

# **CAVE MANAGEMENT NEWS FROM AUSTRALIA'S SUBANTARCTIC**

- Kevin Kiernan

The Australian Antarctic Division has recognised the natural values of some little known lava caves in formulating management proposals for remote Heard Island in the southern Indian Ocean. Landings on Heard Island are difficult and have been extremely rare, but pressure for access by tourist vessels is increasing. The close proximity of the cave entrances to the main visitor access point on the island made the caves a likely target for considerable visitor impact. The Division has now prepared a pamphlet which is being distributed to all tourists indicating that visits to the caves and some other environmentally sensitive areas are not permitted, and instead highlighting alternative worthwhile and environmentally friendly activities for visitors to the island.

The management implications of the Heard Island caves were communicated to the Division in a report by Anne McConnell and Kevin Kiernan following their work on the caves area in March 1997, and subsequently via a well attended seminar. A referees report on the Australian government's nomination for World Heritage listing of Heard Island - McDonald Island was also prepared in mid 1997 following a request from the IUCN. The caves on Heard Island are the only lava tube caves hitherto reported from Antarctic and Subantarctic latitudes. Though not large by world standards, they contain a number of attributes of high conservation significance, including well developed but very vulnerable lava speleothems in some caves, and very fragile sunken gardens of subantarctic plants carpeting some entrance

sinkholes. An underground penguin colony is another of the various remarkable features of the Heard Island caves. Unfortunately, non-destructive entry to caves is often simply impossible, a factor that is just as relevant to the management of expeditioners, aspiring scientific investigators and managers as it is to the management of tourists.

Australia was discovered to possess a second active volcano on the same trip in March 1997, when considerable volumes of gas and steam were observed to be venting from various points on nearby McDonald Island. However, the prospects for lava tubes on this steep and smoking island do not look good!

Heard Island and McDonald Island were inscribed on the World Heritage List on 3 December 1997.

McDonald Island is zoned as a no-go area in the management plan for this Australian Territory, recognising a rare opportunity to keep a small part of the world totally untrodden and pristine. The same seems an admirable objective for the Heard Island lava caves when the management plan is reviewed. Doing the science necessary to allow an acceptably informed level of cave management is likely to cause damage of as much consequence to these largely pristine caves as turning them into a tourist venue. If greed, curiosity and scientific ambition can be kept at bay anywhere on this planet, then surely the remote little caves of majestic Heard Island are one place where it ought to occur.