

SITUATIONS CAN CHANGE: MORE ON MOUNT ETNA

- Dianne Vavryn

It gives me a lot of pleasure to be able to report on the positive things that have taken place recently between the Mining Company and those who opposed the mining of Mount Etna (near Rockhampton, Central Queensland). The value of getting Mount Etna and Limestone Ridge protected was realized as far back as the early 1900's and these areas were gazetted as recreation reserves in 1920 at the instigation of the Olsen family. Shortly after the gazette of the reserves, Theodore Olsen was appointed caretaker of the Mount Etna Caves (i.e. Johannsen's) and for a number of years acted as caretaker-guide. Conservation efforts to insure the preservation of caves began in 1962 and continued until the late eighties. In 1987 and continuing into 1989 the issue became a very bitter battle with direct action activities and court actions both on individual opponents to mining and on the Company. This left behind deep feelings of hurt, anger, bitterness, distrust and suspicion on both sides, and diminished bank balances for some.

The decision by the organizers of the Australasian Bat Conference, which was held in Rockhampton in April this year, to invite Pacific Lime to be a sponsor and to present a paper on the Rehabilitation of Mount Etna was not taken lightly. Done with right motives, we felt some good may come of it. It was hoped the company would be interested in having the opportunity of doing something positive for bats. This did not mean the destruction of any caves or some of the past environmental conduct of the company was condoned in any way. The mental scars still remained but the sores no longer festered. Knowing we can never bring back Elephant Hole and Speaking Tube caves which former mining operations destroyed, we felt that it was time to let the past go, and move forward for the future benefits of bats and the satisfactory rehabilitation of Mount Etna. We thought by involving the company it may help towards this end.

It was a little apprehensive fronting up to the Company Manager with our request, and we did so with some trepidation, being involved in no small way in the fight against mining and not knowing what the response would be on that account. To our great relief we got a very cordial reception and later a very generous offer of sponsorship. The sponsorship of Pacific Lime, Capelec, Titley Electronics, Central Queensland University, Bacardi Rum and locals allowed the conference to keep to budget, allowing \$2500 to be forwarded to the Australasian Bat Society, committed to the protection of bats and bat habitat, and approximately \$2000 to get the next conference started and in return favourable publicity for the sponsors. A good start towards better relations, but it did not finish there.

Trips into Resurrection Cave

Resurrection Cave, which is under the mining benches on the North Eastern face of Mount Etna, had no natural entrances and was opened

through mining operations in 1967 when it was entered on Easter Sunday by local cavers and members of the University of Queensland Speleological Society. Mining ceased on this side of Mount Etna in 1970 but still continued on the North West face. In 1988, during the heat of battle, the Company covered both entrances known to cavers. Since then "The cave has been visited by only company representatives (mainly Terry Williams) a few times over the past few years to check activities associated with rehabilitation above the cave had not resulted in clay or tree root ingress into it." (QCL Group Environmental Report 1998)

The company's poster display on the rehabilitation of Mount Etna was manned by Chris White (Company Manager) and Terry Williams (Production Manager) for conference delegates to ask questions or give advice. When visiting the display a lady now in her senior years and who had worked tirelessly for the protection of Mount Etna, made mention to Terry her wish to see Resurrection Cave once more in her life. This led to two trips into it being arranged. "It was a peace offering, a sharing of an experience both sides regarded with awe" (QCL Group Environmental Report 1998). Invited on the first trip organized by Terry, before his departure to Melbourne, were the local organizers of the Bat Conference, members of the Mount Etna Mine Rehabilitation Advisory Committee (MEMRAC) and Environmentalists. Later, a second trip was arranged by Chris White with members of the Central Queensland Speleological Society. After these trips the cave entrance was again closed off with rocks and the suggestion to cover the entrance between the visits to protect the cave environment was taken. Changes in the condition of the cave since the previous visit in 1988 was of interest to many of us, and its present condition to the MEMRAC members who had not seen it before.

