

DIG THE TROPIC: A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

– Ann Augusteyn

It's not what you look at that matters, its what you see
– Henri David Thoreau, Author and Philosopher

The Dig Site – Capricorn Caves



Introduction

The project, 'Dig the Tropic', was conceived by a sapphire miner and a cave owner. Both operators were passionate about the diversity and wealth of the geotourism products that lay under the surface of the Tropic of Capricorn in Central Queensland. The concept of linking these products in a geotrail from Outback to Reef over 1200 kilometres gained enthusiastic support from Capricorn Regional Tourism Organisation and Tourism Queensland. A successful application for funding was submitted to the Federal Government under the *Australian Tourism Development Program* in September 2007. With the support of sixteen shires, tourism operators, local communities and Visitor Information Centres, Phase One of the project was launched in January 2008. See: <www.digthetropic.com.au>

Project Objectives

The project aims to position the region as a world leader in Geotourism defined as tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place – its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage and the well being of its residents. The project is expected to deliver a range of social and economic benefits including:

- Diversification of economic base from the traditional mining industry
- Improvement of local facilities and amenities
- Collaboration and partnerships between rural communities'

Source: Dig the Tropic ATDP Project

To achieve these objectives the project must deliver:

- 1) An integrated visitor experience supported by services and infrastructure to entice the visitor to spend greater time in drought affected communities located in Central and Outback Queensland.

- 2) Enhanced understanding of the immense geological forces that have taken place over eons of time to produce the current landscape, the underground wealth of water and minerals and the impact of past climate change. Through that understanding grows an appreciation of what we have today and a desire to conserve and protect it for future generations.
- 3) Economic benefits to regional communities particularly those affected by the mining 'boom and bust' syndrome and the ongoing impact of the drought on rural communities.

What is Dig the Tropic?

The trail links sixteen geosites from Boulia, Outback Queensland to the Great Barrier Reef off the Capricorn Coast. The journey unfortunately does not unfold chronologically but it reveals evidence of geological forces from the Devonian era to mankind's footprint on the earth. From limestone caves that were ancient coral reefs 390 million years ago to sunken islands, coral cays and fringing reefs. The journey continues revealing underground treasures from gold at Mt. Morgan to the black gold of the open cut mines of Central Queensland. Thunder eggs of Mt. Hay were formed from the explosions of volcanic plugs and sapphires of the Gemfields formed in weathered basalts that flowed 50 million years ago. Nor must we forget the prehistoric underground water of the Great Artesian basin that has been the lifeblood of Outback communities. Immerse in the warm waters of a mineral spa at Ilfracombe.



Excavation work in the Dig Site.

The trail also documents the evolution of Australia's flora and fauna from the marine burial grounds of platypterigius and kronosaurus of the inland sea at Boulia to the tracks of a dinosaur stampede at Lark Quarry. Fossilised bones of giant sauropods and ornithopods lie buried in cattle paddocks around Winton. Queensland Museum's excavations at Mt. Etna and Capricorn

Caves have revealed bones of thylacoleo marsupial lions, giant wombats and other creatures of the mega fauna era. All of these are now extinct and pose many questions for the future.

The changes in vegetation types indicate adaptation of the flora to periods of aridity in the past. Threatened Species Network recovery programs to save flora from extinction such as the fern *tectaria devesa* at Capricorn Caves are evidence of the impact of ongoing climate change.

Rockscapes are encapsulated in the sandstones of Blackdown Tablelands, Carnarvon Gorge just south of the Tropic of Capricorn, the Great Dividing Range and the vast outback where eroded remnants of a 20 million year old land surface are spectacularly carved into mesas and spires such as the Cawnpore Hills.

At night the vast skies of the Outback stretch across the horizon revealing a timeless skyscape, a display of dazzling light of the Milky Way and beyond.

The importance of Interpretation

The geotourism product and experiences in the region hold little tourism value without the ability to understand and interpret. – Alan Chamberlain, CEO, Capricorn Tourism Organisation.

Dig the Tropic project has become the catalyst for interpretative activity. Interpretative panels have been erected at the sixteen key geosites. Maps and themed fact sheets have been produced for the traveller and special interest groups including educational groups. Visitor Information staff and volunteers have embraced the themes of Dig the Tropic and are proud to reveal the underground secrets of their backyards.

Complementary projects are underway such as the construction of the Australian Age of Dinosaurs Museum at Winton, where the dinosaur bones from the Elliot cattle property are being prepared for identification and display in a breathtaking setting on top of a mesa. The excitement and passion of the local community is contagious and must be preserved and maintained so that travellers may share their stories.

Capricorn Caves are introducing a new cave experience different to the 'walk and talk' style presentation and the physical experience of adventure caving. This geo-tour aims to create a personal journey of discovery hosted by a guide. Refer to Bianca Hagen's article 'Geotourism – The Philosophy of a Tour Guide', which follows below.

