

# LETTER TO THE EDITOR

I'd like to take the opportunity to comment on the article Jenolan – *A New Vision* which appeared in the December edition of the ACKMA Journal.

The compliments on the infrastructure inside the Nettle, Lucas and Temple of Baal caves reflect the skill and dedication of all the staff involved in infrastructure development at Jenolan are appreciated and, I think, well deserved. That said, I am concerned that the article contains a number of factual errors, which in all fairness, should be addressed.

Firstly, the article expresses concern over the use of “chicken wire” rather than Perspex in the Nettle Cave. Various options were considered during the planning phase and the use of Perspex was discounted upon professional advice from the Trust's scientific advisor, the Trust's Environmental Manager and the Jenolan guides. They advised the use of Perspex would have a detrimental affect on wind flow which is essential to stromatolite (crayback) development and might well prove disastrous to the future wellbeing of the stromatolites.

On a more practical note, the difficulty of cleaning the Perspex at such a height was considered, as was the long term durability of the material itself. The additional infrastructure required to stabilise Perspex against wind was also problematic and would have detracted from the visual spectacle within the cave. Consequently, on advice from informed stakeholders and to ensure a safe environment for visitors within both the Devil's Coach House and the Nettle Cave, it was decided a very fine stainless wire mesh be used.

The second issue that concerns me is the reference to the exit of the Nettle Cave, which the article describes as “lunacy”, suggesting access from the Arch Cave should have been considered. It is insulting to imply that all possible options were not thought through, including the possibility of access via the Arch Cave. Contrary to the assertions made in the article, the entire route though the Nettle, including the exit, was in fact determined by the guiding staff. Admittedly, a minority of the guides were not happy with all aspects of this development. It would have been “lunacy” for the Trust not to accept the advice of its environmental advisors or the experience of its staff.

It was always acknowledged the exit of the Nettle Cave would undoubtedly have a visual impact. With a design requirement to handle from 150,000 to 180,000 visitors a year this was to be expected. The final solution is a staircase that follows the side of the cliff face as closely as possible. The structure is certainly visible from a limited range of view, however, this does not include the approach to the Grand Arch as suggested in the article. The visual impact will be softened over time by the introduction of an integrated landscape plan currently being proposed for the Jenolan precinct.

The alternative solution, of using the Arch Cave to access the Nettle Cave was an option that was investigated and discounted due to a number of problems including the logistical nightmare of moving anywhere between 150,000 to 180,000 visitors a year from the Caves House precinct through the Arch Cave and into the Nettle Cave.

This would have required the construction of a very large steep staircase (not a bridge as is suggested) from the Arch Cave to the Nettle Cave which would have created additional difficulties in complying with Australian safety standards a comment made by the previous ACKMA article. Such an imposing staircase would have a detrimental visual impact inside the cave and would hide some of the features which make the Nettle Cave unique.

Additionally, Arch Cave features areas of active and delicate formation regrowth in previously vandalised areas. It was considered impossible to adequately protect these areas without the use of significant invasive infrastructure. Leaving Arch Cave as a regeneration area was a significant factor in the planning for the Nettle Cave self guided tour.

The notion that only a small percentage of visitors have used the Nettle Cave in the “months since it was opened to the public” is, again, ill informed. During the 11 months up to 30 November 2007, some 154,000 visitors went through the Nettle Cave compared to the total of 203,000 visitors to Jenolan over the same period. This represents 76% of all visitors - not a small percentage given the itineraries of some coach tours do not allow a visit to the Nettle Cave. The figures speak for themselves, showing the Nettle Cave to be the most visited cave in Australia and fully justifying an infrastructure designed not only to show the cave to best advantage but also to protect it for future generations of visitors.

To provide some insight into the coloured lights in the Lucas; there are genuine historic reasons for their continuance (just as there are for maintaining representative sections of iron handrails and 110v lighting). The section of Lucas displaying coloured lights was chosen carefully and deliberately and it is presented on tours appropriately and in context, not thrown in as an arbitrary addition. The argument in the article against the use of coloured lights is a subjective and personal opinion and differs from the general response from visitors who welcome the opportunity to view a representative section of coloured lights. The display provides a contrast and visitors can judge for themselves whether the coloured lighting enhances or detracts from the cave experience.

Briefly, turning to the side issue of the boots, the Trust was not aware of this matter. At present there are three options available to staff; the boot the article reports on, an alternate with elastic sides, and the alternative of using ones own boots subject to certain quality control conditions. I might add,

the guiding staff have always had a major input into the design of their outfit and currently there is a staff committee reviewing all aspects of the uniform.

Finally, it disturbs me that this is the second time an article containing factual inaccuracies about the Nettle Cave has appeared in the ACKMA Journal. This should be of real concern to an organisation priding itself as the “professional association for all those responsible for, or interested in, planning and management of limestone landscapes and caves in the Australia Region”. Clearly, the issue of the journal’s editorial veracity must be addressed if the Association wishes to live up to its vision.

In both instances, the authors toured the caves without properly informing management of their visit or their intention to publish a review. Unfortunately, they failed to check their assumptions with the decision makers in the Trust before going to print. Consequently, the views expressed are naïve and irresponsible and do not properly represent the initiatives of the Trust nor the expertise of its staff.

