

CAPRICORN CAVES, ROCKHAMPTON – ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY YEARS LATER

- Ann Augusteyn

Andy Spate, right, conducting a guide training school at Capricorn Caverns



It is one hundred and twenty years since John Olsen first explored the limestone caves north of Rockhampton. Management of the property today faces three main challenges. First the conservation of the natural resource of the caves, the bats and the remnant dry rain forest; secondly the provision of quality interpretation to enhance the visitor experience and thirdly maintaining visitation to ensure economic sustainability.

The caves are located in a limestone ridge adjacent to Mt. Etna National Park. The impact of excessive visitation is not a threat to Capricorn Caves. However guides and management are mindful of visitor impact. Tours are rerouted to accommodate different group sizes and avoid disturbance to the bats when in residence.

Surface management of the dry rain forest presents a greater challenge with on going weed eradication programs and revegetation projects. Last year the staff planted 2000 seedlings raised in an on site nursery from seeds collected on the property. Since there is no main water supply to the property, the decade of drought has had a major impact on all the revegetation work.

However the drought has also curtailed the spreading of weeds such as madeira vine, whose growth rate can exceed a metre a week in warm wet weather.

The second challenge, guide training, remains a priority. The provision of quality interpretation was given a major boost in July 2002 when Andy Spate conducted a Karst School. Members of Central Queensland University and Queensland Parks & Wildlife Service also attended the workshops.

Throughout the years we have always supported initiatives to foster tour guiding and interpretation either through traineeships or hosting work

placement for tour guides. We have also developed an excellent school program with presentations on "Caves, Bats and Karst" and themed tours through the caves.

Maintaining visitor numbers in a competitive and volatile world presents new challenges every day. We have focussed on the provision of facilities and a quality experience. Ken has worked tirelessly to provide a range of accommodation from cabins, caravan park to a 48 bed Eco Adventure Lodge. This was opened officially in 2002 by Hon. Warren Enstch, Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Industry, Tourism and Resources.

It has provided us with the opportunity to develop comprehensive school programs that focus on environmental issues and recreational activities. The packages also incorporate other regional product ranging from Koorana Crocodile Farm to a neighbouring cattle property.

Adventure activities have also been expanded with the introduction of abseiling into the caves. A high and low ropes course is proving popular with youth and corporate groups with no impact on the cave resource! The issue of public liability has been addressed with highly increased premiums.

Visitor numbers are being maintained and with the development of the Eco Lodge as a Field Study Centre this has enabled us to value add to the cave product. Maintenance of visitation is essential to the provision of funding for cave conservation, revegetation projects and guide training.

Advanced Ecotourism accreditation and Queensland Tourism Awards finalist in 2002 are recognition of the position of Capricorn Caves as the premier nature based tourist attraction in Central Queensland.



At the opening of the Eco Lodge.
L to R: Ken Augusteyn, Hon. Warren Enstch,
and Ann Augusteyn.