Much needs to be done to deliver the geo-stories that abound along the Tropic of Capricorn, that tie in with the local communities and indigenous peoples, to recreate the wonder of what has happened in our world and create a desire to protect and preserve it.

GEOTOURISM – THE PHILOSOPHY OF A TOUR GUIDE

– Bianca Hagen*

Geotourism has long been recognised as a channel through which to educate the general public about the phenomena that is our geological landscape. Recently there has been an increased desire to understand the wonders of our natural environment. Geotourism is a vessel through which to educate and sustain awareness. This creates the potential for increased understanding and respect for the complex and timeless forces which shape our continent.

An article written in the December 2008 ACKMA journal by Professor Elery Hamilton-Smith suggests that 'geotourism is too important to be left to the geologists', however, it is too complex to simply be left open to casual interpretation. As tourism operators, it is our responsibility to convey the wealth of knowledge that learned geologists spend lifetimes accumulating and translate it in such a way that can be understood by visitors. One of the benefits/privileges of being a tourism operator is that you are not expected to present information in an academic form to the general public. Whilst your information must be accurate and correct, you are allowed a little artistic license to get the message across. Tour guides can tailor information to suit the tour of the individual through personal interaction. Guides have the ability to assess the comprehension of the guest and can clarify in situ any questions that may arise.

Tourists inspecting bones at the Dig Site.



The potential here for education is enormous and far reaching. In a single tour, guides can educate people from different cultural, economic and racial backgrounds to understand and appreciate caves. Ultimately, the aim of a tour should be to immerse people in an experience that leaves them feeling well informed as opposed to overwhelmed.

The 'Dig-the-Tropic' project is a wonderful chance to boost awareness of the unique landscape that unfolds across the Tropic of Capricorn, from the Capricorn Coast to the grasslands of Western Queensland. Unfolding along a distance of 1200kms and a history spanning over 400 million

years, the aim of the project is to highlight natural wonders, individual pieces of a complete puzzle in a vast and changing landscape. This is an incentive of Tourism Queensland to encourage people to interactively learn about the fascinating geological history of our continent, transformed by time and climate change into the landscape we know today. From limestone caverns formed by ancient reefs, dinosaur tracks laid down on what is now the ceiling of mine, through the sapphire mines at the Gemfields, fossicking for thunder eggs ejected by erupting volcanoes to the incredible dinosaur discoveries at Winton, visitors have the opportunity to experience each special location and discover the wealth of minerals and fossils embedded along the Tropic of Capricorn.



Fossils from the site being scientifically examined.

In an effort to embrace the theme, we, at Capricorn Caves, are in the process of creating a tour specifically about the geology of our caves. We wish to encourage visitors to actively participate in a journey of discovery that spans 390 million years, explaining the mystery of our cave system and how it has been created. We have developed a specialised tour aimed at educating the public more about the immense forces that have changed the landscape over time. Within the very walls of the cave are small marine fossils dating back to the Devonian era. Inside the Colosseum Cave, a palaeontology dig site (set up by the Queensland Museum) contains a large density of small bones from frogs, bats, rodents and other small marsupials, dating back some 40 000 years. The evidence found within such deposits can give researchers insight into the adaptations of plants and animals over time and indications of how climate has changed in the past. We're aiming a tour at people with an interest in learning more about the natural development of a cave system and how it interconnects with our past and our future.

Opportunities to share knowledge in such a way are only enhanced by training we receive from many different sources. Cathie Plowman's presentation on themed tours inspired us to create a specialised tour with geology as a theme. Mark Essenhigh from the CTIA has provided guides with training in tourism operations, enabling us to hone our skills as interpretive guides and deliver a product specifically designed to cater for the enhancement of visitor enjoyment.

Thanks to Andy Spate and Osborne Armstrong and everyone at the 2008 ACKMA conference for sharing their knowledge and educating us on the

intricacies of cave development. Your knowledge is an invaluable resource for the ensured success of such endeavours.

The challenge for natural resource managers and tourism operators alike is to diligently update and refine tours based on new information. Aspects of a lifetime of study can be condensed into a few hours of training and thus interpreted to the public. One of the side-effects is broadening awareness of our natural environment. People often take in more information when there is no pressure to learn and an interpretative tour should be a sensory experience. We hope that the message visitors take home is that of deeper understanding of the delicate and complex balance that is our cave system. We want visitors to understand the amazing processes at work that create such an environment and to develop a greater appreciation for other natural wonders.



Top – Fossil washing. Bottom – Fossil sifting.

Footnote. 'Dig-the-Tropic' was officially launched by the Hon. Martin Ferguson, Minister for Tourism, at Capricorn Caves on 24 July. The Cathedral Cave was well received as the official venue by those attending, including local politicians and tourism industry personnel. It was followed by an inspection of the Queensland Museum's dig site in the Colosseum Cave.

* tour guide – Capricorn Caves, Queensland.