

# BEST PRACTICE IN VISITOR MANAGEMENT

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## INTRODUCTION

The term 'Best Practice', or even 'World's Best Practice', has become the latest buzzword of industry. Often, it is clearly just a lot of hype to try and convince us that the same old mediocrity has been magically changed by using the right words. People are rightly beginning to be very suspicious and even contemptuous of the term.

However, we use it in our title for good or bad, simply because there is a real possibility that it might lead to better practice if we really confront the quality issues. David Weston (1996) of Parks Victoria recently argued that World Best Practice is a 'goal out on the horizon'. This expresses the notion that best practice is not the current operation of any organisation, nor is it a product, but rather it is a process which leads to continual enhancement of standards.

Thus, a number of the practices which we will reject in the course of this paper are ones which various or all of us have supported or used in earlier years. But we have learned from those mistakes, and from the mistakes of others (which are, of course, much easier to see) and so have embarked on the search for 'best practice'. It is now clear that much of what has been done in the past cannot be tolerated if we are to strive for 'best practice.' We trust that our efforts will inspire others to become more creatively and positively critical of standards in everyday practice.

Further, we emphasise that our principles are intended as a basis for discussion ; certainly not as a prescription. We may have overlooked some very important issues, or we may simply have it wrong. But most importantly, the movement towards best practice demands industry involvement and agreement. We hope that people will take the challenge very seriously and look firstly at ways in which each cave area can achieve best practice in the way which is just right for the setting concerned, and only secondly at how this can be translated into industry-wide principles.

## BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

In any discussion of best practice, it is important to spell out one's basic assumptions about the context of practice.

Let us start with karst itself. Rolan Eberhard (1996 : 8) provides a particularly neat description in saying that karst is an integrated and dynamic system of ' . . . component landforms as well as life, energy, water, gases, soils and bedrock.' Note in particular that he includes life - which obviously includes human beings - and that he also includes those things which are, at least in part, the products of life - energy, water and

gases. This notion also directs our attention to some of the things which we do not normally notice, or even recognise. It leads to the inescapable conclusion that part of good practice in visitor management must be maintaining the dynamic balance of life and its products in the karst environment.

Visitors are usually concentrated in one component of the karst landforms - the caves. So we need to next consider some of our assumptions about caves. Here we draw upon the very valuable statements from Gillieson (1996 : 4-5) which set an appropriate baseline :

*First, that caves are a measure of the intensity and persistence of the karst process . .*

*Secondly, that caves tend to integrate both surface and underground geomorphic processes . . .*

*Thirdly that once these products of surface and underground processes enter the cave system, they are likely to be preserved with minimal alteration for tens of millennia, perhaps even millions of years.*

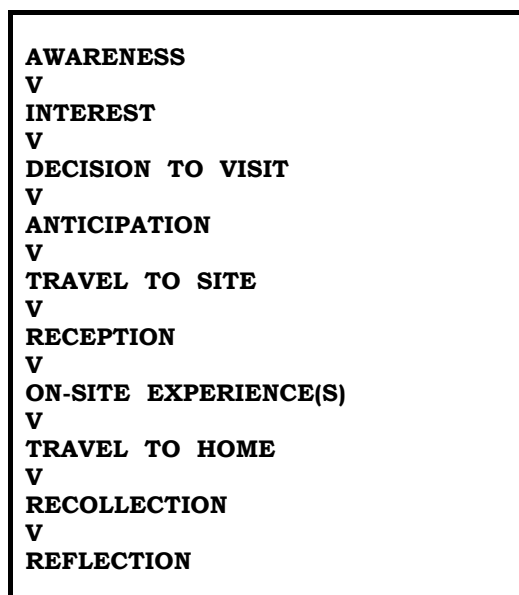
*Thus, caves can be regarded as natural museums in which evidence of past climate, past geomorphic processes, past vegetation, past animals and past people will be found by those who are persistent and know how to read the pages of the earth history displayed for them.*

Again, visitor management must pay proper regard to the protective functions of cave management, and further, must recognise the displayed features of earth history so that they may be appropriately presented and interpreted to those visitors who are interested.

## SHAPING VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Before entering into practical details, we need to also discuss the very basics of the way in which any visitor experience is shaped. This involves a complex of factors, all of which must be located within the so-called trip cycle. This can be detailed in a range of ways, but includes at least the stages listed in Figure 1 below.

