

MOLE CREEK KARST NATIONAL PARK AND CONSERVATION AREA MANAGEMENT PLAN 2004 – A SUMMARY

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A karst ravine – Mole Creek



The Parks & Wildlife Service published the new Mole Creek plan (Parks and Wildlife Service 2004) in August 2004, following its approval by the Governor in February. This is probably the most significant official cave-related document to be produced in Tasmania for many years. It will govern what is probably the State's most visited karst for the next five years. The lengthy process has entailed:

- publication of a draft plan in 2001 (Parks and Wildlife Service 2001);
- review of public representations on the draft by the Resource Planning and Development Commission (RPDC) in 2002 (including a public hearing in June);
- publication of a report by the Commission to the Minister in October 2002; and
- revision of the draft by the Parks and Wildlife Service in light of the Commission's report to produce the final plan.

The Commission's report (RPDC 2002) is a detailed and thorough review of the draft plan in light of the 33 representations received and the Director's responses to them (contained in Appendix 2). Although it is not the purpose of the present paper

to detail the RPDC Report, it is worth noting that it didn't pull any punches – when the Commission disagreed with the Director, it said so. On the other hand it simply dismissed objections (and there were many) which were outside the scope of the plan (eg that there was not sufficient consultation with caving interests and adjoining landowners before the park was created). The Commission recommended 24 changes to the draft.

PROVISIONS OF THE MCKNPMP

The plan contains a good deal of background and introductory material, explaining the layout of the reserves (in 11 separate land parcels), the reserves' importance ("contains a diversity of caves which are widely recognised as some of the most spectacularly decorated in Australia" ...), the threats to the reserves (direct, to speleothems; indirect, from inappropriate catchment management; hydrological, atmospheric and visitor impacts), the park's creation 16 September 1996 from existing State Reserves and Crown land, its area (NP 1,345 ha, CA 68 ha) and its relation to the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (which includes the Marakoopa Cave block, which it is also subject to the WHA management plan. In the event of any inconsistency the MCKNPMP overrides, since it is more specific).

There are useful and clear maps showing location and the complex land tenure. There is a statement of the vision for the park and formal statements of the purposes and management objectives of national parks and conservation areas, some specific management objectives for these reserves (which understandably focus on karst, but also include threatened species, World Heritage values, conserving sites of geoconservation significance, providing recreation and tourism opportunities, enrich visitor experiences and improve public understanding of the park's values and goals).

Zoning is simple, it comprises visitor services zones over the show caves (Marakoopa and King Solomons) and their associated day use facilities, and the parts of Wet Cave and Croesus Cave blocks used by day and overnight visitors – and a natural zone over the rest of the land. High quality visitor facilities may be provided in the VSZ while the natural zone "will be managed primarily for conservation objectives and use by self-reliant recreationists". Camping will be permitted at the Croesus Cave block but only basic facilities will be provided; camping will continue to be permitted at Wet Cave unless it is decided to proceed with an interpreted karst walk at Honeycomb Cave. There will be some "low grade" walking tracks but virtually no other developments will be permitted.

Section 3 deals with conservation; it contains further background information and sets out actions, objectives and policies that apply to various elements, such as topography, climate, geodiversity, hydrology, flora, fauna, World

Heritage and other values, Aboriginal and historic heritage. There is a list of outstanding examples of karst features such as the breach of the Grunter surface divide, a subjacent karst uvala, subsidence dolines, blind valleys, streamsinks and resurgences. Of the 360 entrances recorded in the Mole Creek karst (at 2000) 33 are located wholly or partly within the plan area. A brief overview is given of the values of the various cave systems (admitting that generally only parts of them are reserved and hence subject to the plan). A number of actions are prescribed which relate largely to recording data and producing management prescriptions; "cooperative arrangements" with [other] land managers and freehold owners are to be promoted to protect vulnerable karst features. There is an interesting discussion of the complex hydrology and a useful map (which incidentally shows how much of the limestone/karst is not subject to the plan).

The flora section mentions the presence of the threatened old-growth forest communities *Eucalyptus viminalis* grassy and wet forests, shrubby *E. ovata* forest and *E. regnans* forest. There are also unusual *Sphagnum* peatlands in some sinkholes and a diversity of bacteria, algae and fungi underground.

