

SELF-GUIDING OR SELF-TIMING ?

- Elery Hamilton-Smith.

Back in the early 1970s, Greg Middleton and others developed South Glory Hole at Yarrangobilly as the first 'self-guiding' cave tour in Australia. The term and the idea have both become popular since then. Regrettably, they together lead to some very sloppy thinking about this aspect of cave management, and I have encountered examples of this in several areas recently. The two most dangerous bits are that the assumption that it is appropriate to send the general public through a cave system without any guide, and that we should use such an approach in order to save money.

There are, of course, a whole spectrum of people who visit caves. Some want the guided tour ; some want to just take in the cave at their own pace, but feel uneasy about it ; some are perfectly at home underground, and still others want to squeeze themselves thorough tight places and grovel through the mud.

The provision of cave guides is not just to tell people about the cave or to entertain the public. It is also to help members of the public who are uneasy about new experiences to feel comfortable when visiting a cave, to ensure protection of the cave and to meet the public liability responsibility of the cave manager. Just think of how familiar it is to have a visitor on a cave tour suffer a coronary, or even a

major fall; then think of the further delay in rescue which may occur if there is no near or frequent guide presence. In other words, there should be a guide on hand or very close at all times.

The first such cave tour which I saw in operation was at Akiyoshi in Japan. Here there was a permanent guide station at the midway point in the cave, while another guide was on the move, walking through the cave in the opposite direction to the visitors. Both were talked with visitors and so provide information or answer questions as well as see to all the other aspects of the visit.

As a starting point for change in our thinking, why don't we refer to all such tours as 'self-timing' ? The basic principle is then clearly expressed for all. People can move through at their own pace ; they can even just sit in silence and contemplate the wonder and beauty of the cave environment. For many visitors, this is cave tourism at its best. As the second step, we should be very careful to always have a guide presence either in the cave or within very easy reach. To note one example where an in-cave guide may not be necessary, Wet Cave at Naracoorte is a relatively small and very accessible cave and is very close to the current visitor centre. I cannot think of other examples.