As we deal further with the actual detail of management, we will return to this cycle and deal with it stage by stage. But even at this point, let us emphasise the importance of such factors as awareness, anticipation, reception (arrival) and recollection. Any one of these may well be more important than the experience itself, and of course, it is the recollection which counts most to the visitor in the long run. Do we give enough attention to ensuring that every visitor receives a memorable rather than a routine experience ?



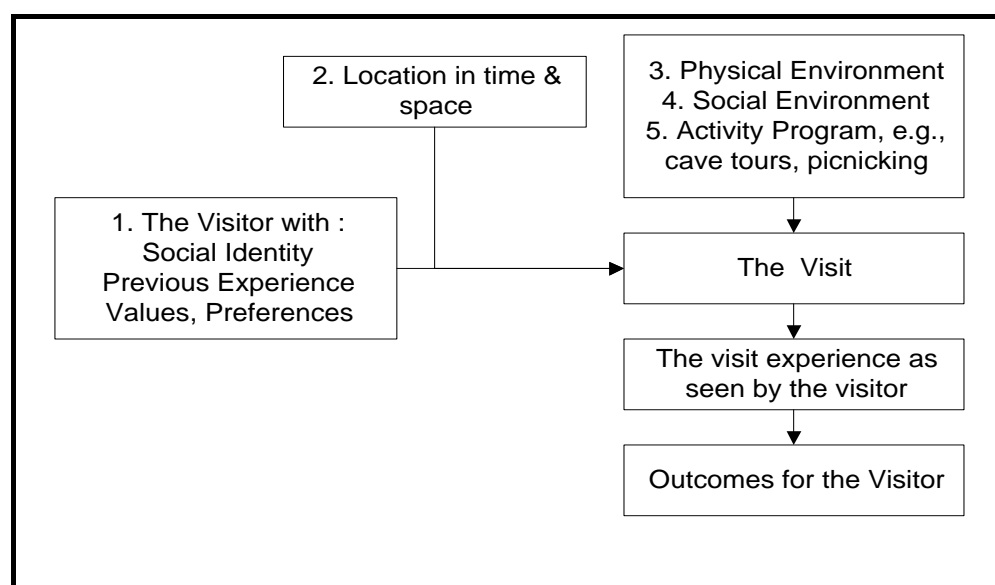
**Fig. 1 : The Trip Cycle**

Of course, the cave managers are not solely responsible for the quality of the experience. In Fig. 2, we introduce a way of considering a cave visit, based upon a model for understanding any recreational experience developed by one of us (Hamilton-Smith 1994 : 80). This argues that there are five key sets of variables which enter into shaping the experience and its outcomes :

- opportunities and constraints which are brought to the experience by the visitor
- time-space location  
(neither of which can be shaped or altered by cave managers)
- physical environment of the cave park
- social environment

- program and activities of the visit  
(all three of which can be shaped or influenced by cave managers)

Finally in this prelude, we have to ask the question of 'Who are the Visitors ?' It seems to us that common cave management practice only really recognises 3 categories of visitors : cavers, wild cave tourists and tourists. Some might even be sophisticated enough to recognise bus tourists as different from FIT tourists. But the fact is that most tourist visitors are lumped together in standard routine tours and other than some individual attention from the better guides, no real consideration is given to the remarkable heterogeneity of tourists.



**Fig. 2 : The Shaping of Visitor Experience**

To integrate this discussion, we suggest that cave managers have a wide range of responsibilities, but pre-eminent amongst these are

- proper stewardship and preservation of the caves resource,
- safety of the visitors (there is no point in a good experience if it is also terminal !)
- quality experience for all visitors.

We now turn to suggesting some practical guidelines.

## **TOWARDS BETTER PRACTICE**

### **Awareness and Interest**

Obviously any better practice must commence near the top of the trip cycle with the public information and marketing program. There are at least two principles which should be applied here. If these are applied properly, particularly with an eye to specific population segments, we will may also help to shape the decision to visit (and with whom people choose to visit) and the anticipation of the visit.

- 1. The information made available to the public should be accurate, but also should not convey a misleading impression, no matter how accurate.**

Probably photographs are the element most often at fault ; they all too often imply silent contemplation of a particularly beautiful scene, presented far more dramatically and effectively than is in fact the reality. In other words, they are all too likely to build an anticipation which will not be fulfilled by the visit, even though the portrayal is accurate. Similarly, slogans may well exaggerate some aspects of a cave beyond what visitors will experience.

