

# UPDATE ON MOUNT ETNA CAVES NATIONAL PARK

- Dianne Vavryn & Cameron James



Youth Conservation Corp with Trainers before a trip into Johannsen's Cave. Photo: D. Vavryn.

Since we last wrote much work has been accomplished on the Mount Etna Caves National Park. In 1988 the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) constructed a walking track to Bat Cleft to make it more accessible for park visitors and tour clients.

In the following years, several parts of the track deteriorated and required major re-construction works. The decision to implement the repairs also required that other parts of the track should be reconstructed to contemporary standards. Over a period of several years, various teams of ranger trainees from the Youth Conservation Corps and Queensland's *Better Parks* traineeship programs while supervised by QPWS staff have rebuilt the track up to the ninth quarry bench.

The gradient is much better now and the risers on the steps are better suited to short people. All the previous log stairs have been replaced and in excess of 200 new sawn timber stairs installed.

On 10 April 2001 the Honorable Dean Wells, Minister for the Environment, opened the new track giving well deserved credit to all those involved in its construction. He commented on the benefits of the Youth Conservation Corps program in giving the participants a wide range of skills and experience to better enable them to increase their self-esteem and more importantly to find full time employment. Other invited guests also gave speeches including the local State Member Vince Lester and Dianne Vavryn.

In the words of Leanne Edmonston, Trainer/Youth Worker "If you ever find yourself out near Mount Etna, make sure you drop in and check out our 'Stairway to Heaven'."



Youth Conservation Corp trainees preparing steps before they installed on the Bat Cleft track.  
Photos: D. Vavryn.

## Bat Cleft

As written previously the number of visitors doing the Bat Cleft tour had diminished when *Lyssavirus* became known and two deaths occurred in Central Queensland from bat bites.

This season for the first time since those events the Bat Cleft tour numbers have increased considerably and are in keeping with previous good years.



Medley of photos and captions showing the stages of building the Bat Cleft track. Photo: D. Vavryn.

For the majority of this year's Bat Cleft tour season, Central Queensland was still in severe drought conditions with a very noticeable decrease in the insect populations. Many of the bats, although not all, that were seen to land on the walls, both young and adult, were so thin that they seemed little more than fur and bones.

All through the season bats were emerging earlier when the light was still quite bright. On one evening the flow commenced at 6:25pm when usually it would have been around 7.15pm at that time of season, remembering that Queensland still does not use daylight saving.

This occurred after we had some good rainfall over a couple of days when the bats would have been unable to feed. We have little doubt these events are associated with a limitation in food availability.

This year the Director General of QPWS, James Purtill, visited Bat Cleft and was impressed with both the tour and experience. Accompanying him was the new Director QPWS, (Central Region) Keith Twyford, Manager Technical Services, Doug Crossman and other visitors.

## Vegetation Restoration

Since the drought started breaking on 5 February the area has received over 470mm of rain (already more than 2002 total), perfect conditions for planting in the restoration sites.

Led by Alan Rogers, the park ranger staff has been busy revisiting the sites previously planted and filled in the gaps where plants could not be watered and did not survive the drought. These areas included a large section around Johannsen's Cave, several areas on Mount Etna and Cammoo.

The majority of the plants have come from Dianne's vine-forest revegetation nursery and are funded under a generous cooperative sponsorship arrangement between QPWS and the neighbouring Pacific Lime mine restoration program. Cameron has also helped in the supply of locally sourced

revegetation trees but lost a great many to the dry conditions during his 2002 study absence. Collectively we have learnt a great deal in this field of endeavour through trial and error and sharing knowledge as others have shared theirs with us.

Previous reports on the vegetation restoration and fox control program for the Mount Etna Caves National Park were published in the proceedings of the 14th ACKMA Conference, 2001.

## Recreational Infrastructure

Work has been in steady progress on the Cammoo section of the park. The dwelling attached to the kiosk was found to be structurally unsound has now been removed. Many of the worst weed infestations are gone and ongoing work is scheduled to remove more of the lantana patches.

An enormous amount of cosmetic and restoration work has been done and is still in progress and large areas are replanted with endemic species. Watering facilities were installed where possible before planting commenced.

The old track leading to Chandelier Cave has been renovated, a new track built by a slightly different route while the surrounding area has been replanted in the character of the existing vine forest. New picnic tables and seats have been installed, barbecues awaiting a stonemason and a new toilet facility is being planned for the coming winter. Most of the construction work has been carried out by the *Better Parks Program* participants and supervisors, freeing the park rangers to attend to other resource duties.

The cave that has been called 'Flogged Horse' (another story to tell) has been closed to public access indefinitely for safety reasons although bats have retained their free and easy access. Chandelier Cave is currently decommissioned pending a final decision on how to present and protect the cave within a myriad of contemporary organizational obligations.



The house at Cammoo just after preparations for its removal. Joe Vavryn is standing in the doorway.

Photo: D. Vavryn.

## Management Planning

The inclusion of Cammoo Caves and the Pilkington's Quarry sections into the National Park also prompted the revision of the park's Management Plan. When it is released, we hope ACKMA members with knowledge of the area will consider the invitation to put in a submission.

A management advisory committee was established to support the plan review and meetings continue to be held at regular intervals under the enthusiastic guidance of Regional Planner Dave Marshall. These meetings typically included representatives from the local community, caving club, tourism body and shire council along with staff from the Central Queensland University and other specialists as required.

The meetings have been constructive giving the differing stakeholders the opportunity to express

their ideas towards park management from their perspective.

The recent additions to the park have allowed QPWS to implement an affective public access strategy and the Cammoo Caves section can now be the main focal point for visitor use, services and interpretation. QPWS is currently progressing steps to license and permanently close superfluous gazetted roads at Cammoo, Johannsen's Cave and near the Bat Cleft car park to support the access strategy. The intention at Johannsen's is to relocate the car park out on Rossmoya Road adding 400m to the walk to the cave entrance in an attempt to discourage those who want to enter during the closed season.

An enormous amount work has already been accomplished on the park over the past few years and a lot more is planned. We will endeavour to keep ACKMA members up to date as work progresses.



**L to R:** Cameron James, Dianne Vavryn, Vince Lester & Dean Wells (Queensland Minister for Environment) at Bat Cleft, after the opening of the refurbished track. Photo: L. Edmonston.

