

# PRESENTING WORLD HERITAGE VALUES TO THE VISITOR

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## NARACOORTE CAVES WORLD HERITAGE AREA

Naracoorte Caves Conservation Park is one of 13 areas in Australia with World Heritage status. The benefits of this are obvious (financial, media exposure etc.), however to present the World Heritage values of the caves to the public offers a greater challenge than for other areas. Take for example Uluru, which is visually spectacular, as are the Great Barrier Reef, Tasmanian Wilderness and Fraser Island. The natural values of these areas are immediately obvious. The Naracoorte Caves gained World Heritage for the fact that "they are outstanding in their representation of major stages of the Earth's evolutionary history, of significant ongoing geological processes and of the evolution of life", so for visitors this may not be immediately recognisable!

World Heritage listing and a lot of hard work has changed the face of Naracoorte, with the opening of the Wonambi Fossil Centre in 1998. This gave a visual aspect to the animals talked about on the Fossil Cave tour, but the cave tour itself remained largely the same. This paper covers how guides are trained at Naracoorte, and how they present the fossils and World Heritage values on a cave tour. It also discusses how the Wonambi Fossil Centre presents the World Heritage values of the Naracoorte Caves to the public, and possible future directions.

## A BRIEF HISTORY

The fossils in the Naracoorte area were recognised more than a century ago, however the discovery of a large fossil deposit in Victoria Cave in 1969 created much scientific and media interest. Public interest was also high, with visitation reaching 60,000+ in the mid-1970s. Not having the benefit of thirty years of research on the deposit as we have now, the guides had to make do with a mix of basic knowledge and lot of creativity. A memory of about 20 years ago of a guide telling the group I was in about "marsupial frogs" and other equally fantastic creatures that had been discovered in the fossil deposit. Ironically, the group contained Dr. Peter Baverstock, a research biologist who found the delivery particularly entertaining. As with many other cave systems, a period of stagnation occurred through the 1980's and 1990's with very little change in the way tours were presented.

## GUIDE, INTERPRETER OR PRESENTER?

Much has been written in recent years regarding interpretation, with many people now referring to cave guides as site interpreters. A change in title does not necessarily change the way a tour is conducted. Whether you call them cave guides or a site interpreter is irrelevant, it is their ability to present the relevant information that is fundamental to a successful tour. A guide (interpreter) needs to have a sound knowledge base, a cheerful disposition and a passion for what they are talking about. A scientist may be able to interpret the geology of a site to perfection, but if

the presentation is boring, interest will wane. Naracoorte's guides are selected on their people skills and their ability to communicate, rather than scientific knowledge. They are the interface with the public and their ability to stimulate the visitors and give them a memorable experience is the best advertising a business can have. My career as a cave guide began in 1990 with a basic knowledge of the caves, an interest in palaeontology and a fair grounding in natural history courtesy of my parents. After 12 months as a casual guide I was getting pretty bored, presenting the same old stuff on every tour and most definitely boring some visitors. I decided to visit other cave systems and anywhere tours were conducted and analysed the performance of any poor guide who had the misfortune to get me on tour. The problem I encountered is well known and well documented; people get bored doing the same thing all the time (mostly!) and this is really obvious with a tour guide. I had to improve my performance and now enjoy guiding as much as when I first started.

## PROBLEMS IN PRESENTATION

So how do you present a pile of old bones to visitors? The actual viewing area for visitors in the Victoria Fossil Cave hadn't changed for many years, save the wooden trestle being upgraded to a plastic table. It was noted by some at the ACKMA conference (1999), and then during a guides workshop that a visitor sitting listening to a guide talking at the deposit couldn't actually see their face and the view wasn't very satisfactory. A new platform for guides was constructed (so the guide and visitors could be much closer to each other), and a "table" chipped into the rock, so props are close at hand. A reconstructed skeleton on each side of the viewing area completes the display. The lighting creates a sense of theatre, with the *Thylacoleo* skeleton casting a shadow that appears to protect the bones in the deposit.

White (1999), highlighted problems in interpretation of science to visitors to cave areas including:

- Failure to absorb and use new ideas; ongoing use of old ideas.
- Failure of communication at various levels
- Failure to update information
- Myth and "mis-information creep"

## OVERCOMING THESE PROBLEMS THROUGH BETTER TRAINING

To overcome these problems, the guides at Naracoorte participate in a different training program than previously had been undertaken. Over the previous twelve months six new guides have started. Conveniently they have started in pairs. They have been given written information covering cave science, geology, palaeontology and bat ecology. Rather than follow other guides on

their tours, they had been walked through the caves and shown the lighting and given some ideas on how to handle groups of people and guiding techniques. They have then been given several days to walk around the caves by themselves constructing their own tours using their own ideas. When they feel comfortable they take another senior guide or myself on a tour with a small group, to assess how they are progressing. It is only after they have conducted tours of their own are they allowed to follow another guide's tour. By training guides in this manner old ideas do not perpetuate and 'mis-information creep' (probably better known as a Chinese whisper) is avoided.

