

8th CAVE GUIDES GABFEST - 2000

- David Smith*

Beginning on Monday, 28 February 2000, Wombeyan Caves (New South Wales) played host to the 8th Australian Cave Guides *Gabfest* - a conference for cave tour guides and others associated with karst landforms. The four-day program incorporated a wide range of physically and mentally challenging activities from wild caving to karst workshops. The number of participants fluctuated between 15 and 32 at various stages due to other commitments, although a reasonable spread of karst areas was represented. These included Wellington, Yarrangobilly, Jenolan, Wombeyan, JCRT (NSW), Kelly Hill, Naracoorte, Tantoola, Princess Margaret Rose (SA), Buchan, (Vic), Calgardup and Margaret River (WA). Unfortunately Tasmania, Northern Territory and Queensland had no representatives at this *Gabfest*, and numbers were generally down on previous occasions. Apparently there are still organisations that either have not heard of *Gabfest*, or are undecided about its relevance to the guides of their Reserve. After all, the concept of a guide's get-together is still relatively new and the name "*Gabfest*" is not self-explanatory when trying to promote a guide's conference. Also of consideration is the staging of the 14th ACKMA conference at Wombeyan next year.

On a more positive note, *Gabfest* 2000 participants were treated to an exciting, enjoyable and thought-provoking experience. During the initial organising of *Gabfest* 2000, the Wombeyan staff decided to run the program along the theme of "taking interpretation beyond 2000 with new ideas". Over the course of the conference many new and interesting concepts on karst interpretation were discussed and all present acknowledged that they had a mentally and physically fulfilling week. A brief summary of the *Gabfest* 2000 program is as follows:

Sunday 28 February

This was basically a travelling day for most of the participants, those bringing their own transport had arrived at Wombeyan by early evening for registration. A BBQ was arranged and old acquaintances were renewed and friendships made.

Monday 29 February

After breakfast and a briefing on the day's program, Mike Chalker, manager of Wombeyan Caves, was invited to present the opening address to the conference. Mike outlined the major features of the reserve, a brief history of the various departments responsible for the running of Wombeyan's tourism industry and the political anomalies of having a shire boundary running smack-bang down the middle of the Wombeyan Valley!

Kooringa cave became the first taste of the spectacular Wombeyan underground for many participants and an hour or so was spent dissecting (metaphorically speaking, of course) the many and varied geological and geomorphological features

that this small cave has to offer. The idea was to closely examine some of the more mysterious and baffling cave phenomena (the things some of us do not have an answer for) and discuss these features with Dr. Julia James on Wednesday.

John Dunkley addressed the conference on the roles and functions of the Australian Speleological Society as well as caving codes of conduct, achievements of the organisation and contacts for guides wishing to become members of ASF.

The afternoon provided an opportunity for some wild caving. The venues decided upon were Bullio cave, Grant's cave and Junction cave (upper and lower streamways). Hopefully a good mix of difficult to slightly more relaxing but enjoyable caving was achieved. It must be noted that not everyone participated in the wild caving exercise due to departmental policies in some management organisations. This was unfortunate and disappointing because wild caving provides a guide with a whole new perspective on cave interpretation, teamwork, a sense of achievement, not to mention being extremely good fun!

Tuesday 30 March

Mike Attard from the Blue Mountains Adventure Company and NSW Cave Rescue gave a discussion on basic caving equipment, including recommendations for equipment to be carried by a caving team as well as by each person. The importance of suitable equipment on caving trips cannot be underestimated because of the unpredictability of wild caves and wild cavers. John Bonwick (of Bonwick ladder fame) followed up on the equipment discussions and provided some advice on the proper use and care of his caving ladder. Of importance was the environmental concern for anchor points such as trees. Once used for rigging the ladder to trees, the wire trace has been relegated to packing up the ladder only. The wear and tear on large trees from wire traces and ropes at Bungonia was very evident and quite alarming.

A trip through the lower streamway of Fig Tree cave was organised for the afternoon to discuss aspects of the morning's presentations on caving equipment and play out some hypothetical situations involving rescues.

For the more courageous (and maybe less sensible) a canyoning exercise led by Mike Chalker and myself was organised to show off the Mares Forest Creek Gorge. Only five people decided to brave the conditions which wasn't surprising due to the coolness of the afternoon (and the water which I have heard various swimmers describe as "spanner water!")

