



## NEW INFRASTRUCTURE AND OTHER TASSIE STUFF

– Rolan Eberhard

There have been some significant recent improvements to infrastructure in and around the Mole Creek Karst National Park. Mole Creek township now has a brand new Parks & Wildlife Service office. The building has a modern look to it and, as I understand it, doubles as a community on-line facility. There is space within for an interpretive display – methinks it would be a useful opportunity for something about karst.

Other developments include modifications to the Fern Glade Track, which extends between Marakoopa Cave and the nearby PWS base. The track has been upgraded following flood damage about 18 months ago.

Sections of the track had been washed out and two foot bridges across Marakoopa Creek were destroyed. The bridges have been replaced with very solidly engineered prefabricated steel spans anchored to big concrete footings. It'll take more than a 100-year flood to rattle these babies!

The track itself has benefited from resurfacing with limestone gravel and improvements to drainage. Tickets to the cave are now sold at the PWS base, not at the cave entrance as previously, providing visitors with the option of strolling up to the cave via the Fern Glade.

Public toilets at King Solomons Cave were upgraded a few years ago. The small, dark toilet 'sheds' that had been there for many years were replaced with a spacious modern amenity block. The new arrangements include a sewage holding

tank. A commercial operator periodically empties the tank for disposal at a council facility. The previous system had been a traditional septic tank, raising concerns about possible effects on groundwater. The pump-out system experienced some initial problems because of slumping of a nearby slope. This has now been addressed by constructing a retaining wall above the tank.



New amenity block at King Solomons Cave. The holding tank is shown waiting to be deployed following repairs to the site.

In July 2007 Diamond Cave at Mole Creek became Tasmania's newest gated cave. The entrance is a circular hole less than a metre in diameter – ideal for gating in many respects. Ross McNeill knocked up the gate using bits and pieces lying around the PWS workshop.



Diamond Cave: an integral chain passes through an eye bolt fixed in the rock above the gate – when locked, this stops the gate from swivelling on its single hinge



Diamond Cave: the chain passes through a second eyebolt at the locking point. The lock cannot be removed by cutting the chain.

The design is simple, comprising a cross-shaped bar that hinges across the entrance, blocking access when locked in place. Installing the gate required only three holes to be drilled in the rock: one to take a pin at the hinge, another to take a pin at the locking point, and a third that receives a chain that leads back to the locking point.

The lists of materials include 3 m x 20 mm square bar, 1 m x 12 mm round bar, 0.5 m x 8 mm chain and a small piece of 5 mm steel plate. The process of installing the gate took about three hours.

A quick count suggests that there are now about 19 gated caves in Tasmania, comprising some 28 separate gated or barred entrances. The gated caves are predominantly in reserves managed by the PWS (14 caves), although four caves on State forest are gated and one cave that extends across the boundary between reserved land and State forest and is gated on both land tenures (Croesus Cave).

Three of the caves are show caves; the others are wild caves that were gated to protect the caves from environmental damage due to unrestricted visitation.

There are 12 gated caves at Mole Creek – more than the combined total of gated caves in all other Tasmanian karst areas. This reflects the highly decorated character of many of the caves at Mole Creek, the popularity of this area as a caving venue, as well as the history of management

Why gate Diamond Cave? The short answer is that the management plan says so, which is not particularly informative of course. The plan itself notes that this entrance is part of the Diamond Cave-Kohinoor Cave-Maze Puzzle system, which is

subject to moderate levels of cave use and contains sensitive features including speleothems and other sediments.

Log books placed in Diamond Cave and Kohinoor indicated that these caves had been subject to at least a dozen trips (66 persons) over the previous six months. Only one of these trips was by a group affiliated with the Australian Speleological Federation. Both caves show the effects of considerable wear and tear.

As a 'gated cave' under the management plan (as distinct from 'restricted access cave', which would be available to ASF cavers only), Diamond Cave will be open to trips on application to the PWS.

The plan indicates that only one group will be permitted in the cave at any one time, and that the key must be collected and returned on the same day.

The rationale is that the requirement to collect the key will increase the accountability of cave visitors and promote responsible behaviour. One other cave at Mole Creek, Baldocks Cave, is managed under a similar regime.

Other developments affecting Mole Creek include the release in June 2006 of an assessment of unallocated Crown land in the municipality of Meander Valley.

