

THE CAVES IN CENTRAL QUEENSLAND – AN UPDATE

- Ann Augusteyn

As public attention focuses on the laying to rest of the Mt. Etna issues, another chapter of controversy also closes. The inclusion of Cammoo Caves in the Mt. Etna N.P ends thirty years of commercial rivalry between the owners of Cammoo and Olsens Caves. Now the critical question is the future role of Cammoo Caves and what effect this will have on the long term viability of Olsens Caves.

The essential issue to consider is that cave visitation in Central Queensland is not sufficient to support two commercial cave operations. Immense time, effort and money has been invested in Olsens Caves to create a well managed cave with facilities and ongoing landcare activities. This requires funding and manpower. The very nature of the private ownership of Olsens Caves limits its eligibility for grants, so that all developments and management plans must be funded from the sale of cave tickets. In contrast the E.P.A. has access to both manpower and resources and enjoys eligibility for government grants and corporate funding. Any change to that equation has serious consequences for the integrity of the caves.

There is the opportunity for the only privately-owned show caves in Australia to work cooperatively with the government, community and industry through the provision of complimentary activities. This partnership should be addressed now to ensure that issues do not arise that can lead to conflict and the undermining of the viability and integrity of the caves of Central Queensland.

In other news, Olsen's Caves has introduced a "Friends of the Capricorn Caves" group. It was formed at Easter, and entitles locals to a complimentary tour on a return visit with friends or relations. It also builds up a data base of people who may volunteer their services for working bees or special events in the caves. Visitation has been steady with similar numbers to last year – in other words the closing of Cammoo Caves has not seen a significant increase in our visitation. The caravan park is starting to enjoy patronage and people are enjoying the tranquillity of the bush setting. Lack of rain continues to cause problems with water supply and the bush is looking very dry.