

A CONFERENCE TRIUMPH!

- Kent Henderson

Well, it was just a bit special, wasn't it? The 18th Australasian Conference on Cave and Karst Management, held at Margaret River, Western Australia (3-9 May 2009) was, indeed, a triumph! The organization was superb, and the attendance (101 registrants) a record.



Conference Convenor Anne Wood, and her husband Peter

Day One – Sunday 3 May

I arrived in Perth two days prior to the Conference to attend the Pre-Conference Study Tour day to Yanchep Caves on Saturday 2 May (of which more elsewhere in this Journal), prior to marshalling about 25 Conference attendees onto a bus the next morning for the trip to Margaret River. We arrived mid afternoon at the local Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) Office, to be warmly welcomed by our Conference Convenor, Anne Wood, and her team – all running around like headless chooks (but organized ones!) handing out conference satchels and stuff.



Allan Griffin (left) and Peter Austen present their paper

After settling in at our accommodation, we were bussed off to *Caveworks* for drinks, the obligatory back slapping, the Official Opening of the Conference (aka *family gathering!*), and a wonderful BBQ. The first part of the program consisted of a

'Welcome to Country' by members of the local Wardan Aboriginal Cultural Centre, which featured most colourful dancing and music – marvelous! Our President, Steve Bourne, then introduced the Hon. Troy Buswell, Western Australian State Treasurer, and Minister for Commerce; Science and Innovation; Housing and Works, and local member of parliament, who officially opened the Conference. We also had words of welcome from our Convenor, Anne Wood, and from Francine Burton, the CEO of the Augusta-Margaret River Tourism Association (AMRTA), the manager of *Caveworks*, and a much-valued sponsor of the Conference. After dinner, a number of attendees took the opportunity to visit the fabulous Lake Cave, as did I. Sadly, the local water table continues to fall, and was possibly another two feet lower than when I last visited this cave only a few years ago. There are predictions the cave could be 'dry' within ten years. Sigh... So, after a most pleasant first evening, we were bussed back to our accommodation in Margaret River. A late night was had by many...



Attendees enjoying dinner

Day Two – Monday 4 May

The next morning we gathered for breakfast at the Margaret River Cultural Centre, our main venue for the week, followed by the first session of papers. Twenty-eight papers were presented across the week. This was my twelfth ACKMA conference attendance on the trot, and I must say the papers at this conference were the best ever. Usually, a conference throws up at least a few doubtful papers, but not this time. The quality of every paper was absolutely outstanding. Marvelous! The advent of *Powerpoint*, used for almost every presentation, makes a great difference. Happily, gone are days of papers being 'read out', perhaps with the assistance of a few overhead transparencies...

The First Session was chaired by Steve Bourne, who introduced the opening paper – a *keynote address* by Dr Julia James – *Ring in the changes in Cave Tourism*. It was a sensational start. In keeping with the conference theme 'Winds of Change', this

presentation featured an overview of some of the recent changes in cave tourism. She presented a number of examples (not all good...) and gave a 'bell rating' (out of 10) for each location. It was a lively and most entertaining paper, and 'bell ratings' became a recurring *theme* as the Conference proceeded! Next up was Ken Grimes who, unknown to him at that stage, was two days away from being elected as a Fellow of ACKMA. His scene-setting paper *Syngenetic Karsts in the Southwest of Western Australia* was excellent and well received, and gave a superb overview of the local karst. Ken, with Rauleigh Webb, had put together the Field Guide for the Conference – wonderful! Ken was followed by Anne Wood with the second scene setting paper, a brief overview entitled *Cave Management in the Leeuwin Naturaliste – an accident of history?*



Lloyd Robinson (left) with Geoff Kell at Jewel Cave. Lloyd, a surprise visitor to the Conference, provided interpretation on attendees' tours.

After morning tea, Peter Chandler chaired the Second Session, featuring three more excellent papers. First up was Sasa Kennedy, a guide at Jenolan Caves, whose passionate paper, *Thematic Interpretation – adding value to your tour and variety to your day*, was outstanding. Her paper, amongst other things, looked at how karst managers can effectively utilise the principles of thematic interpretation to give their tours a point of difference, raise the standard of guiding at their site and improve job satisfaction for their guiding staff. She was followed by Lindsay Hatcher, AMRTA's Environment Manager, with *Mammoth Cave Megafauna*.

