

SHOULD WE BE RACING IN CAVES?

– Ian Collette and Fran Head*

In Western Australia recently there has been a proliferation of race-type events seeking to use caves as one of their 'extreme sport' elements.

First was the X-Adventure Raid World Cup in March 2006, where the organisers originally wanted competitors to traverse across the Bride's Cave doline. Fortunately, strong representations from the cave manager regarding the fragility of the cave and its surrounds, firmly supported by the speleological community, ensured that no cave was included in this event.

A proposal from another group for a similar marathon event, also hoping to involve a 'cave leg', did not go ahead this year owing to insufficient lead time, but may well raise its head again in the future.

Then we heard that the second leg of the Anaconda Adventure Race National Series 2006 was scheduled for 24 September in and around Dunsborough, with – in the words of the organisers – 'a cave thrown in for good measure'. By the time the Western Australian Speleological Group (WASG) learned of this event, plans to include Ngilgi Cave at Yallingup were well advanced, and reservations expressed verbally to the cave manager were politely countered.

Although we knew beforehand that we would not be permitted inside the cave during the race, Fran and I decided to go down to Yallingup to observe from outside. We were able to count and time the participants, and also talked to race stewards and to the St John Ambulance personnel who were taking rotating shifts in the cave.

The cave section of this race was positioned in the middle of the mountain bike leg, with participants arriving tired and sweaty after a long uphill ride. The guidelines prohibited running in the cave, which would have been just about impossible anyway due to the restricted headroom and narrow, twisting walkways. Just as well they were wearing their bike helmets, though the cleats on the soles of some competitors' cycling shoes provided another hazard and could have ended in a broken leg.

A total of 237 competitors went through the cave over a period of three and a half hours. We estimated that the maximum number inside the cave at any one time was 45 competitors, plus a further 8 stewards and ambulance personnel. Our timing of a number of participants indicated that the average time spent in the cave was 11 minutes.

When the event was over, I went through the cave following the same route; I timed myself doing a fast walk and took 9 minutes. Given that the competitors had to stop at a number of checkpoints to have their cards stamped, I was probably moving at a very similar speed to them.

What did I get out of it? Although I had arrived at the cave by car rather than mountain bike, I emerged slightly(!) out of breath and sweaty. What did I see? Nothing – I had no time to look around and appreciate my surroundings, and was too busy looking out for the correct route. What did the competitors get out of it? They were in no mood for sightseeing, and judging from their comments on exiting the cave, they viewed it as just another physical challenge – basically an exercise in stair-climbing. If stairs were needed, surely this hilly coastal area could have offered some alternatives – maybe the nearby lighthouse, where spectators could see the competitors emerge at the top and the participants could have enjoyed the view. What did the spectators get out of it? In fact, there was only a small group of supporters (20–25) at the cave; none were allowed inside, and none waited or returned to tour the cave when it re-opened.

It is accepted that Ngilgi is a tourist/show cave with excellent infrastructure and raised walkways throughout, and that it regularly handles more people than this in a day, with group sizes of up to 50 at a time. Perhaps there may have been no specific negative impacts from this race (though we still contend that there is potential for negative impacts if this kind of event is allowed to proliferate). But when all is said and done, what was the point?

Events of this kind represent an abrupt departure from the modern approach to cave tourism. So much has been done to replace the old careless attitudes with an educational and interpretive experience, and to foster appreciation of the beauty and uniqueness of the cave environment. Let's not go backwards again. Should caves be associated with races? Our answer is a resounding 'no'.

* The foregoing article was originally published in the newsletter of the WA Speleological Group. The authors would be interested in the opinions of the wider cave management community. They can be contacted at <wasg@wasg.org.au>.



Competitors in the race exiting Ngilgi Cave