



## THE RACE THROUGH METRO CAVE

### Report on the Te Tahi Cave section of the World Adventure Championship Race (ARWC), Buller District, Westport, New Zealand, November 2005.

– Deborah Carden

The Adventure Race was held on the West Coast of New Zealand's South Island for the second time, this time based in Westport. The race organiser applied to the Department of Conservation for a one-off permit allowing competitors to go through Te Tahi (Metro) cave.

The cave is located in the Four Mile area near Charleston, approx twenty minutes drive south of Westport. It is quite popular with cavers as it offers variety with a walk-in or abseil entry, active streamway passages, pretty sections and some marine fossils. Norwest Adventures have been operating an adventure caving activity in this cave for several years.

Initially the Adventure Race application was turned down as there was insufficient information provided on cave values, potential threats and mitigation measures. These are three key aspects of a concession application.

If an applicant revises the application and it can be seen that satisfactory controls can be implemented a decision can be reversed. That occurred in this instance. Norwest agreed to co-

ordinate the underground component, and this supported the applicant's case for revision of the department's initial decision.

The decision by the Department to allow the cave section proved controversial. Cavers from Westport, Christchurch and Nelson converged on the site and held a quiet protest, obtaining some media coverage.

#### Site Controls

On 15 November 2005 prior to the Adventure Race starting, representatives of three parties met for a site visit and a briefing session. Those attending the meeting were ARWC safety staff, Norwest Adventures and DOC staff.

ARWC and Norwest, supervised by the DOC staff, installed tapes and ropes at the congregation area and in the cave and defined a specific route for race participants to follow.

The main reason for doing this was to ensure that cave values were protected though it also meant that competitors had no chance to get lost.

## Environmental Protection Actions

### 1) CONGREGATION AREA AND TOMO SITE

- Entry steps and the congregation place near the top of the 40m Hi Hi tomo were defined with a rope.
- Competitors clipped onto the rope and stay within a defined area waiting to be brought forward to the abseil.
- The abseil site and activity was under the control of Norwest staff.
- Norwest laid a carpet over the lip of the tomo so the abseil rope was protected.

### 2) TAPING

600+ metres of tape laid from the bottom of the Hi Hi abseil through to the cave exit.

- Side passages were taped off. Those that are considered particularly important were double taped i.e., a tape across the entrance and another one a metre or two further in.
- A running tape was laid on left hand side of cave from the start of the main streamway to the cave exit.
- Teams were advised at check points and as they started the descent at the tomo that they must not to cross any tapes.

### 3) PHOTO-MONITORING

Fragile passages and decorated areas on or near the taped route where photographed by the DOC staff.

The idea was to establish a before-and-after photo record. This was so any new damage could be easily identified as there is significant damage throughout the cave caused by cavers and during a SAREX that took place 15 years ago.

### 4) UNATTENDED ABSEIL

Norwest had removed old cave ladders in Te Tahī the previous week and a five-metre drop in the floor level had to be accessed via an abseil. A rope was attached to a sling looped over a natural projection on the cave wall.

Geoff Schurr placed the sling on the projection and the abseil was rigged by the adventure race staff so competitors would be able to abseil with prussic backup as they had been trained to do.

This abseil was classed as 'unattended', meaning that teams would have to get down by themselves. Adventure race staff felt that teams would be able to do the five metre abseil without the belay assistance they would receive on the Hi Hi abseil and the Charleston cliffs.

## Post Visit Briefing

After the site visit the group convened at Norwest's Charleston headquarters and Ray Moroney of Norwest Adventures joined the group. The briefing assessed the site visit and discussed the following:

### TEAM TRAVEL TIMES

- ARWC would provide Norwest and DOC with locations of teams on Stages 10 (trek); Stage 11 (mountain bike) and expected arrival times at cave check point.

This was to ensure that Norwest had sufficient time to bring staff together, setup the abseil and for DOC to arrange staff to observe.

- The applicant had proposed that the cave section be a compulsory but untimed (non-racing) section. It was agreed that two and half hours would be sufficient time for this section of the race, being the time between the check-in point and the cave exit point.

## COMMUNICATIONS

- Radios were to be positioned at the cave entry and exit check points and a radio was placed in a waterproof bag/box at the base of the Hi Hi tomo.
- Teams were to be checked into and out of the cave.