This paper focused on ongoing excavations over many years that have produced a sizeable fossil collection, some thousands of specimens representing over thirty vertebrate species, including several types of extinct marsupial *Megafauna*. Finally, John Brush gave us *Track marking in wild caves – The Yarrangobilly experience*. This paper briefly covered the history of track marking efforts, reviewed the methods used and considered its effectiveness and impacts on caves.

At the conclusion of the morning sessions, two busses left for alternative field trips. One was Mammoth Cave, and to Lake Cave or Contos Spring; the other to Calgarup Cave and Giants or

Golgotha Caves. This program was scheduled to repeat on Friday afternoon, to allow everyone the opportunity to visit all sites. I chose the first option. Mammoth Cave is a large cave with a through tour, and is normally 'self guided' with visitors receiving use of a handset with commentary.



Lindsay Hatcher, left, 'marshals the troops' at Mammoth Cave

Our guide was Lindsay Hatcher, who gave us interpretation of fossil collecting from the cave – an excellent *in situ* follow-up to his excellent talk that morning. Mammoth is in great shape, having been upgraded in both lighting and infrastructure in recent years, and Lindsay's presence made it memorable for those attending. After Mammoth, with many going on to Lake Cave, I took the Contos Spring option (having been in Lake the night before).

Contos Spring drains the Mammoth/Lake Cave system into the sea a few kilometres away. It is dry – no water flowing – sadly indicative of the sorry state of the aquifer, and the severely diminished water table of the area. Everyone rendezvoused back in Margaret River late in the afternoon, and afterwards dined at the Spaghetti Bowl Restaurant in the main street of Margaret River. Again, it was a late night for some...



Van Watson and our keynote speaker, Dr. Julia James

Patrick Nykiel (left) at 15 years old our youngest ever Conference attendee, being 'educated' by Andy Spate (poor lad...)



Day Three – Tuesday 5 May

After another hearty breakfast (as usual with ACKMA Conferences, one returns home to a severe diet!), it was time for the Third Paper Session, chaired by Dr Julia James. First up was Steve Bourne with his paper – *'Close to the Bone' – remodelling Victoria Fossil Cave, South Australia, Infrastructure* – a wonderful presentation on work to upgrade the fossil viewing area (originally created in 1970) in Victoria Fossil Cave. The paper outlined the thinking and processes behind the redevelopment of the viewing area, difficulties and how they were overcome and thinking behind the design and materials used. Steve was followed by Allan Griffin and Peter Austen with *The Evolution of Management Models at Jenolan Caves – The Next Stage*. This paper presented the results of recent work looking at the future management structure of Jenolan Caves and examined two options; either of which might serve as the Jenolan business model for the short to medium term. The final paper of this session was from Nic Haygarth and Arthur Clarke (delivered by Nic), a most interesting and entertaining look at the 'wild days' of the Tasmanian Caverneering Club – *White Knuckles in the Underworld*.

After morning tea, ACKMA Life Member Greg Martin took over as Chairman for the Fourth Paper Session, and introduced Travis Cross to speak on *Monitoring and Management in the Waitomo Glowworm Cave* – another fascinating offering. The final paper for the day was another offering from Sasa Kennedy entitled *Adventure Activities as a Tool for Management*, in which she looked at a range of commercial adventure activities which are suited to karst environments and discussed how they can be used to encourage visitors' understanding and support of management decisions.

The afternoon field trip was to the Jewel Cave area, via Cape Leeuwin to visit its wonderful seaside tufa banks. Jewel Cave is one of Australia's most heavily decorated, and once contained a great deal of water – now gone with the area's sinking water table,

sadly. The tracking infrastructure in the cave is good, but the lighting is a little tired. The Jewel Cave Precinct is about to have over \$3 million spent on it, to re-light the cave, move the car park away from the cave entrance area, and create a new Visitor's Centre. After the cave tour, with Rauleugh Webb as chair, we had an on-site session of one paper, delivered by Lindsay Hatcher on the *Jewel Cave Re-development*. He answered many questions, and attendees poured over many maps and diagrams of this exciting project, for which work is imminently to commence. A few attendees also visited Moondyne Cave, a former show cave close to Jewel which has, in more recent years, been used as an adventure tour – although no longer – the result of difficulties with perennial carbon dioxide in the cave.

