

BLACK WATER RAFTING AND FLOODING

- Peter Chandler

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After the generally long warm summer in Waitomo (we were far enough north to avoid the strong south-westerly winds brought about by the *El Nino* weather pattern), July saw a dramatic change to this - rain! The low pressure systems coming our way were neither too far south or north, and so repeatedly brought rain from the north west ahead of cold fronts, which were and are often followed by smaller ones till some relatively fine weather arrives.

From my perspective at *Black Water Rafting*, this meant more days flooded out in July than we would normally expect in a year. Wednesday 1 July - closed all afternoon. Re-open Friday afternoon. The following Wednesday 9th July, rain set in again, and as expected the cave was well and truly flooded out by next morning. Willy Poulson, one of our guides, stashed all inner tubes to avoid floodwaters. Water reaches amazing heights in Ruakuri carpark. Entire carparks plus picnic area are underwater. Water peaks half way up barbecue wall. The area was water-blasted clean by Department of Conservation staff, only to be covered again two days later.

We are again up and running on Tuesday 14th, though it seemed most visitors had thought up other activities rather than floating through flooding caves. High water trips involve three guides per group of twelve clients and preferably all happy in water (good swimmers). A great degree of technique is required to get the group safely past obstacles such as ducks (sumped passages would force us to cancel), assembling the "Eel Chain" and disassembling after the glow-worm float, climbing down past tomo and floating rapids (the latter made easier with the extreme flow), avoiding sections of

the lower cave where currents can take the unwary. and then exiting the cave avoiding the rapids under the Walkway Bridge. After that there is a relatively quick float down the Waitomo stream to the start point. A consolation of these high water days is warmer water temperatures. It is a great contrast to fine frosty weather and low water with cave water temperatures of around 9°C. The ultimate is high water combined with sunny day- not that uncommon recently.

On Wednesday 15th we were flooded again, for two and a half days. Things have been back to normal since then (except 11 August). Overall, the flooding meant something like a 25% drop in visitors for the month making July - our quietest month for the year, normally June and more recently May.

As users of an active cave streamway, the variations in water levels is certainly part of the operation. There are many different routines for any point in the cave depending on this water level. Our maximum operating water levels were established over the winter of 1991. They are often studied but have not increased - there are plenty of times when it is not the place to be, let alone as a Guide.

Thankfully, as we dress the visitors for the cave, and there are very little in the way of cave modifications, there is very little to be damaged. There was minor damage to the lower part of the BWR 2 track surface (half-round tree fern trunks being ashed into the Slot entrance and some handrails coming off the old bridge in the Ruakuri Show Cave), and to the walkway bridge near the BWR 1 exit. Many roads in the area did not fare so well....