

TASMANIAN CAVE AND KARST MANAGEMENT: A REVIEW OF THE LAST DECADE

- Chris Sharples

There is no doubt that cave and karst management in Tasmania has come a long way from the bad old days when pocket handkerchief reserves around cave entrances were considered adequate, and much of this progress has occurred over the last decade. Despite its small size, the high relief, wet climate and relatively extensive carbonate rocks of Tasmania mean that the state boasts many important karsts, including several of Australia's longest and deepest known caves.

Many factors have contributed to progress in karst conservation in Tasmania; however, prominent amongst these must be the fact that nature conservation generally has dominated Tasmanian political agendas since the early 1970's, and the efforts of cavers who have sought persistently to enhance the status of karst management in the major Tasmanian government land management agencies (notably including Greg Middleton in the Parks and Wildlife Service and Kevin Kiernan in the Forest Practices Unit). Indeed, the development of karst and cave management in Tasmania in the last decade has been sufficiently vigorous that it has been the catalyst for major developments in the theory and practice of geoconservation generally (a discipline encompassing the management of all sensitive landform types, soils and geological features, in which we parochial Tasmanians have the gall to believe we are leaders, to the horror of some others who thought they were the leaders on the grounds that nothing new could possibly come out of a backwater like Tasmania!).

It was probably Kevin Kiernan's major study of the Mole Creek Karst in the mid-1980's (funded by both the then - Tasmanian Forestry Commission and the National Estate Grants Program) which initially did most to focus attention on the sensitivity of Tasmanian karst systems to human disturbance, and highlight the need for their sensitive management. This need was translated into specific management provisions in the Tasmanian Forest Practices Code which came into being in 1986. Since that time, Kevin's persistence within the Tasmanian Forest Practices Unit, and the efforts of energetic offshooters such as Rolan Eberhard, have made karst and cave management issues familiar to all foresters and the forestry industry in Tasmania. The Tasmanian Forestry Commission and/or the forestry industry have funded several major karst management studies (including Kevin's mammoth Atlas of Tasmanian Karst, and Rolan's detailed management study of the Junee-Florentine Karst), and it is fair to say that there now exists substantial recognition of the need to safeguard karst values amongst the Tasmanian forestry industry. The positive attitude to karst shown by a number of foresters in the commercial forestry companies (notably Andy Warner of North Forests

and Chris Mitchell of ANM) has shown that much can be achieved by karst managers co-operating with the industry.

Within the Tasmanian Parks Service, its predecessor the Scenery Preservation Board, and earlier incarnations, an involvement in karst and cave management goes back decades with the existence of various (tiny) Cave Reserves and the promotion of several tourist show caves at Hastings, Mole Creek and elsewhere. However, in the early decades this interest was more focussed on tourism "mining" of caves than on their sensitive management, as recent operations to remove decades of accumulated rubbish from the Hastings show cave emphasize. It was about a decade ago, in the late 1980's, that the need for environmentally sensitive management of reserved caves finally came to a head with the political controversy over limestone quarrying in part of the major Exit Cave system in southern Tasmania. After several commissioned scientific studies of Exit Cave, the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service appointed a specialist karst manager, Ian Houshold, whose job was initially to gain ulcers over the Exit Cave issue. With the eventual closure of the Exit Cave quarry in 1992, Ian's job has become more pleasant, involving the implementation of a major state-of-the-art monitoring and rehabilitation program at Exit Cave, and the development of improved management programs for other karst and cave areas throughout the Tasmanian World Heritage Area.