After Jewel Cave, attendees were bussed to the nearby 'Explorus' operation – an adventure camp for children, where we viewed its treetop infrastructure and were favoured by a talk. It was most interesting, and our President did endeavour to ascend the high altitude obstacle course, with little success. Back in Margaret River, we were taken to DEC's *Wharneckliffe Eco Discovery Centre* for the evening meal, followed by much mirth and singing around a campfire, attended by ACKMA musicians Dr John Watson on guitar and Geoff Kell on mandolin. We also enjoyed the 'dance of the seven veils' by Mary McCabe! In between this glee, the ACKMA Committee met, and dwelt upon several mundane administrative matters, as is its wont. By our President's invitation, the meeting was also attended by Brian Clark to 'thrash out' details for ACKMA's visit to Mulu Caves next year, and by Hein Gerstner, who put forward a proposal for ACKMA to hold its Annual General Meeting at Cango Caves in South Africa in May 2012. The Committee unanimously resolved to support this offer, and to put the matter to the ACKMA AGM (successfully!) the next day. Another (very!) late night was had back at the Tourist Park, where most conference attendees were accommodated, especially in the Steve Bourne and Brian Clark rooms...



Our President, Steve Bourne, characteristically amuses the ladies – on this occasion Ann Augusteyn (centre) and Dr Claire Baker.

'Light-fingered' Rauleigh Webb attempts to 'flicht' a bat from the Ngilgi Cave Visitors Centre



Day Four – Wednesday 6 May

Wednesday dawned, although not well for some, particularly the aforementioned, about whom loud noises were ill-advised. After breakfast, it was straight into the 2009 ACKMA Annual General Meeting. The current committee were re-elected for a further year, save that Anne Wood became Australian Vice President upon the retirement of Rolan Eberhard as such, and Tony Culberg came in as Conference Convenor. Unfortunately, Tony and his wife Pat, who were registered for the Conference, had to pull out about week beforehand, due to a family illness.

The Committee members' Annual Reports were presented and taken as read, as was the Treasurer's Report. Happily, ACKMA is in a relatively sound financial position, and no increase in membership fees was put forward. Incidentally, the Committee Reports, and several other Conference papers, are on the 'Members Only' Section of the ACKMA Web Site, if non-attending members wish to peruse them. Following a submission from New Zealand, the meeting resolved to grant the 2013 (20th) ACKMA Conference to Waitomo Caves. The AGM also appointed Miles Pierce as ACKMA Public Officer, vice Elyer Hamilton-Smith, retired.

To the delight of all present, Elyer Hamilton Smith was awarded, by sustained acclamation, ACKMA's *Outstanding Contribution to Cave and Karst Management and Conservation Award*, after Steve Bourne read out his citation. Rauleigh Webb was elected a Life Member of ACKMA with a standing ovation, and Rauleigh, quite overcome, responded (but only just!). Ken Grimes and Anne Wood were elected as Fellows, also by acclamation, and both responded with great modesty to their most merited awards. Finally, Dan Cove received the *President's Award* for the best article/paper in the ACKMA Journal (2007-09). Brian Clark then gave a comprehensive presentation on the ACKMA AGM 'week' at Mulu scheduled for late April next year. Finally, all members observed a period of silence in

the memory of the late ACKMA Life Member, Roy Skinner.

