

Old friend returns to run museum

By GRANT MILLER

A Christchurch man who helped establish the Waitomo Museum of Caves about 20 years ago, has returned to the museum to run it.

Kevan Wilde is the new managing director of the museum and i-site.

He says the appointment is almost like a spiritual homecoming.

"The community grabs you. Lots of people come here intending to stay for a short time, but end up staying longer, or coming back. I'm just one of the latest ones," said Mr Wilde.

He was welcomed back into the community with powhiri at the museum last week.

Mr Wilde was a ranger in the Waitomo area for Lands and Survey in the 1980s, when he was involved in working on the museum concept and setting it up.

Lands and Survey (government department) formed a partnership with the community, but Mr Wilde said the museum was a community driven initiative:

Mr Wilde knew the museum's previous director, Peter Dimond, for more than 30 years, before Mr Dimond died in December last year.

"It's important to acknowledge the commitments and achievements of Peter," said Mr Wilde. "It's not going to be easy to follow in his footsteps. He was an extraordinary man and a dear friend."

Asked if being Mr Dimond's friend had made part of him doubt that he should accept the job, Mr Wilde replied "not one part of me at all".

"I am absolutely passionate about it. I would have regretted not doing it," he said.

"The hardest part is splitting up my family, but that was the only hesitation".

Mr Wilde's wife Dawn is staying behind Christchurch for "a while" to manage the transition of their business.

They have two sons – Anthony (28) is a trained chef and Andrew (15) is studying at Wanganui Collegiate.

Mr Wilde was previously a shareholder and director of an English language college in Christchurch, where students learned English in preparation for university.

Prior to that he was manager of the New Zealand Conservation Trust, breeding kiwi on the outskirts of Christchurch.

He worked for the Department of Conservation for nine years and also lived in Papua New Guinea for 11 years, where he was a police officer and occasionally riot squad commander.

Mr Wilde has had a lifelong interest in caves and karst – the characteristic scenery which tends to accompany caves and streams.

He started caving as a recreational interest – a sporting challenge, an adventure.

He then he began to look at other values connected with caving – aesthetic, scientific, cultural and historical values.

His interest just kept on growing.

"Limestone landforms are spectacular. There's no doubt about it," he said.

Mr Wilde said people with an interest in caving developed a strong rapport with each other. Along with his strong interest in caves, he is also attracted to the natural environment and cultural history of the Waitomo Caves area.

"The museum job was the perfect opportunity for me to come back," said Mr Wilde.

He said the true character of the Waitomo Caves remained the same, but the tourism industry had diversified.

He plans to steadily introduce himself to tourism operators in the coming weeks to gain a better understanding of the area.

He will try to learn as much as he can about the museum functions and establish a working relationship with staff and museum trust board.

"It's familiarisation, basically," he said. "I think it will take several weeks before I fully understand what makes the place tick."

"The hard work has been done. Now it's just a matter of taking the museum forward"



MUSEUM MAN: The man recently appointed to run the Waitomo Museum of Caves, Kevan Wilde, helped set up the Museum in the first place.

Photo: Dr. Grant Gartrell*

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(*Grant was coincidentally present when the reporter interviewed, and photographed, Kevan for this article. Grant's photo is a clearer shot! The photo caption is the original.)