

KARST MANAGEMENT NEWS FROM TASMANIA

- Kevin Kiernan

Mole Creek

Proposed private forestry operations around Mole Creek have been of some concern over recent months, and the subject of proceedings in the Forest Practices Tribunal. First, the refusal by the Forest Practices Board of an application to establish a Private Timber Reserve (PTR) in a sensitive location on the margin of the King Solomons Cave Reserve was the subject of an unsuccessful appeal by the property owner. The landowner is currently seeking compensation. Second, a proposal to establish a PTR over much of Herberts Pot has also been successfully opposed by the Forest Practices Board. Once again, the landowner is currently seeking compensation. Third, Private Forests Tasmania has since advertised the intention of another landowner to seek a PTR over an adjacent property that covers other parts of the main Mole Creek system *sensu stricto*, including most of the rest of Herberts Pot.

Herberts Pot is the largest cave in the Mole Creek karst area and is the centrepiece of the Mole Creek Caves National Park that was proposed over a decade ago in a Forestry Commission report, but it was not included in the reserve given that name by the Tasmanian government last year (which was essentially a renaming of existing small reserves). Finally, another potential dispute on a nearby property was averted by negotiation. In that case the problem appeared to be largely a misunderstanding of process and no impediment to operations was imposed by the Board.

Regional Forest Agreement

From the point of view of geoconservation in general and karst management in particular the Regional Forest Agreement signed by the Commonwealth and Tasmanian governments recently has been a disaster. None of the highly significant karst sites identified in past studies but left unreserved were given any effective protection status, not even such icons as the proposed reserve for the Croesus Cave area. Protection from limestone quarrying was actually removed from the Dogs Head reserve at Mole Creek. The nature conservation component of the RFA exercise was dominated by biological, principally botanical, considerations. Problems such as those arising with private forestry at Mole Creek, which involves a relatively tiny area of land, could have been averted had the Tasmanian government not determinedly resolved to exclude karst from the RFA process. Their action has ensured ongoing conflict since geoconservation interests do not recognise the RFA as having been a legitimate process.

Karst RAPS

Following the Tasmanian Karst Atlas exercise it has become possible to undertake a comprehensive

systematic assessment of Tasmania's karst diversity in a way never previously possible. The result has been the compilation of a proposal for a statewide system of reserves to safeguard important elements of this diversity. The focus is not on impressive caves so much as an attempt to capture the wider range of karst landforms. However a number of state's most important caves, such as (you guessed it) Herberts Pot and Croesus Cave, are among the sites identified.

Legislative and Policy Inconsistencies

Inconsistencies between legislation and the attitudes of different government agencies towards karst have been highlighted in a recent case in which riparian protection along a watercourse that flows into a stream sink, required to maintain water quality as a matter of course under the Forest Practices Code where logging operations occur, was negated when another agency gave approval for construction of a farm dam involving bulldozing in the creek bed a short distance upstream of the stream sink. Similarly, any decisions by the Forest Practices Board or the Forest Practices Tribunal to preclude logging only safeguards the area of land from the adverse impacts of forestry operations. The landowners are still at liberty to clear their property for pasture should they so chose. Nor is there any protection from the possibility of limestone quarrying. Some attention to this crazy state of affairs is long overdue.

Magnesite Karst

Tasmania's magnesite karst is noteworthy, as karst in magnesite is unusual in this country and internationally. Recent proposals to quarry magnesite are not necessarily at variance with protecting this important geoheritage providing they are well planned and there is a genuine commitment to get things right. Enormous damage was caused to the karst at Central Creek during mineral exploration activities some years ago, and it is imperative this not be repeated. If siting and operational considerations are not approached in good faith then we stand to lose features that in some cases may have no counterpart in Australia or possibly on Earth, such as Victory Springs.

Ida Bay

Detailed studies of the biological resources of this area have been in progress over the past few months. When coupled with the considerable volume of geomorphological and hydrological information now available a very worthwhile data base will be available upon which to found the new management plan for the Ida Bay karst. It is hoped that a draft will be completed by the end of 1998.

Hastings

The Parks & Wildlife Service and a private concessionaire have entered into a joint partnership agreement for management of the caves and thermal pool area. The concessionaire will be constructing accommodation in the existing developed area near the pool. Both parties will sit on a Board of Management. There have been no firm decisions as yet regarding financial arrangements such as whether profits from the cave can be retained for cave management or will be used to subsidize the accommodation enterprise, or vice versa for that matter.

New Cave Area

One of the nice things about caving in Tasmania is the ease with which whole new cave areas can still sometimes turn up in unexpected places. During a recent routine inspection of a proposed logging roadline a major sinkhole was encountered in the

base of which a large cave entrance was discovered. This proved to give access into a very large chamber with a small lake and some higher level passages. On starting to scrub-bash back in the assumed direction of the cars afterwards, the party unexpectedly fell out of a thick belt of scrub bordering the sinkhole into an old gravel pit that was used during construction of a nearby road in the early 1960s. Yet we have found only a single set of earlier footprints in the dusty/crusty floor deposits - thanks to the thick scrub perhaps? A subsequent trip found there was somewhat more to this cave than we initially thought. It is all of two minutes walk from a major arterial road. I am not going to say anything about the obvious management implications of such a setting because I am determined to end on a cheerful and positive note!