In years past, any snippet of knowledge gleaned from a visiting palaeontologist was kept to oneself and very little information sharing took place. We are now very fortunate to have a Flinders University researcher on staff doing some guiding work. This has allowed the guides to participate in fossil excavation gaining real hands on experience. Imagine how much more interesting your talk can be if you have actually been digging and uncovered the jaw of an extinct kangaroo. The passion and excitement always comes across. A manual has been put together as a reference for each guide that contains enough information to answer most of the questions asked on tour at a basic level (mid to upper High School level). The guides also have a very large library of scientific papers and manuals relating to Naracoorte and the fossils at their disposal, so they can expand their own knowledge base as required. They become quite well versed in subjects such as functional anatomy, palaeoecology, taphonomy, geology and general palaeontology, and have the ability to communicate this to visitors in an interesting manner. Workshops are run on a regular basis where guides can get together and discuss questions they have had on tour and haven't been able to answer, and perhaps other questions of their own. By having guides quite well versed in the science it allows a much better presentation at the fossil deposit.

This method of training and open transfer of knowledge allows guides to present a tour in their own unique manner, yet every tour will have the same backbone of material (no pun intended). The guide's performance is monitored through various means to keep them from lapsing into the bored and boring phase all guides encounter. An excellent way to make a guide think and present a different tour is to do the tour backwards, wherever this is possible.

## MEETING VISITOR EXPECTATIONS

Pick up any interpretation manual and you will find it says there is no such thing as the "average visitor". Our visitors could be roughly placed in five categories:

- Educational groups
- Family groups and individuals on holiday
- Popular science magazine reader
- Visiting professionals

- International visitors with little English

Each of these people are expecting different information, so how do you cater for that?

Educational groups are catered for independently, so the level of information can be adjusted depending on the age group. It is important to have communication with the class teacher to determine the outcome they are looking for from the cave visit. Hands on props and activities are important, as doing rather than listening is a more effective form of learning for most.

Regularly, the other four groups can be represented on any given tour. Family groups are after a good time, so a presentation that keeps the kids quiet is rated by Mum and Dad as a good one. Again the hands-on bone material is very important with the kids and helps to create an awareness of what palaeontology is. The most difficult concept to put across can be that the animals we are presenting aren't dinosaurs, but existed in a different time period, and are known as Megafauna.

The popular science magazine reader eg. GEO, Australian Geographic is better informed and after a higher level of information, but provided this information is presented in an easily understood form the whole group will still enjoy the tour. The visiting professionals that come on a regular tour are few and far between and can be very useful in stimulating discussion in the group on topics not usually discussed. They can also have the opposite effect. International visitors with little English are the most difficult group to present to, but are often aware of what is at Naracoorte and have come to see the fossils rather than hear about them. Sometime soon, however, multi-lingual written material may become necessary.

The visitors to the Victoria Fossil Cave hopefully leave the cave knowing Australia once had animals we now call Megafauna, some understanding on how palaeontologists are reconstructing Australia's past and the reason why Naracoorte Caves is a World Heritage Area. Also, we hope they had a wonderful experience and visit the Wonambi Fossil Centre.

## THE WONAMBI FOSSIL CENTRE

The Wonambi Fossil Centre is the culmination of many years research at Naracoorte and other areas into Australia's past. It is a display of what the palaeontologists believe Naracoorte may have looked like 200,000 years ago. This display provides a great visual interpretation for visitors after the cave tour, with them (hopefully) gaining an appreciation of how the animals were reconstructed from the fossils.

The Wonambi experience is one of stepping back in time, walking through an ancient forest with the Megafauna. The animals that could only previously be described by the guide on tour have been brought back to "life". This display has been well received by the public, most enjoying the fact they can see a "real" *Thylacoleo* and *Diprotodon*. Locals have a lot of pride in what has been constructed

with some having visited more than a dozen times with their own visitors.

The rear of the Wonambi Fossil Centre has the Flinders University Gallery with nine panels depicting the various sciences studied at Naracoorte. Despite these being quite in depth, research using time lapse video has shown that these panels are very successful and often read (Evans, 1999). Many requests are made to purchase copies of these panels. Touch screen computers in this part of the centre are also well received. It is not unusual to see a visitor spend over an hour reading information on these.

### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The Wonambi Fossil Centre development has been most successful with a large increase in visitation to the Caves. The science of palaeontology is a dynamic one, with ongoing research always changing and updating theories. It is important

guides remain enthusiastic and continue to use current information so a repeat visitor doesn't hear the same story on a cave tour ten years after they first heard it.

Further developments in infrastructure are planned to continue to enhance the visitor experience and promote World Heritage Values. Some real fossil material will soon be on display and will look spectacular. Enough said, you will have to come and see for yourself!

Comparisons between the past environment recreated in the Wonambi Fossil Centre and that of today are planned, with the construction of walking trails that will take in various geological and natural features.

Our aim is to give every visitor a little information on World Heritage, Australia's Megafauna, caves, but most of all a great experience so all visitors become advocates for the Naracoorte Caves.

### **REFERENCES**

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