

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

– Steve Bourne



The Christmas season is over and normality is returning. It has been a hectic time at Naracoorte, with visitation up on the previous year. I feel we have benefited from the misfortune of eastern Victoria that has been ravaged by fires over the summer holiday period. Inadvertently, Victoria's premier became an advocate for the Limestone Coast region by encouraging people not to head to the Gippsland region while the fires burnt. Many people then looked west and our region had an excellent summer. Buchan was fortunately spared the worst of the fires and now they are out, thus Dale and his team can prepare for our arrival.

January also saw the 50th Anniversary of the Australian Speleological Federation (ASF) hosted by the Cave Exploration Group of South Australia (CEGSA). Record numbers attended the conference, based at the Mount Gambier Race Course from 7–12 January.

I had the opportunity to attend some sessions and Naracoorte Caves hosted a field trip on Wednesday 10 January. I will remember this day for a long time; you think ACKMA people are difficult to organise – “herding cats” took on a

whole new meaning!! It was a great day and an opportunity to showcase the work that has been happening at Naracoorte since World Heritage inscription.

The conference dinner was a special occasion; with an extraordinary amount raised for the ASF conservation fund – and some of it was my money! I was invited to speak at the dinner and congratulated the ASF on their 50 year achievement, of behalf of ACKMA. A meeting was held between representatives from each organisation with a follow up planned at Buchan. A closer working relationship between our two organisations can only be conducive to better cave and karst protection in Australia.

I am sure most have seen the publicity generated by Dr Gavin Prideaux and colleagues coinciding with scientific publications on Cathedral Cave (the Naracoorte variety) and the spectacular Nullarbor “*Thylacoleo Caves*” find of 2002. Once again the debate on the cause of megafaunal extinctions has reached the popular media and humans, not climate change have been pushed forward as the probable cause. Much work remains to be done yet, but as climate change is such a topical issue, palaeontological studies are more relevant than ever. I am also enjoying our new Australian of the Year, Professor Tim Flannery, pushing the climate change issue to the highest levels!

I look forward to seeing everyone at our Buchan Conference and to enjoy the excellent program that has been developed by the conference committee.

Brisbane Courier Mail – 25/1/07:

Natural selection rules

Extinction regardless of climate

Susanne Dunkerley

A TEAM of scientists has proved once and for all that climate change did not cause the extinction of Australia's giant animals 50,000 years ago.

The continent lost 90 per cent of its megafauna, including rhino-sized marsupials, 3m-tall kangaroos, sheep-sized echidnas and huge goannas, within 20,000 years of human arrival.

The mystery of whether human arrival or climate change contributed to the megafauna's extinction has been one of the longest running debates in the field of palaeontology.

But research published in this month's issue of *Nature* shows the climate in southeast Australia half-a-million years ago resembled that of today, which, say scientists, proves climate change was not the cause of extinction.

Co-author of the study, Gavin Prideaux, said research showed megafauna was adapted to dry and arid conditions at least 400,000 years before they disappeared.

“Our work removes another pillar of support from the idea that the megafauna were driven to extinction by climate change,” Dr Prideaux said.

“In view of other evidence, that Australian megafauna species were resilient to glacial and interglacial cycling, climate change is unlikely to have precipitated the demise of the remarkable fauna.” Dr Prideaux, a vertebrate palaeontologist, and a team of scientists, spent the past four years analysing the largest discovery of fossils from the Pleistocene era (1.8 million to 10 thousand years ago) made in Australia.

The discovery, labelled the “Rosetta stone” of palaeontology, was made by covers exploring the vast, arid, Nullarbor region of southwest, southern Australia in 2002.

Fossils from the discovery showed the Nullarbor was once home to at least 69 species of mammals, birds, and reptiles, including 23 different types of kangaroo, ranging from the pint-sized 1.3m tall,

Expedition leader and palaeontologist John Long said the scientists were stunned at the condition of the fossils that had been preserved inside a cave.

“Many of the skeletons are complete. As palaeontologists, we spend most of our time trying to identify and reconstruct extinct animals from fragments, all of a sudden, it was information overload,” Dr Long said. During the past four years, researchers have determined the animals fell into the caves between 400,000 and 800,000 years ago.

“Our data shows that the megafauna was resilient to climatic fluctuations over the past half-million years,” Dr Prideaux said.

AGE-old research ... a drawing of a Diprotodon, one of the world's largest marsupials, and right, Gavin Prideaux on the floor of the Nullarbor Caves.