The evening exercise involved a group discussion instigated by myself. The idea was to write down some of the problems encountered by tour guides

during the course of a cave tour and to try and find solutions to the problems listed. The discussions proved to be very constructive and brought back many memories (not all of them nice) of past tours. The results of the discussions were typed up and distributed to each participant.

The main focus of the evening was to make a decision on a possible name change of *Gabfest*. This arose due to concerns listed earlier in this report. After a vote it was decided to keep the name *Gabfest* because it was catchy, familiar to many guides and was starting to become some sort of a tradition. A sub-title "Cave Guide's Convention" was added to "Gabfest" for an explanation of the event and to perhaps highlight the importance of the event for future *Gabfests*.

Steve Bourne of Naracoorte caves conducted the final presentation of a very busy day. Steve presented some slides and discussed the importance of effective guide training for interpreting a World Heritage Fossil Site.

Wednesday 2 March

Dr. Julia James and Dr. Craig Barnes were invited to join the conference and lead discussions on cave minerals. Julia presented four questions regarding helectites, ages of cave decorations and management and development of potential show-caves. These topics were discussed in sub-groups and the group with the best answers was presented with a bottle of red wine - more than enough incentive to get the brain functioning again!

After a break, Julia and Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust *Karst Resources Manager* Ernst Holland gave the conference an interpretation of the Wombeyan marble and limestone quarries. Although the blasting and cutting operations had ceased in 1997 with the passing of new legislation on quarrying activities, there is still much interest in the quarries due to the large stockpiles of marble blocks and crushed limestone. Ernst discussed the proposal to use the abandoned quarries as both educational and recreational areas. Quarry ML4 (Red Hill Quarry) is an ideal classroom because of its complex display of geology, minerals, geomorphology, history, mining operations, environmental concerns, as well as the grades, colours and values of the marble. ML4 also exhibits the compressed air powered crane used for lifting the marble blocks and provides a potentially ideal abseiling, laddering and prussiking site. A proposal was made to Ernst that he put together a book or paper on all aspects of the mining operations for use by guides and schoolteachers in future interpretation of the quarries. Maybe a bottle or two of green ginger wine might twist his arm!

A look at Steetley's Quarry revealed much invaluable information - aboriginal artifacts, cave paleosystems, doline sediments, bone deposits and fossils. Ken Fleming, a guide at the caves for many years, presented a brief history of the site including

the residence of the first caretaker of Wombeyan Caves, Charles Chalker, in 1865.

During the course of the afternoon the *Gabfesters* inspected all of the Wombeyan show caves with the emphasis on picking Julia's brain at every opportunity. It's always interesting to compare the theories given by different cave experts on the formation of caves and the processes of speleothem development. Hundreds of questions echoed through the caves that afternoon, highlighting a real thirst for information amongst the guides. Important points to come out of the exercise included the fact that there are a vast array of processes operating in cave systems; that many concepts are still theories and different people have different theories; and it also revealed just how much I didn't know about my place of work!

After dinner Julia presented some slides on cave developments in other countries. Some of the infrastructure was appealing to the eye and very well thought out while other ideas were appalling, inappropriate or in bad taste (the guide in 4-inch heels and the bright green painted rim-pools spring to mind!). To top off a very fulfilling day the guides had the opportunity to promote their own cave reserves via a slide show.

Thursday 3 March

The program for the final day of *Gabfest* featured an excursion to Bungonia State Recreation Area for a bit of sightseeing. The head ranger introduced us to the area and from there we made our own way around the reserve looking at the landforms, geology and cave entrances. The camping facilities were quite impressive and not unlike the quality of those at Wombeyan caves. It was interesting to hear of the recreational activities undertaken at Bungonia - many of them highly illegal like base-jumping and suicide. On average there is some sort of incident every month requiring rescue operations and a fatality every two years.

The farewell dinner was held at the Taralga Sports Club on Thursday evening with everyone doing their utmost to boost the economy of the local area and thoroughly enjoying themselves in the process. Jenolan Caves manager, Steve Reilly and some of the Jenolan guides made the journey to be part of the final meal. During the evening, Mark Bonwick presented some slides of some new discoveries in Mammoth Cave at Jenolan as well as parts of the fascinating Lechuguilla Cave. A vote was taken for the host site of the 9th Australian Cave Guides *Gabfest* in 2002 with Naracoorte and surrounding areas receiving the most interest.

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