

Conservation Column No. 3

THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING CAVE RESERVE

– Rolan Eberhard

It's natural to assume that once an area has been reserved – that is, given statutory protection within a national park or other class of public land managed primarily for conservation (generally alongside other objectives such as tourism and recreation) – that the conservation values within it are 'safe'. In this context 'safe' means that threatening processes that could degrade the values are kept in check through proper management, and that the status of the place as a reserve will be maintained over time. In fact there are many examples of reserves that have not lived up to these expectations. This article provides a case study from Tasmania of the second of these forms of reserve 'failure' i.e. reserves rendered ineffective by revoking them or tampering with their boundaries.

The reserve in question is one of three on Sassafras Creek that contribute to the Mole Creek

Karst National Park. The largest of the blocks (~26 ha) takes in the currently known passages of Baldocks Cave, a former show cave. A few hundred metres away is Cyclops Cave, which appears to be mostly inside a somewhat smaller reserve (~15 ha). Some distance downstream on Sassafras Creek is a postage stamp-sized block (~2 ha) that encompasses two of four known entrances to Sassafras Cave and possibly around 10% of the known passages within it. The Sassafras Cave block is entirely surrounded by private land with no road reserve, right of way or similar means of access. The Baldocks Cave and Cyclops Cave blocks are less problematic in this regard, being contiguous with uncommitted Crown land and the Great Western Tiers Conservation Area, which can be entered via road reserves (access has nevertheless been an issue at these sites – but that's another story)

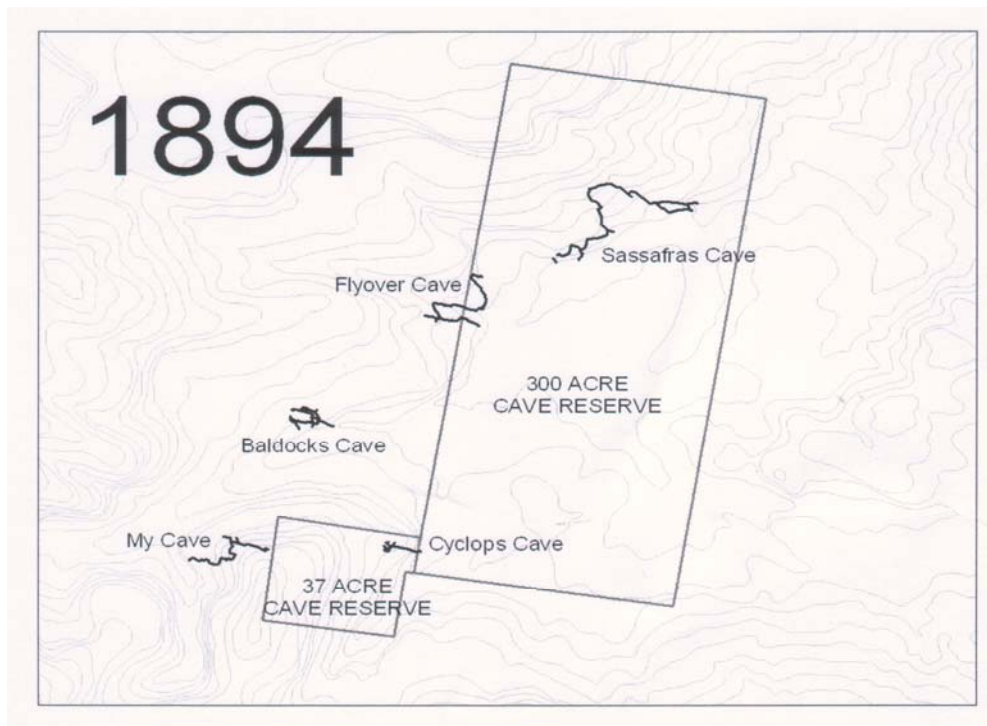


Figure 1: Reserves at Sassafras Creek from 1894 to 1939. The 1939 reserves are reflected in the current extent of the Mole Creek Karst National Park at Sassafras Creek. Land to the west of the caves is now part of the Great Western Tiers Conservation Area.

Clearly, the boundaries of the Sassafras Creek blocks of the Mole Creek Karst National Park are inadequate on any reasonable criterion. This is the rule rather than the exception at Mole Creek, creating an ongoing headache for park managers, neighbouring landowners and a recreational public that struggles with some very arbitrary land tenure arrangements. Most of the ~22,000 ha of potential and confirmed karst at Mole Creek is privately owned. The remaining ~3,500 ha of Crown land comprises about 1,500 ha of reserves managed by the Parks & Wildlife Service, 1,900 ha of State forest (including 600 ha of Forest Reserves), and about 200 ha of unallocated Crown land.

Many of the reserves at Mole Creek provide partial protection for caves with passages that extend

across the reserve boundary into surrounding State forest, unallocated Crown land or private land (as at Sassafras Creek). Some fourteen major examples of 'cross-tenure caves' (caves that extend across the boundary between Crown land and private land or different classes of Crown land) and 'cross-title caves' (caves that extend across separate titles in private land) are known in this area.

