facilities, the family atmosphere. Capricorn Caves has a great family atmosphere. A lot of what you get in tourism nowadays is commodified.

Steve: Have cave tours that you have been on met your expectations? How could caves improve their standing in the tourism industry?

David: One cave tour does not make a holiday experience and one operator does not make a destination experience. Need to have a collective of businesses that can work together. One risk is that a poor experience in one cave may prevent someone from visiting the next cave they come across because of the experience that did not meet expectations. Cave operations work together and take on similar philosophy, maybe caves in

Australia should all take on the GUEST philosophy, it could be really powerful. Maybe this is something ACKMA could drive.

Food for thought. See Regina Roach's report from the workshop elsewhere in this journal for a discussion on the GUEST philosophy.

Friday was the cross over day; the Guides' School over and ACKMA weekend officially starting that evening. Some went to Keppel Island, some did a karst walk and others went caving. I

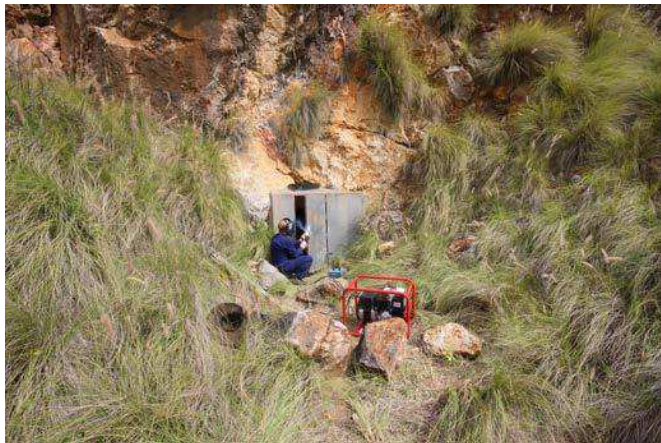


John Augusteyn at the entrance to Johannsens Cave



Some of the cave dwelling fauna at Capricorn.

joined the caving group and visited Resurrection and Main Cave on Mount Etna and Johannsens Cave across the road. Noel Sands led the trip into Resurrection Cave and provided the history behind the discovery of the cave during mining operations and the long battle to save the caves of Mount Etna. Some of the actions of the mining company, such as deliberately blowing up a cave used by ghost bats, are deplorable, but thanks to the determination of conservationists, at least some caves have been preserved. Resurrection Cave is well decorated, much more so than other caves in the area, with the damage from blasting clearly evident. Pieces of very large stalactites and sections of roof were dislodged and strewn across the cave floor. The cave had been recently accessed illegally but the only damage I observed was to the gate. Cameron James spent the day repairing it while we enjoyed our caving. Main Cave required far more energy and climbing and is quite a sporting cave.



Cameron James repairing the gate on Resurrection Cave, Mt Etna



the cave was totally emptied by the miners. I visited this cave again on Sunday with John Augusteyn, who provided excellent information on the cave's history and current management. Johannsens Cave has had a tough history and I hope current management strategies will work to conserve the cave as important bat habitat.

The (somewhat depleted) ACKMA committee met Friday afternoon in preparation for Sunday's AGM, prior to the dinner at the Great Western Hotel.

Some energetic souls did the karst walk at 6.30am on Saturday morning before we gathered at The Lodge for the morning's talks. John Augusteyn's presentation on Monitoring Central Queensland bats was excellent, although painted a fairly grim picture for the Ghost Bats. Only 50 individuals remain the Capricorn area which is a significant decline from the 400 that John Toop recorded about 30 years ago. This decline is worrying and confusing, because Scott Hocknull's work shows that the species has been a long resident in the area for several hundred thousand years, surviving large shifts in climate and being seemingly unaffected despite massive faunal turnover. Of course the difference between changes in the past and now is us - humans in the landscape and all of the issues we have brought.

