

The Pre-Conference Study Tour Attendees at Yanchep National Park



THE PRE-CONFERENCE STUDY TOUR

– Kent Henderson

Lex Bastian addressing attendees



On Saturday 2 May 2009 about 25 souls, destined to travel to Margaret River the following day for the start of the 18th ACKMA Conference, were picked up in central Perth at a brisk 7.30am (!) to be bussed about one hour north to Yanchep National Park. This one-day Pre-Conference Study Tour had been organised by Jay and Ross Anderson, and it was Jay who acted as our main guide for the day.

En route, we drove past a number of karst features before arriving at Yanchep NP. Our first point of call was the Yanchep Inn, where we had an introductory talk on the caves, karst and general geology of the area by Lex Bastian, OAM. Lex, who has been caving at Yanchep for many decades, is a noted expert on the area, and the discoverer of many of its caves. His talk was most interesting and was followed by many questions and rousing applause.

After morning tea we viewed, and had interpreted by Rob Susac, two excellent models expounding the local karst system and its hydrology. The Yanchep karst sits on a very large (and now significantly depleted) aquifer, of which more shortly.

Our first cave visit followed – to Cabaret Cave. It is somewhat difficult to describe... Cabaret started its 'life' as a show cave about one hundred years ago, and then fell into disuse. It largely lacks decoration today – like many early-discovered caves in the area it was vandalized of many of its speleothems through early unregulated tourism. Subsequently it was heavily modified, to say the least, with a number of pillars to 'support' the roof (clearly by people with zero knowledge of karst).



'Roof supporting' columns in Crystal Cave



The 'earthquake shelter' – Crystal Cave



A glass slide over a roof fissure in Crystal Cave, on basis it will crack/break if there is any ground movement. There are several in the cave, and have been for many years. No cracking yet....

Today, it is used as a function centre, mostly for wedding receptions! Indeed, I understand that such is its popularity that it is usually booked out every Friday and Saturday night (at least) over a year in advance! The cave has its own kitchen, bar, dance floor... Normally, I'd say 'Oh dear', just before

having a pink fit. However, given this cave's long (albeit unfortunate) history, I suppose even a cave purist like me can live with it. It would, undoubtedly, be a most pleasant wedding experience, and clearly a vast number of people agree! I have visited this cave previously on more than one occasion, but never before seen it set up for a wedding as it was this time. Aesthetically pleasing though it sort of was, it was still, to me, a bit eerie...

After Cabaret Cave we did a walk-through the nearby Boomerang Gorge – the *Dwerta Mia Walk Trail* – which was wonderful! This relatively-long gorge is, in fact, an ancient collapsed cave. It was fascinating, and very picturesque.



Rob Susac interpreting a karst system model

Prior to lunch, it was off to visit Yanchep's only current show cave. I last saw Crystal Cave about seven years ago, and I was interested to see if any improvements had occurred in the interim. I was bitterly disappointed. Crystal is, very sadly, the 'worst' tourist cave in Australia – I refuse to mince words, I'm sorry. Its infrastructure is appalling – third world, I'm afraid. The first problem is that, historically, its development has been overseen by mining engineers, who have absolutely zero karst knowledge. Hence, it has been treated as a 'mine'.



Catherine Sellars viewing interpretation signage on the visitor's shelter at Crystal Cave

Travis Cross viewing a 'roof supporting column' in Crystal Cave



Throughout the cave there are a large number of wooden or concrete pillars 'supporting the roof so it won't collapse'. Oh dear... They are, of course, a huge eyesore, and absolutely and totally unnecessary. But there is worse. The cave is the repository of an unspeakably appalling 'earthquake shelter', consisting of a corrugated iron tunnel overlaid with tons of rock – again impressed on the cave by the said karst-ignorant mining engineers. Absolutely shocking.



Attendees in the rear chamber of Yonderup Cave

I have been in innumerable show caves around the world (more than a few of which are very ordinary...) and this is without doubt the worst infrastructure I

have ever seen. And the tracking and lighting? 1950s (?), tired, outdated, and well below modern Australian (or even international) standards.

But there is worse still. How do you waste (reportedly) about \$3 million? Answer – try to artificially re-charge a cave in karst with a significantly lowered water table.

As I noted above, the Yanchep area karst possesses a very large aquifer, the water table of which has progressively been lowered by being drawn down over many years to supply Perth with drinking water and feral trees (notably pines) planted above – combined with the effects of climate change and significantly less rainfall over the last few decades.

Formerly Crystal Cave (and many wild caves in the area) possessed a number of lakes, ponds and streams – the home of significant stygofauna. As the water table fell, so the water dried up in the caves.

What to do? As anybody with even a basic knowledge of karst processes would know nothing can be done, effectively, unless there is a general and natural re-charge of the aquifer (not likely, unless the population of Perth goes very thirsty). The only other 'solution' is to concrete the base of the pools. Yes, well...



A 'roof supporting' structure in Yonderup Cave. The 'idea' is that rocks fill the inside of the wooden structure, thus holding up the ceiling. There are several in the cave, none of which is full of rocks – thus defeating their (highly dubious) purpose...

Lex Bastian at the entrance of Mambibby Cave



So, the powers-that-be decided, nobly, that the now *critically-endangered* stygofauna must be saved, so every effort was made to artificially re-charge Crystal Cave. (I will add that, unless the aquifer is completely exhausted – unlikely – the stygofauna will most probably survive therein. Undoubtedly the caves have been dry before over the millennia...). Strangely (!?), all the water pumped in quickly sank to the lowered water table, leaving the cave dry once again. One effort, evidently, involved pumping in impure water, with significant pollution resulting. So, about \$3 million later, we still have no water in the cave to speak of. Sigh...

For a lot less than \$3 million, one could easily have made Crystal a world-class show cave – but barely a dollar has been spent in living memory upgrading its appallingly tired infrastructure. Yet, the above-ground infrastructure in the National Park – roads, lawns, buildings, car parks, koala sanctuary, etc, etc, is first class – massive amounts of money have

been spent there. And the money spent in the show cave, its greatest asset? Close to zero. Someone should be ‘shot at dawn without a trial’.

After lunch, most attendees split into groups to visit various former show caves. I first visited Yonderup Cave, which is located quite close to Crystal Cave. Despite some historical damage, it is in relatively good condition, and the rear section is well decorated. It is currently used, occasionally, as an ‘adventure cave’ by school groups, and there is ‘talk’ of opening it as a second show cave.

In my view, the cave lends itself to this use. There is an excellent path to Yonderup, and power is at the entrance. The tracking in the cave could be brought up to speed without too much effort – in short I suspect the project would be far from expensive, although given the history of the lack of funds spent on Crystal Cave, I do not suggest we hold our breath.

The other cave I visited was Mambibby Cave, again a former show cave. This cave has been totally trashed historically, with virtually every speleothem souvenired. A tragedy. As much as I lamented the fate of the cave, I did enjoy the experience of touring it with Lex Bastian; his knowledge of the area is great and his enthusiasm quite infectious!

So, it was onto the bus and back to Perth, to get psychologically-prepared for the trip to Margaret River the next day. MANY thanks to Jay and Ross Anderson, Lex Bastian, Rob Susac, and Rob Foulds for all their organisation and interpretation on the day, and especially our thanks go to Alison Prichard and her staff at Yanchep for all their organization, help and assistance. It was most appreciated.



Cabaret Cave set up for a wedding reception