

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The following letter was sent to Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri Dr George Chan Hong Nam, Deputy Chief Minister and Minister for Tourism, shortly after ACKMA's visit to Mulu in April.

## A LETTER TO SARAWAK

Dear Datuk Patinggi,

I write to report on the very successful Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association (ACKMA) meeting recently held in Sarawak. I would also like to thank you again for your wonderful address to our members at the gala dinner at the Marriott Hotel in Miri. During that address and in the media that followed, you requested feedback on our experiences.

We were hosted by Sarawak Forestry staff on our visit to Niah Caves. The scientific, cultural and aesthetic significance of Niah is well documented and our members appreciated the opportunity to view the cave and the informative address from Mr Haider. The current management of the site to allow the cultural practice of bird nesting, which provides revenue for local communities, while balancing with conservation requirements by limiting the months of collecting is to be commended. Careful management and monitoring will be required to ensure nest collecting remains sustainable for the long term. Bird nesting is a highly skilled practice which could be presented to visitors with demonstrations of climbing poles to reach nests; an experience that would further enhance the appreciation of the site. Of concern at Niah is the amount of litter accumulated in the cave, especially cigarette butts and used batteries. Both of these are unsightly and could impact on important archaeological remains as they leach downwards. A program to clean up this litter, educating bird nesters to ensure they remove their rubbish, and guiding and educating of visitors are measures ACKMA recommends to address this issue. The management of Niah Cave is a complex task and balancing the scientific and cultural requirements with tourism and conservation will ensure Niah retains the values for which it has become world renown.

The majority of our Sarawak meeting was spent at Mulu National Park World Heritage Area, hosted by Mr Brian Clark, past president and life member of our association. For most members it was their first visit, but for a few including me, it was our second time to Mulu. Mulu has continued to develop since my visit in 2006, with advances in cave lighting, and building of new accommodation and a new visitor centre underway. The range of experiences for visitors has been further expanded with the new Tree Top Tower, the "Bat Cam" experience and Lagang's Cave "Fast Lane" tour.

One very important personal observation is the advancement in skills and knowledge of the park's staff. Their presentation and interpretation to park visitors demonstrates a great understanding of their park and a confidence in themselves. This can only be achieved through training programs provided by committed management embraced by equally committed staff. Mulu has interpretation of the very highest level, most befitting for a World Heritage Area and staff and management are to be commended for their

efforts. The quality of the training program is not only reflected in the Mulu staff, but that it is attracting staff from other sites to participate. While ACKMA was on site, four guides from Vietnam were being trained and will utilise their experiences to develop training programs of their own. This cooperation and sharing of experiences raises the profile of Mulu and assists with improving the quality of visitor experiences at all cave sites.

Unlike Niah, the impacts of visitors are not obvious suggesting management strategies at Mulu are more effective. Park presentation is at excellent with very little litter and none observed in any of the caves. Infrastructure is appropriate for the location and well maintained, often in difficult situations. Again, staff and management are to be commended for their pride in their park.

Mulu has been developed to provide a wide range of visitor experiences while retaining a sense of remoteness and ruggedness that visitors are seeking. I understand from your address that a road to Mulu has previously been proposed. In the opinion of ACKMA, this would be detrimental to the park and potentially create a mass tourism experience the park cannot handle.

ACKMA is an association concerned with the sustainable management of caves and karst, and promoting and presenting these to visitors. Our conferences and journals focus on current best practice and sharing new ideas and technologies. Mr Brian Clark has maintained a close association with ACKMA since relocating to Sarawak and has benefitted from this by learning of advances in cave lighting technology. ACKMA members also had the opportunity to learn firsthand from Brian's great work and innovative ideas. Our visit to Sarawak was our first meeting outside Australia and New Zealand and one that fulfilled all the objectives of our association. I thank you again for your interest in ACKMA and advise that the next ACKMA conference will be held in Tasmania, Australia, from 8 May 2011. I hope we will see a number of delegates from Sarawak attending.

Yours sincerely,

Steve Bourne,  
President.



Steve Bourne and Datuk Patinggi in Miri, Sarawak.