Further complexity arises because no depth limitation applies to many older land titles in Tasmania.

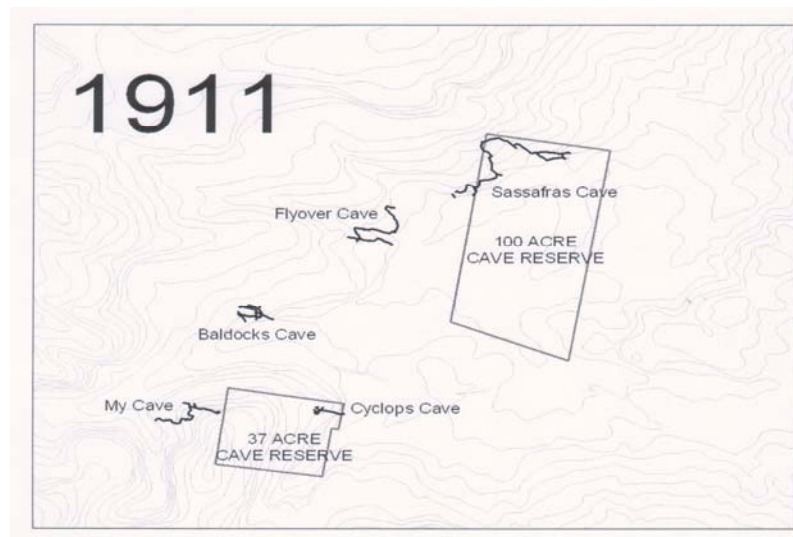


Figure 2

This means that the land is privately owned at the surface and to the centre of the earth, including any caves within it. More recent titles have a depth limitation of 15 m – deeper land belongs to the Crown. Thus, a cross-tenure cave situation can exist vertically as well as horizontally, and probably does so at sites around Mole Creek.

How did the present land tenure arrangements arise? The answer varies between sites. In many

cases it can be put down to the fact that much of the karst was sold off by the Crown in the 19th century, before many of the caves had been discovered and their values and extent appreciated. The Crown later purchased back some of the land it had previously sold off – the reserves at Marakoopa Cave and King Solomons Cave are examples of this.

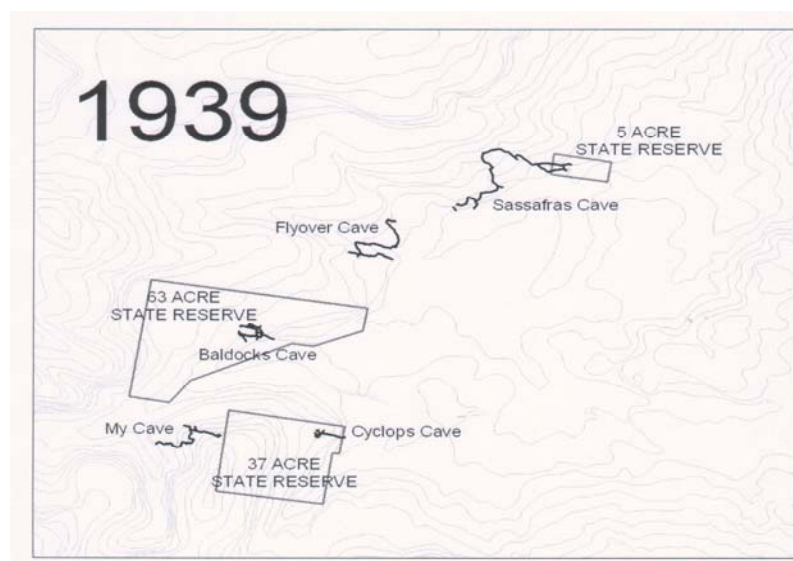


Figure 3

The scenario at Sassafras Creek is somewhat different – here, after initially reserving a reasonably extensive area (~136 ha), the Crown progressively sold a large part of it to private interests (Figure 1). As far as I can tell the story goes something like this:

1860s: caves discovered on Sassafras Creek;
 1879: surveyor Charles Smith recommends that Cyclops Cave be reserved from sale;
 1894: a 300 acre (~121 ha) cave reserve is gazetted at Sassafras Creek, including all of Sassafras Cave;
 1901: Crown purchases ~40 ha of land previously sold off at Baldocks Cave;
 1911: Crown sells two thirds of the 300 acre reserve, including parts of Sassafras Cave and other caves;

1939: Baldocks Cave State Reserve gazetted, comprising part of the block purchased at Baldocks Cave, Cyclops Cave and a minor remnant of what remained of the original 300 acres;
 1996: Baldocks Cave State Reserve incorporated in the new Mole Creek Karst National Park.

The net result of these developments being that of an area of ~136 ha set aside as cave reserves on Sassafras Creek in the 19th century, by the late 1930s more than two thirds of this had been revoked, creating cross-tenure situations and access issues that persist today. In these more enlightened times we can reasonably hope that the Sassafras Creek approach to reserve design in karstlands will remain an historical curiosity, but let's not be complacent either.

