

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

– Steve Bourne



I visited Western Australia for the Geotourism conference in August and while in the sunny west journeyed to the Margaret River region. I thoroughly enjoyed the hospitality of the Augusta Margaret River Tourism Association for a few days and reacquainted myself after a ten year absence. I spent a couple of days speaking with the AMRTA crew and viewing their caves and lighthouse. The development at the lighthouse is amazing and although not a lighthouse person myself, being a part of International Lighthouse Day (didn't know there was such a thing!) was great fun. Margaret River has certainly expanded since the *Gabfest* of 1997 and fortunately not too many recognised me! Many thanks to Francine, Jayme and Lindsay for putting me up there and for showing me around, including a day away from caves at a lovely winery. I also wanted to catch up with Anne and Peter Wood but they had already departed for Fremantle for business prior to the conference, but I did speak with them there.

The Geotourism Conference was interesting, but for me far too much time was spent by various speakers trying to define what geotourism actually is. The National Geographic Society in the US definition uses 'geographical' tourism whereas most participants at the conference use geological and geomorphological values as the basis for geotourism. While the distinction may be important for academics, the real issue is presenting inspiring and interesting visitor experiences based on 'geo' assets. Haven't we been working on this for years in ACKMA and cave tourism?? This was the basis for the presentation that I presented with co-authors Elery and Andy, 'Cave tourism: Australia's oldest form of geotourism?'

Post the Geotourism Conference, I participated in the workshop convened by Jay and Ross Anderson titled the 'State of WA Karst'. They brought together Department of Environment and Conservation staff, other agencies and interested persons for a morning. It was reasonably productive but demonstrated an all too common issue in Australian conservation agencies – fur, feathers, flora and flippers are well catered for but the landscape upon which they depend – the hard stuff – is mostly relegated to second place. Pleasingly, ACKMA Member John Watson (who

produced the IUCN guidelines for caves and karst with Elery and Dave Gillieson in 1996) has written a draft karst policy for Western Australia which will hopefully be adopted in the future.

We have an interesting issue at Naracoorte for which I know of no precedent. The Ossuaries Chambers in Victoria Fossil Cave are superb fossil deposits with skeletons of megafauna littering the surface with numerous skulls visible. The site is rarely visited as it is considered any visit can potentially have an impact and the chambers have been well studied. I decided to film this area for a new promotional DVD of Naracoorte and was horrified to find tree roots had penetrated the ceiling and through into the fossil-rich sediment floor. The land above the cave had been farmland for many years, but we had revegetated the land with 'local' species (that is from seed we collected locally). I think the timing with dry seasons, perhaps the incorrect species for the area (based on pollen records we are now extracting from the Holocene/late Pleistocene) and modification of the surface with road building that occurred prior to the chamber's discovery may have all contributed to the issue. Tree roots are common in Naracoorte's caves; however the fossils show no signs of root damage. This appears to be a human induced action and as such the tree roots have been carefully removed and we are trying to determine the culprits so they can be removed. Research into what is the 'true' pre European vegetation continues and will hopefully guide future revegetation programs. It makes you wonder what the landscape was really like and if we truly have any 'natural' landscape left in our heavily developed region.

There have been a few jobs advertised in the caving world, including the Wombeyan Caves Manager and Manager of Commercial Operations at Jenolan Caves. There is another one coming, Manager of Naracoorte and Tantanoola Caves. I have taken a Deputy Regional Conservator role for twelve months, with more regionally focussed duties. I still retain a strong interest and involvement in both cave sites, still responsible for World Heritage issues with the Australian Government and research interests. We will see what happens after twelve months, but a there is a great opportunity for someone.

The President of ACKMA, Steve Bourne, extends to all ACKMA members, and their families, the warmest Seasons Greetings, and best wishes for the New Year.