

THE PRIVATISATION OF CAVES

- NIGHTMARE OR DREAM?

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History has shown that time tends to make the wildest ideas and schemes eventually become reality. This paper was commenced in 1986 and surfaced during a periodic clean out about two years ago, when it was basically completed. The paper is already again, not up to date, but illustrates the concerns and possible advantages.

Cave and Karst Resources could be broadly categorized into 4 groups:-

1. Government owned and operated.
2. Government owned and privately operated.
3. Privately owned and operated.
- and maybe 4. Privately owned and Government operated.

Governments and Politicians are busily selling off our assets as fast as possible in their quest for a balanced budget. Anything that stands still is at risk, and it is not too far fetched to see the future sale of our natural assets. In fact, to some extent this may be deemed to have already occurred in respect of certain Native Title Claims. Waitomo Caves and to a lesser extent Jenolan Caves, may also be considered to have been privatized.

Governments, in the continual struggle to fund such worthwhile projects as recliner chairs in Parliament and new furniture for the Lodge, may soon see the National Parks, and in particular the Nation's Karst Resources, with their considerable tourist visitation, as highly saleable properties. The fact that Tourist Caves generally operate on a near break-even basis would not mean a "fire sale" price, and Governments would envisage substantial returns from privatization.

Under these circumstances, we could see assets in Category 1 in private hands very quickly. Those in Category 2 would be sold to the operator or disposed of at the end of the Lease or License. Status quo would continue for those in Category 3, whereas any assets in Category 4 would be subject to the arrangements with the government operator, and their salability on that basis.

Assuming a worst case scenario, as the Government desperately seeks funds to meet its more pressing commitments (such as providing Social Benefits to out of work Brain Surgeons), our assets (lets now specifically refer to Caves) will be sold without strings and not subject to on-going management or conservation controls. It is possible this will result in bad management practices in the pursuit of the mighty dollar, eventually degrading our karst assets.

OK, let us now assume that the Governments have sold all their current Tourist Caves and have brought in a bundle of cash. But the Minister wants to attend a conference in New York on Conservation

of Natural Resources and the coffers are empty, so some bright-eyed Public Servant (no disrespect intended) says "We can sell some undeveloped caves. Exit Cave would be good as I have heard it has more than one entrance so we can sell it at least twice!"

Obviously these undeveloped caves will be cheaper and available to people like Joe who has retired from the Railways after 47 years and has a super superannuation pay-out.

In addition, the existing operators would be put under immense pressure to maintain their market share and trim expenses. They will undertake alterations and additions to make their perception of the cave and its environment more attractive to tourists. Lots of colored lights and a sprinkling of statuettes, gnomes etc. A couple of radio controlled flying model bats would be good. We'll put in a natural swimming pool upstream of the cave with toilets and change facilities. No problem there, the stream will take the effluent away.

Exits would be opened up to allow the maximum numbers of people to be pushed through the cave and forced air ventilation provided for tourist comfort. Our Tasmanian Caves are cold to mainlanders so heating will be required. Once the cave is totally degraded, a new cave would be opened. Any decoration surviving out of the original would be sold as souvenirs, and the old cave area sold to the Karsttopowder Quarry Company.

This is certainly a nightmarish picture. However the other side of the picture may show privatization resulting in better management practices and sound commercial decisions based on proven conservation principles, without degradation to what is basically a non-renewable resource.

It should be expected that Caves would not be sold to "Mommas and Poppas" (because of the price tag), but rather to established financially sound business enterprises with previous tourism experience. Such operators are cognizant of the importance of good commercial and environmental practices for continued financial success, and do not operate on short term policies.

They would appreciate the non-renewable aspect of their acquisition and treat conservation practices and policies as economic sense. The problem that faces all Cave Managers of whether to use or conserve becomes more complex for these operators, who must use (for profit) and must conserve (to maintain profits in the future).

In my opinion, these operators will encourage and support scientific investigations in general, and in particular in respect of Carrying Capacity.

I would envisage very detailed monitoring of the effects of tourist traffic on their cave, and consultative discussions with relevant experts prior to commencing any works of any nature within their cave system.

As tourist satisfaction will be of prime importance to the operators, they would ensure that guides are well trained in all aspects, and able to discuss educational, historical and scientific details as the circumstances dictate. They would be encouraged to be enthusiastic, and particularly not to run tours by rote.

Many current Government operations are required to be self-funding which often results in a shortage of funds for capital works leading to peripheral organizations, such as "Friends of the Cave" assisting in cleaning and other works.

Our private operators should not be cash-strapped, and will be considering the bigger picture. Ample

capital would be available for necessary works and new facilities. Admittedly the whole operation would be profit orientated, but the over-riding concern will be maintenance of profits, and thus, conservation of the cave system.

This is a much better picture incorporating all the current aspects of good cave management together with ample capital funds, improved facilities and on-going subsidized scientific research.

Realistically, it is probable that the results of privatization will fall somewhere between the Nightmare and the Dream. We should consider it incumbent on our organization to ensure that when privatization occurs, the operators will be subject to comprehensive compulsory guide lines administered by a statutory body, specifically set up for the purpose of maintaining the current good management and conservation policies being followed by Cave Managers throughout Australasia.

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