

BLACK WATER RAFTING ALLIES WITH MASONS GLOWWORM CAVES

- Peter Chandler & John Ash

In the December ACKMA Journal, Dave Smith briefly mentioned Black Water Rafting's (BWR) taking over of Mason's Glowworm Tours (near Waitomo, New Zealand). This started with making a commitment to operate tours on demand from the start of Derek and Jill's season – the first of September 1999. With plans for upgrading much of the infrastructure, there has been a low-key approach to promoting the tour until this is satisfactory. Promotion includes listing the new tours on a Waitomo Brochure/Map, and upgrading of the Black Water Rafting Website.

The singular piece of cave work that has helped out the tour was the rebuilding of the weir in the cave for Derek's boat. Five metres upstream of the previous site a solution hole on the true left and a slot opposite provided a natural anchor for a six metre long timber pole. The area below the pole is blanked off with four square sections of galvanised grip-tread grating, angled upstream at the base and plywood at each side that is shaped to prevent water or plastic liner loss. Two layers of construction plastic seal the structure and create a lake back to the second bridge on Derek's original tour. This has also eliminated the need to scramble over the undulating rocky floor for thirty metres to the previous loading point, or construction of additional pathways.

After trialing an inflatable kayak in a local cave last winter, logical progression was to test a white water rafting style inflatable in the new improved reaches of the Mangawhitakau (Masons) Glowworm Cave. A vessel loaned from Keith Hughes of *Kaituna Cascades Rafting* in Rotorua proved perfect, just narrow enough for one point but short enough to spin around in the widest section. A permanent addition to the fleet was purchased. This has three thwarts, or seats, and provides adequate seating for 10-15 people. We are presently putting together an operational code for the raft and applying for a lifejacket exemption for the low water conditions applicable in the cave, through the Maritime Safety Authority.

As an upgrade for the Weir, plans are to make it adjustable and automatically releasing in a flood – probably designed with air/ water bags/ hydraulics to raise and enable adjustment of the structure beneath the anchor pole. If anyone knows of any experts in this field, we would be keen to learn more. This would, as Professor Paul Williams suggested, provide minimal interference with natural stream dynamics, especially if lowered after each days tours.

Alas, the coffee and muffins no longer happen on the Mason Homestead Lawn. On the BWR version, (after usually visiting Masons Dry Cave first) upon entering the sandy stream bypass passage of the Glowworm Cave, visitors are treated to tea or coffee and muffins while everyone's eyes adjust to the required levels – reputedly this takes twenty-five minutes from a bright day. An added adventure for visitors is the prospect of floating over the new weir in the inflatable. We do not do this,

but the approaching noise gets visitors imaginations going and many do not utter a word....

With a platform, handrail and ramp beside the weir, it is also possible to negotiate the final thirty metres of the cave to the sump by walking in a close group, carefully, with the glowworm light reflecting off pale surfaces to some simple benches on the gravel banks in the end chamber. An underwater light conjures up images of cave divers emerging from the murky depths before re-tracing ones steps for the return boat journey. Simon Hall of *Long Tomo Rafting/Cave Canoeing* operates downstream from the resurgence of this sump. Some delegates to the 1997 ACKMA Waitomo Conference did this adventure tour.

Tours over summer were generally taking between 3¼ and 4¼ hours (ex Waitomo) – still too long. The delays are usually with visitors having difficulty negotiating a slippery, muddy 200 metre trail in Mason's Dry Cave before returning. As a best practice pathway is developed in Mason's Dry Cave, we expect to have the time under more control.

The licensed operation of Masons Dry Cave terminated on March 31. We are at present negotiating with the 'new landowners', MacDonalds Lime (the large quarrying operation visited during the 1997 ACKMA Conference) and we are hopeful about arriving at a symbiotic relationship. It is certainly hoped to renew operations in Masons Dry Cave with its Moa and other bones, and history of human visitation between 1849 and 1900. Consequently, the present tour incorporates a little Maori history by viewing an old fortified pa site, *Pa Nikau*, that overlooks the gorge just upstream of the Mangawhitikau submergence as well as the lower reaches of the Mangawhitakau gorge.

A lower price tag and slightly shorter turn-around time has increased numbers, mainly on weekends. Visitors have included family groups unable to do a cave tubing-style tour and free independent travellers (FITs) wanting a 'soft adventure' cave experience with more detailed interpretation, away from the main show cave and wet suits. Group sizes have generally been limited to six per group (the number of seats in the ex Mason 4WD Van). Plans are to increase our capacity after the cave work is done.

What's in a name?

From a marketing point of view, while we have thus far continued with the Masons name, we have come up with the descriptive generic: "Waitomo Moa and Glowworm Experience". This name change has recently been put on hold with use of the "Black Water Dry" label - not a new local beverage! Although we are aware of the risks of market confusion by using these different names, we view it as creating an entry point for several distinct visitor groups. Watch this Space!!