

EDITOR'S NOTE: Two members who attended the Post Conference Study Tour – John Brush and Kirsty Dixon – were kind enough to write articles on the event. Their musings follow:

THE POST-CONFERENCE STUDY TOUR

18th ACKMA Conference 2009 – Margaret River

Kirsty Dixon writes:

Have you ever had one of those moments when you realise that no matter how good the experience you have had – you still need more? Those were obviously the feelings that overcame a select group of ACKMA delegates who chose to participate on the post-conference trip to see a few more sights (and caves) in the Leeuwin-Naturaliste area.

After a relaxed start to the day (well the conference dinner was good and celebrations for some did go into the wee small hours of the morning!!!), twelve of us headed down to Glenbrook to our accommodation in a peaceful bush setting with a large and very well equipped kitchen and a big friendly communal eating and relaxing area. Ross and Jay had done a great job of coming up with various options for activities to suit the experience and energy levels of everyone in the group, so there was always something to do. After settling in and getting some lunch organised the group divided into two, with the first group going to Strong's Cave to have a look at the reputed longest straw amongst other things (yes I know – another one, I think that perhaps there needs to be a bit more definition of that term). All involved said that it was very interesting and enjoyable. The second group took a more leisurely stroll through the bush to have a look at Crystal Cave, which was also enjoyed by all participants.



Professor Grimsely assists Ms McCabe as she descends from On High. Photo: Kirsty Dixon.

Meals were self catering and everyone pitched in to either help prepare and cook or clean up afterwards, so with much merriment and goodwill, along with a few mood-enhancing beverages, we all went off to bed tired but happy.

Day two saw us spoiled for choice. Those with a more adventurous bent set off to tackle Kudjal Yolgah in the morning, while those who preferred a more sedate past time chose to do a section of

the coast to coast walk to have a look at some of the huge Blackboys (*Xanthorhea* spp. if we are being politically correct!)



Deb Carden contemplating the end of another fantastic ACKMA field trip. Photo: Kirsty Dixon.

We all met up for lunch and then again split up for afternoon activities. Ross had to leave to go home and begin to be a normal person again ready for Monday morning, but Jay was able to stay and keep us organised enough to get through the afternoon, when she also had to leave. Andy took John, Marjorie and Cath back to Jewel Cave as they had missed it before and the rest of us went to investigate Ruddock's Cave for the afternoon.

After fighting our way through dense jungle and fighting off a swarm of killer bees – well maybe I exaggerate a trifle! – we had a lovely, very dirty crawl through the cave because to our delight there was actually water on the floor. Some of us went up to have a look at the upper gallery which had some very nice formations, but discovered that getting down was not quite as easy as getting up. Luckily help was at hand!

We all met up again and did a little sightseeing on the way back to our accommodation, taking time to appreciate the rugged beauty of the coastline in that area.

Another pleasant evening was spent in conversation, culinary delights and reminiscences. With no leadership things were a bit interesting as to what the plan was for the following day, but luckily Jay had left us a set of instructions so we were all soon clear and went off to bed happy little vegemites.

It rained a few times in the night but we awoke to a beautiful sunny day once again, so after breakfast we headed off to meet Mike Longman, who had very kindly offered to give up his day off

to be our guide. We went and investigated Quinnup Lake Cave in the morning, investigating several different chambers and even finding several clusters of roosting bats, which was very exciting (well I thought it was anyway!) We then went back and had lunch in the grounds next to Caves House.

It was gloriously sunny and everyone was finally getting in to wind-down mode so we decided that a cruisy afternoon was in order.

Those who were still interested did a trip to Terrible Cave – although none of us could figure out why it got that name, and then we all did some final sightseeing around the coastal areas

before heading back to meet Anne Wood for a very enjoyable dinner. The whole time was fantastic and everyone greatly enjoyed themselves. Huge thanks must go to Jay and Ross for all their time and effort in organising such a varied and interesting program, and finding us such a perfect place to stay.

In closing, I think the whole spirit of the post-conference trip can be summed up in a comment from Ken Grimes, after emerging from an alternate exit than everyone else had used – ‘I was just following the girl in front. I was mesmerised!’ I think the whole trip had a mesmerising effect on all of us and it really added the final icing to the conference cake.

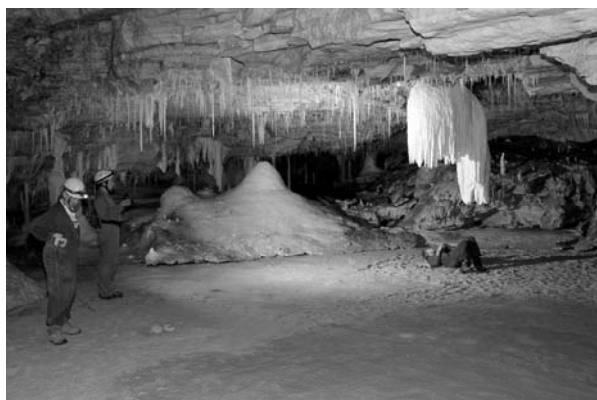
John Brush writes:

The (now dry) stream passage in Strongs Cave. Note the Precambrian gneiss (arrowed) sitting beneath the dune limestone walls and roof.

