

# MEMORIES OF AN ACKMA CONFERENCE

- Karen Smith

Well I have to admit I was a little nervous about going to an ACKMA Conference to start with. Meeting and mingling with people I had only read about. It all seemed a little scary. There would be scientist there, doctors, geologists, managers – the list goes on. Who was I? I'm a guide at Buchan Caves. What have I got to contribute to ACKMA!?!? You know what else I was nervous about? Travelling 7-8 hours with my two bosses (Dale and Steph), spending a week with them, and then travelling back. Argghhhh!!!

I decided to throw caution to the wind. I packed my stuff and headed north to Wombeyan. The trip in the car was interesting. Has anyone lost their boss in a town of about fifty people and one main street? We managed to. We arrived at Wombeyan about 7.30-8.00pm. There were already quite a number of people there, including some that I knew. Whew! By the end of the night I had managed to meet a lot more people (with the aid of cold one) and organised my adventure caving trips for the week.

I slept in until 7.30am the next day and to my surprise I think I was the only one. But it was all right because there was still heaps of bacon and eggs left. Piggied out big time and then went in to hear the first paper. Wow, what a first paper! After the morning papers we had a huge lunch and then it was off to Sigma Cave with some fantastic fellow cavers. It was great to go caving in a different place with different people. That night we had another huge feed. Did lots of chatting and sharing ideas and passions. It is great to be the presence of so many people who you can just walk up to and start talking about my favourite subject – caves! That night was a very late night for me, thanks to my new friends I had met underground.

I woke early the next morning and to my delight had bacon and eggs again. More papers in the morning, another great big lunch, and then off to do another caving trip. Mate, I was having the time of my life!! Next day more food, more papers and I think it was this day that we did the gorge run with Steve Bourne and some crazy New Zealanders. There was no way I was going to submerge myself into freezing cold water voluntarily. No way known... OK, I'll go. Someone said I might miss out on something. I hate missing out. It was absolutely freezing, even with my two layers of thermals, and wetsuit gloves and booties. And what made things worse is there was no way of backing out because an audience had arrived at the start. I am glad I did it. Although cold there was some sensational scenery, some big blue ponds and some very high voices. It was well worth it.

One of the nights we went to Taralga pub for dinner. What can I say about the food except sensational? It was a great social night. There were some speeches, and there were some that I unfortunately missed out on, sorry Brian. The trip back on the bus was interesting with a few people having a go in the spotlight belting out a few tunes. Very brave people.

We went to Goulburn the next day. We checked into our room and to my absolute disappointment Steph and me had the honeymoon suit. How are we

going to put up with a spa? It was hard but someone had to do it. I decided not to go Bungonia. I thought I had better make sure the spa was working. Ahhhhhhhh! That night was a fun night and a very learning experience. I had never thought that people would actually want to walk with a two bob stuck between their bot cheeks for fun. These cavers sure are an interesting lot. Off to Careys Cave in the morning. It's great to see two people managing caves that have such a passion for the kids and involving them in interactive activities. That evening was the final night of the conference. We had a lovely tea, some nice red wine and fantastic company. In the morning we all met at a homestead for breakfast and said our farewells.

In summary, I went to the conference a little apprehensive. I did used to think, "I'm just a cave guide". I don't have anything to offer. I've learned so much about cave and karst, that other people and fellow cavers are just that – other people and fellow cavers. There's no ranking. We are all in it because we love the cave environment. I'm one of the ones up the front showing these unique, precise places. I as a cave guide, along with other cave guides, play a very important role. Its up to us to present the cave with all the worthiness that it deserves. I would like to encourage any guides/site presenters to get involved in ACKMA. It's a great organisation. Don't make the mistake like I did thinking "what have I got to offer?" We have a lot to offer and ACKMA has a lot to gain from us guides. Also it was fantastic going with Dale and Steph – they weren't as scary as I thought they would be. One thing I did find out about my boss Steph, she has a fascination with mens' toilets. I'll leave it at that.... Thanks for a great conference everyone. Hope to see you at the next one. P. S.: SIGMA RULES!!

## Editor's Postscript:

It is a long time since I published such a refreshing article in the ACKMA Journal as the above offering from Karen Smith. Karen's passion for caves, and dedication to our collective cause, simply oozes from her every word. I was in Buchan a few months ago (after the Conference) for a weekend with friends who had never been there before. Karen guided us through both the Royal and Fairy Caves as "hangers on" to scheduled tours. My friends were spellbound, not just with the caves, but more so by Karen's tremendous and passionate interpretation.

I have probably been on more guided cave tours, both in Australia and around the world, than many people have had hot dinners. I may have heard Karen's equal, but certainly none better. Her grasp of the history, geology and secondary deposition in the caves was superb, and put across with that much enthusiasm ("To me guiding you people is such a privilege, and I can't believe I actually get paid to enjoy myself so much!"). Let me say too, Karen doesn't prattle on non-stop either. She gives the right amount of information, at the right time, and engenders an absolutely memorable, entertaining and valuable educational experience to visitors. She might not be the "Prefect 10" as a cave guide, but let me tell you, she's as close as I've

seen. Says a lot about the training of Dale Calnin and company, too....

Just one thing Karen, I don't know about your crack about "crazy" New Zealanders! I mean, there is John Ash, Van Watson, Dave Smith.... Okay, okay - but Peter Dimond's sane, he's our President, after all!!!

While on Karen, she has just become engaged (on 2nd August) - to Cory Perkins. Cory came to Buchan last year to play football, and hasn't left! Can't argue with that logic! I understand they are marrying next year! Warmest congratulations and best wishes to both!!