Wherever there is a discrepancy between what our information promises and what we can deliver on site, we have two choices - change our information or change our on-site offerings.

- 2. Recognise the extent to which information prior to the visit can reduce depreciative or other undesirable behaviour**

An outstanding example has been noted by Hamilton-Smith (1980) from Plitvice in Slovenia. Here all publicity and information emphasises the 'four keywords' of the park : Water, Forests, Waterfalls, Silence. These four words are repeated in 8 languages on the archways through which one enters the park. The result is that visitors treat the park with remarkable respect, and move through quietly, almost as if they were visiting a cathedral.

In a similar way, the message 'Travel Through Time at Wellington Caves' will hopefully convey the idea of an exciting educational experience - something which Wellington is ideally placed to deliver.

In other words, through our prior information, we can not only help visitors to understand what they might expect of their visit, but prepare them to enjoy the experience in an appropriate way. In some cases, the fact that a number of quite different tours are available is not made known, and so visitors arrive, having planned a brief visit, and are disappointed because they cannot stay long enough to see more.

Then the information which might be provided to caving groups wishing to visit the caves should make the outcome expectations of the management authority clear ; something which is all too rarely done.

### **Arrival and Reception**

Few areas are as fortunate as Jenolan in having the spectacular and truly memorable entry through the Arch. But this is no excuse for failing to design an attractive entry at other places. In particular, there are many where a simple relocation of the car park would be of immense assistance to the quality of arrival - visitors should be able to park and then enjoy a delightful walk to the entrance. We can also think about proper location of simple amenities - at one well-known cave area, the dominant vision at the moment of arrival was the brightly lit and brilliantly coloured Coke machine. We should convey something of welcome, awe and mystery, beauty, or grandeur, do it in a way which will be genuinely memorable, and avoid kitsch at all costs.

- 3. Ensure that the best possible appearance is given at the entry to the cave area.**

- 4. Every visitor should be welcomed as a real person, not just as another number in the queue**

Bus groups demand special attention, simply to overcome the 'conveyor belt' syndrome. A guide should welcome the party as they leave the bus.

The purpose of this would include welcoming them, telling them where the toilets and kiosk are and outlining the plan for their visit. It is more

difficult with those travelling independently - but the welcome is of immense importance. Just having to join the queue to buy a ticket is already starting behind the post, and demands either a 'welcome and information' guide near the ticket office or a particularly welcoming ticket seller who can answer all the questions about tour options.

### **Framing of tours**

Sometimes there is just one cave with only one route and it will demand considerable imagination to ensure that each tour is individualised. But we can do a great deal better in most cave areas. We start with the overall organisation of tours, and move later to issues of pathways arrangement and guiding.

#### **5. Each tour should provide for an appropriate number of people and last for an appropriate time.**

Actual tour size should, at least, depend upon :

- the nature of the cave ; no tour should be so large that some visitors cannot see the same features as others, or cannot hear the guide
- the character of the tour

Similarly, the timing of the tour should be based in the character of the tour ; people should not feel unduly rushed. Then, we all know that some visitors want to go on talking with the guide and at least some recognition should be given to this in time allocation ; but schedules certainly have to be maintained.

#### **6. The guide is fundamentally important to all cave visitors ; each tour should be based in the relationship between the tour group and the individual guide(s).**

In other words, daisy-chain use of multiple guides, changing guides in mid-tour, etc. are all bad practice. In those special situations where it may be necessary to have two guides involved, each should have a clear understanding of their respective and different roles. Other interruptions, e.g., noisy repair or construction

work going on during visiting hours or having parties close enough as to disturb each other in terms of either sound or vision is also bad practice. Sending late arrivals to join an already commenced tour should be avoided if possible, but clearly there is always a judgement to be made in this issue.

#### **7. Visitors should be accurately informed as to what they can expect from each tour.**

There should always be readily available information about how strenuous any tour may be, how long it will take, and what the character of the tour experience will be. Think about how

good it is to have a restaurant menu which not only gives a name to each dish but which tells you in a line or two what the ingredients are and how it is cooked.

#### **8. Avoid mixing unduly diverse kinds of people or diverse interests in any one tour if this will have adverse impacts upon the experience of any visitors.**

As an obvious example, a group of high school students should not be on the same tour as a group of old age pensioners; and if there is a tour which comprises an organised party, then one should try to avoid having individual visitors on the same tour.