Photo: John Brush.



The list of options for the Margaret River post conference study tour appeared to be almost endless. Did we want to study the local geology, wines, cave life, fauna and flora or caves? Visit wineries? Did we want active or energetic cave trips? Was our preference to abseil or to climb a ladder? Rest or relax? A touristy look at the area, perhaps? Almost anything seemed possible as Ross Anderson sought guidance on how to plan the three day trip.

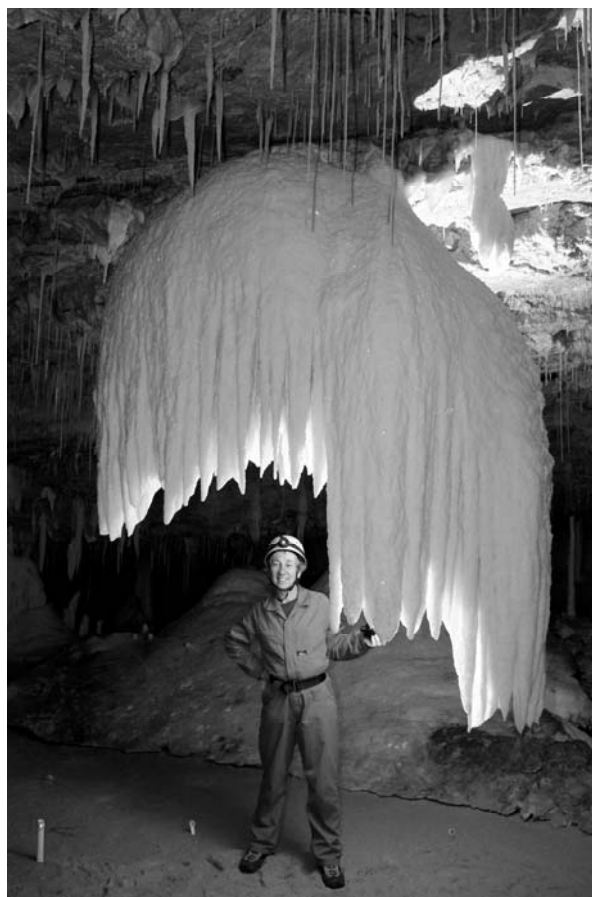


Boredom sets in (and Deb falls asleep?) as the photographer records yet another scene in Strongs Cave. Photo: John Brush.

As it turned out, the select group of nine visiting delegates (Deborah Carden, Mary McCabe, Catherine Sellars, Kirsty Dixon, Marjorie Coggan,

Phil Wood, Ken Grimes, Andy Spate and John Brush) took on bit of almost everything on offer, as we were guided around by the locals (Ross and Jay Anderson, Rob Foulds and Mike Longman). Andy even explored the inner recesses of his laptop in an attempt to finish off yet another report. But that is another story.

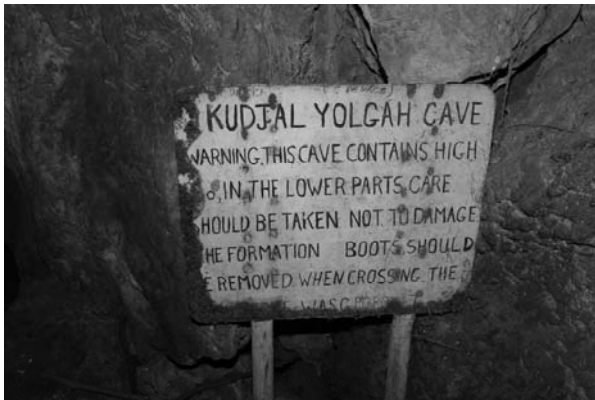
The study tour swung into action as soon as we'd said our goodbyes to other delegates as they left Margaret River for home or further travels. The first task for our enthusiastic little group was to cram ourselves and our gear, along with a mountain of food, into vehicles for the short trip to Glenbrook Lodge. This comfortable retreat on the outskirts of Margaret River was to be our base for the next three days.



The Judges Wig, a well known feature in Strongs Cave. Photo: John Brush.



Above: Fibrous tree roots in Kudjal Yolgah Cave.
Below: Rusting sign in Kudjal Yolgah.
Photos: John Brush.



Decisions, decisions. Walk, cave or stare vacantly into a laptop. Those seemed to be the options on offer for the first afternoon. Several chose the walk while most of the rest of us opted for a visit to Strongs Cave.