As a Fellow of one professional body and a member of another, the seemingly lackadaisical attitude of the ACKMA journal surprises and disappoints me. The apparent ease with which ill researched and defamatory articles are published is damaging not only to the journal’s professional reputation but to the people it maligns. In this case, the Trust staff who contributed to the redevelopment of Jenolan.

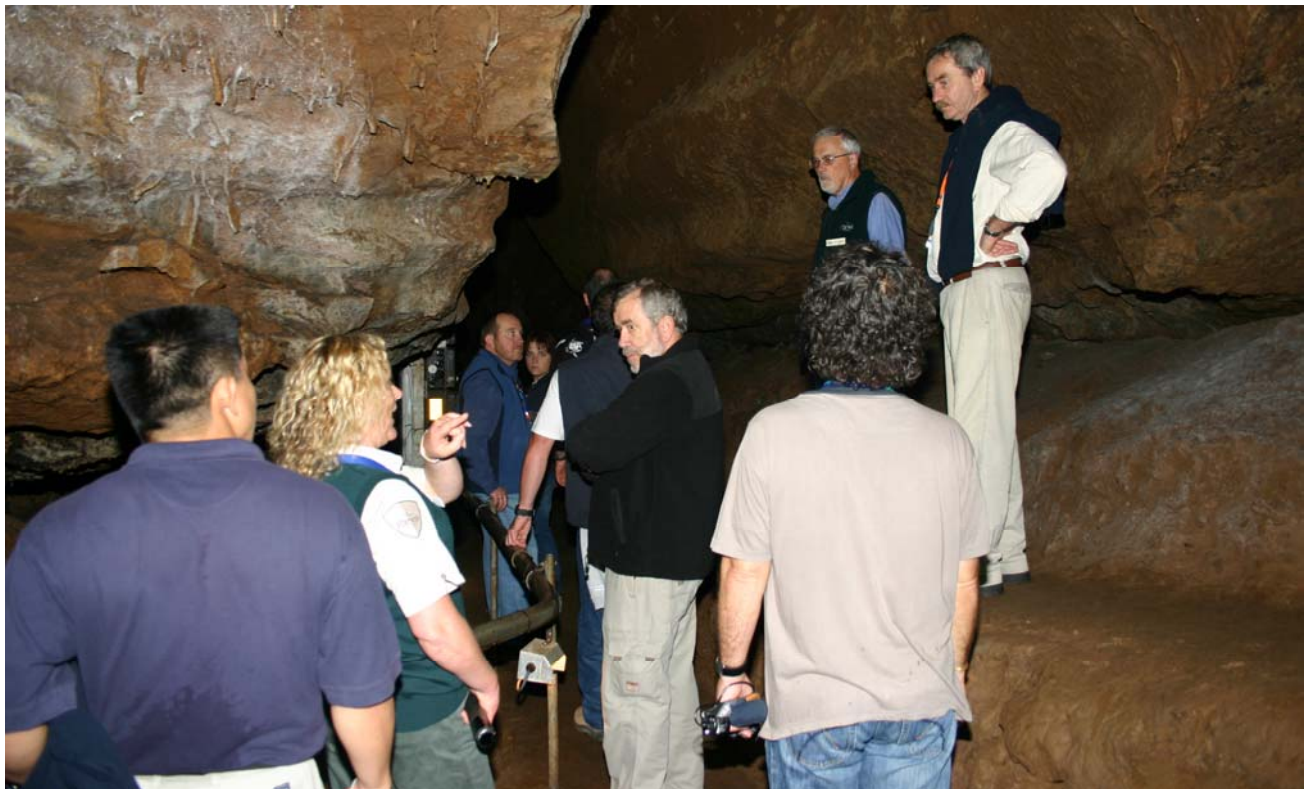
All developments, and particularly those of such iconic stature as Jenolan, should be subject to and encourage critical review and comment. It is

reasonable, however, to expect such input to be professionally delivered and factually correct. Unfortunately, the article in question, containing as it does such basic factual errors, emotive and subjective opinions and damaging statements, cannot be taken seriously. The only purpose it serves is to give credence to the commonly held belief that the ACKMA journal has an inclination to be critical of all things Jenolan.

It is reasonable to expect the voice of ACKMA be focussed on progressing the knowledge and expertise of karst and cave management and not act as a vehicle for relating individual travel experiences or personal views. In saying this, I acknowledge it is at times difficult to attract professional articles, but this could be overcome by a targeted approach to those professionals whose experience, knowledge and current research studies would benefit those responsible for karst and cave management. In addition, I suggest the journal introduce peer reviews, a practice adopted by most professional associations.

This response is not intended to be defensive; rather it is an attempt to set the record straight by providing the facts, especially in regard to the Nettle Cave. I hope my comments on the editorial quality of its journal are taken constructively by ACKMA and a more professional approach embraced to enhance the reputation of the Association and its journal.

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Alan Griffin (centre) surrounded by other attendees, underground – ACKMA Conference 2007, Buchan