

# HASTINGS CAVES UPDATE

- Arthur Clarke

The new Hastings Caves Visitor Interpretation Centre (Tasmania) looks quite majestic set amongst the tall eucalypts on the thermal pool side of the road - with its large plate glass windows and steep sparkling unpainted iron roof reaching for the sky. Although not yet been officially opened, the new visitor centre has been functioning since around 19 December 2000 and all the old office buildings and kiosk across the road (except the Chalet) have been demolished. There have been a few "false starts" for the official opening which has now been re-scheduled for 4 March 2001. The promised construction of the six or more complimentary four star visitor accommodation cottages - uphill behind the Chalet and old former office bldg. site - still has not commenced.

The car park toilets near start of track to Newdegate Cave are still where they have been for many years - situated near a doline - with fears that there maybe leakage of human wastes into the aquifer system that feeds the Thermal Springs. There still hasn't been any hydrological dye tracing work done at Hastings to check the subterranean drainage or source of thermal spring waters. Staff are still smarting over the loss of the proposed surface karst walk development due to the higher than expected cost of the new Visitor Centre and revamp of Thermal pool surrounds.

Interpretations in the new Visitor Centre have not yet been completed. You may recollect from my previous article that the interpretation was being put together by private enterprise - outside of Parks (DPIWE) - for subsequent vetting by Parks. A number of these initial interpretations were not accepted and Parks have requested rewrites and/or complete new interpretative presentations. When eventually completed, the Visitor Centre interpretation will now be slotted into a very small area, squeezed beside the reduced seating area in the new cafeteria (where patrons look out on to the road, car park and entrance area instead of native vegetation on the Thermal Pool side). Visitors to the Thermal Pool are now channelled through the new Centre where tickets are purchased for pool or cave visits. There is concern that the building size and some of its infrastructures may have been compromised by the funding shortfalls due to the expenses entailed in the process of engaging external non-Government consultants. There are a number of inadequacies and occupational health concerns with the new bldg., incl. the fact that the completely enclosed office of the Hastings Enterprise Coordinator/ Manager (Keith Vanderstaay) has no natural ventilation and no external window - only a small viewing pane looking through to the service corridor behind the new kitchen.

Caves staff - guides and/or interpretation officers - are employed by Parks (and the Hastings Enterprise) as casual staff - i.e., permanent part-

time (paid casual rate). One of the drawbacks of this status of employment appears to be the fact that since they're not considered as permanent staff - though some have been there continuously for 10-12 years - they seem to miss out on professional development opportunities or skills courses (and getting the paid - or non-paid - time off to attend these courses). Hastings staff relate that most of the little information about skills training courses gets to them too late - often when they read about it our quarterly ACKMA magazine. Most of the staff are really keen and eager to learn more about caves, cave fauna and karst etc. in order to improve their knowledge and repertoire of facts to interact with tourists or to relate information and answer the many questions that arise on topics, covering more than just their local karst environment. These guides are at the "coal face" engaging with tourist visitors on a day-to-day basis; therefore they are in the ideal situation to impart knowledge and current concepts regarding karst environments and caves.

On the side of skills training, for example, a number of staff said they would have been interested in doing caving courses including abseiling / prussiking training courses or attending the Gabfest meeting. Another guide said some of them would like to go to the ACKMA Conference at Wombeyan and there were also queries about whether they could still do the CSU Karst Management course this year - however, the Hastings Staff had not been advised about any of these opportunities or given the chance to partake in them! Another staff concern relates to the fact that over the summer months, a number of extra casuals are engaged at Hastings - and some of these untrained casuals are being asked (or expected) to do specialist activities or functions without adequate training or briefing, incl. Taking adventure tour parties thru' King George V Cave.

Although there are budgeted monies for some continued development works in Newdegate Cave, including the re-lighting project by Neil Kell (?), there has not been any continued funding to maintain the impetus of the previously reported cave rehabilitation and cave fauna habitat studies. During the previous rehab. programme, sections of rubble and rock, plus mud and gravel etc. were removed from the sides of entrance pathway revealing a hitherto unknown section of rimstone gours, flowstone floors, calcified mud platelets and "nests" with hundreds of cave pearls. Most of these cave pearls were removed from the site (and the cave) for cleaning and safe-keeping while the restoration works continued. It is hoped that rehabilitation funds become available soon to permit the re-installation or replacement of these cave pearls back to their natural environment - albeit perhaps with some protective fencing to prevent further possible "escape" from Newdegate Cave.