

STAMP of APPROVAL

Lorna Charlton

“There are fantastic new interpretive panels out at Cocklebiddy Cave in Western Australia. Honestly, they are the best thing out there ... besides the caves, of course.” Dr Peter Buzzacott

It's very rewarding to receive such praise when you have put in a lot of hours to produce an interpretive product you feel worthy of presenting to the public, especially when it comes from a specialist in the topic and someone who has a passion for the place.

In this case Peter is referring to two large, interpretive panels that were recently installed at Cocklebiddy Cave on the Nullarbor. Peter is a diving scientist and former instructor with wide-ranging interests including diving physiology, research in caves, high-altitude diving, occupational diving and diving epidemiology (injuries and fatalities).

The installation of the panels at Cocklebiddy Cave is the culmination of a lengthy, complex process that is perhaps not readily evident in the panels' brief messages and simple design. Here are some insights into that process, which made this a very special and memorable project.

DESTINATION NULLARBOR

When the opportunity arises to develop interpretive panels for a site on Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) managed estate I start with desktop research to become familiar with the location and its values so that I have an understanding of the site before I make my first visit. Fortunately I had the opportunity to visit Cocklebiddy Cave in 2003 as a tourist several years before the project began. At this time the cave was still open to the public. I had previously crossed the Nullarbor several times by car and train, the sort of trip where your focus is on the endless line of bitumen ahead and the scenery on either side is just a blur, but this time my destination was the Nullarbor.

I spent two glorious weeks exploring homestead ruins, historic wells, the plains and woodlands, the cliffs and whales of the Bight and of course some of the caves. I didn't have the equipment or the experience to enter these caves and so Cocklebiddy was a great opportunity to do so. For a non-caver it was quite an adventure to descend deeply into a cave that has not been developed for tourism – one without artificial lighting, stairs or boardwalks. My lasting impressions are of cool water on my fingertips, the peaceful stillness and utter blackness in that large space, and the small reassuring circle of sunlight in the distance that marked my return route to the cave entrance and the surface. It truly was unlike anything I had ever experienced and worth every step along the steep, boulder-strewn slope that led down to the water's edge.

KEY MESSAGES

My experiences as a tourist on the Nullarbor and in Cocklebiddy Cave were just the beginning of a growing appreciation for this unique landscape. When asked to create interpretive panels for the cave several years later, the challenge then lay, as always, in the ability to convey the wonders of a place in just a few words. To encourage readability, interpretive panels have tight word limits. This means that we avoid unnecessary use of facts and figures, which are easily forgotten, and place greater emphasis on important take away messages. After reading numerous scientific and newspaper articles, attending fascinating talks by Jay Anderson on karst and John Long on the megafauna, and scanning management strategies and stories posted on the internet, it became clear that the Nullarbor karst contained a wealth of stories and values. In a nutshell this is what I discovered ...

Cocklebiddy Cave is one of many thousands of caves that dot the Nullarbor 'karst', the largest arid area of exposed limestone in the world. These caves are significant because they contain unique terrestrial and aquatic communities, endemic species, unusual formations and the fossils of an extinct Australian megafauna. For many thousands of years the Nullarbor Region has been the traditional country of the Mirning and Ngadju Aboriginal people. Natural features in this karst landscape are therefore also of great cultural significance.

Cocklebiddy Cave is arguably the Nullarbor's most famous cave, for being the object of numerous expeditions and the world's longest cave diving penetration in 1983 when a distance of 6.24 kilometres from the cave entrance was reached. The cave was extended in 2008 by Craig Challen to 6.380 km and this has been declared the end of the main passage. The interpretive panels at Cocklebiddy Cave were designed to help visitors understand and appreciate this great diversity of natural and cultural values. The panels also promote minimal impact and safe behavior.

A CREATIVE COLLABORATION

As the project progressed I also consulted with DEC Esperance staff and specialists in caving, cave diving, karst geology, ecology and management, palaeontology and cultural heritage. This group included individuals who provided invaluable help with references, images and feedback on the draft panels and included Gavin Prideaux, Peter Buzzacott, Steve Trewavas, Norman Poulter, Ken Grimes, Susan and Nicholas White, Stefan Eberhard, Paul Hosie and Tim Payne.

When all of the elements had been gathered together, Shaun Bunting, a Senior Graphic Designer with DEC's

Interpretation Unit, worked his magic. He selected a colour palette and fonts suited to the topic and setting and created a design that leads readers on a visual journey across the two large panels. The images include a stunning collage of the Australian megafauna painted by noted Australian artist Peter Trusler for Australia Post. You may recognise them from the stamp series, which was released in 2008.

With a myriad of knowledgeable and passionate stakeholders, this proved a complex but rewarding project. Now that the panels are complete and installed

in the shelter that stands near the entrance to Cocklebidy Cave, it's a terrific outcome to get Peter Buzzacott's stamp of approval.

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Interpretation panels at Cocklebidy Cave.