After a most successful AGM, and morning tea, it was onto Paper Session Six, with Deborah Carden as chair. First up was Dr John Watson with his most important paper – *Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) Draft Caves and Karst Policy*. The presentation provided an update of progress with the draft policy, an indication of some of the major strategies proposed and an outline of the steps required for its finalization towards release for more general public comment. The next paper, by Ross and Jay Anderson, was *Urbanisation and Karst Systems – living with karst in Western Australia*. This offering noted that urban development and its associated impacts is one of the major karst management issues within south-west Western Australia. The paper considered the key associated issues and options for the future. The next paper, by Ross Anderson, considered the *Woodvale Swimming Pool Collapse* whereupon a backyard swimming pool at the rear of a residential property in the Yanchep karst collapsed in to a cavity beneath it in March 2007. The story was fascinating, as was the sorry response by government agencies. The final paper of this session was *Filling the Gap – the role of a non-government karst conservation organisation in Australia*, by Jay Anderson and Alan Briggs, which outlined the development of a new conservation group in Western Australia – 'The Caves and Karst Conservation Foundation' – set up under the WA National Trust, specifically to protect and conserve caves and karst areas. Hopefully, its future will be great indeed!



Mary McCabe does the dance of the seven veils

The afternoon was designated as 'time out', with many attendees doing a winery tour, or browsing in Margaret River township. Some went canoeing (!), while about 25 attended a *Planning and Urbanisation in Karst Lands Workshop* at the *Wharnecliffe Eco Discovery Centre*. I attended the workshop, which was excellent. A number of attendees were planners and other local government officials, and it was great opportunity to expose them to cave and karst issues – in some cases probably for the first time. A number of brief papers

were presented, all of which were good stuff! My only criticism is that there were too many presentations, and not enough workshoping. Unfortunately, the time available for discussion, in what was an (overly) packed program, was very minimal. Nonetheless, it was a very worthwhile session.

Wednesday evening saw us dine at Goodfellas Pizza Restaurant in Margaret River. Given the 'green gills' of the 'usual suspects' after three straight nights of imbibing, the normal late night festivities were not nearly as late as usual...



Lisa King attempts to massage her way into the affections of Kent Henderson (poor misguided girl)

Day Five – Thursday 7 May

Thursday rose bright and sunny (as did every day during the Conference – we were most blessed with the weather!). Dr. Grant Gartrell chaired the Seventh Paper Session, and first up introduced Greg Martin, who explained the *Waitomo Glowworm Caves Facilities Development*. As most will be aware, the infrastructure at the Glowworm Cave burnt down in a horrific fire a couple of years ago, and the paper focused on the plans for its redevelopment. Construction has commenced, and it is expected to be open by February next year.

The second paper of the session was from Dennis Williamson, who gave us an exposition on *The Nullarbor Karst System – managing an iconic dryland landscape of world significance via remote control?* He gave us a good overview of the area, and noted that recently prepared Interim Management Guidelines provide a 'remote control' framework for management of the area's resources and various land use threats. He also noted that dryness, remoteness and current economic barrenness seem to conspire against appropriate levels of protection, research and management of this karst area of world significance. Next on the agenda was one of our international visitors, Hein Gerstner, with *Cango Caves – A Progress Report*. This wonderful paper is published elsewhere in this Journal. Finally, we were favoured by Dan Cove and David Head's *Synergy driving innovation in Cave Lighting*. This paper dealt with the enormous advances made

in recent years in the field of cave lighting, most importantly the evolution of high intensity LEDs. The recent experience of relighting the *Orient Cave* at Jenolan Caves was cited, highlighting the necessity of collaborative efforts.

After morning tea, Paper Session Eight got underway, chaired by Dan Cove. The initial presenter was new ACKMA Life Member, Rauleigh Webb, who had by now recovered his composure after the 'shock' of his award the previous day! His paper, *The Winds of Change – a Karst Management Database*, was very well received. It outlined the design of the database and how it would be built to simplify a cave manager's job in collecting the varied data that is required to make informed decisions about the caves and karst features they manage. Impressive stuff.

The second paper was delivered by Brian Combley, entitled: *A Snapshot and History of the Leeuwin Ridge*. He provided a series of photographs of the area and its caves, both historic and current, with a broad overview of historical events affecting the Leeuwin Ridge Karst Area. The final offering of this session was another paper from Dennis Williamson, this time on *Cape Range and Ningaloo Reef: a semi-arid Karst and Coastal Area unlike any other*. Cape Range is one of Australia's most important karst areas, with over 700 caves and unique cave fauna.