The relationship of sport cavers to professional karst managers has at times been uneasy as the government land management agencies have focussed more of their attention on cave management over the last decade. Cavers have seen their traditional sporting freedoms eroded as permit systems, locked gates and minimal impact caving codes and regulations have been introduced in the quest to reduce human impacts on the cave environment. This has naturally aroused resentment amongst those who may not always see caves as outstanding natural systems of great intrinsic value so much as underground gymnasiums and challenges for their adventurous, unfettered spirits. This sort of tension between managers and users is, I think, endemic to many outdoor sports - much the same uneasiness currently exists between walking clubs and the managers of Tasmania's (surface) wilderness. A similar tension exists between managers and some commercial cave tour operations who see their commercial enterprise being needlessly restricted. In essence, the tension seems to me to revolve around sport cavers considering that they already understand the cave environment well enough to not need paternalistic restrictions on their use of it,

and the professional managers pointing to past abuses which have resulted from unfettered access.

I do not, however, mean to paint a picture of all Tasmanian sport cavers being opposed to sensitive cave management; indeed on the contrary most of Tasmania's professional karst managers are themselves chronic troglodytes whose interest in management grew out of their sporting experiences. Caving clubs continue to make substantial contributions to karst management, not only by adopting sensitive codes of practice, but importantly by doing nearly all of the cave mapping which is so important in providing the real, hard information upon which to base good management. In this respect, the efforts of the Savage River Caving Club in mapping the Mt Cripps Karst in northwest Tasmania has been a particularly notable effort during the 1990's, which has led to the loggers (North Forests) agreeing to protect that substantial karst.

Despite the progress which has been achieved in Tasmanian karst management, as the decade closes a number of recent events have been equivocal harbingers for the future. The declaration of the Mole Creek Karst National Park in 1996 is, in one respect, an advance for karst management in that it further underlines the growth in recognition of the importance of karst systems. The downside, of course, is that the National Park consists of little more than the grouping of several small discontinuous existing reserves under a single heading, with integral parts of the same karst systems remaining unprotected and no action having been taken to resolve important reserve proposals that in some cases go back three decades, involving such celebrated caves as Herberts Pot and Croesus Cave.

However, the Tasmanian Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) process (finalised in 1997) has presented a major setback to karst conservation. Although several studies under the RFA related to karst (notably Arthur Clarke's study of cave invertebrate management requirements and the compilation of a geoheritage inventory by Grant Dixon and Nathan Duhig which re-emphasised that karst management remains one of our most important geoconservation issues), the focus of the RFA was on conserving

"Comprehensive, Representative and Adequate" examples of Tasmania's biodiversity, and no effort was made to ensure the systematic protection of representative karst systems. No karst reserve proposals were acted upon, even though many karst issues could have been sorted out relatively easily compared to some of the biodiversity issues which the RFA did tackle. To indicate the way the RFA ought to have gone in relation to karst, Kevin Kiernan has recently used the comprehensive data from his Tasmanian Karst Atlas to identify a set of proposed reserves which would safeguard important representative aspects of Tasmania's karst diversity. Unfortunately, political expectations that the RFA has once and for all resolved land tenure allocations in Tasmania mean that it will now be harder than ever to achieve "Comprehensive, Representative and Adequate" reservation of examples of Tasmania's karst estate.

In relation specifically to cave management, a recent (1998) development has been the privatisation of the Hastings Caves tourism operations, as reported in ACKMA Journal No. 30. This will result in increased 'development' of caves and associated warm springs at Hastings, and fits well with the Tasmanian Government's economic rationalist policies, but in so doing seems certain to increase the scale of the management problems confronting environmental managers. Given the Tasmanian Government's desire to 'mine' tourism resources there is little doubt that there will be political pressure for further privatisation of other Tasmanian show caves.

However, in another development which may hopefully balance out some of the impacts of privatisation, Rolan Eberhard in 1997 compiled a cave classification system for Tasmania, commissioned by both Forestry Tasmania and the Parks and Wildlife Service, which it is hoped will provide a better basis for deciding which caves should be allocated as show caves, and which are best reserved for lower levels of, or no, human impact. Whether Rolan's system will be adopted to optimise the recreational and environmental management of Tasmanian caves, or be over-ridden by political pressure, remains to be seen - but at least a promising process has been inserted into the land management system.