

AN UPDATE ON RUAKURI CAVE, WAITOMO

- John Ash

The catwalks lie damply in darkness occasionally “washed” by the muff led screams of modern-day “explorers” tubing their way down the main stream on a Black Water Rafting trip.

7 February 1998 was the tenth anniversary of the closing of the traditional Ruakuri Tourist Cave. It was also the beginning of a patient challenge to clarify land ownership and cultural issues and to search for partnerships which would see the cave re-opened.

The learning curve still slopes onward and outward but patience has yielded progress. Surveys have shown that the majority of the cave resource lies under the Holden family’s property. Local government (the Waitomo District Council) has become a resource owner as road reserve has proved to overlie sections of the old tourist route. The original entrance to the cave has been recognized as a significant *waahi tapu* (or sacred burial site) lying just inside the Ruakuri Bush Reserve which is administered by the Department of Conservation. Initiatives are underway to delineate this area and, through a process of public consultation and legislation, re-vest it in the local Moari people. If this is successful it will become a cultural “island” in the main body of the Reserve. The Holden family has opened negotiations with upstream landowners with regard to purchasing the upper reaches of the cave in the hope of more easily protecting the integrity of the system.

With the historic *waahi tapu* entrance closed, access to the system is still an issue. A possible partnership with a major tourism operator. Tourism Holdings Ltd. (ex The Helicopter Line) and the boring of a 90 metre tunnel into the cave have been quietly shelved.

A new venture has been struck between the Ruakuri Holden Trust and another company, N Z

Glowworm Caves Ltd. (Mike Gibbons), based in Rotorua. Part of the initial thrust of this new venture has been to revisit earlier exploration (1988) carried out by the Holden family and Peter Chandler of Black Water Rafting.

This was focused on the Rimrock Gully area which branched off from an old abandoned tourist walkway (see map). It was hoped that it could side-step the need to excavate an access tunnel. In early October 1997, a preliminary ground radar survey, carried out by Detection Solutions of Auckland, indicated an underground void in the approximate area of projected exploration extensions. This was plotted at 12m below the surface. More detailed data from a second survey seemed to confirm the results. However, the void identified lay within a zone of landslip that had probably blocked any exit to the surface. A decision was made, therefore, to attack the problem from the inside out.

The month of December was to be “excavation month”. John Newby and Kip Mandeno, local covers and BWR guides, tested the Rimrock extremity and pronounced it “worth a push”. John then passed some punishing skills on to corporate “caver”, Mike Gibbons. Together they dug, bailed and sucked and siphoned a muddy crawl/duck to give access to an upwardly sloping slippery tube. This in turn broadened into a well decorated, mud-floored gallery some 35-40m long (3-4m wide and up to 15m high). It appeared to terminate in a very small silt/mud tube.

A few days later an energetic push by Mike Gibbons and NZ ACKMA Vice President Peter Chandler overcome about 10m of tight “tooth paste tube” to break into another decorated chamber about 30m long. This terminated in steeply sloping mud and a rock debris slide approximately 10m high.

Access routes were taped and the new extensions were surveyed in early January in an attempt to estimate the position of the final chamber on a surface plot. Much mud was collected by all and body temperatures plunged to low depths by exit time. Another reconnaissance discovered a series of upper level passages that ended in a 15m shaft that had tree roots dangling tantalizingly from the mudstone ceiling.

If entry was to be gained by excavating this new extension then the accurate estimation of the end point and its depth below the surface were critical. Another survey team, which included ACKMA Information Officer (NZ) Dave Smith from the Department of Conservation, was dispatched. Mud, instrument fogging, cold and the lack of being able to check the accuracy by closing the survey left us with a two metre discrepancy which we decided was fine considering the conditions. Energy levels precluded the climbing and surveying of the upper levels. Accessing this passage becomes less attractive after each visit (as do the participants).

So, here is where it is all at. Gaining entry by the new Rimrock Gully extensions to Ruakuri Cave will require excavating the hillside just above where the Black Water Rafting trips enter via the Huhunui Stream. It is a theoretical 17m down into the final chamber and a further 8m down to the cave floor proper. Then there is the issue of whether or not airlocks need to be installed. Once inside, mud and rock debris fill will have to be cleared from the passage (possibly 2m deep in most areas) involving digging through two fossil floors, protecting delicate formation and possibly blasting in the really tight sections. The local District Council has indicated the need for a Resource Consent.

Just up the hill and across the road lies another possible access route - the Drum Entrance. This was excavated by recreational cavers in the late 1960s and is named after the 44-gallon drums that one slides down to gain entry. It is situated just within the boundary of the Ruakuri Reserve. The

passage is dry, is relatively spacious (3m wide by up to 8m high), has some old in-fill and one narrow flow to be removed, and will require a stairway of some sort to overcome a 6m drop down into the old tourist level. It comes out about 50m from the Rimrock Gully passage. Probably about a 10m depth of spoil and rock debris will need to be removed to open this route for public tours.

There are decisions to be made and much planning to be done. All of the parties involved are committed to ensuring that any further development is done according to the best practice of the time. In a manner of speaking, modern technology has given us a public forum - the ability to create electronic "partnerships" in this venture. There is the ability to bounce ideas around and access wisdom within a global framework.

Some of the ideas we are grappling with are:

- When opening up a pristine passage which has been naturally sealed at each end, what pre- and post- monitoring should be done? Or will it not matter in such a large and well-ventilated system?
- Can one and how does one slurry pump out mud and rock debris in an environmentally sensitive manner'?
- All of the old lighting needs to be re-done with quite a few areas requiring subtle low lighting which may even have to mimic glowworms. What's out there?
- Walkways. Past cave developers and management have used jarrah. Some of this has survived but most has been torn up and replaced with treated pine. It would be nice to get rid of this as well. While waste rock rubble could easily be converted into permanent concrete paths - what is the present status of steel, aluminium, plastic?

- And then there is the ever-present infrastructure of carpark, toilets and service buildings. Keep it tight and close in to the attraction or make things scattered and as far away as possible?

In between the rural pastimes of tractors and cows, we have managed to smuggle in an E-mail address: ruakuricave@xtra.co.nz There are also plenty of

spare beds and handles of warm beer if you are ever passing through Waitomo. Perhaps a discussion of options on the ACKMA E-mail list would also be very useful, allowing many of our “electronic” members to contribute. We look forward to hearing from you and will keep you informed.