

TOWARDS BETTER MANAGEMENT....?

- Elery Hamilton-Smith

My first encounter with cave management was back in about 1954 on my first trip to Naracoorte. We were made very welcome indeed by the curator of the time and invited to join in a guided tour of the Alexandra Cave. There we learnt how the caves were formed by the volcanoes down at Mt. Gambier, and were actually bubbles which were left behind when the molten rock solidified! We were then shown all the delights of the cave, like the Wedding Cake and the Butcher's Shop. Naive as we were, we were shocked by the awfulness of it.

But the curator could not have been more friendly and helpful - a characteristic of most cave managers whom I have met since then. On another journey, we arrived near midnight on Friday to find him agonizing over whatever was wrong with the Lister engine which drove the generators for the cave lighting - with a whole special caves picnic day booked on the Saturday. The only good news was that he had a good stock of spare parts, so two of us took the whole thing apart and completely reconditioned it, finishing the task by about 8.30 a.m. It didn't do our caving trip much good but it was some thanks for the hospitality and assistance we had enjoyed.

Then I met Agnes Reddan, daughter of the famous early curator of the caves, and she told me about her father's life with his discoveries of new caves, his battle with those poaching the guano deposits in the bat cave, and his difficulties in trying to manage the caves properly. It became clear that he had been a man of very remarkable commitment, intelligence and vision - again, something shared by some of his contemporaries and many others today.

The second cave manager of my personal acquaintance was at Kelly Hill. When he heard we were coming, he left to take his long overdue annual leave, and left us to run the caves, including two scheduled tours a day! Fortunately, the engine and generator were in good condition, and we found time to virtually double the extent of the cave, thus beginning the process of expanding the known underground of Kelly Hill which continues to the present day.

So, it continued. We, and other cavers, found cave managers to be genial, helpful, under-equipped, rarely with any understanding of the cave environment, usually amateurish, lacking in vision and yet most were trying very hard to do the best they could. Those of us involved in the infant Australian Speleological Federation of that time often talked about what we should and might do to change all this; we came to realize that any hope of effective cave conservation lay in having a better educated general public, and the key to this was probably largely in the hands of cave managers. While the highlight of tours consisted of Snow White and Seven Dwarfs, Hexatites, and 'Bet you can't guess what we call this one!', there was not much hope of getting caves taken seriously.

Then in 1963, I had the pleasure of meeting with Roy Skinner at Hastings. Roy was different - he had a very considerable knowledge of caves and a lot of vision. In 1971, he was successful in gaining a Churchill fellowship to study cave management around the world.

This in turn resulted in the country's first conference on cave management - probably one of the first in the world. John Dunkley and I, in conjunction with the then N.S.W. Department of Tourism, convened it at Jenolan, and to our delight, 41 people turned up from all over Australia. Roy was the keynote speaker, and provided very considerable stimulation for people to think about wider options in cave management. But overall, although there were a lot of new initiatives developing throughout the country by that time, cave management was focussed entirely upon traditional tours and the quality of tours and of cave development ranged from poor to appalling.

But the conference marked a real turning point. It led directly to the beginning of systematic management planning for cave reserves (commencing at Katherine in 1974), the continuing conference series, and inspired a number of those present (including two novices named Richard Guy and Ernst Holland) to experiment with new ideas.

But perhaps the most important single outcome was that people started to look critically at their own practice and to ask questions about all the old assumptions. This marked the beginning of true professionalism in cave management in Australasia. The next historic landmark was the establishment of ACKMA commencing in 1987, and resulting in a great leap ahead for cave management. It is now time, against this brief summary of beginnings, to look at some of the various trends and changes which have emerged as this professionalism has evolved.

From Tourism Traps to Recognized Environmental Resources: Probably the first emerging change was the recognition that caves were not just a convenient means of getting some cash from unsuspecting visitors, but were actually an important resource which needed stewardship. This might sound exaggerated - but it is not.

From Tour Management to Resource Management: So, this in turn meant that the focus of management had to shift, and to give some real consideration to the degradation of the cave environment which was widespread at that stage. Ron Newbould pioneered the idea of actually cleaning caves, and although we now do it much more gently than Ron did, at least he brought home the urgency of tackling the problem.

From Single Caves to Categories of Caves: Generally, caves were either show caves or 'unimportant'. Speleologists were bringing in the evidence that some of the 'unimportant caves'

were immeasurably more important than the show caves, but the idea was slow to catch on. Andrew Skinner started off the idea that we might recognize various categories of caves for management purposes, and this led to the ongoing debate about how caves might be classified and what we might then do with the classification. Despite the debate, it has greatly furthered recognition of the diversity of responsibilities which managers must accept.

