

WET CAVE RESERVE DEVELOPMENT QUASHED WITHIN RFA PROCESS, BUT MAKE WAY FOR THE MANAGEMENT PLAN

- Deb Hunter

OUTCOME FOR WET CAVE RESERVE, MOLE CREEK, TASMANIAN REGIONAL FOREST AGREEMENT PROPOSALS

On 13 April there was a meeting in Deloraine held by the Nature Based Tourism Project Steering Committee of the Great Western Tiers-Kooparoonia Niara RFA Tourist Interpretation Project. Neither of two controversial proposals to develop the Wet Caves Reserve (see ACKMA Journal 38) gained Committee endorsement.

The proposals for Wet Caves Reserve included development of Honeycomb Cave as a self-timed (-guided) tourist cave with an interpretative surface walk and a proposal to establish an Aboriginal Cultural Centre at the Reserve. During discussion, Bob Tyson of Parks and Wildlife said that the first proposal was discounted because of known Aboriginal interest in this land, because of other users of the land and because of staffing issues.

I have been involved in the Project' community consultative process and have been working to generate awareness and discussion of issues and implications of development at Wet Caves Reserve since the proposals arose. It appears that the Steering Committee has conceded Honeycomb Cave should remain as it presently is - a popular *beginner's cave* with a high degree of naturalness. The cave is much more robust than any alternatives.

The proposals which the Committee have favoured for progress within the "Caves, Forests and Wildlife" component of the Project are the Alumn Cliffs lookout and walking track improvements, devils education research, whitewater facilities at Mersey/Arm River and King Solomon's (show) Cave extension and surface trail. The completion of these projects is expected to take approximately 15 months. As part of the RFA process, it was decreed that all Tasmanian National Parks should have Management Plans by 31 December 2000. These Plans will be in force for a period of ten years.

THE DRAFTING OF A MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE MOLE CREEK KARST NATIONAL PARK

The Plan (MCKNPMP) is presently being drafted, so undoubtedly further issues will arise regarding the Wet Caves Reserve (part of the actual Mole Creek karst drainage subsystem) when it is released for public comment (due August 2000, to be followed by a sixty day public comment period). As Kevin Kiernan lamented (ACKMA Journal 30), land reservation proposals over a decade old have not been enacted to protect such icons as Herbert's Pot and Croesus Cave, as the Park is really just a collective renaming of eleven small pre-existing State Reserves. Small additions to these reserves could have averted the inevitable ongoing controversy over adjoining land uses. Kiernan highlighted the legislative and policy inconsistencies of Government agencies that can allow activities destructive to karst values. A three-year study of the Mole Creek karst catchment by Rolan Eberhard is about to commence. However, ten years of the management of the Park will already have been determined.

At a presentation to Meander Valley Council on 9 May, Vicky Shivlock of Parks and Wildlife informed councillors of the progress of the draft and issues which have arisen during the pre-draft community consultations. There were two issues aired of particular interest in the context of our present debate, both affecting the Mole Creek subsystem.

Wet Cave Reserve Development

The idea of a surface karst walk around and above Honeycomb Cave is still under discussion. This was one of the original proposals put forward during the RFA process (and earlier, during the Recreational and Tourism Strategy (RATS) field trips in 1998). I have argued since 1998 that because of the frequent large and obvious daylight holes and easily accessible entrances of Honeycomb, such development is unwise. It is likely that many tourists would enter the cave (either independently or following cavers in), throw things down holes (onto cavers?) and be exposed to examples of inappropriate caver behaviour of the beginner cavers who use the place. However, perhaps the greatest potential tragedy remains the possibility (probability?) of the displacement of those beginner cavers to other more remote and less robust sites.

Westmorland Cave and the "nine-foot" water diversion

I have been advocating the need for environmental flow to be guaranteed to Westmorland Cave since the improvement of the water diversion at its entrance earlier this year. During a meeting between local cavers and karst officers from Parks, it was discussed that the ownership of the land containing the cave, the diversion and a walking track could be transferred to the Crown for addition to the MCKNP. The land was originally given to the then Deloraine Council (now amalgamated into Meander Valley Council) within the first few years of last century. The land, cave and water diversion have had no active management all this time. The walking track, which leads to the Westmorland Falls upstream of the cave, goes directly past the cave entrance and diversion. It is promoted to tourists. It would be appropriate that this track be re-routed. The "nine-foot" diversion carries water to an open ditch that flows through several farms. It would be better to have the balance between environmental flow and pastoral needs administered by the Crown, after having been established within the MCKNPMP. Vicky said that funds are short to purchase land for addition to the MCKNP. If the land was originally given to Council, which has made no input either in dollar or human resources terms, then it should be given, not sold, to the Crown.

I have also recommended that this track be re-routed. The "nine-foot" diversion carries water to an open ditch which flows through several farms. It would be better to have the balance between environmental flow and pastoral needs administered by the Crown, after having been established within the MCKNPMP. Vicky said that funds are short to purchase land for addition to the MCKNP. If the land was originally given to Council, which has made no input either in dollar or human

resources terms, then it should be given, not sold, to the Crown. No provision for an independent review?

The timeline is tight for the finalisation of the MCKNPMP. It will be one of the most complex first management plans for a long while. The limited access cave permit system, show caves and associated management issues, cooperation with other agencies where caves and their catchments extend beyond Park boundaries, commercial operator's access and wild cave gating are just a sample. The Mole Creek karst is unrivalled in Australia in the intensity of the human utilisation of its resources. It would be appropriate in the context of the number and

diversity of interested parties and many ongoing conflicts and controversies to allow for an independent "third party" review. The Resource Planning and Development Commission (RPDC) (formerly the Public Land Use Commission) should be engaged to ensure an objective assessment. This was not assured at the Council meeting. Kiernan wrote in 1989: "The system of caves within the Mole Creek/Lobster divide is of a complexity and scale without parallel in Australia". It would be tragedy indeed to allow this heritage to be despoiled out of either short-sightedness or for reasons of political expediency.

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