

MANAGEMENT OF WILD CAVES

- AN INTERROGATIVE SERMON in three parts.

(CUMBERLAND RIVER CAVE - VICTORIA Perceptions and Management Difficulties)

- Andy Spate

For today's sermon (in *The Cave* rather than on *The Mount*) I take as my text Kent's article on Cumberland River Cave under the above title in the last issue of the Journal. I hope Kent will not mind if I use it to draw out some points for discussion. It will also give me the opportunity to push another barrow. We will get back to that barrow later. And perhaps others?

CHAPTER THE FIRST

The article admirably demonstrates some of the issues to be faced in considering the broad issue of how do you manage "wild" or "non-show" caves (for a brief discussion of such terms see Spate and Hamilton-Smith elsewhere in this issue) – especially those cave or cave areas that are remote from a management presence or where there is a history of use or abuse. What are the values one manages for? What happens if the needs of the different values require different management approaches that might be conflicting. How can we protect the values and allow some right of access? How do you impose an effective management regime?

In this case Kent, at least initially, would seem to have wanted to protect a large and impressive sounding stalactite and some other speleothems. He had also noted the presence of a small number of Large (or Common) Bent-winged Bats, *Miniopterus schreibersii*, which have a "hatred of gates". Don't we all! More on gate hatred in the next AndySez.

It would seem that we may have at least four issues here:

- The use of the cave by an unknown number of visitors of unknown attitudes.
- A spectacular and easily accessed stalactite and some other speleothems.
- A small number of bats of a species listed as "vulnerable" in Victoria (and with similar classification in other States).
- What is the cave's precise topographic relationship with the sea (I am writing this in the absence of Kent's original (1991) article whilst on the way back from Antarctica)?

Kent's initial reaction and my discussion here were/are made in absence of the total information available. Kent, very properly, as he recounts out in his article, took steps to find out more. I am not going to look at his 1991 article in Chapter 1 at this stage as I wish to draw out some further problems - to make this a theoretical discussion rather than a case study.

First some comments and questions on each of these issues:

1. Was any graffiti or other damage evident? Had there been in the past? What values did the users place on the site? One user, at least, has thought it interesting enough to write about and to take the time to show it to his overseas relatives. He and others presumably have some sort of visitor's rights. One wonders what other users think of the Parks Victoria's actions? There is an implication from Lindy Lumsden's comments that visitor numbers rise during school holidays. This suggests that it is used by non-locals - or is it just the kids home from school? Is this a local tourist attraction. Should we have a chat with those giving directions to the site?
2. The stalactite is said to be active and clearly has some "recuperative" powers. One assumes that the other speleothems are similarly active. In the context of this site, the stalactite and other features are clearly of local significance. Can we afford to neglect it in an attempt to provide unfettered cave use?
3. Leaving aside the statutory need to protect the bats, we need to ask ourselves how important is this site in the overall perspective of maintaining their overall population in a healthy state. We also need to think about the "death of a thousand cuts" situation. This individual cave may not be of critical importance - but if we add all the caves that are not critically important together and let them go is the total effect likely to be catastrophic? How much is too much?
4. Assuming (and I might be completely off the planet here) this cave is at least episodically an active sea cave what will the effect of a gate in the entrance be? Will it be smashed several times a year? Will it cause the cave's entrance to silt up? Thus denying its use by bats and people? If my assumption is correct did the Parks Victoria people consider this?

If my assumption is incorrect we can ignore the interaction between sea, cave and gate - but it could be another variable in this complex equation. How I wish it could be reduced to an equation! Such questions were highly relevant to similar management

proposals for another sea cave with bats in southern NSW - Merrica River Bat Cave.

The Parks Victoria people may have addressed some of the questions raised above? It was not really within Lindy's brief (as a bat expert) to have done so. Did they consult Kent's 1991 article? Was it useful? Did they think about consulting Kent, ACKMA, ASF or anyone else? Perhaps my comments and Kent's articles could be relayed to them for some input? I am after some constructive discussion on the issue of management of this type of cave. I certainly don't think that anybody has done anything wrong here. It seems to me to be an interesting site with interesting and useful actions by Parks Victoria and a useful discussion by Kent. Let's build on this for this site – and for many others.

I will make two criticisms. The first reinforces Kent's comments on the placing of the sign (but check your spelling, Kent). I, too, incline to the idea that the sign should not be outside the cave drawing attention to it - but not necessarily right at the gate either.