Scott Hocknull then presented his 3D photogrammetry work. Many are doing this kind of work around Australia, but as usual, Scott is taking to the highest level. His vision to make museum collections accessible to all through the digital

Johannsens Cave is one of those caves that are a nightmare for the management agency. Multiple entrances, impossible to prevent access, breeding and roosting cave of the Ghost Bat and other species, and popular with the local community, many of whom would appear to have little regard for the cave's special values based on the amount of graffiti and rubbish observed. We had a good example of this when a father and his two daughters walked out of the cave in bare feet as we arrived.

This may paint a rather negative picture of the cave, but Queensland Parks has taken a number of measures such as preventing vehicle access to the cave and installing signage closing the cave during important periods for the bats. The most serious damage to the cave was done 100 years ago when guano miners used burning sulphur to gas the bats and remove them by the wheel barrow load. It appears from descriptions that many of these may have been Ghost Bats. The guano was several metres deep judging by the lines of the cave walls and



ACKMA members in Colosseum Cave with Scott Hocknull

medium, virtual cave tours and augmented reality really are at the cutting edge of technology.

ACKMA members were then shown the solar-powered LED lighting system and Scott's palaeontological site in two groups as the guides had been previously. It was excellent to get a second look at the cave, having largely missed the cave tours when I last visited in 2008. Mid afternoon we set off to Byfield National Park, visiting Lake Mary and volcanic plugs along the way. The destination was our dinner site at the Ferns Hideaway Restaurant. The late afternoon was only slightly spoilt by light rain, but it meant the evening festivities got underway a little earlier than planned. I admit to being concerned when I saw the restaurant with a small stage and microphone. Oh no, a

karaoke evening?! Far from it. Our host John Martens and his sidekick guitarist Mark were outstanding entertainment, playing non stop for over four hours of requests thrown at them from the floor. Their repertoire was extraordinary, and I will long remember Mark's guitar work with the Eagle's hit *Hotel California*.

The one and a half hour drive home gave most a chance to rest up for a little more socialising back at Capricorn, but it appeared most were a little weary by this time, or getting a good night's sleep prior to the AGM.

Sunday morning AGM? Who had that good idea? Despite the 8.00 am start, there was a good turn out and some really good discussion. A key item is the journal that you are now reading. It is costing more to produce than the membership fees we are receiving. Not a good business model, certainly for long term sustainability. We explored several options, including increasing the fee for a hard copy to cover printing costs (certainly a good idea in a user pay landscape), reducing the number of pages, seeking to reduce postage costs and putting more text on each page. In the end, membership fees were held at the current level and I am making changes to reduce costs in other ways.

The elections were held and the new committee is:

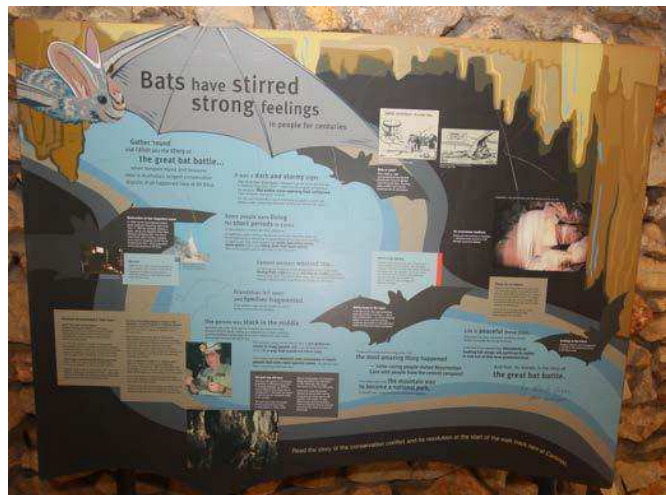
President	Dale Calnin
Australia Vice President	John Brush
NZ Vice President	Neil Collinson
Treasurer	Cath Loder
Executive Officer	Dan Cove
Committee members	Ann Augusteyn, Scott Melton, Tim Moulds
Publications Officer	Steve Bourne
Webmaster	Rauleigh Webb