Allowing photography or video cameras is a common but thoroughly undesirable practice. Other people should not be subjected to the

special demands and common lack of good manners shown by photographers. Photography should either be totally banned, or separated off into special photographic tours. It is clear that this is not a matter upon which managers have agreement at this point, at least partly because the articulate demands of photographers tend to overshadow the 'silent majority'. We also note with interest several reports of (sometimes serious) safety problems of photography.

#### **9. Every efforts should be made to identify the needs and interests of all visitors and to provide for these.**

This provides a very important balance to the last principle ; we should provide an opportunity for the photographers - and for the various ethnic

communities, disabled people, people who just want to be entertained, people who want to learn about caves, and so on.

### **Pathways and Lighting**

Best practice in environmental management generally demands that pathways and other engineering be minimised, so there may only be one path. However, with creative design and environmentally sensitive construction, we may well be able to provide alternatives.

**10. Pathways and lighting should always provide for as much flexibility as possible in tour arrangements.**

At the minimum, in a two-entry system, pathways should be designed for use in either direction ; if possible without unduly increasing impacts on the cave, loops or other options might be provided.

Lighting should be such that the pathway always remains lit ; this is both an important safety measure, particularly in any emergency, but also enables an individual to easily return to the entrance if they wish. Obviously, this demands low intensity lighting with a minimum of spillover. Fixed feature lights should be installed to match the needs of the guides as agreed by the electrician. They should be able to be switched on and off in any sequence (remote controls are obviously appropriate) and with small groups, or in a cave where it is feasible to split large groups into smaller groups, hand-held lights may well be very much preferable to fixed lights.

### **Tour guiding**

There is virtually universal agreement that the quality of a tour experience depends more than anything else upon the quality of the guide (see Hamilton-Smith 1985). But there is no such thing as an ideal guide, nor should there be any set of rules about how a particular tour should be conducted. The character of any tour should be based in not just the nature of the cave, but much more in the individual character given to the tour by the guide.

**11. Every guide should be expected to develop their own repertoire of tours**

Basically, the best tour will be one where the guide is enthusiastic about what they have to deliver - and that is most likely if it is their own tour program, not a prefabricated one put together by someone else. They should be able to define their objectives in terms of visitor experience, and set their own program content and means of delivery

Each guide needs to have a diversity of tours to offer, and should be able to set a size and time to suit each one : naturally, if this is carried out properly, then prices may have to vary in relation to size and length of the tour. Each tour would also have to have a brief description available to the public (see 7 above) so that they know what to expect.

**12. Recognise that good guiding does not just consist of talking to the tour group.**

In the first place, there are a range of other functions, like proper marshalling of the tour group (Hamilton-Smith 1985). More importantly, excessive talking is one of the most common ways in which some guides manage to degrade tour quality. We cannot improve upon natural beauty by talking - it may even be better to insist upon total silence.

Underlying this, of course, there are all the very necessary basic communication principles. The guide must be audible, and the visitor must be able to not only hear but to see any features which the guide is discussing. But above all, each visitor must feel that the guide is acknowledging them and speaking to them. Eye contact, speaking to special issues which interest some

people, speaking with people rather than to them, encouraging them to ask questions or comment are all part of the communication package.

Finally, there is the conclusion of the tour experience. Again, this is a human relations issue - we should ensure that we thank people for joining us, and wish them a safe and pleasant journey and many happy memories.

### **'Adventure' Tours**

There has been a gradually developing fashion for 'adventure' or 'wild cave' tours.

There are several problems in the very notion as we commonly see it. In particular, it is set up as an opposite to the traditional tour, rather than

just one spot on a spectrum. In general and quite idealistic terms, there might be a spectrum where visitors can simply walk through an undeveloped cave with a guide ; walk through an undeveloped cave on their own ; scramble with some difficulty through an undeveloped cave with a guide(s) ; scramble through such a cave on their own ; or even assist in cave survey, research programs or work programs in the caves.

However, current problems in risk management and the increasing litigation following accidents mean that managers must tread very cautiously. Encouraging, or even allowing, visitors to enter

and move through undeveloped caves on their own should only be undertaken after very careful assessment of the site and the development of a full risk management plan. No doubt this is possible with some caves - but many will prove not appropriate for this kind of activity. Similarly, of course, any guided 'adventure' tourism demands a proper risk management assessment and plan.

Probably all of the same general principles apply here as in a developed cave tour, but there are additional considerations.