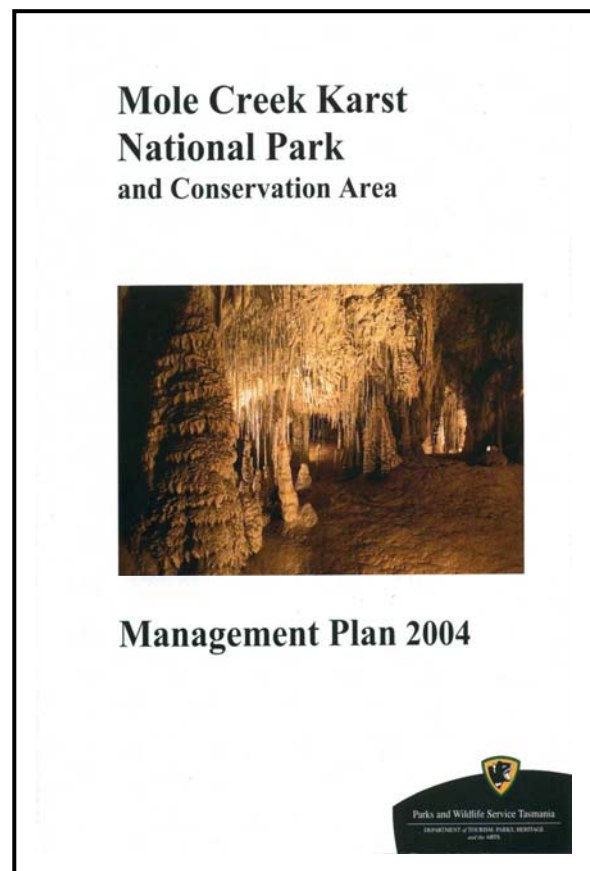
The fauna section deals with surface fauna, which appears not to be exceptional, and the cave fauna which includes at least three invertebrates which are endemic to the Mole Creek karst, *Tasmanotrechus cockerilli*, *Hickmanoxymma gibbergunyar* and the extremely rare *Pseudotyrannochthonius typhlus*. A number of actions are listed concerning fauna surveys and monitoring.

Policies are set out for dealing with sites of Aboriginal significance and protection of Aboriginal heritage and historic heritage. A conservation plan is to be prepared covering historic values within Baldocks and King Solomons caves relating to early cave tourism infrastructure. There is a requirement for an investigation of the historical significance of ivy growing at the entrance to Marakoopa Cave (!) and a requirement that it be maintained and contained.

Section 4 deals with protection. This covers fire management, pests, weeds and diseases, soil conservation and erosion control (there is specific reference to erosion around some entrances on the Wet Cave block and requirements for (a) liaison with upstream landowners/managers "to identify mechanisms for minimising soil erosion where it enters the park" and (b) monitoring of sediment deposition within caves), natural landscapes and water quality (data on water quality in karst aquifers is to be collected and signs are to be erected warning that some water may be unsuitable for drinking), catchment management (another area requiring liaison with adjoining landowners/managers).

Section 5 covers tourism and recreation. Three categories of visitor are identified: day visitors taking guided tours, day visitors who visit Wet Cave and/or Honeycomb 1 Cave and "small groups of cavers ... who visit undeveloped caves"; those who take adventure cave tours are also mentioned. In the 5 years 1994-99 there were 178 visitors to Kubla Khan Cave, 118 to Genghis Khan, 260 to Croesus and 260 to undeveloped sections of

Marakoopa. One licensed commercial tour operator uses Baldocks, Cyclops, Wet, Honeycomb and Croesus caves; between 1994 and 1999 they had 553 clients. This section also deals with promotion of the park, interpretation/education, visitor services, visitor impacts, development proposals and access. Conditions are set out for consideration of new tourism and recreational opportunities, facilities or services (must be 'environmentally sustainable, etc; input from karst specialists will be required). Among the policies listed are limestone sand from local quarrying is the preferred material for maintenance work in caves or for bag 'stepping stones' in Kubla Khan; materials used in cave development must be chemically and physically inert and should be easily removable; route marking materials used in undeveloped caves are to be "as visually unobtrusive as possible as the purpose of the marking permits".



