

REFLECTIONS OF AN ECOTOURISM CONFERENCE

- Steve Bourne

Dr. Kevin Kiernan (left) with Steve Bourne – Conference 2003



The 11th National Conference of Ecotourism Australia was held in Adelaide and the Riverland in South Australia from November 10-14. A total of 320 delegates, 22 key note speakers, 57 papers presented and 12 workshops showed this conference meant business. The business of ecotourism is certainly growing and the conference presented findings of some key research of a global scale right down to some site-specific case studies. This was the first ecotourism conference I had attended and I found the experience a rewarding and educational one.

If any delegates had not previously heard of Naracoorte Caves National Park and that it is South Australia's only World Heritage area, they were certainly aware of it after the opening address by the Minister for Tourism, Dr. Jane Lomax-Smith. She is a strong supporter of Naracoorte Caves and of the concept of fossil and geological-based tourism. The second key note speaker, SA Museum's director Dr. Tim Flannery expanded on the concept of fossil tourism presenting "Selling the Past: Fossils as a Tourist Attraction".

The support for fossils has recently been translated into a comprehensive investigation into the feasibility of utilising South Australia's extensive fossil record as the basis for a new tourism strategy. For Naracoorte Caves this would be excellent, but the benefits will flow on to other areas such as the Flinders Ranges and Kangaroo Island. Caves naturally lend themselves to any tourism that aims to present the history of life so Kelly Hill Caves, Tantanoola Caves and even Princess Margaret Rose Caves could potentially benefit.

Prof. Sam Ham from the University of Idaho is one of the best speakers you would ever want to listen too and he held the delegates in awe with his presentation. I had the privilege of attending a workshop with Sam and Betty Wieler on the Saturday before the conference in what was an outstanding day that was way too short. With Sam and Betty presenting at the Cave Presenter's Workshop at Mole Creek next year, I cannot recommend highly enough the value of having staff work with them.

Paper presentations were grouped together in themes, (or really as topics as Sam Ham will tell you) with four sessions running concurrently. The 15 minute presentations and some distance between each session made it difficult to attend a variety of papers across different topics and tended to restrict attendance to one session only. Fossils again made it to the fore in the first paper session with the author presenting "Fossil-based Tourism-developing new products from old bones." Naracoorte Caves has developed and trialled a range of new products, from children specific products to participatory excursions and this paper reflected on the varying successes of these experiences. Discussion was stimulated with several delegates identifying opportunities for translating the Naracoorte experience with fossils to other areas of interest.

A focus of several keynote speakers and papers was the development of partnerships with local communities. This theme ran from establishing ecotourism ventures in the Amazon by using donations and tourism revenue to purchase jungle from locals and then training them to conduct the tours, to community partnerships at the local level in Australia. In every case, the main thrust is to establish community pride in the resource to ensure it is valued and preserved and to deliver authentic local experiences. Tourism is now being promoted as a possible means of preserving the planet's biodiversity and to do that, poor communities need to be financially rewarded.

A very important piece of research, the result of a collaborative project of CI (Conservation International) and UNEP (United Nations Environment Program) was launched at the conference. Titled "*Tourism and Biodiversity; mapping tourism's global footprint*", the project examined the impacts tourism is having on 'biodiversity hotspots' and attempted to calculate the size of the world's tourism industry. The biodiversity hotspots contain 44% of known endemic plant species and 35% of known endemic fauna in only 1.4% of the planet's land area. These hotspots are the focus of the burgeoning ecotourism industry and are therefore most at risk from being 'loved to death'. The launch was complemented by a presentation by lead author Costas Christ and is a publication well worth reading.

Probably the most disturbing presentation was that of frog expert Prof Mike Tyler who enlightened delegates on the spread of the cane toad *Bufo marinus* across the northern parts of Australia. It is appalling to think he alerted governments to exactly this issue in 1963 and it is only now that action is being considered. It is likely we shall see them in South Australia after the next big rains in southern Queensland.

Senator Bob Brown struck a chord with delegates pleading the case for tourism as a means to save the Styx Valley in Tasmania from logging. Other Tasmanian input came from Peta Dowell-Hentall who presented the tourism activities of Forestry Tasmania including the Tahune Forest Airwalk

and the upcoming Dismal Swamp development. ACKMA members will all be familiar with this second development.

The final keynote speaker at the Adelaide section of the conference was from Cathy Freeman. Cathy is a great Australian and was warmly received by all as she launched the Respecting Our Culture (ROC) Program in her role of Ambassador for Aboriginal Tourism Australia. Ecotourism Australia is taking an active role in promoting Indigenous tourism and the need to develop and deliver genuine Indigenous experiences.

After two and a half days in Adelaide, the conference moved three hours inland to the town of Renmark on the banks of the River Murray. A series of twelve workshops were held over four sessions, necessitating choosing which to attend. Again, the concurrent sessions made it difficult to participate in all workshops of interest.

NEAP 3, or **eco certification** as it will now be called, was launched. To my knowledge Naracoorte Caves National Park was the first cave system to achieve accreditation with several products receiving various levels of accreditation. After completing this, several suggestions were sent for consideration when NEAP was reviewed. The final document was not released at the conference, but I wait with interest to read the caves section. One would have thought ACKMA might have been approached for input into this review in this specialised area. NEAP accreditation has had little impact on Naracoorte Caves' visitation, but has enabled participation in several marketing campaigns that would be out of price range individually. The standards set by NEAP are quite high and form the basis for sound management and protection of all environments used for tourism purposes.

Dr. Natarajan Ishwaran and Art Pedersen facilitated a workshop on "World Heritage Partnerships in Tourism, examining how World Heritage influences tourism and the desire for

people to visit. Experience at Naracoorte Caves suggests the World Heritage inscription itself has little impact on visitation until the flow on benefits of funding enabled infrastructure to be developed. This experience has been replicated across most of Australia's World Heritage properties.

The lack of awareness of the World Heritage concept and the logo were identified as key weaknesses and a campaign to 'brand' World Heritage sites was suggested. A few copies of "*Managing Tourism at World Heritage Sites: a practical guide for World Heritage site managers*" by Art Pederson were available for delegates. Although this guide was written for World Heritage areas, the suggestions and strategies are readily transferable to any natural area of cultural site management. It is practical, easy to read and contains many good suggestions.

The final of many launches was that of the "*Responsible Nature-based Tourism Strategy*" by the South Australian Tourism Commission and the Department for Environment and Heritage. The two departments have collaborated to produce a strategy for the next five years to increase tourism in the nature-based sector of the market. The caves of South Australia could benefit from the desire to use the fossils/geology/caves theme. Both Naracoorte and Kelly Hill Caves are performing strongly at present, but Tantanoola Caves could well do with extra promotion.

All in all, the Ecotourism conference was a wonderful opportunity to speak to a national audience and network with a large number of like-minded protected area managers and tourism operators. There was an excellent mixture of managers, operators, internationals but unfortunately was out of the price range for most students. I can recommend attendance by ACKMA members and hope there may be more representation at the next conference in the Blue Mountains.



Steve Bourne chats to Lana Little – Conference 2003