Lisa King (left) and Sasa Kennedy discuss their visit to Mulu Caves next year with Bian Rumei

The afternoon saw a field trip to Ngilgi Cave near Yallingup, plus a trip to the nearby Meekadorabee Cave. I had been in Ngilgi Cave many times before. It is, without doubt, a highly decorated cave of great quality. Unfortunately, over the years, infrastructure development had been haphazard, with no longer term planning used. As a result, its infrastructure is something of a hotchpotch, with successive managers doing different things as and when funding (invariably limited) became available. The lighting in the cave, in particular, is now quite tired. Despite my many visits to the area over the years, I had never been to Meekadorabee Cave before. A very pleasant walk gets you to the cave entrances – front and rear – with a good view at both ends of its interesting geology/hydrology.

Steve Bourne (left), Andy Spate (centre) and David Summers (right) field questions at a paper session



The Thursday evening meal was again at the *Wharnecliffe Eco Discovery Centre*. It featured a raffle in aid of the ACKMA Life Member's Fund – raising quite a few hundred dollars. Indeed, the proceeds from the bar (always heavy at an ACKMA Conference!) were also donated to the Fund, which has swelled quite considerably as a result. For the benefit of newer members, the Life Members Fund is used to assist students in cave and karst management or karst science, or selected cave/karst employees from a regional country, to attend an ACKMA Conference.

Day Six – Friday 8 May

Our last day – phew! The thing about ACKMA Conferences is, without doubt, how quickly they come and go. A certain past president of ACKMA once famously said 'Life is but one ACKMA Conference to the next!' ...and once one arrives, it is over in a flash!

Prior to the start of the Ninth Paper Session, chaired by Peter Wood, we were favoured with a presentation by Andy Spate, ACKMA's International Relations Officer, on coming events in 2010. These are listed elsewhere in the Journal. The first paper of the session was by Lisa King and Steve Bourne, presented by Lisa, and entitled: *Visitor Monitoring Needs within the Australian Fossil Mammal Sites World Heritage Area – Potential Applications for other Protected Areas*. Lisa is a PhD student from North Queensland, and was funded to the Conference through the ACKMA Life Member's Fund. This excellent paper dealt with the thesis that systematic visitor monitoring programs should be implemented across the Australian Fossil Mammal sites to collect comprehensive baseline data for future planning and management purposes.

Dr Brendon Knott followed with his fascinating paper – *When to Turn the Tap Off*. In it he reviewed the fauna, and the history of the remediation, in Western Australia karst aquifers, notably at Yancheep. He suggested that it is all futile given that it is not possible to predict reliably future climate of the region. The last paper of the session was presented by Andy Spate – *Climate Change and*

Karst, in which he explored some of the impacts of climatic factor change on karst processes.

After morning tea, the tenth, and final, paper session was held, chaired by Andy Spate. Peter Buzzacott, of the Cave Divers Association of Australia (CDAA) commenced with: *The Cave Divers Association of Australia – Linking Land Owners to End-Users*. He outlined the history of the Association and its benefits to managers. The second paper, and penultimate of the Conference, was *Bioluminescence in cave glow-worms: signs of altered circadian rhythmicity* by Dr David Merritt and Arthur Clarke, presented by David. While 'scientific', it was couched in clear language, and gave all present a good understanding of current glowworm research. A truly fascinating paper. The final paper of the session, and of the Conference, was by the International Show Caves Association (ISCA) President, David Summers – *The Need for International Collaboration to Achieve Sustainable Development in Show Caves*. This paper is printed elsewhere in this Journal. It was a pleasure to have David at the Conference, and to further cement the already warm ACKMA-ISCA relationship.



Dr John Watson delivers his poem at the Conference Dinner

Friday afternoon saw a repeat of Monday's field trip program – either a trip to Lake and Mammoth Caves, or Calgardup/Giants/Golgotha Caves. As I had done the former on Monday so I now went for the latter, starting with Calgardup. This DEC-managed cave (specifically by our Conference Convenor, Anne Wood) is a former 'old' show cave, which saw significant damage early last century. It has been re-opened for some years now as a self-guided cave. It has complete (excellent quality) infrastructure, but no lighting – visitors are equipped with helmets and lights. Despite the historical damage, it remains a cave of considerable beauty, and I enjoyed visiting it once again.

