

# IN PURSUIT OF BETTER CONSERVATION AND ENHANCED MANAGEMENT

– Elery Hamilton-Smith

Patricia Seiser at Big Spring in the Ozarks



Readers might be getting sick of the perpetual travelogues from others and myself. I know I am totally sick of airports and aeroplanes, particularly our own National Carrier with its steady decline in quality of service. But one of the great advantages of my role as chair of the IUCN / WCPA Taskforce on Caves and Karst is that it gives me lots of fun and lots of learning. So, this time let me focus mainly on the fun and some of the many things I have learned recently.

The current round commenced when Emily Davis and Mike Warner, of Speleobooks fame, invited me to give a keynote address at the 30<sup>th</sup> National Cave and Karst Management Symposium in Albany, NY. Then Louise Hose of the National Cave and Karst Research Institute arranged a pre-conference tour across the USA. Patricia Seiser from the Institute met me at the Los Angeles airport and we drove right across the country stopping off to see interesting people and interesting places. Fortunately, we enjoyed each other's company! If you want to look at it for details of our odyssey, Patricia's journey blog is still on the Web at <[www.nckrms.org/2005/Travel.html#blog](http://www.nckrms.org/2005/Travel.html#blog)>.

We neglected the UFO museum and research centre at Roswell! But we did have a wonderful time visiting Bottomless Lakes Park in the nearby gypsum karst - why is it that I (and probably many visitors to Carlsbad) had never heard of it before? Do not miss it when you go that way.

Austin, Texas proved to be a fascinating place. It is located on karst, with a multitude of small dolines and caves. Many of these have provided small patches of vacant land, many of which have been turned into neighborhood parks with fences around the cave entrances and a few simple conservation signs. These not only provide for recreational access, but they are the focus of an annual cultural festival so that the community is continually made karst-aware. Why isn't this done more often?

The Edwards Aquifer Management authority proved to be a fascinating visit - we should try to

set up an exchange with our Limestone Coast water management people. They were fascinated when I told them about Mt Gambier's Aquifer Tours.

Our amazing friends, Cathy and Tom Aley, provided a wonderful pause in the hectic rush of life. Amongst many wonderful things, they have a wonderful bat gate that was built to provide for a bat species that, like our bent winged bats, does not accept the conventional barred gate. It has an enormous open chute (see photograph) and the bats commenced using it while it was still under construction.

Normal US paranoia appeared along the way - a road traffic check operated jointly by three separate law enforcement agencies who were a bit baffled by the Nevada-registered car being driven by a New Mexico resident with an Australian passenger - but they let us drive on.

Judy and Gordon Smith operate their Caves Museum adjacent to the Mammoth Cave National Park and they had a current major exhibition on Jenolan Caves. Gary Berdaux, who manages their Diamond Caverns, presented me with one of his magnificent panoramic photographs, produced by electronically stitching together a whole gaggle of normal digital images. It's a sort of 90cm. long postcard and now sits above my desk.

The Mammoth Cave area and the State of Virginia, one after the other, provided an incredible variety of programs, people and discussions. Virginia really leads the field in broad-scale public education and in conservation practice. Many of you will have seen their wonderful poster, "*What Goes Down Must Come Up*". At both of these places, there was just too much to learn in one brief visit.



The massive Nare Doline in the Nakanai

Tom Aley's bat-friendly gate



I'd been commanded to make my address (at the symposium banquet) amusing as well as informative. My underlying theme was "*Let's stop doing things the way we have always done them*". I started off with a wonderful little bit of animation from my laptop. It commences by noting that the standard railway gauge of 4'8½" is a pretty odd measurement and raising the question of what Horse's Ass would even think of using such an odd size. It then traces it all back to the Romans who were the world first great road-builders. Their war chariots cut ruts in every road and so that forced all vehicles to have the same distance between their wheels which happened to be determined by the width of a Roman horse's ass, namely 4'8½". So all roads were made like that. Then when new forms of transport evolved, like trams and trains, they were designed and managed by bureaucrats, who always do things the way they have always been done, so they were the same width. Finally, it examined one of the spacecraft design features. Every spacecraft launched from Cape Canaveral has two immense booster pods attached to it. These are actually manufactured in Utah and in order to get to Cape Canaveral they have to pass through two sets of railway tunnels – so guess what determines the size limitations on their design!

I argued, with examples, that we needed to rethink the ways in which show caves to people, which depends upon the words we use. Thus, we use guides – China and Vietnam have both taught me that we should have Hosts, not guides. Similarly, we should not take people on tours, but rather on journeys where they seek out their own discoveries (Vietnam again – but also thanks to Danny Cove). And why do we still have interpretation? Why not experiences, visions and love? After all, it doesn't matter whether people really understand karst (when even those of us who have made it a major interest in life have to admit we still don't fully understand it) but it does matter that they grow to love it and so to care about it.

The next venture was to Guizhou in China, basically to review and comment upon their draft World Heritage nomination of the South China Karst. There were many highlights of this visit.

But, in particular, I visited the Maolan Nature Reserve, managed by the Shui minority people. This is a magnificent forest park that has been

managed on a sustainable basis for over 1,000 years! It puts us and many other countries to shame to realize that what we think is a brand new concept has been part of the Maolan philosophy for so long. I also visited the museum of their books, again, many of a great age, but providing serious texts on such issues as forest management, health and governance.

A very minor thing but one of considerable merit that I discovered is that at many of the tourist caves, the admission ticket is a beautifully printed postcard. It has a tear-off tag that is the actual ticket, but people are encouraged to send the postcard to friends as a way of telling them also about the cave. It is a great example of using the personal recommendation as a way of advertising. Actually, it was a nice comparison with having been in the USA and encountering Alan Graefe's report on his retirement holiday tour. He now claims Graefe's First Law of Advertising: *Never Tell The Truth!*



At Bottomless Lakes State Park

Finally, I have not long returned from Papua New Guinea. For several years, Dave Gill, Jean-Paul Sounier and myself have been planning this venture together with many of the local people. Our program includes David and Jean-Paul currently leading still another expedition in the Nakanai Range of East New Britain. Apart from its own value, the expedition is also serving as the flagship for a karst conservation program. I have been working under the sponsorship of UNESCO with government agencies and others towards the establishment of conservation areas over key areas of Karst and their nomination for World Heritage Inscription under the title of *The Sublime Karst of Papua New Guinea*. This will include the Nakanai, Muller Plateau and Telefomin-Hindenberg area. We had initially planned to include the Huon Peninsula, but I found that there was also moves for nomination of the Huon from the biodiversity people, the geo-climatic historians and the archaeological / palaeontological researchers. So, we are hoping to work together in a unified strategy to achieve nomination of the Huon in its own right.

All in all, it's been a great couple of months. In the US, I met two cavers with who had corresponded for over 40 years but never previously met face-to-face. Then it was great to return to PNG where I had worked back in the 1960s and 1970s.