Secondly, and Kent may not have fully thought through the literal meaning of his words, I was a little distressed by the statement in his third last paragraph that "my perceptions from a cave management perspective" needed considerable adjustment when taking account the 'bat equation'. I thought that I had trained Kent better than that - his perceptions should have included bats as part of the "cave management perspective"! But he is an older and wiser man now - and I must take the blame for not having had ensured that his perspective always included bats!

CHAPTER THE SECOND

"...and before long, after following a group of locals who knew all about it, I was at the entrance of Cumberland River Cave.

The cave is in dune limestone, overlaid with sandstone, which observation suggests is continuous from the spur to the right of the nearby Cumberland River. The entrance is narrow, and the cave is "delightfully" floored with empty (I checked...) Fosters cans, intermingled with rounded pebbles of varying sizes, and silt. Actually, the rubbish in the cave was not that bad, and given what I understand is wide local knowledge of its location, damage appears relatively light... although clearly I have no historical reference on which to base my observations.

The entrance opens into a single chamber approx. 25m long, 12m wide and 6m high. It contains some reasonable decoration, with tiered flowstone on several wall sections, and a quite ample stalactite... Of greatest interest, however, was a sizeable bat colony, which my count put at about 30-40. They all looked to be the same

species, but then, all bats look the same to me.... Davey & White suggest occasional bats in the cave, but clearly ongoing monitoring would be useful. While on a coastal reserve, access is regrettably uncontrolled. The only positive mitigating factor is that the cave is removed from normal tourist tracks, and is itself somewhat concealed. Thus, specific local knowledge is largely necessary to locate the entrance. On the downside, it appears more than a few possess this knowledge."

The above three paragraphs are verbatim from Kent's 1991 article which I have now re-read. Several interesting things emerge which are relevant to my sermonising.:

Compare paragraphs one and three. The expert found the cave by following locals but local knowledge seems to be a bad thing. Relate these points to the oft-repeated statements of organised cavers that they provide the knowledge to the managers that then impose management regimes which may not be appropriate often without understanding the needs, aspirations and potential inputs of these users.

Read paragraph two above and go back and read Kent's most recent article. His emphasis on what is most interesting in this cave (Does interesting = significant? I certainly don't know) has shifted from bats in 1991 to speleothems in 2000. Now we have demonstrated an attitudinal and temporal change in cave management direction.

The shift from bats to speleothems seems to parallel my cave conservation career (although I have now drifted back to bats and invertebrates).

CHAPTER THE THIRD – Waffling toward some conclusions.

The point that I am trying to make in all of this is management of caves is difficult, subject to changing attitudes and values. **There are no easy answers. Nor will there ever be an equation to provide an easy route.**

Note that having gone back to the original material (Davey and White 1986 and Henderson 1991, 2000), I still don't know anything about the setting of the site. Are geomorphic processes and management actions such as gates under the influence of the sea? This indicates how those providing management prescriptions need to be wide-thinkers – multi-disciplinary thinkers

While we are pushing barrows (and I still haven't got to the initial one yet), are there any other values, conflicts between values and between human users at this site? Are cave invertebrates, geological structures, minerals, sedimentary sequences, fossil sea-monsters? Is anyone making a buck from visiting this site? Who has looked? Who can be fully didactic? These sorts of questions need to be addressed in considering management actions on such a site?

I am heartened by Lindy's and Parks Victoria's approach to a partial gate to protect part of a bat cave as I have been considering such an approach for Ashford Cave in northern NSW. I am going to give it a whirl! But I had better get back to my first barrow.

At the 2001 ACKMA Conference at Wombeyan/Goulburn, one of the themes will be "The Management of Wild Caves". The Cumberland River Cave story as related in Kent's two articles and further discussed here is an example of the sort of thing that we might wish to discuss next year. Get to it you mob and start thinking about these issues and their complexities. And provide me with a simple equation so I can die happy!

REFERENCES

- Davey, A.G. and White, S. 1986. *Victorian Caves and Karst. Strategies for Management and Catalogue, A report to the Caves Classification Committee*, Victoria, Applied Natural Resource Management, Canberra
- Henderson, K. (1991). An Interesting Little Sea Cave. *ACKMA Journal* No. 7.
- Henderson, K. (2000). Cumberland River Cave – Victoria: Perceptions and Management Difficulties. *ACKMA Journal* No. 37