Adventure caving at Jenolan Caves

REFLECTIONS ON THE NATURE OF GUIDING

– Dan Cove*

Discussion of differing methods of presenting caves is not new. A great many articles have appeared on the subject over the years, offering a huge variance in possible approaches. Yet regardless of the differences in approach, the objective was always motivated by a singular desire; to provide the best possible experience for visitors to our cave systems. The authors of these articles were, without exception, passionate in their views and understandably desirous that their own love of caves and karst be passed to as many others as possible. However, it is extraordinary how different the proposed approaches have been and continue to be. The discussion has, in recent years, turned to the very nature of presenting caves and focussed upon a once unassailable figure, that of the 'cave guide'. Whereas once the methodology of guiding may have been questioned but the underlying concept of 'the guide' was unthinkingly accepted, this role has come under scrutiny with advocates variously suggesting we replace cave 'guides' with 'hosts', 'presenters' or 'interpreters'. In particular the idea of 'hosting' rather than 'guiding' has been put forward as a preferable ideal, with this argument based upon the assumption that terminology is of genuine importance as our underlying vocabulary contains an inherent bias towards a specific approach. A cave 'guide' will be very different to a cave 'host' because guiding is not the same as hosting. This is more than a semantic or definitional debate, it questions the fundamental principles behind why people visit caves, what they are looking for in a cave experience and what we, as the managers and custodians of these natural wonders, should be offering/imposing upon our visitors.

In this paper I wish to put forward the argument that there are serious problems with the universal replacement of the term 'guide' with that of 'host' and that, in the majority of instances, 'guiding' in the truest sense of the word is the most appropriate approach to show-caves. I would further suggest that there is a genuine challenge to the way we approach cave presentation in the early 21st century, but that the problem is in the ideal of the 'guided tour', rather than in the concept of the 'guide'.

So what is the difference between a guide and a host? If we are to be true to the literal meaning behind both terms then there is a stark difference in that one presents as active role (the guide) an the other is fundamentally passive (the host). The guide, as the title suggests, attempts to give *guidance*. This includes both guidance in facilitating

and shaping visitor appreciation, as well as a role that may seem anachronistic but that I believe to be entirely relevant, the literal guidance of uncertain visitors confronted with an unfamiliar and daunting physical environment. A host should attempt neither. Hosts welcome their guests and invite them to make themselves at home, but they do not necessarily accompany their guests and should certainly provide no interpretation.

It is interesting to make the immediate observation that can be a great deal of overlap between these two terms. Every 'guide' will still welcome their group, and it should always be the case that they will at all times exhibit the greatest courtesy and respect (remember that we are discussing basic principles of guiding here, not the issue of 'bad guides' which we will come to later). Equally most hosts will inevitably end up 'guiding', if interpretation is a facet of the latter. Even when hosting a visitor to ones home for the first time, who does not ask to be shown around or, even, to be 'given the tour' of the house. Here stories are told of the history behind a particular antique, the setting and back-story of a series of photographs on the wall, the names and lineage of faces that peer from old prints and, one would hope, directions are given to the bathroom. Do we send our visitors to our gardens unaccompanied, the better to appreciate the flowers, or do we offer to show them around. Does this diminish the experience, as we point out plants we are particularly proud of, or give a little of the garden's history? Is this displaying a lack of respect for our visitors, or is it merely attempting to 'make them feel at home'?

How does this relate to our cave experience? First and foremost I would question both the effectiveness and the merit of any attempt to make our visitors 'feel at home' in the cave environment. A good host can indeed make a visitor to their house feel at home, because the experience of visiting is not dissimilar to the experience of being within ones own home. It is a comfortable and familiar setting. This is not at all the case with a cave, which is an unusual and confronting experience to the vast majority of visitors. Hosting, at its most literal, is denying this fact. It is also assuming that visitors themselves actually want to be placed entirely at their ease and made to feel at home and this is a mistake as it denies one of the primary motivations behind visiting a cave which is that it is different.