## COMPETITOR AWARENESS LEVELS

Dave Bergman, the adventure race's safety officer commented that by the time the race got to the cave stage it will only the first five teams that will still be seriously racing.

- ARWC staff at the cave check-in point were to assess competitor awareness levels and decide if they could proceed or if they should rest. (One team was told to rest).
- Norwest staff were to check competitors again to ascertain if they had the correct abseiling gear. If Norwest not happy the competitors were to be sent back to the check point.

## NORWEST CAPACITY

Norwest had four staff available of whom three were able to manage an abseil.

- Only three staff would be available from midnight Thursday to the end of the race, two of whom would manage the abseil. Geoff Schurr had a prior engagement and would only be available for one 24hr period.
- It was noted that if more than three teams arrived for the cave section the level of Norwest's capacity would not be able to trail each team through the cave. Norwest proposed that only each fourth team be trailed. DOC asked ARW to have each team followed in the cave so they would not 'race', would stay on the marked route and that no environmental damage would occur.
- Ray Moroney made the comment that if teams knew they were not being followed or observed they would race through the cave and rest near the exit (This is reportedly what occurred when the Southern Traverse used Clifton cave in Southland).

## SAR

- Norwest's and BCG SAR gear was on site.
- A SAR procedure was agreed – NZ Police are in charge of rescues but Norwest would initiate a first response if necessary.

Stalagmite broken during a SAREX. At a meeting to be held on 1 April 2006 DOC and the NZSS Council shall confirm a protocol whereby there is no need to cause this sort of impact in a SAREX.



## **MEDIA**

ARWC and Norwest were keen to have the cave section recorded. ARWC were to advise how this would be managed and they would be responsible for controlling media.

Dave Bergman advised that ARWC would assess the photographers who were interested to go underground.

He explained that some of the photographers at these events are also 'extreme sportspeople' and as capable as any competitor.

In the end the media sorted it themselves once they discovered that the exit was a 20m long mud crawl (colloquially known as the Birth Canal).

One cameraman, an experienced outdoor sports photographer who had been in many overseas caves such as Mammoth and *Lituguia sp?*) went into Te Tahi. Most media went to via an overland route to record competitors exiting from the mud.

One issue did arise that could have had serious consequences. Two still photographers were permitted to take photographs at the tomo site.

One was not familiar with how to do up a harness and therefore be properly clipped onto the safety system. ARWC were absent from the site when the

Cave SAR co-ordinator noticed and fixed the problem.

## **CANCELLATION OF CAVE EVENT**

It was agreed that if the weather deteriorated, an accident occurred or people not associated with the event were in the cave the cave event would be cancelled.

## **ROLE CLARIFICATION**

It was agreed that roles were:

- ARWC was the main concessionaire, accountable for all activities.
- Norwest was contracted by ARWC to run the Te Tahi cave section.
- DOC was not involved with running any part of the Adventure Race. DOC was overseer and observer.
- NZ Police were in charge of SAR.

## **UNRANKED COMPETITORS**

Competitors were to bypass the caving section and go straight to the next part of the race.

## **Post Event Monitoring**

Two days after the event Geoff Schurr, Chippy Wood and Deborah Carden visited the site. The tapes were removed and the photo sites re-photographed

- No breakages were observed. The photos match with no changes.
- The exit passage which is through a mud-crawl, was splashed with mud as had been expected. Norwest and DOC have previously cleaned this exit passage and this should be programmed to be done again. It is very near the Nile River and water is easy to obtain.

## **Summary**

- Apart from the mud crawl there was no noticeable impact on the physical cave environment.
- The activity operated smoothly due in part to the amount of route taping and the attention to detail that arose as a result of the 15 Nov site visit and subsequent debrief of that visit.
- The concept of racing in caves was met with strong opposition from NZ caving groups and ACKMA members.
- The concession application process that the department operates will be discussed at a meeting of DOC and NZSS Council in Westport on 1 April. Applicants identify potential human-made impacts and must show they can mitigate them by implementing suitable control impacts.
- Some karst sites will be too vulnerable to this sort of activity and would not be permitted.
- Where a site is more robust and it can be shown that impacts could be controlled the potential for an application to succeed increases.

