

NICE CAVE (WJ 135) WEE JASPER, NEW SOUTH WALES: MANAGEMENT REPORT

David Wools-Cobb*

EDITOR'S COMMENT

The owners of Nice Cave, Ian and Helen Cathles, kindly gave permission for a small group of ACKMA members to visit the cave during the AGM weekend. Advice on the management of this spectacular cave was sought and David Wools-Cobb compiled this report, and I thank him for taking the time to do so. David also liaised with John Brush, Andy Spate, and Ian and Helen to review his report and their feedback is a footnote to this report. I was on the trip and I concur with David's report for the outer section of the cave. Unfortunately, I could not access past the gate restriction, only small cavers will ever see this section!

LOCATION and ACCESS

Nice Cave is located in the Wee Jasper valley NSW, on private land. The land owner states that she rarely allows visitors, parking nearby makes visitation obvious to any passer-by. A key is required for a gate about 180m into the cave.

CURRENT CONDITION

With no gate at the entrance, it is obvious that this cave has been visited very often in the past. Mud tracking has been extensive, making conditions particularly slippery. For much of the first section of the cave, the route is not always obvious, so mud has been tracked over many surfaces.

Unfortunately in this type of limestone, the amount of embedded clay is extensive, resulting in a muddy layer over many surfaces, regardless of human visitation.

Some management has been installed in the form of plastic tube track delineation (much of this is brittle and readily broken), sometimes on only one side of the "track", and a crude but effective gate. At the time of visit the padlock was in place, however unlocked; as it appeared to be extremely gritty, making locking and unlocking difficult.



*Top: John Brush at work in Nice Cave.
Below: Some of the "nice" decoration in Nice Cave.
Photos: David Wools-Cobb*





Chamber in Nice Cave. Photo: David Wools-Cobb

Some signage has been installed advising of two boots-off areas and a “de-trog” area.

In places it is not obvious just what side the visitor should be on the stringline, and in one place three different fragile routes may be followed.

MANAGEMENT IMPROVEMENTS

Due to the extensive areas of mud, interspersed with areas of flowstone, some of which have significant mud tracking, I believe it would be virtually impossible to clean a route. Much of this mud is of considerable depth. In my experience, natural rock surfaces and to a slightly lesser extent, flowstone surfaces are cleanable, however the mud is so extensive that I feel such cleaned areas would not remain so for long. It is impractical to install boot wash stations in what would be become dozens of places. Water access is also extremely limited.

If such cleaning were to be undertaken, I would recommend a large water storage container be placed immediate outside the cave entrance, with black 12mm polypipe used to gravity feed throughout the cave. Fire-

fighting hand pumps attached at the end of such piping make for an effective ‘high pressure’ cleaner.

The best contribution for improved management would be replacement and extensive additions to the string lining of the route and some ‘no-go’ areas. This may be easily done, using natural tie-off points and stainless steel pegs (not aluminium as they corrode in a cave environment). Route sections not requiring string lining could be marked with reflective discs on each side.

The route width should be minimal but practical, taking advantage of well used areas and the natural ‘flow’ thru the cave. Stringlines and route markers should be placed in such a manner that leaves the visitor in no doubt as to the correct route position from either direction of travel. Any delineated no-go areas should be marked in an obvious manner, however at times consideration should be given to the possibility of temporary removal (end looped onto a natural anchor) of the stringline where it crosses a particularly photogenic scene...or placed low enough to be effective without intruding into the photograph.



Left: Fossil



Right: Helictites. Photos: David Wools-Cobb

Below: David Wools-Cobb speaking with Marjorie Coggan in Nice Cave. Photo: Steve Bourne

“Boots off” and “de-trog” areas need replacement signage: waterproof paper, laminated with good border seal around the sign. These areas also require some matting, to ensure that the visitor is able to step on to a non-muddy area before proceeding. At the end of these sections, further matting is required, to allow a transition from clean area to muddy. Matting must be suitable for at least one caver plus associated gear, but accommodating more is desirable. I note that some cleaning of both the boots-off sections would be of value.

For crossing areas of clean flowstone cavers should be encouraged to use soft-soled, non marking shoes/thongs/wet suit booties rather than socks. Large plastic bags for outer caving suit is also good practice, or caving suit turned inside out, with gloves & boots and pack placed within.

Some areas involve quite delicate thin flooring and would be best marked off as “no go” areas.



One loose bank area would benefit from a permanently placed climbing tape; less damage and less mud tracking would result.

In one place the route along some muddy/soiled banks is not obvious, improved track marking with regard to going into the cave and the return would be advised.

The gate is unusual, placed in a position that is very difficult to access and requires a new lock and perhaps total replacement. I recommend consideration be given to the placement of a new bat friendly gate at the entrance, with landowner permission and A.S.F. specific restricted access, thereby protecting the whole cave.

SUMMARY

Nice Cave involves some 350m (estimated after visit) of passages. The first section has been extensively visited and muddied, with considerable speleothem damage. After the gate and “squeeze restriction” which have offered some protection to the latter section, the cave is quite beautiful.

It is a cave in which some of the previous damage may not be reversible, however the limited and mostly inexpensive suggestions outlined above would reduce much further mud tracking and greatly influence in-cave behaviour by visitors.

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FOOTNOTE

Since the ACKMA AGM weekend and the preparation of the above comments, there have been several developments:

- the landowners have agreed that visitor impact issues in Nice Cave should be addressed and would like to convey their thanks to ACKMA members who provided comments;
- the padlock on the gate has now been replaced;
- work has already commenced in the outer parts of Nice Cave to improve track marking and signage and replace the deteriorating lines and signage; and
- the landowners have decided that to reduce visitor impacts, future trips will be limited to those that are led by someone who is on their list of approved leaders.



*Marjorie Coggan admiring helictites in Nice Cave.
Photo: Steve Bourne*