

CAVE LEADERSHIP COURSE

for the caves of the Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge

- Heather Jefferies

1999 saw Edith Cowan University become the provider for the (Department of Conservation and Land Management) C.A.L.M. Cave Leadership course in W.A. The caves of the Leewin-Naturaliste Ridge (Margaret River region of W.A.) are young caves of aeolian calcarenite; heavily decorated, and particularly fragile. Increased visitation over recent years both by cavers and members of the general public has seen a great deal of damage occur to many of these caves. The Department of Conservation and Land Management has been proactive in karst management in the region by drawing up what is, in essence, a three-pronged attack to counter this increased visitation damage.



Photo: W. Tyson

The Cave Leadership course is undertaken over three days; the course content has been fine tuned after feedback from a pilot course held early in the 1999, which was attended by both cavers and commercial operators. The course currently involves a theory day, which focuses on the specific topics of geomorphology of the region, the cave permit system, cave related palaeontology, archaeology, and zoology, cave conservation issues, group leadership, risk management, and accident protocol. This theory course is supported by an in-depth manual.

The theory day is followed by two practical days which involve visiting two caves each day, with an instructor modelling group leadership skills, and also focusing on specific cave details, and it is hoped that visits reinforce aspects discussed in the theory day such as conservation issues specific to each cave, track-marking, points of scientific interest etc. The course ends with the participant completing a theory exam, however full assessment is not accomplished until the participant is assessed running a trip into one of the caves available to them on the permit system.

Firstly, a permit system was established, limiting the number of trip members, as well as numbers of trips into caves was devised. This has been running since the early 1990's with success. In order to increase compliance with this permit system, gating of many of the more accessible and popular caves in the region was undertaken.

Secondly, the recent appointment of a Cave Manager (Ann Wood) for the region has focused efforts on sound karst management. One of Anne's first tasks was to co-ordinate the track-marking of many of the more heavily visited caves, in order to decrease damage by groups, whilst maximizing the experience for these groups within conservation parameters.

The third "prong" has been the development of this Cave Leadership course. It is designed to ensure that all cave leaders who take groups into the caves designated available to the public, have attained a basic standard of both cave and group leadership. The objective of the course has been to modify the "in-cave behaviours" of leaders (and groups) in order to increase compliance with many of the conservation strategies undertaken within these caves. CALM has set a date of 30 January 2000, by which time all non-caving club leaders will be required to have completed this course, or lose their cave access. Caving club Trip Leaders are exempt from this process, in acknowledgement of their speleological experience, both theoretical and practical, gained during trip-leader training within the three caving clubs of W.A.

The Cave Leadership course is run within the framework of the A.S.F. safety guidelines, the MICC, and ASF Code of Ethics. No S.R.T. skills are taught on the course. Participants wishing to be eligible to lead trips into vertical caves must first obtain the Ministry of Sport and Recreation *Abseiling Instructor* qualification. Participants wishing to be assessed on a trip into a vertical cave will, however, have their ropework assessed under a "best practice" framework by their assessor.

The course content has been (in the most) prepared by members of the three caving clubs of W.A. and is a credit to the hard work of the club members involved. The course itself is overseen by the Cave Leadership Assessment Panel, membership of which is drawn from each of the three caving clubs, and representatives of the commercial operators, community service organizations, and the Camping & Outdoor Education group of WA, and is chaired by CALM. Course fees are set to reflect the actual costs involved in running the course. Any profits recovered by the course provider are shared, with half going into course development, and half going into conservation of the caves of the region. CALM subsidizes some aspects of the course, including

the course manual being provided free of charge to participants. The course provider until the end of the year 2000 is Edith Cowan University.

Whilst the development of this course will attract criticism from those who will highlight the negative

aspects of regulation, CALM as the karst managers of the region have recognized the need to develop this multi-faceted plan in order to conserve and protect the caves of the region, and this Cave Leadership course forms an integral part of the overall plan.

Further information concerning the course can be obtained from Dr Heather Jefferies (course co-ordinator): heatherj@cygnus.uwa.edu.au