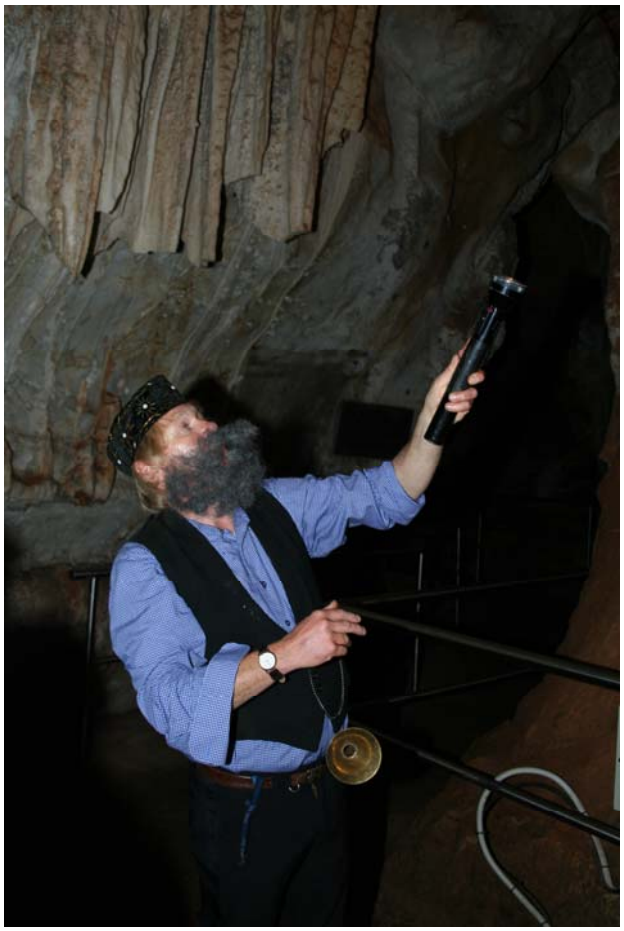
There is a cultural element that is very important at this stage. Any study of the cultural significance of caves shows a definite bias in Western cultures towards a perception based around mystery and magic, generally dark magic. Caves are the domains of dragons and demons, places that resonate form our childhood fairy tales as not too be entered lightly. However far we have come, and how much we choose not to believe in such things (a questionable point), we should never forget that our visitors are not as comfortable as we are in the cave environment. As managers and lovers of caves we visit them daily, they are as natural a part of our lives as our very homes, and it is so easy to overlook the fact that this is not true of everyone. Nor do I ever wish it to be, as I believe that there should lurk a hint of danger and mystery on every visit to the cave, it is a part of what makes them so very special, so very different to our visitors, and what will enhance their appreciation of their experience.

There is an alternate cultural element which should not be overlooked, and that is especially prevalent in parts of Asia. Here caves may be perceived more as Temples and places of great religious significance, indeed many have been or are still used as such. In this context the role of the guide should be very different, in keeping with cultural sensitivities, but it is reasonable to expect that this context also produces a different pattern of behaviour in visitors, more akin to the respectful silence and contemplation within a western cathedral. Naturally we are not faced with a complete separation of values between cultural elements, and neither the western nor eastern values discussed here are complete. What of aesthetic beauty? Is there a common inherent love of nature? What of scientific values (and the beauty and wonder that can also be a part of science)? What of recreational values related to physical endurance and exertion? These all constitute equally valid motivations to visitors to our cave systems.

So where does this leave us? Quite often the answer is that it leaves us feeling overwhelmed and confronting seemingly unanswerable questions about the values and desires of our disparate visitors and facing the immense challenge of providing an experience that meets all needs. But does it leave us questioning the necessity of the 'guide'? Is 'hosting' an answer to addressing the needs and motivations of our visitors? Once again, if we are true to the literal application of the terminology, I would suggest that hosting is a flawed model as, rather than actually addressing any of the above values and needs, hosting merely removes the onus of enhancing the visitor experience from us, and transfers it to the visitor themselves.

