

NEW PRIVATISATION ARRANGEMENTS FOR HASTINGS CAVES, TASMANIA

- Arthur Clarke

On Saturday, 3 January 1998, the Tasmanian Government Minister for National Parks (Hon. John Cleary) officially declared "open" the new privatization partnership arrangements for the Hastings Caves complex in southern Tasmania.

The new partnership involves a 50/50 arrangement between the Tasmanian Government's *Parks & Wildlife Service* (PWS) and nearby Dover tourism operators and holiday accommodation providers: Ian and Sue Hall. The arrangement is being put forward as a means to re-establish the Hastings Caves and Thermal Pool experience as one of Tasmania's top five tourism attractions.

The Hastings Caves has been a popular visitor attraction for nearly fifty years since their opening as tourist caves in 1939. The present tourist cave, Newdegate Cave, was discovered during early logging operations (reportedly around 1918-1919) along with several other caves including Beattie Cave and King George V Cave, which were the original tourist destinations. Although popular as a day trip attraction, annual visitor numbers have only been around the 40,000 mark and for several years now the caves and nearby thermal pool have no longer been considered among the top tourist destinations in Tasmania.

A new ticket, costing \$10.00, will provide entry to the Caves Reserve, covering both the tourist cave and the thermal pool. Locals (and others) will still be able to access the pool as a stand alone experience at a cost of \$2.50 entry per person.

According to an article by Mike Binham in Hobart's Saturday *MERCURY* newspaper, PWS will spend close to \$1 million on a new visitor interpretation centre. The private operators (Ian & Sue Hall) will spend an almost equal amount in the development of 10 to 12 environmentally-designed chalets, each accommodating up to six people, with the ultimate aim of making this complex and the surrounding area a tourism destination, rather than just a day tripping experience.

The Halls have already developed a new brochure with the heading - "Natural Sensations: The Hastings Experience", describing the caves reserve as "...where forest becomes World Heritage experience". The new promotional brochure for the area was launched on site on Saturday morning, 3 January 1998) by Hon. Peter Hodgman, the Tasmanian Government Minister for Environment and Land Management.

A board of management has been formed with the new partners having equal representation with PWS and Tasmanian Govt. officials. The profits (if any) of the new arrangement will be shared between the Halls and PWS. Parks and Wildlife (PWS) will still provide all the staffing: with rangers, information and interpretation officers.

Over the last few years, PWS have been actively involved in cleaning out the accumulated debris of old wooden stairs, broken light globes and tourist's refuse from the past decades of use as a tourist cave. An unfortunate side effect of this appears to have been the inadvertent removal of invertebrate cave fauna that has been harbouring in the numerous artificial habitat niches created by this accumulated debris!

Along with an already-approved extensive marketing campaign over the next 12-18 months, it is proposed that an environmental impact statement (EIS) and management plan will be prepared outlining future developments, including both the infrastructure, new construction and the caving/ pool experiences. Hopefully, this will lead to the sealed bitumen formation of a better road surface, rather than the present greasy, gravel road. It will probably put more pressure on PWS to establish some other caving experiences in the region including the possible mooted development of nearby wild caves such as King George V Cave, Beattie Cave or Wolf Hole as either guided or self-guided wild adventure experiences.