

TOURIST CAVING IN NEW ZEALAND OVER THE LAST 10 YEARS - A PERSONAL OVERVIEW

- Ruth Lyons

I would like to stress that this is indeed a *personal* overview focusing on what I see as the significant developments and issues of the last ten years; it's not an official report! There is no space here to itemize the specific initiatives which have made the development of cave and karst tourism so exciting in New Zealand in the last 10 years, nor do I intend to provide "summary statistics". However, I must begin by saying that in my visits to tourist caves around New Zealand in the course of my research, I have been incredibly impressed by the professionalism, variety and enthusiasm brought to the many different operations, each as unique as the caves they are in.

Last October, several hundred people of all sorts, from knobbly-kneed cavers to tourist operators, local identities to overseas visitors, applauded as a representative from Cadbury's Chocolate factory presented a large block of chocolate in appreciation of the 180,000 chocolate fish that *Black Water Rafters* have consumed on tourist trips since their inception ten years before. To me, this, more than any other event, epitomizes the single most striking development in cave tourism in New Zealand over the last 10 years - the establishment and rapid growth in adventure cave tours.

Overall, cave tours now cover a wide range of activities, some requiring technical skills and a fair degree of intrepidity, others being gentler but no less enjoyable, including, perhaps, a cup of tea in the bush, as well as the traditional "board walk" tours which are still flourishing. In this way people of all sorts have the opportunity to enjoy the exceptional variety New Zealand caves and karst the country has to offer, and, in turn, the wider available market increases the viability of all aspects of the cave tourism industry. The flow-on effects from these enterprises have benefited the local communities and the tourist industry in New Zealand as a whole, with increased demand for hospitality services and a general increase in morale and enthusiasm.

The increase in the use of caves for tourism has brought issues of cave ownership, conservation and access to the fore. Questions of ownership of Ruakuri cave in Waitomo ten years ago led to the legal opinion that caves belong to those who own the land above them, ie: a cave which lies under different properties has different ownerships for different parts of it - a potential problem in the development of any such multi-ownership caves. The Tourist Hotel Corporation operation ceased in Ruakuri in 1988 and, although more adventurous tourists still have access to the cave with Black Water Rafting, the original tourist access to the cave has remained closed because of the *wai atapu* significance of the burial cave above the entrance.

Caves are increasingly seen as valuable assets with potential money-earning capacity and many formerly "wild" caves are now predominantly used by tour groups. Traditional cavers, once tolerated (if regarded as more than a little mad) as long as they didn't interfere with stock, now suffer increasingly restricted access to caves which they or their predecessors discovered. Sometimes this restriction is in order to allow uninterrupted commercial use, sometimes it is argued that cavers are conservationally careless. However, the cavers would equally vehemently maintain that in some caves it is the commercial trips that have caused the majority of the damage! It is ironic to remember that, when the proposed establishment of Black Water Rafting was put to the New Zealand Speleological Society for comment, the major concern was the possible impact of increased usage by commercial cave trips on the cave environment.

In general, cave tour operators are well aware of the need for minimizing the impact of tours on the caves and are most conscientious in their operations. However, in some cases, development of tours has led to substantial modification of the caves, for example, damming streams and opening new entrances. Such actions are highly controversial and potentially damaging but, as there is no scientific baseline data, it is difficult to quantify the impact any particular modification may have any cave in question.

Where caves lie under parks and reserves, the need for conservation is now more formally recognized. Cave management plans are required as part of park management plans; restricted access, licensing operators and formal gating have become recognized administrative tools for cave conservation and development. Significant modifications to publicly owned caves should thus be subject to sufficient scrutiny to ensure they are planned wisely and carried out responsibly, according to sound scientific criteria.

However, under present law, caves under private land do not have the same protection, or a degree of scrutiny, if any. What modifications and usage caves are subjected to is very much a matter of local body policy. However, local body regulations are formulated to protect the surface environment and may not be appropriate for caves. For example, earthworks which are "minor" above ground can have very major, and possibly irreversible, consequences in the cave environment. Although waterways are partially covered by resource consent legislation, there is no provision for protection of the status of airways - irrelevant above ground but possibly critical below ground. A strong argument can be made that the laws should be modified to recognize the peculiar vulnerability of the cave

environment. This is not to argue that such actions should be banned nor that they are necessarily detrimental, simply that present legislation is inadequate to ensure that cave modifications are carried out in a considered and informed way to safeguard the cave and the asset.

The key to good conservation and wise development is, however, not legislation, but knowledge and a recognition of their importance. ACKMA's role has been crucial in fostering these, through its journals, conferences and the personal contacts established through the Association. It is nearly 20 years since Dave Williams was the first NZ person to attend what were then Australian Cave Management & Tourism Conferences, but New Zealand participation was formally recognized only in 1987 when the *Australasian Cave Management Association* (ACMA) was formed. (However, the 6th ACM conference had been held in Waitomo two years previously!) Two subsequent conferences have since been held in New Zealand, in 1989 at Punakaiki and last year in Waitomo, and approximately 20% of ACKMA members live in New Zealand. In my travels around the tourist caves in New Zealand I have almost universally found an encouraging enthusiasm for scientific understanding and informed conservation - convincing evidence of ACKMA's effectiveness.

The Waitomo Cave Museum, the only museum in the country dedicated specifically to caves and karst, deserves special mention for the awareness it has fostered in the general public of the importance of conserving, understanding and enjoying the unique karst environment. Currently, approximately 50,000 people visit the museum each year. Opened in 1981, the museum doubled in size in 1989, to include an audiovisual theatre as well as increased display areas. In 1994 an education centre was added and since 1995 the important educational function of the museum has been recognized by the Ministry of Education who now contribute to the museum funding.

In summary, the growth in cave and karst tourism, particularly adventure caving, in the last 10 years has seen the growing appreciation of caves as a financial asset, a clarification of cave ownership issues, and a growing awareness of conservation as a top priority and education as a means of achieving this. The increasing usage of caves for tourism provides an additional financial incentive to protect our caves but at the same time puts them under threat. It is our privilege to be involved in using caves and karst to bring enjoyment to many people (and, for some of us, to be financially rewarded for it!). It is equally our responsibility to work to conserve, indeed, to preserve, a unique and vulnerable asset for future generations.