The entrance to Strongs is in a collapsed doline set amongst the giant Karri trees of the Boranup Forest in the Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park. The cave is well known for its spectacular decoration, large tree roots and extensive root mats. Access is controlled by the WA Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) by means of a restricted access permit system and double gates at the entrance.



Quininup Lake Cave, entrance.
Photo: John Brush.

After the gates and short entrance pitch, the passage quickly descends to a streamway. In places the streamway is floored with Pre-Cambrian gneiss while the walls and roof are in

Quaternary calcarenite. There is the best part of a billion years difference in age between the walls and the floor. You don't see that every day, not in the eastern states, anyway.

Until recently, the streamway was active, as it was in fact when I last visited the cave in 1979. But alas, the stream has become a victim of falling ground water levels. At the time of our visit, the water level was about a metre below the cave floor, according to the reading on a depth gauge sunk into the cave floor.

Towards dusk, everyone returned to Glenbrook where there were opportunities to study some local wines and cheeses. Later, several delegates displayed their culinary and washing-up skills.

Next morning the range of options on offer included a walk around the grass tree track, a cave visit or more laptop gazing. The cave team drove to the Boranup Forest and walked across a valley to Kudjal Yolgah.

This is a relatively short cave with breakdown floored chambers, a dry streamway, some fine decoration and a reputation for high levels of CO₂. The party headed into the eastern section and went 'downstream'.

In lower parts of the cave, some heavy breathing suggested elevated CO₂, but Cath, our self-appointed canary, never once fell off the perch. We decided not to enter the final 50m of highly decorated passage and so returned to the surface and then drove to Calgardup Cave for lunch.



Despite the vandalism, some attractive decoration remains in Quininup Lake Cave.
Photo: John Brush.

After lunch, most of the team dropped into Calgardup Cave, but Ken went for a walk and Cath, Marj and John headed for Augusta Jewel Cave where they tried to act like ordinary tourists. This was a bit like an undercover trip and all was going well until Cath asked a couple of probing questions which prompted our guide to ask 'are you ACKMA delegates'? Cover blown!

Feeling a little chastened we hung back towards the rear of the group, which unfortunately served only to demonstrate the sort of things visitors get up to at the tail end of a large group when the guide is out of sight. That evening there was time for further in depth studies of the fine local produce.

The final day of the study trip saw everyone head north towards Yallingup, guided by Rob Foulds. We also met up with another local caver, Mike Longman, who showed us into Quininup Lake Cave. Here, several entrances in a short section of cliff lead to two spacious chambers and some tortuous crawls. To our surprise we also encountered a few shallow puddles, which appear to be what passes for a cave stream in the southwest these days. One of the chambers has extensive decoration, albeit dry and partly vandalised and in places there are remnants of a marked trail around the chamber. The cave is just 10 or 15 minutes walk from a car park and with no natural barriers, it is hardly surprising that it has been hammered. A vandalised sign near the main entrance probably once set out the access provisions, but it is now illegible and it would seem a good idea to either replace or remove it.



Ken Grimes inspecting mineral sand layers in Terrible Cave. Photo: John Brush.

After leaving the Quininup Lake area, we drove to Yallingup Caves House and had lunch on the lawns. Afterwards, Mike suggested we wander across the valley to Terrible Cave and true to his word we discovered the cave was actually not terrible at all. In fact with bands of minerals sands (ilmenite and rutile) exposed in the cave walls, it was really quite an interesting cave.

Later we had a brief look at the dramatic exposure of aeolian calcarenite in cliffs at Bunker Bay near Cape Naturaliste and finished up with a scramble over the Precambrian gneiss at Canal Rocks. Here, preferential erosion along joint lines has created a series of intersecting channels through which the pounding surf continues to surge.

From a cave management perspective, the study tour provided some interesting insights. For Strongs Cave, the restricted access arrangements, substantial double gates at the entrance and clearly marked track have undoubtedly protected the spectacular decoration and have probably prevented a lot of trampling of tree roots along the sandy passages, but it was disappointing to see a few boot prints on the wrong side of the track barriers.

Similar access controls appear to be working in Kudjal Yolgah, however the ancient sign (apparently predating DEC involvement) is in need of replacement.



Members of the study team in Terrible Cave. Photo: John Brush.

The contrast between the above two gated caves and Quininup Lake Cave is startling. Easy access, an absence of natural or man made entry barriers and perhaps wide spread local knowledge of the cave's location have resulted in irreversible visitor impacts. The marked track around the decorated chamber needs major repair work, but in reality, it is debatable whether a marked route in a cave with no other apparent access controls would be really effective.



Mary McCabe on the grass tree track. Photo: Kirsty Dixon.

Finally, a word or two of thanks. The study trip would not have been possible without a lot of hard work by some of our Western Australian colleagues. On behalf of all the trip participants, I would like to thank Jay, Ross, Rob and Mike for organising the trip and expertly guiding us around the area and into the caves.

We must also extend a special thanks to Anne Wood and her team for approving access into the caves we visited.