Caving is addressed under 5.7.5. The role played by cavers (especially the members of ASF-affiliated clubs) in the discovery, mapping and management of the caves is acknowledged and the role played by clubs in fostering awareness of cave safety and minimal impact caving is recognised. On the other hand it is observed that caves contain sensitive features and all visits to caves cause some level of impact. A cave classification system comprising public presentation caves, special value caves and wild & unclassified caves is adopted (based on the system developed by ASF). The problems raised by cross-tenure caves is addressed (see section 7). Some caves are 'restricted access caves' requiring a permit to enter which will generally only be available to ASF-affiliated groups. The existing requirement for approved leaders to run trips to Kubla Khan will continue. This could be extended to other caves if monitoring indicates it would be worthwhile, but only in consultation with cavers.

The requirement to obtain a key to access Baldocks Cave will continue and will also apply to Diamond Cave. A table lists gated and restricted access caves. Related policies include recovery of costs where staff are required to conduct groups, charging a fee for authority to film, photograph or undertake other commercial activities in the caves, Abseil/Blackberry Hole will continue to be the only site managed specifically for abseiling, use of carbide lamps is prohibited in caves, excavation in caves requires written authority of the Director [this is covered by the general regulations which require such authority anywhere on reserved land], camping is not permitted in caves, smoking is not permitted in caves, a system for marking tracks in caves will be formalised and moving off designated routes will require the written authority of the Director [a hard one to enforce!]. In addition to designated restricted access caves, access to caves may be restricted "if it is considered necessary to protect cave values". PWS staff may join any party visiting a restricted access cave and maximum party size for such caves is six, including the leader; a trip report must be provided within 8 weeks. Annual trip limits will continue (Kubla 12, Croesus, Genghis and Lynds, 25; no more than one trip per group per year; limits don't apply if undertaking "approved management works"); no authorities for Herberts Pot until a management study has been completed and access policy determined. Actions to be taken include, in consultation with clubs and other key users, the development of guidelines for entry to caves for management purposes, liaison with caving clubs "as part of any management process likely to affect access, development of information sheets detailing site-specific minimal impact caving techniques.

Section 6 deals with **management of particular blocks of land**. Major caves in each block are described and management issues for each block are outlined (eg cross-tenure caves, lack of boundary fences allowing access by stock).

A site plan is to be developed for the Sassafras Creek blocks to address surface and underground issues. An environmental monitoring program is to be initiated for Baldocks, Cyclops and Sassafras caves. Caves crossing boundaries are to be mapped "to clarify management responsibilities". Options for securing public access to Sassafras Cave block are to be pursued. Liaison is to take place with adjoining owners regarding complimentary management of cave catchments, fencing relevant boundaries to control stock, protecting and revegetating streambanks and access issues. Appropriate trackmarking is to be installed in Baldocks, Cyclops and Sassafras caves; fauna management prescriptions are to be implemented at Baldocks Cave; a fauna sanctuary is to be considered at the MC33 entrance to Baldocks; a conservation plan for historic relics in Baldocks Cave is to be developed; trackmarking and matting in Cyclops Cave is to be assessed and removed, cleaned or replaced as necessary. There is to be liaison with the owner of Cow Cave [just outside the Cow Cave block] about cave management.

There are a number of issues relating to the Croesus Cave block, involving Croesus and Lynds

Cave. The collaborative management with Forestry Tasmania under the "joint protocol" is to continue but PWS nevertheless recommends "that the Mill Creek-Kansas Creek catchment be formally protected in order to ensure protection [of] karst values". Soft-soled footwear is to be worn in Croesus Cave to protect flowstone and rimstones. A site plan is to be developed for the Croesus block to address surface and underground management issues. The joint protocol with FT is to be implemented but concurrently PWS will liaise with FT "regarding the most appropriate tenure option for a reserve to cover the Mill Creek-Kansas Creek catchment", the options being: a Forest Reserve managed by FT under a jointly prepared management plan, or revocation of the State Forest and extension of the national park. An environmental monitoring program is to be initiated in Croesus and Lynds caves, comprising photomonitoring to determine speleothems and cave sediment degradation and track monitoring. The gate on Lynds Cave is to be redesigned to better accommodate use by owls and bats.

In relation to the King Solomons Cave block, there is to be a site plan for the visitor services zone to address surface and underground management issues; the environmental impacts of the proposal to create another entrance to KSC are to be assessed; an environmentally-sustainable sewage treatment system is to be developed; options for managing visitor numbers are to be assessed; alternative car parking arrangements are to be assessed; programs to monitor visitor impacts are to be developed; entrances to the Diamond-Kohinoor-Maze Puzzle system in the park are to be gated and negotiations re gating are to be held with owners of other entrances.

