

RESPONDING TO CHANGE IN CAVE MANAGEMENT

– Elery Hamilton-Smith & Andy Spate

We plan to hold a workshop at the Buchan Conference on what is wrong with cave and karst management (and what is right!) and the development of appropriate and strategic responses to examine this question and to produce ideas for where ACKMA and its members can work to improve cave and karst management.

Do contact us if you are interested in contributing a brief statement of your problems and responses at the workshop.

We both attended the recent Australian Speleological Federation Conference at Mt Gambier and frequently found ourselves listening to and discussing concerns about problems in the quality of cave management. At least in part, this is a result of reductions in funding and new managerial demands, both of which are commonly cited problems or excuses.

However, to lay it all at the feet of those who decide upon budgets would be a gross oversimplification. It must also be said that many of the comments were made in ignorance of how management occurs and of what managers actually do – and have achieved.

Since then we have seen the results of the 2006 World Heritage Rating system. A panel of over 400 frequent and suitably qualified travellers evaluated a list of selected World Heritage sites (415 sites in 2006) and rated them on a number of set criteria.

Over half of these sites received a rating that indicated they had significant problems. Given that one would expect quality management of World Heritage sites, this is a sad indicator that the general state of protected area management is in a bad way. There are many local examples in Australia.

Many of these were in difficulty because they were quite unprepared to manage the rapidly increasing number of visitors, even though in many cases we know this could be managed. Some, of course, do face impossible pressures. The massive cruise ship industry can and does deliver up to three thousand visitors in a single day!

Although not a World Heritage site, the 53 km² syngenetic karst island of Bermuda (population of 66,000) hosts up to three such cruise ships at once – often arriving on the same day. There are also hundreds of cruising yachts and many plane flights from North America and Europe. Coping with such floods of visitors is virtually impossible.

Many more World Heritage sites simply had poor quality of visitor management, even though they were not facing massive increase in the number of visitors. They offered seriously deficient infrastructure, lack of proper people movement management, or inadequate hosting services.

Then, particularly in poor countries, they failed to clear litter and often allowed beggars on the site. There were many complaints about the sale of shoddy souvenirs: but that of course is almost a

universal problem. Then some countries, as deliberate policies, are doing their best to turn wondrous heritage sites into pseudo-Disney style amusement parks

Most of the rated sites were cultural ones focusing upon built environments, and only a few of the natural sites included caves or karst. But again, this survey provides a valuable indicator of the general state of park management. One of the strongly criticized karst sites was the famous Ha Long Bay of Vietnam. Having visited there only a few weeks ago, Elery was shocked and appalled at the decline in standards of care and protection.

We (and many others who have spoken to us) are both shocked and amazed at the recent development of the Nettle Cave at Jenolan. In spite of the World Heritage status of the site, this development contravenes all Australian documented codes on heritage management: Burra Charter, Natural Heritage Charter, Heritage Commission Guidelines on Tourism, the Richmond Communique on World Heritage Management, relevant ASA Standards and possibly NSW environmental planning legislation. [N.B. We are simply listing clear discrepancies in the project; not voicing any judgments about the quality of the outcomes.]

It can well be argued that it therefore also fails to recognise and implement the principles laid down in the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention.

Then there is the Nullarbor, where trans-border co-operation should ensure a permanent on-site ranger presence but little has been done to ensure on-going protection and adequate visitor support. On a much less internationally significant level, the Wee Jasper caves and karst, much of which is on private property, has many significant physical and biological features of value.

But the largest, and most heavily used caves, Punchbowl and Signature, simply have had no management although they are on government-managed lands.

The use of Tunnel Creek Cave in the Kimberley for rural leadership training by building their team spirit and 'character' by leaving teams of about six to find their way out of the cave in the dark is only one example of the use of caves as outdoor gymnasias and should be seriously challenged