**13. 'Adventure tours' demand special attention to both safety and environmental considerations.**

Guides taking 'adventure tours' must have adequate skills in handling accidents or other safety problems and there must be a risk management and emergency plan in place for any caves selected for this purpose.

Such caves should also be subject to a special environmental assessment before selection with environmental management guidelines being established and observed.

We also know that often these tours are just 'added on' to the existing program without real consideration of the arrangements for issue of equipment and changing clothes. A good example is provided in New Zealand by Blackwater Rafting - but we would suggest that while their arrangements are very adequate, they are also the

minimum that should be available in an 'adventure caving' operation..

**Cavers**

There is a range of groups who wish to undertake exploration and research or recreational caving. First of all, let us be clear that those undertaking exploration and research may well make a massive contribution to the knowledge base for better management of the caves, and should be encouraged at all times. However, this does not ensure that they are necessarily safe, environmentally sensitive or responsible. There are also many kinds of such groups : Speleological Societies, Scout Groups, Schools, Other Outdoors Clubs, Commercial Tour Providers, etc.

**14. Cave managers should accept the responsibility of ensuring that ALL caving groups visiting their area are both environmentally responsible and safe.**

This means that they are aware of and adhere to the appropriate Minimal Impact Codes and are aware of and act responsibly towards any specific vulnerability of the area concerned. Similarly, they should demonstrate adequate equipment, leadership and safety practices.

We know that although most Speleological Societies are very responsible, there may be the occasional one which at some time in its life-span is just a batch of hoons, and that even in the best group, there will be the odd wild-card member. Managers cannot abdicate the responsibility of regularly checking every group - if a group does damage, it usually cannot be made good again. The focus must be on prevention, not on what we do after the event.

Then there is safety. The kind of training standards being established by the Outdoor Recreation Council of Australia are a very valuable and positive attempt to deal with this and we must continue to work at effective regulation of this kind. However, at this stage, the standards have had to be developed within an outdated and essentially inappropriate

educational framework imposed by the training regulation industry. They focus on technical competencies, not on judgement and wisdom, which must be the basis of all safe practice. Anyone with long experience in outdoor recreation management knows that major disasters result not from failure in technical expertise but from mistakes in judgement. Even worse, the ORCA competencies are being applied by a diversity of instructors and instructional organisations. Some of these just do not understand what they are doing, e.g., the instructor who believes he can train people in caving skills by using abandoned mines. He seems to have no understanding that the environmental and safety considerations are very different.

So, do not accept a certificate or any other accreditation as meaning anything other than the best of intentions. As Colin Abbott has pointed out on various occasions (firstly 1981), including the first national meeting held in Australia to discuss outdoor recreation leadership training, "There are many people who are competent and not qualified and many people who are qualified but not competent." So, the manager must accept

the responsibility for checking the equipment and competence of all visiting groups.

### **The Nature of Management**

Finally, we come to a notion that underlies all of our thinking above. One of the characteristics of the prevailing economic irrationality is that it has emphasised the so-called 'new managerialism'.

This involves the boss giving commands from on high which are implemented without argument by the workers. It is an utter nonsense ; we have 75 years of industrial relations research which has established that real productivity and quality comes from seeing management not as a role but as a shared responsibility.

**15. Management must be seen and operationalised as a shared responsibility by all staff.**

We are concerned at the growing perception that guides are not part of the management team, but just carrying out a routine task. Guides not only have a very demanding and highly skilled job ; they are the real managers of visitor experience ; they should have ready access to staff development opportunities and their expertise should be properly recognised.

### **Putting it all Together**

By now, we have raised a number of issues. If these are all taken as seriously as we hope they will be, the quality of visitor service will be considerably enhanced, but it will mean a new look and often significant changes in practice. In the case of a major cave park, this will demand integration through a Visitor Service Plan.

One aspect of any such plan is the identification of clearly defined objectives for the visitor experience. This single step is vital if we are to follow one of the basic principles of most best practice schemes, namely, the monitoring and evaluation of outcomes. This is not the place to discuss monitoring and evaluation in any depth, but unless there are clearly defined objectives, then any evaluation of outcomes will be of much more limited value.

But, of course, many cave managers are responsible for relatively small scale operations in a single cave - the full-scale visitor service plan is probably not warranted here, but the same principles apply. Perhaps we need a general manual on visitor service management to provide basic guidelines and advice for both managers and guides ?

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