

A DAY AT MARGARET RIVER, with a practical visionary

- Kent Henderson

A day at Margaret River is an uplifting experience, especially if you like caves or wine, or both!! I was in Western Australia recently to attend a (non-cave related) Conference in Perth, and with two other wine-loving delegates headed to Margaret River on Friday 11 October. Caves Manager Robyn McBeath kindly arranged some very pleasant local cottage accommodation. The next morning, my two companions sloshed off for a day in the wineries, while Robyn picked me up for a day in the caves. It was my first visit since the 1991 ACKMA Conference, and I was keen to see what had transpired in the interim. Mostly good, I am happy to report - though not all...

First up, we went to Ngilgi Cave at Yallingup, where we caught up with its manager, Liam Kinsella. First impressions were excellent. The walking track to the cave had been greatly improved and landscaped well into the bush environment. Similarly, the cave entrance had been vastly improved, with the former opera house-like canopy removed and placed further up the track as an assembly point for tour groups. Newer external signage was also good. Full marks so far, Liam.

Upon entering the cave, as I already was aware, the former underground office was gone. The scorecard was still looking good. Then Robyn and I turned left to top of the *Antechamber*, a rather pleasant rock-collapse cavern. Oh dear. All the old lighting had been removed, only to be replaced with what must have been forty 12v diacronics (unshielded) intermittently placed all over the rock collapse, and mostly pointing upwards. The visage was simply one of a myriad of spotlights in one's eyes. Without great difficulty and concentration, it was very hard to focus on the features of the cave. Sorry Liam, it was not good. Not even any switching, either. Hmm... If it were me, I wouldn't take the public down into the chamber at all, the view from the top (lighting notwithstanding) is excellent. However, if one simply must allow tourists into it, on a self guided basis, then infrared trip switches (a la Fig Tree Cave at Wombeyan and Wet Cave at Naracoorte) is the obvious answer, together with a complete rearrangement of the lighting. For mine, a well-lit cave is one where visitors do not see any light globes shining in their faces, only the lights on a chamber's features, which is what they have come to see, and what we want them to see - surely? Of course, the demographics of some caves make this ideal more difficult to achieve than in others. However, I can see no problem, given a little thought, to getting most lights out of tourist's faces in the *Antechamber*.

The tour through the rest of cave showed some changes to my past visit, particularly in improved tracking and rock & rubbish clean up. Good Stuff. The lighting was largely unchanged, yet Liam has plans, given the funding to work on this. Still, with

respect, there were areas which could of been addressed immediately, at no cost, which haven't as yet - such as removing the appalling old "descriptive" signage dotted through the cave.

Liam, with the assistance of Stewart Dallas (see his separate article herein) has done great deal of experimentation on pathways in the cave. Yes, and quite impressively, too - addressing some key problems such as the movement of dirt on tourist's shoes. Be that as it may, again with great respect, most of this work has already been done in Eastern States' caves.....

Upon bidding adieu to Liam, Robyn and I trundled down to Jewel Cave at Augusta. Jewel was mostly unchanged since my last visit. Robyn is keen to do some significant re-lighting, particularly in removing, in time, the appalling green-flourescent strips that serves currently as track lighting near the entrance. I noted that the revolting old (long disused) power cables draping down the floor-to-ceiling tree roots at the first viewing platform were still there (Keith Tritton promised they were going in 1991). Robyn renewed that promise. We had a considerable discussion on the hydrology of Jewel Cave, namely the lack of water in what once was a lake-type cave. Of course, there are no definite answers to the lack of water, though several theories. A proper hydrology study of the Jewel Cave System is one of Robyn's highest priorities.

As so to Mammoth Cave. Now I was impressed. Virtually all the tracking in the cave has been replaced, and tracks re-routed away from sensitive areas, particularly the wonderful shawls towards the rear of the cave. The awful *stalaglights* (vertical flouro lights on posts) of the past are gone (I believe only just, because I reminded Robyn before my visit...), and the lighting generally is up to expected standards now. The new rotunda and boardwalk to the entrance is excellently done, too, as is the new gating at both ends of the cave. Impressive stuff. Peter Bell has recently been experimenting with a weir upstream in the creek through the cave, that has thus far successfully regulated the water flow through the cave much to the enhancement, in my view, of the visitor experience. 9 out of 10, Robyn and Peter!!

Then to Lake Cave. The entrance area Robyn inherited needs work, as we both agreed. Inside, however, Peter and Robyn have just about totally re-lit the cave, mostly in 12v, at little cost and with excellent effect. Very impressive again. Virtually no light bulbs shining in your eyes here. In my view, Lake is one of the most beautiful show caves in Australia, and it now has lighting worthy of its status. Robyn and I discussed the idea of eventually taking the pathways out altogether and making it a boat-tour cave (a la Waitomo's Glowworm Cave). It's demographically feasible, and demonstrated to me

(as all my discussions with Robyn did) that I talking to a visionary, yet one with a firm view of reality and the possible. Lake Cave? 9 out of 10 again.

And so to the highlight of the day - Caveworks!!! It is truly magnificent, and when completed (largely by the time members are reading this article) it will rival the Waitomo *Museum of Caves*. Robyn spent some time explaining the displays to be put in place, and guiding me around the soon-to-be audio-visual room, offices, karst science laboratory, and general visitor areas. Outside, was a then-nearly-complete (now complete) universal access boardwalk to the edge of the Lake Cave doline, allowing wheelchair access to the vista. Things were more impressive every step I took! Wow!! People, get over there and see it! I can't wait to get back to see the completed product!!!

During the day, we also called in at several CALM-managed caves. CALM has recently moved to a user pay system for its "adventure" caves, such as Giants Cave, with \$2 coin-in-the-slot boxes at entrances. Some recent track work in the caves I saw was also good. At two different sites CALM has

erected steel or wood structures to "assist" abseiling into cave entrances. All I can say is I hope their public liability insurance is very well paid up. I would have thought anyone injuring themselves abseiling over such purpose-built, but totally unsupervised, equipment would go for CALM's financial juggler. Of course, when there is no infrastructure, and someone breaks their neck, one can readily argue it was not CALM's fault. But when you put in the infrastructure, and then it happens, I cannot see how CALM could not be sued blind....

Overall, then, I had a most pleasant day indeed. Thank you, Robyn, for your great hospitality! It was also great to catch up with Raughliegh (one day I'll learn how to spell his first name) Webb during some evening arm-bending. And what of Robyn? I was extremely impressed, folks. I have, of course, met many wonderful and dedicated cave managers - we are fortunate to be well blessed across Australasia. Still, Robyn is definitely in the top draw - a great practical visionary, who knows how to handle both people and caves, with both tact and sensibility. Watch this space....!!!