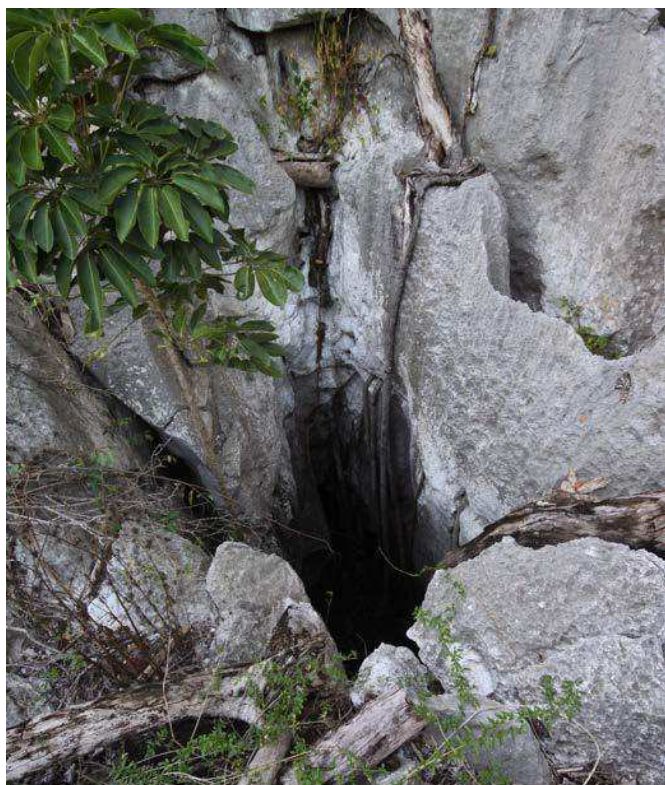
Laura Dawson and Lucy Collinson with John and Mark, who provided excellent entertainment at "The Ferns"

Photo: Ann Augusteyn

Grant Gartrell has been indicating for several years he would like to step down as treasurer and at last he has been relieved of his duties. Grant took over from Dennis Rebecchi as treasurer in about 1996 (neither Dennis or Grant are quite sure). It is remarkable that ACKMA has only had, until now, two treasurers for the whole of its existence. I wonder if Cath knew it is a 20 year term for this role when she accepted it?!



Above. Some interpretation is still in place at Cammoo. This panel features bats and the story of the long battle between cavers and miners on Mt Etna



The meeting also considered where next year's AGM would be held. ACKMA made the decision several years ago to hold consecutive AGMs when the International Speleological Congress was held in Australia in 2017, to get our conferences out of step with the Australian Speleological Federation conferences. Prior to the meeting, Neil Collinson had proposed that Te Anau host the meeting. The brief presentation compiled by Neil, daughter Lucy and Laura Dawson certainly had me salivating at the prospect of a trip to the south of New

Zealand's South Island. More information appears in this journal on this meeting.

The rest of the day was spent doing what cavers should be doing, looking at caves. I visited Johannsens Cave again with John Augusteyn as guide, and a visit to Cammoo Caves. This is now closed with the old visitor centre mostly stripped but still with some interpretation in place. The same pink paint used for navigational aids that was in Johannsens was in Cammoo, a caving weekend by some novice locals perhaps. During John Augusteyn's talk on Saturday, I had noticed that Gigas Cave, a ghost bat site as the name suggests, seemed to be quite close to the Lodge where the majority of people were staying. Early Sunday morning I located the cave, but of course didn't enter. I asked John about it and he kindly offered to show our group this cave on Sunday afternoon. No ghost bats, but a few *Hipposideros* as well as bones of rock wallaby pitfall victims.

Sunday night was the farewell dinner and the opportunity to thank the Capricorn Caves' team for their efforts. It was a superbly organised event which is well summed up by the guides who have provided their thoughts for this journal. During the week we had been upholding the ACKMA tradition of raising funds for a local worthy cause. In this case, the recipient was the local primary school, who after donations were collected and items sold, received just under \$500. The largest input came from Kent Henderson, who despite feeling most unwell for the duration of the meeting, was not going to be beaten for a framed print of the ACKMA delegates at the meeting. The photo was taken the morning before and hastily printed and framed by Ann. Kent paid \$90 (I think) for the picture, a most generous donation.



*Above. Andy Spate with Kent Henderson and his auction win
Below. President Dale Calnin thanking Ann Augusteyn for the excellent week*