



2ND GLOBAL GEOTOURISM CONFERENCE

Royal Mulu Resort, Mulu, Sarawak

17-20 April 2010

– John Watson*

Some of you may recall that the *Inaugural Global Geotourism Conference* was held in Fremantle, Western Australia, in October 2008.

It was attended by over 220 delegates from some 36 countries and around 20 ACKMA members and other karst specialists attended. There were several excellent presentations on caves, karst and associated topics at that conference

The *Second Global Geotourism Conference* was held at the Royal Mulu Resort in the four days immediately prior to the ACKMA 2010 AGM ‘week’. Some five ACKMA members attended, two of whom gave excellent plenary addresses (Brian Clark and Lisa King) and two others (Stefan Eberhard and myself) who gave concurrent session papers. Jay Anderson also attended as well as going to, and presenting a talk at, the *International Geoparks Conference* in Langkawi beforehand. Well done to Jay and Ross – the only ones to go to all three meetings back to back!

The Mulu Geotourism Conference was much smaller than the Fremantle one, with around 80 delegates attending from 12 countries. Apart from the ACKMA presence, there were strong contingents from Malaysia, Western Australia and the Sultanate of Oman, including His Excellency the Undersecretary, Ministry of Tourism, and his leading tourism advisers. Oman has made a bid for the *3rd Global Geotourism Conference*, tentatively scheduled for Muscat in November 2011.

As most of the European attendees had been at the Langkawi Geoparks Conference the week before, the Iceland volcanic activity did not (quite) prevent anyone attending, however several delegates had to leave early due to disruption of return travel schedules.

Most of the presentations at the conference were *Powerpoint* shows of existing and proposed geotourism developments in different countries around the world. If you go to search engines like *Google* and enter ‘geotourism’ you will mostly be directed to earlier definitions of geotourism which are really *geographic* and even socio-cultural tourism rather than the stronger focus on *geological* tourism being promoted in the ‘new age’ concepts that have been the focus of the two conferences to date. The current definition of ‘new age’ geotourism includes a strong component of ‘educative interpretation’. I fully support this but I also see a place for geotourists simply to enjoy and appreciate outstanding natural features both above and below ground at their chosen level of interpretation and in their own time – hence my paper on ‘*Simply Being There*’. This seemed to be well received and generated much positive comment afterwards, so I think it was well worth the effort to make the point.

This paper was of course written prior to visiting Mulu and, ‘Wow’, there are so many ‘*Being There*’ places in the Mulu karst – a factor which Brian Clark is also considering for parts of his new

developments at places like the Fast Lane of Lagang Cave – maybe a section of cave where you just sit and experience the pure magnificence and sense of place around you, rather than being pre-occupied with *how* what you are experiencing has evolved over time...did you get this feeling at Deer Cave, especially if you managed to hang back from the large parties and pause a while on your own ?

There were several excellent presentations at the concurrent sessions and I particularly enjoyed these because there was an opportunity to ask questions and to develop some discussion. Unfortunately the plenary sessions had no such opportunity.

For me the highlights were Stefan Eberhard's talk on the impacts of climate change on karst in South West WA and a paper by Chris Grant (UK) on her hierarchical typology of visitors to geosites. The conference field tour of Deer and Lang Caves with Brian Clark was outstanding as well...as some of you may also have experienced during the ACKMA meeting if you scored Brian as guide.

On the down side, I felt that many of the so-called 'innovative' examples of geo-interpretation that were shown in several presentations (including some plenary presentations) were 're-inventing the wheel' by simply re-badging existing interpretation approaches that have been used in protected areas like national parks for several decades...at least in Australia & New Zealand and many other countries.

Nevertheless, this was a valuable small conference which made up for its lack of formal discussion opportunities through the ample time available for networking. This group (like our indefatigable ACKMA Editor the following week) also really got into the local spirit with the cultural dance evenings including the bamboo pole ankle crusher dance and the blow pipe challenge (including His Excellency). The group also had a mass photo taken with the dancers at the end.

Watch out for Al Hoota Cave and the Oman conference in 2011...

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L to R: John Watson, Andrew Hansford & Jay Anderson in the wilds of Mulu.
Photo: Ross Anderson.



Attendees at an interpretive talk in Trader's Cave at Niah – ACKMA AGM 'week'. Photo: Garry Smith.



The Western Australian-resident Attendees at the ACKMA AGM 'Week' 2010. Photo: Ross Anderson.