After Calgardup, I visited Golgotha. I had last been in this cave only in January, but I wanted to return to view the demonstration LED lighting temporarily installed in the cave by David Head and David Rowling. It was great! What is now achievable with LEDs is awesome indeed!

Attendees at the Wednesday afternoon workshop



And so, it was back to Margaret River for the grand finale of the Conference – the famed ACKMA Conference Dinner! Always a marvelous occasion, this was no exception. A traditionally ‘dress up’ affair, it was held at the All Seasons Motel in Margaret River. And what an event – the food, the company, Rauleigh Webb in his yellow suit, and Brian Clark as Master of Ceremonies! Brian had gathered together ‘quotes’ of various attendees (dubbed in by others) of their ‘faux pas’ during the week – he had many, which he whittled down to about ten, all of which were read out with considerable hilarity. Attendees then ‘voted’ on each, with Dr. Julia James gaining the dubious distinction of being the ‘winner’.



Brian Clark in full swing at the Conference Dinner

We were subjected to many other gems during the evening, including a rousing poem by Dr John Watson, and an incredible poem of parody by Candace Williams, in which she managed to name and shame most of the ACKMA glitterati. It was hilarious, even if yours truly got more than his fair share of attention! The night ended with the infamous Conference Awards, which I was delighted to present once again. Several ‘minor’ awards were bestowed with all our international visitors receiving a ‘prize’. Finally, after great anticipation (?), the two major awards were announced. The Dr. Kevin Kiernan Perpetual Award for gluttony (a pink toy pig) went to Dr. Grant Gartrell, while the Brett Dalzell Perpetual Drinking Award (pink rabbit ears)

was well and truly won by Dr. Claire Baker, beating off strong competition from many, including Steve Bourne, Brian Clark, Nick Heath and (of course) Brett Dalzell himself!

What a night, and what a Conference!! Thus, this fabulous family gathering came to end. I recall David Summers being somewhat perplexed as to why ACKMA was such a successful organization – he was a bit amazed as to how we could be such a ‘broad church’ of managers, cave guides, cavers, scientists as well as ordinary people interested in caves and karst – which he described as unique in the world. David, that is our secret!



Candace Williams (left), ACKMA poet laureate, with Dr. Claire Baker sporting her rabbit ears, at the Conference Dinner

As stunningly successful as the Conference was, it doesn’t just happen. Our greatest thanks go to our Conference Convenor the wonderful Anne Wood who, like all her predecessors, aged considerably from the experience! She was greatly assisted by her Conference Organising Committee – Jay and Ross Anderson, Jayme Hatcher, Renee Mouritz, Tracey Robins, Neil Taylor, Rauleigh Webb, Candace Williams and Peter Wood. They have our sincere thanks. But many others played their part, including Francine Burton, the CEO of AMRTA, and her staff, particularly Lindsay Hatcher; Simon Taylor, the manager of Ngilgi Cave and his staff; Ann Wood’s staff and colleagues at the Department of Environment and Conservation; the wonderful ladies of the Bunbury Pathfinders Club who prepared our breakfast each morning; Simon Hanson, who hosted us at *Explorus*; Lex Bastian, Rob Susac, Rob Foulds and Alison Prichard who looked after us on the Pre-Conference Day at Yanchep; Rob Klok who set up the Conference Hall each morning; Carolina Paice who tended to the sound system; Rauleigh Webb and Ross Anderson (with considerable help from Patrick Nykiel!) who looked after the AV; Rob Foulds, Brian Combley and Mike Winn who facilitated Post Conference Caving; Rauleigh Webb and Ken Grimes who prepared the Conference Field Guide, and finally our wonderfully friendly and helpful bus drivers, Steve and Neville from Shepherdson Transport. Our most sincere gratitude to them all.

So, see you all at Mulu next year, and Tasmania in 2011!!