From Fairy Stories to Environmental Education: The presentation of caves to visitors moved away from the old-time childish fantasies into full-blown enthusiasm for environmental education. Regrettably, some of the fun and interest got lost along the way, and gradually a better balance in interpretation has emerged. In my experience, Australasia now generally offers a very good level of interpretation through a whole spectrum of media and forms, with the best of it being really wondrous. But we are still experimenting and developing, with lots of new things due to arrive on the public scene over the next few years.

From Caves to Karst: There has been a gradual recognition that caves are only one of the important features of any karst area and that proper management of the caves means consideration of all the various factors which may impact upon the integrity and health of the total karst province concerned. David Williams took a lead here with the Waitomo research program which demonstrated that events at a considerable distance upstream from the karst might have very damaging impacts indeed. Since then others, particularly Kevin Kiernan, have ensured that we must give due attention to karst and geodiversity.

From Manual Labour to Cyber-management: We have indeed moved a very long distance from the days of a couple of cavers having to repair the engine at Naracoorte! I recall the exchange at the first conference where an un-named manager was arguing that all cave lighting should be run at 32 volt level because 12 volt didn't give bright enough light and anything more than 32 volts was just not safe underground - and was demolished by Lloyd Robinson pointing out that mines used up to 44,000 volts underground. Now we have moved not only to 240 volt systems, but back to low-voltage dichroics, remote-control systems and a host of other electrical magic. Managers are also used to various forms of environmental metering, data-loggers, computers, automated ticketing, and even familiar with the wonders of the internet. Where will it end?

From Cleaning Caves to Monitoring and Managing both Environmental Quality and Visitor Experience Quality: Every effort is now being made to ensure quality practice in all aspects of cave management, and the last conference even started using that dreaded bit of managerialist jargon: 'best practice'!

So, in brief overview, we have come a very long way indeed. It has been indeed exciting to see it happen, and even more exciting to have some share in it all. But we must remember that many of the good things we have achieved bring their

own threats for the future. The obvious one is complacency. If we look at the long-run history of cave management, Australia (and Jenolan in particular) set a remarkable pace in the 19th century. Jenolan was Australia's first ever conservation reserve; and over the years, it saw the first use, anywhere in the world, of magnesium lighting, then of electricity to light caves, and Australia's first hydro-electric plant. Perhaps more importantly, the Wilsons developed a truly craftsman-like standard in the use of wire-netting protection which served to protect many of our caves through the dark years of the worst vandalism and meant that many survived in remarkably fine condition. Then throughout the first half of the 20th century, cave management slumped into a mind-numbing complacency; nothing new happened and most of the vision just evaporated. We must not allow that to happen again.

Currently, the biggest threat probably comes from the economic irrationalism, mean-mindedness and pseudo-managerialism which dominates the thinking of Australian governments. Public resources are being reduced, sold off to the highest bidder and often irreparably degraded. The Auckland blackout is surely symbolic of what is happening right across many less visible facets of our society. The tragedy is not that it is inevitable, but that it was a conscious choice by our political leaders when there were other options available. We must resist any depredation upon our natural and cultural heritage, and continue to safeguard it, as always, for future generations. Obviously, an agency which operates tourism programs as many land management departments now do, should do so with efficiency and 'profitability' in mind - but only idiots would allow that to degrade or destroy the resources upon which the tourism rests.

Then there is the threat of embracing new technology too quickly and without consideration of the potential side-effects. Technology offers wondrous benefits and the potential for equally wondrous damage. We only need to look at public health to see the other side of the coin in the immense amount of human illness and suffering which is a direct result of the gallop to new technology, even within the medical sciences themselves. So, new technology can help make caves even more accessible to all, more fully understood and more exciting. So far, I think it has been used very wisely in cave management. Some of the potentially destructive errors have been recognized and dealt with promptly by managers. Hopefully, we will continue to show that level of sensitivity.

And there are also, of course, the things we still have to confront. One of the major ones is the issue of privately owned karst areas, the management of which often sees karst simply as a place where it is easy to both mine water and dump rubbish. I believe it is urgent that we foster the development of karstcare programs, equivalent to the Conservancies of North America. Poor management of karst benefits nobody and damages many, no matter what their interests.