Within the Kubla Khan Cave block there are a number of restrictions on access to, and within, Kubla. These appear to be the same as in the draft plan and apparently were not the subject of representations. As with others, there is to be a site plan for the block; boot washing stations are to be monitored, sediment collected to be removed from the cave; alternatives to the current bag 'stepping stones' are to be investigated; the cleaning program is to continue in conjunction with clubs and existing gates are to be maintained.

The Wet Cave block is to have a site plan, as with others. There has been some angst in relation to a proposed karst interpreted walk and the continuation of camping. The plan says if the walk does not go ahead camping will continue, subject to monitoring, but if the walk is installed, camping here will cease. The visitor services zone is "not to be allowed to evolve into another developed camping area". However, a "suitable" toilet system is to be installed. It is asserted that Abseil Hole is an appropriate site for abseiling and the entrance to Wet Cave should not be used for this purpose. There is to be liaison with adjacent landowners on the management of Wet Cave [one can but hope ...]. Works are to be carried out to facilitate abseiling at Abseil Hole, there are to be signs, trackmarking, etc.

The conservation area north of Westmorland Falls [acquired land which will presumably be added to the park] is important because it contains at least

part of Herberts Pot, but apparently not the entrance. Liaison with the neighbour owning the entrance is the key to effective management here; a detailed management study of this cave is to be undertaken and site-specific planning to address cross-tenure issues, access issues and management generally.

Involving the Community is addressed in section 7. Given the local ill-feeling towards the park, this is a most important section. Policies include consulting neighbours and other groups when their interests may be affected, developing partnerships with local and other communities, encouraging volunteers, recognising that effective management of cross-tenure caves and cave catchments will only be achieved through collaboration and not accepting responsibility for policing trespass on [or under] private land. A Cave Management Advisory Committee is to be formed “as a forum for communication between stakeholders and PWS on cave and karst management at Mole Creek.”

Under **Boundaries**, in section 8 (Other issues), actions include addition of the conservation area to the park, assessment of purchased karst properties and adjacent Crown lands for possible inclusion in the park and liaising with neighbours re rationalisation of boundaries at Cow Cave

(perhaps swap land for the cave entrance). In relation to **leases**, Honeycomb 1, Baldocks and Cyclops caves are identified as “suitable for commercial cave tours where the clients are inexperienced cavers”; the cave classification process is seen as the appropriate context for deciding which caves are suitable for commercial cave tours. Caves used for commercial tours will be monitored and changes will; be made if unacceptable impacts are detected. Limited continuation of grazing may be permitted but will be monitored. An extensive program of **monitoring** is envisaged, involving Marakoopa and King Solomons (show) caves, all restricted access, gated and “other significant undeveloped” caves; cave fauna to be monitored at Marakoopa and Baldocks caves, visitor numbers at Wet Cave, Honeycomb 1, Cyclops, Sassafras and Soda Creek caves, Devils Pot, Devils Anastomosis, Devils Drainpipe, Snailspace, Baldocks and Diamond caves and restricted access caves.

The plan is rounded off with a glossary and appendices covering reservation history, list of significant surface karst features, caves wholly or partly in the reserves, flora and fauna, the protocol for the Mill Creek-Kansas Creek catchment and the ASF code of ethics & conservation and minimal impact caving code.

REFERENCES

- PARKS AND WILDLIFE SERVICE TASMANIA 2001 *Draft Mole Creek Karst National Park and Conservation Area Management Plan 2001*. Dept. of Primary Industries, Water and Environment: Hobart vi + 112 pp.
- PARKS AND WILDLIFE SERVICE TASMANIA 2004 *Mole Creek Karst National Park and Conservation Area Management Plan 2004*. Dept. of Tourism, Parks, Heritage & the Arts: Hobart vi + 111 pp.
- RESOURCE PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION 2002 *Report on the Mole Creek Karst National Park and Conservation Area Draft Management Plan 2001*. The Commission: Hobart iv + 60 pp.



L to R: Arthur Clarke, Dave Gillieson, Mike Lake and Chester Shaw, at the 'Tuning Fork' in Marakoopa Cave – 4th Australian Karst Studies Seminar, Mole Creek, February 1998