



## THE WOES OF WAITOMO

- Van Watson\*

A close up view of the devastation  
– Waitomo Glowworm Cave. Photo: Greg Martin.



### WAITOMO GLOWWORM CAVES

#### The First Blow

In the early morning of Wednesday 14 December, the main facilities building at the Glowworm Cave (GWC) at Waitomo burnt to the ground – totally destroyed. The ticket office, souvenir shop, café, administration offices, meeting room, workshop, staff room and the all important toilets were reduced to ground level rubble and ash. It was well alight by the time the Fire Service arrived. Apart from some containment, saving the redwood trees and keeping warm there was little they could do. Robert Tahi and some of his crew and locals

watched their work world disappear. Just what a caves manager needs two weeks before Christmas...

#### The Response

The Managing Director of THL (The GWC operator), Dennis Pickup and Attractions Manager, Grant Webster arrived with the dawn and took some of the national damage control and re-establishment of temporary systems organisation away from Robert, so his focus could be on clean-up and reopen.

The two main administrative/finance managers for the GWC and Blackwater Rafting (BWR), Judith Greer and Anne Davis (with support from a bevy of Auckland IT people), retrieved as much memory as they could from off-site computers and in-head knowledge, so that by 9.00am, with little more than a forced smile, the BWR Booking Counter at the Long Black Café was geared for handling the approaching crowds of pre-booked GWC clients.

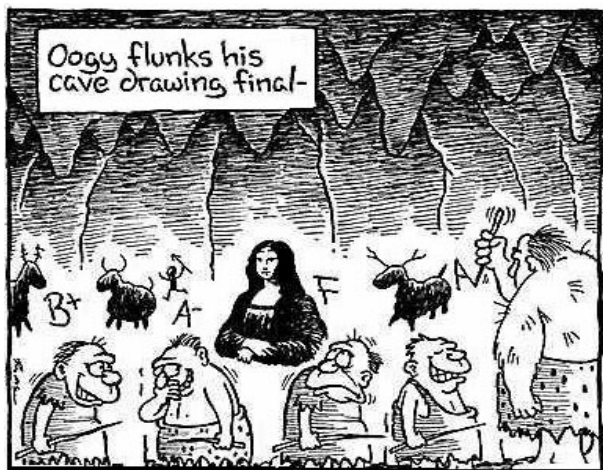
#### Where to send them?

The GWC access path was still a hazard/fire investigation area. The answer was Ruakuri Cave, of course. The GWC guides were rushed through the cave in a half hour fact and fiction briefing, and as each one came out of the cave there was a bus unloading thirty or so clients for their tour. It was Showtime! Ruakuri went from thirty clients per day to five hundred clients per day.





View of the graffiti vandalism in the Glowworm Cave. Photos: Greg Martin.



It didn't even blink. It couldn't – we hard wired all the lights on for the whole day. Those 900mm wide suspended walkways coped with two-way traffic and gave the Ruakuri Guides a glimpse of a future – that was scary, but could be managed.

### Meanwhile...

Robert contacted the Hawkins Construction crew that had worked on Ruakuri for two years. The relationship was still there.

Dave Middlemiss and his crew used their contacts with local firms and a few stored up favours to get the site cleared and a small city of Portacom Buildings swung into place.

Five days after the disaster – by Monday 19 December – tours were again underway in the Glowworm Cave and slowly the ticketing and administration moved back down to GWC site.

Sometimes, in organisations, people take their wage/salary when things are going well and in a crisis they all 'disappear' or take a silly 'self-important' stance.

THL looked good in crisis. From the managing director sideways to the managers, administration and guides, everyone just rolled up their sleeves and kept on working until some semblance of normality was restored.

### How did it Happen?

They think it may have been an electrical fault.

Fire crews on the scene – Waitomo  
Glowworm Cave. Photo: Greg Martin.



## The Second Blow

Two weeks later some person/persons unknown entered the Glowworm Cave with a tub of acrylic paint and daubed general obscenities on the walls. So, Ruakuri was full on for another day – nine hundred visitors. – all at peak season! Fortunately, the humid environment, the inputs from Dave Smith, John Ash and Rob Tahi and the GWC and BWR crew, meant that it was business as usual by the next day.

## How did it Happen?

It was unlikely to have been an electrical fault.

## Impacts

The cave itself is OK. In million year time scales humans are just a twinge of protoplasm on the larger geological and planetary time cycles.

However, the small rural village of Waitomo does not feel so 'secure'. Hiring security guards and getting bigger locks is more an admission of society decay than being 'secure'.

It's not all that relaxing for the GWC staff to be operating out of temporary buildings. The clients

get stacked up without those great souvenir, café and toilet blocks to browse in. The facilities building will have to be replaced in some form or another after concept planning.

## BLACK WATER RAFTING - RUAKURI

But the show goes on! Other than the obvious, it has been a very similar summer to last summer. Not as big as the summer before, that but that had floods as well. Predicting client visitation is a bit like weather forecasting; it makes people feel like they know something but on the day it'll do what it'll do. On many days, we have had one hundred and fifty out on Black Labyrinth Tours and thirty or forty on the Black Abyss.

Ruakuri lopes along with ten to fifty clients a day. Launching a new product into a busy marketplace has been a relearning experience. The eighteen years experience of BWR product credibility show what can be achieved, but with the direct infrastructural cost of Ruakuri, we obviously would like it to happen sooner than that.

All the Ruakuri guides are also adventure guides. This gives a credible empathy with the lights in the streamway and the diarama of cave explorers on the wall.

Occasionally a wet suit tour clammers out on to the boardwalk for a 'tiki tour' and will come face to face with a 'dry' tour. If we go way back to the first ACKMA Conference in Waitomo (in 1985), there was a classic photo of a cave explorer meeting a band of 'regular' tourists.

Twenty-one years later this is now not an unusual occurrence. Jules Verne and ACKMA seem to publish first and then wait for technology and innovation to catch up. Which reminds me, I must press this send button...

\* Van Watson is Operations Manager of BWR/Ruakuri

Below: Graffiti vandalism in the Glowworm Cave – 'funz' it most certainly wasn't. Photo: Greg Martin.