A group prepares to descend into the 'Plughole' cave at Jenolan

Guide David Hay bringing Jeremiah Wilson to life



This may sound clinical, but if you are to be true to the ideals of hosting it is accurate. Hosts are passive participants in the cave experience. They should not draw attention to specific formations, the visitors have to find them for themselves; they should not illustrate geomorphological processes; they should not tell stories, no matter how thrilling, about the exploration and discovery of the cave; they should not discuss the long association between the indigenous peoples and the area. If we are to be strict, then they should not have any control over the lighting within the cave at all, because this is imposing a sense of direction and timing on people that is incompatible with the principles of hosting that people may wander freely. Is this the most effective approach to dealing with visitors? Is it, when all is said in done, what our visitors want themselves?

My own experience suggests that it is not. I have personally led over 5000 guided trips through caves, have accompanied hundreds of others around the world, have blended incognito into tour groups while assessing new trainee guides and have listened to the comments, concerns and background conversation of countless thousand visitors. From this I have arrived at several convictions that form the basis of my support of 'guiding';

1. Visitors are not necessarily equipped with an intrinsic or automatic love of nature. To those of us that love caves it seems amazing that this is not common to all or that any could look upon our most beloved formations with indifference, but it happens. Yet this indifference can be turned on its head! With a little probing and careful gauging of reactions, we can find a trigger within the visitor and use that to begin to build upon to eventually establish a genuine appreciation. These triggers vary, they can be subjects such as cave exploration, specific formations or lighting effects. Whatever their nature, they will not be discovered without guidance. Given the opportunity to simply walk through the cave at their own pace, these visitors will leave having gained no increased respect or attachment.

2. A high percentage of visitors to caves are happier to enter them knowing that they are accompanied by an experienced guide. This is not to say that they have an overwhelming desire to listen to lectures on Quaternary geomorphology, but rather that they feel safe in the company of a guide. Once again the literal meaning of the word is significance. A guide is an active leader, and is responsible for ensuring the safety of the group in their care. Many times when checking tickets at the entrance to the cave I have encountered the tremulous question: 'But you are coming with us aren't you?' followed by a most relieved smile when hearing in the affirmative. Even in the case of our self-guided tour of the Nettle Cave at Jenolan, the audio tour commentary was scripted to provide a 'guide' rather than merely a commentary, with the reassuring voice asking visitors to 'Walk with me, as we continue into the cave…' Visitors are not left to feel as if they are without guidance.

3. Protection of the fragile cave environment often requires guidance. This is not exclusively the case, as the physical nature of certain caves makes vigilance and protection possible form a central point; Tantanoola Cave and Kooringa Cave at Wombeyan are both examples of this. However in the case of longer complex caves, particularly those that receive higher visitation, the unfortunate truth is that without the accompanying presence of a guide, more damage is likely over time. The conservation message seems to work best when it is incorporated throughout the trip, rather than just presented in the introduction (usually out of the cave where it is easy to agree not to touch what you have not yet seen) and then left to the group to follow.

4. Just as there is not always the instinctual love of/respect for nature that would exist in an ideal world, so to there is not always an automatic appreciation of science in many visitors. However, there is frequently an underlying curiosity particularly evident in children who are natural scientists in that they exhibit a great desire to understand the natural world. Unfortunately this desire is often suppressed by adults who scold their children for asking 'silly' questions (often the most thoughtful and hardest to adequately answer). A guide has the opportunity to encourage and nurture this natural tendency by making science fascinating, relevant and even cool! When are Earth

system processes ever as easy to captivate an audience with, than when one is quite literally surrounded by them? A passive hosted experience may miss this golden opportunity and another potential scientist or two slip away.