I would never have even dreamt twelve months ago that I would be going on a trip into Resurrection Cave as the invited guest of the mining company. Although there is some blast damage and mud ingress from mining operations, the cave is still one of great beauty. Speleothems of all sorts from helictites in abundance, straws, massive flowstones (one being approximately forty foot high and one hundred foot long), numerous shawls, rim pools and cave pearls etc. Some are crystal clear, others white and colours ranging from light cream through to bright oranges. I think all caving trips leave us with fond memories of the experience and of the people we shared it with and this trip was no exception. I will long remember with affection how Terry looked after those who needed a hand as any caver would do and asking us to sit quietly with our lights out to experience the total darkness, the silence and tranquillity. This is something many of us do on caving trips and I felt a quite sense of joy that Terry too was aware of the inner peace this brings. He agreed with us that caves are catching. "Relations can only improve when you have

shared an experience such as that, of being in a place of beauty, quiet and introspection.” (QCL Group Environmental Report 1998). There certainly was a spirit of peacemaking that we each contributed to. The peacemakers of this world will help heal the wounds, soften the scars, and help make this a better world to live in.

The future of the cave appears promising: “for Resurrection Cave itself, the knowledge that it will be protected for all time is confirmation that the words of reconciliation have been backed by action.” At this point in time it seems unlikely that Resurrection cave will be developed into a show cave. Efforts are being made to make sure any of the rehabilitation methods done on the benches above don’t affect the cave adversely.

Rehabilitation of Mount Etna

.In November 1994 the size and type of blasting on the old benches for rehabilitation purposes caused a great deal of concern. This year a plan for further blasting on the benches for rehabilitation purposes was designed by Kim Henley, Principal Blasting Specialist from Orica Explosives Pty. Ltd. With the company’s new policy of consultation, a mine representative attended a Central Queensland Speleological Society meeting on 16 September, to consult with members on this new plan which met with their approval. The plan had been specifically designed to attain the desired results from the rehabilitation blasting without causing damage to nearby caves such as Winding Staircase, Resurrection Cave, Bat Cleft and the Bates residence and addressed some concerns raised from previous blasts. Relations continue to improve at Mount Etna with a representative from the CQSS now invited to participate on MEMRAC - which was previously denied. This has given the club a renewed interest in the rehabilitation of Mount Etna.

A test blast was done on the 13 October 1998 and interested parties invited to witness it. Monitors were placed at Bates’s Residence with the Peak Vibration Level measuring 0.12 mm/s and Maximum Over Pressure 112.4 dBL; Resurrection Cave at PVL 3.53 mm/s, MO 69.8 dBL; and Winding Staircase PVL 35.14 mm/s, M.O. 119.2

dBL. The approximate monitor distances from the blasts were Bates Residence 400 metres; Winding Staircase, 50 metres; and Resurrection 100 metres (Don Kime, Mine manager per comment). I was told the reason the readings in Winding Staircase were so high was because the monitor was sitting on a loose surface causing extra vibrations which gave an incorrect reading. This problem was overcome during the main blast, a different style monitor was used which was attached to the rock.

The main blast which took place on the 16 October measured PVL 0.15 mm/s, MO 110.1 dBL at Bates Residence; PVL 10.94 mm/s, MO 63.9 dBL at Resurrection; and PVL 6.09 mm/s, MO 120.1 dBL at Winding Staircase. For comparison, the regulations for residential blasting is up to 10 mm/s Peak Vibration Level and 120 dBL Maximum Over Pressure

“A new company name, Pacific Lime, a new commitment to environmental protection, a corporate ethic that speaks of and rewards consultation - it all adds up to reconciliation, to healing the wounds of the past, to sweeping clean with a new broom. The last few years have been ones of the past meeting the future at Mt Etna, of QCL’s former approaches to such issues being locked in archive boxes to see the light of day no more.” In the same document: “What we were before is for archive reference only. What we are now is being able to recognize our flaws and improve our performance.” (QCL Group Environmental Report 1998).

Yes, things have changed at Mount Etna. “People are sitting around the table reconciling differences over rehabilitation methods, mining techniques, access rights and future site uses.” The company is aiming at closing the files as soon as possible on the outstanding court judgments against opponents and we can hope that this too will reflect the new company spirit and that a favourable outcome is reached between the parties. I do hope that relations continue to improve for the sake of Mount Etna, that has given us so much pleasure on one hand and much heartache on the other, and for future generations.

REFERENCES

QCL Group Environmental Report 1998 (Oct). *The Past Meets The Future*

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