

## A Letter to the Editor...

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** An incredible character, Val Speedie, Head Guide at Undara for many years, and a member of the 15th ACKMA Conference Organizing Committee, has recently retired, as attested in the following letter. This is this third "Letter from Undara" from Val that I've had the pleasure of publishing in the ACKMA Journal (see Journal 32, p 18; and Journal 33, p 32-33). Val has been a tremendous ambassador for Undara, and a passionate member of her profession, as her latest epistle below readily attests. I am certain I am joined by all ACKMA members in thanking her for her efforts over the years, and wishing her a happy "retirement". Those members who haven't had the pleasure of meeting Val will have the opportunity at our Conference next May.

## A LETTER FROM UNDARA

*Val Speedie (rear) with Ann Augusteyn  
– 13th ACKMA Conference*



Hi Kent,

After 11½ years as a guide/biologist at Undara, I decided that it was time for a change. Not to mention that "de knees was complaining something awful" at doing 1500 steps per day. I feel for guides at other cave sites with more steps.

The management of Undara gave Tony and myself a party at the resort, with very nice comments to take away with us as well as a decadent holiday at a five star hotel. Much appreciated. The staff gave us a spontaneous send off with, a paintings, framed photos, hilarious cards and comments on T-shirts to commemorate the occasion. I do not know if any official work was done that day but someone had lots of fun with paint and imagination. There were drinks lined up, three and four deep... Bailey's Irish Cream for me and triple Glen Fiddich for Tony (scotch for a Scot). However at the end of the night, Tony and I were stone cold sober, but several of the staff saw the evening through a slightly distorted view. In fact one staff member, who shall remain nameless, had a close encounter of the OUCH kind with a lamp post. Not a single one of us thought of a camera, perhaps just as well when I think back.

The change in the resort; how it has grown over the eleven years has been fascinating to see and it has been great to be part of the growing process. The change in the public attitude towards the environment has been discernible; a change for the better; much more public awareness and interest today.

One of my greatest pleasures has been in the growing professionalism exhibited in the guiding industry – both by staff and management. Staff, given incentive and encouragement by management, have usually been passionately involved in their job. Certainly they are not in it for the money! – that has not yet reflected the level of involvement that is required and requested of them.



*Val Speedie (front) listens to Brian Clark speak  
– 13th ACKMA Conference*

Management has started to realise that guiding is more than an ability to talk the hind leg off an iron pot – it is darned hard work! It requires a degree of knowledge of psychology; geology; geography, biology; and most other 'ologies, and a good relationship with the Almighty, upon whose help, the guides call with great regularity.

I would recommend that every manager did a stint as a qualified guide and did tours – where these are a significant component of the operation. In operations where managers have become; or used to be guides; the realisation of the importance this occupation plays in the success of the venture, is obvious in the improved conditions under which the guides work and the quality of the guides employed. This has been the corner stone of the Savannah Guide movement and why I believe in the concept so passionately – it works!!

Guiding has developed from “If you don’t know, just bullshit, they won’t know the difference” attitude to becoming a profession to be proud of, with recognised certification. Guiding is growing in stature, as an occupation, in the workplace.

I loved working part-time with TAFE as a teacher of the dry landscapes section of the Heritage and Interpretive Tourism Course run in Queensland. The people who attend the course come from amazingly diverse backgrounds and are fascinating in themselves. They look at your familiar world with such different eyes that you see it anew – prostitutes, priests, lawyers and lay-a-bouts, creationists and naturalists, all drawn together by

an interest in expanding their own horizons and a fascination with the natural world.

The pleasures of guiding are in the ever changing environment around you, changes that occur daily, seasonal variations, arrivals and departures of locals (furred, feathered and scaled) the patterns you can see evolving, the longer you stay at a place and observe these changes.

The ever changing kaleidoscope of people, fascinating people; you see every day. Some of these visitors become firm friends that last for years. The incredible stories you hear daily – stories of courage; fear; adventures and joys; some funny, some heartbreaking, that make each tour and each day, different.

Time for a change. I have been lucky. I have always loved every job that I have done. Hmmmm.... .not quite right. I hated slicing burrs out of sheep carcasses in an abattoirs; but I only lasted a fortnight doing that! Whether working in retail, managing a caravan park, pulling lawyer vine out of the rain forest, growing strawberries, zucchinis – that was a degree in manual labour from the university of hard work! – or looking after snakes, crocs etc. in a wildlife park; for spruiking poetry around a campfire – I have loved doing it. Don’t know what will come up next but no doubt, I will love that also.

See you at the Conference in May!

Val Speedie.



*The infamous “Rooter Hooters” cheer squad, with Val Speedie fourth from the left – 13th ACKMA Conference*