5. There is absolutely no reason at all that guides need ever make a group feel anything less than welcome and special. Too often when one has a bad experience, this negative element is transferred by extension onto associated elements, generally without justification. An experience with a bad guide may lead one to believe all guides to be lacking, and there are certainly bad guides; I have seen arrogance, rudeness, ignorance, racial and cultural intolerance and boredom displayed on tours. But I have also experienced bad hosts who are equally rude, dismissive and unattentive. A bad guide does not automatically call the practice of guiding into question.

I have never forgotten my own experience training as a guide as a teenager first at Wombeyan, then at Jenolan Caves. I began assuming that guiding was easy and discovered it to be anything but, and realised that I was learning from true craftsmen. I was taught from my earliest tours that the guide should always be in the service of the people, but I also saw how profound the influence of the guide can be. I saw guides sculpt their groups, chipping away to find the motivations and fascinations of their visitors. I saw guides reassuring the nervous and unwilling, as patiently and kindly as trained psychologists. I saw guides who could tell of 450 million years of geological processes in minutes, weaving so amazing a story that groups were silent, spellbound. I realised that guiding, at its highest form, was artistry indeed.

Here, I believe, is the very crux of the argument. Guiding is hard, far harder than hosting, in the demands it places upon you. As a guide you accept a role as leader, protector, entertainer and teacher. In addition you will be required, on demand, to become a counsellor, psychologist, confidant, environmental advocate, clown and child minder. You will also be variously expected, by your groups, to be a scientist, historian, anthropologist, linguist and philosopher. In short, it is not an easy undertaking, and in all instances you are expected to be the soul of courtesy and diplomacy. But the rewards are great. By taking an active role, by guidance, you can work to establish bonds between visitors and the natural wonder before them that never existed before, but will endure forever. You could 'host' a visitor to a cave that is already passionate about caves, who is already a 'convert', and who is comfortable in the cave environment. But such an individual is the minority, the majority require more work and that is the role of the guide. In an ideal world it might be otherwise, but as managers it is the real world that we must operate in.

So is there a problem in how we operate today? I believe that there is, and that the problem does to a large extent fall to the guides to address. The problem is that today's visitors are more stimulated than ever before and thus require more from us than ever before to meet their need to a stimulating experience and that the level of competition faced by tourism generally from home entertainment systems, shopping mega-malls and other contenders for available leisure time mean that we must compete on a level that is effective with these energetic alternatives. The traditional 'guided tour' concept may not be as sufficiently enticing as it once was, and this is our problem. Our guides must work even harder, as they are now competing against over-stimulated audiences used to the quick sound bite, an instant gratification culture and armed to the teeth with digital cameras. Guided tours have got to change. 'Good' is no longer 'good enough'. We must offer an experience that is fresher, more challenging to the visitor and delivers a surprise factor. In reality, we are looking to evoke the same emotional response that guides of the 1880s achieved by simply turning on a single light switch. Marketing research across demographics suggests that the visitor need is, more than ever, to engage with their experience.

How to achieve this? At Jenolan we have experimented with our lighting designs, creating lightscapes of great beauty but also lighting that surprises and confronts the visitors. The Temple of Baal is genuinely different, and the Orient Cave (work underway currently) will be different yet again, lit to surprise, as well as please the eye leaving visitors a little dazed and (hopefully) thinking 'well, I certainly didn't see that coming'. We have added more themed tours, from the popular Ghost tour to a historical series featuring guides in character and costumes leading their groups back through time. Adventure tours continue to grow in popularity, combining the adventure seeking with the more intimate discovery and eco-experience that comes from leaving the pathways behind. Yet behind all these experiences we still find the figure of the guide.

But there is more work to be done. Our guides need to be equipped with increasingly innovative tools to meet these modern challenges, to be ever more flexible in approach and presentation. But they are still guides, and there are certain fundamentals that have not changed; they all care passionately about their caves (and the most infectious enthusiasm comes from such passion) and they take their role as custodian seriously, they still take on the responsibilities of leadership and care of their groups and they still actively work to facilitate a relationship, in whatever form it may take, between visitors and the cave.

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