This is part of a Statewide process coordinated by the Department of Primary Industries & Water to resolve the status of hundreds of mostly small parcels of unallocated Crown land. Several parcels of currently unallocated Crown land at Mole Creek were recommended for inclusion in the Mole Creek Karst National Park.

These include Lime Pit, a major karst spring adjacent to the King Solomons Cave block of the park, a strip of land relevant for access to the Westmorland Falls block of the park, and two parcels containing various karst features at Sassafras Creek. Reservation of the Sassafras Creek parcels will help resolve some long-standing difficulties concerning access and boundaries in this area.

In fact the process had originally recommended that the parcel which is critical for access to Baldocks Cave should not be added to the park; however, this was amended following public representations.

A web page published by DPIW indicates that, for Tasmania as a whole, a total of approximately 78,000 hectares of currently unallocated Crown land has been recommended for reservation under the *Nature Conservation Act 2002*.

The web page notes that although Cabinet has endorsed reservation in all twenty-nine municipalities, it has deferred implementation of the recommendations to create these reserves, pending resolution of funding issues. We can only hope a resolution is forthcoming, as the new reserves would help fix some long-standing problems with the boundary of the Mole Creek Karst National Park.



Logging operation in the Picton Valley, Tasmania



Weld Valley near Eddy Creek

Away from Mole Creek there have been developments in northwest Tasmania, where Forestry Tasmania manages extensive dolomite karstlands in the Trowutta-Sumac area. Forestry Tasmania promotes this area as a venue for forest tourism.

Its efforts in this regard include the 'Dismal Swamp experience' as well as various walks and lookouts. Two walks have a karst focus: Lake Chisholm and the Julius River 'sinkhole trail'. The Julius River walk, a new initiative, is Tasmania's first karst walk, in the sense of a walk developed specifically to present and interpret karst features.

When I visited the site last year there was no interpretation in place, although a spacious public shelter had been erected. The route is quite short – I think it took me 10-15 minutes – and meanders around occasional dolines and dolomite outcrops in rainforest. It will be interesting to see the final product.

State forest in the south of the State has been marked by ongoing controversy about logging old-growth forest, which include some important areas of karst.

The upper Florentine Valley has had a high profile in this regard. Protest actions in this area are reported to have disrupted planned roading and logging operations. To highlight the case against logging, the Wilderness Society has produced a poster titled 'Tasmania's Irreplaceable Oldgrowth Forest' with a panorama view of the upper Florentine Valley.

Public shelter at the Julius River sinkhole walk



The text below the photo states that ‘the Florentine Valley is riddled with caves, including the spectacular Growling Swallet, one of Australia’s deepest’. While it is true that Growling Swallet is located in the Florentine Valley, this cave is in the Mt Field National Park and not under any immediate threat from logging. However, there are caves and karst features in the vicinity of areas proposed for logging in the upper Florentine.

Further south, karst complications have continued to plague forest operations in Forestry Tasmania’s Huon District. Discovery of karst at Eddy Creek is a recent development that has fuelled opposition to logging parts of the Weld Valley. Protest actions in this area have targeted roading operations.

Eddy Creek is not far from Riveaux, a highly cavernous karst area where a few years ago Forestry Tasmania halted construction of a road when caves were discovered virtually underneath it.

Despite a promising initial collaboration to map the caves and assess natural and cultural values, with input from cavers, the Aboriginal community, Forestry Tasmania and DPIW, progress towards resolving future management arrangements at Riveaux has been slow.

On a more promising note, Forestry Tasmania has extended an existing protection zone in the Florentine Valley to include an important area of forest within the catchment of Junee Cave. This area, near the Nine Road, had been excluded from a series of informal reserves created in the mid 1990s to protect karst values.

Forestry Tasmania’s earlier decision to exclude the Nine Road area was based on the commercial value of the forest and the lack of karst features within the area concerned, which is a karst catchment and not karst per se.

They have now changed their position on this in response to further work to clarify suitable for forest operations in this part of the Florentine Valley. The new informal reserve is contiguous with the Mt Field National Park.

Not far away, at Welcome Stranger Cave, Forestry Tasmania has repaired the cave gate, which has been broken into several times in the last few years.

As an additional measure of security, the access road has been ripped up. Although the walking distance to the cave is still not great, it is hoped that the various measures in combination will deter would-be vandals.



New bridge under construction on the Fern Glade track, Marakoopa Cave, Mole Creek