

## CAVE GUIDES CONFERENCE: BUCHAN, VICTORIA

Steve Bourne

A small but enthusiastic group attended the biennial cave guides gathering in Buchan from 2-5 September. Guides came from Jenolan, Yarrangobilly, Naracoorte and of course Buchan. Disappointingly, two guides from Tasmania withdrew at the last minute when they could not gain departmental support. Interstate travel for state government employees can be very challenging - it's hard to believe that imaginary lines create so many issues. Parks Victoria provided excellent support for the conference, not just with the hosting but by encouraging parks staff from non cave areas to participate. This included Nick Jansen whose role is interpretation in Parks Victoria who travelled from Melbourne for the conference, and other staff from nearby parks.

Dale Calnin, Ranger in Charge at Buchan welcomed everyone to Buchan on Monday morning, after everyone enjoyed the previous evening at the Buchan Hotel. Dale gave a summary of the evolution of the caves guides

gathering, the first of which was a meeting in Yarrangobilly in 1987. After 5 annual events, it reverted to a biennial event and has been ever since. Known as the "Gabfest", the name was changed to Caves Presenters workshop for the Naracoorte gathering in 2002, in an attempt to raise the profile and perception that it was a group of guides getting together to have a good time, to an event that managers would see as valuable staff development. Still colloquially known as the Gabfest, various names have been used with the 2012 gathering termed the Cave Guides Conference. Although the name keeps changing, we should not lose sight of what these events do and the value of them for front line staff.

District Ranger Will McCutcheon officially opened the conference. Will highlighted the key role guides play as the public point of contact for park visitors, and through sharing knowledge and encouraging visitors to share their passion for their park.



*Spring Creek Falls, one of the above ground Buchan experiences*



*Dr Susan White delivering her paper*

Dr Susan White delivered the first paper titled *Caves and Karst of Victoria*, an excellent summary of the state's karst areas. Susan covered both true karst and volcanic or pseudokarst landscapes, highlighting the diversity that exists within the state. Her talk was an excellent overview of the current knowledge of Victoria's karst assets and also highlighted some opportunities for further investigation, especially into paleokarst.



Top. Shawls in Shades of Death Cave.  
Bottom. Geoff Rebeci and group at the cave entrance.

Susan's talk was followed by Helen Green, a PhD student from Melbourne University who has been researching climate change over the past 20,000 years in south eastern Australia using speleothems from Buchan, Yarrangobilly and Portland. Helen's work will fill a knowledge void on climate change over this period. Her talk *Exploring the potential of speleothem palaeoclimate records from South East Australia* also highlighted the value of retaining speleothem samples for reanalysis at a later date. She was able to use half a stalagmite first analysed by Dr Albert Goede in 1996, and with advances in technology, able to greatly refine his work.

I attended a workshop in Canberra a few years ago, when the idea of a national database of speleothems collected from caves was mooted. At the time, I hunted down samples that had been collected from Naracoorte and brought them back to park for storage. Helen's talk reminded me that the database has not been done, but is still a passion of Susan White and others to make this happen.

Unfortunately Elery Hamilton-Smith fell ill over Sunday evening and was unable to present his paper on the history of cave guiding. He has indicated he will write it up and I hope something may appear in the future in this journal. To fill the void created by Elery's absence, I presented my talk which was set for the evening session. Naracoorte and World Heritage was very kind to me and





enabled travel to a number of countries. The slide show showcased a number of different countries and caves with a commentary on learnings from the various caves.

Monday's weather was extraordinary in Buchan; sunny, warm and really ideal conditions. Delegates were split into two groups; one visiting caves within the reserve and the other visiting off park caves of Lilly Pilly, Murrindal and Shades of Death Caves. Co owner of Shades of Death Cave, Geoff Rebecchi was on hand to lead a tour through the cave, which I thoroughly enjoyed. The passion, commitment and drive of Geoff and his co-owners is to be admired, as well as their determination to develop the cave for public viewing. Tours ceased at the cave in the mid 1990s when the operation became unviable, which is a real pity as the cave offers quite a

different visitor experience. Not sure how well the infrastructure would stand up to public sector scrutiny now, but an excellent visit nonetheless.

I had been fortunate to visit Lilly Pilly Cave twice previously and again enjoyed the cave. Despite the record rains in recent weeks, the cave was generally dry although the entrance path was covered with a film of fine calcite deposit. I pondered what might have been for Shades of Death and Lilly Pilly (and perhaps Murrindal) Caves if they were closer to the main Buchan visitor precinct. I feel the caves (as tourist caves) are a victim of their location – if a few kilometres closer to Buchan and the caves within the main reserve, who knows how successfully they could be operated.

David Head from Weidmuller was the first speaker on the second day with a talk on the *The Evolution of Cave Lighting*. It is interesting that electric lights found their way into caves in 1880; at Jenolan in Australia and caves in the Czech Republic (called Bohemia at the time), one year after Thomas Edison took out a patent on incandescent globes. Ultra high intensity LED lights now emit over 100 lumens per watt compared to the 5 lumens per watt in Edison's days, demonstrating the enormous advances in light output for each unit of energy. David later demonstrated some of his products in the east wing of Fairy Cave and Federal Cave, doing a quick lighting job with Dave Harper from Buchan. I gather David did not get all his lights to take home and some have found a new home at Buchan.

We then heard from guides from each site represented at the conference. The three Naracoorte representatives, Barb Lobban, Yarrow Lee and Decima McTernan presented on three aspects of Naracoorte; current research and its aims, educational products and developing strong community links. George Bradford, Manager of Yarrangobilly Caves gave a summary of developments at Yarrangobilly in his six years as



*Top left. Lilly Pilly Cave*

*Top right. David Head's incandescent globe demonstrating the output compared to his new age LED lights.*

*Left. David Head demonstrating his lights.*

manager, and there has certainly been some impressive work completed. A paper on this is promised for a future journal, so I won't elaborate too much here.

Jenolan Caves had its usual strong contingent representing their work site and once again they delivered excellent presentations. Anita Eddison reminded the group of some key basic principles of cave guiding, especially to be yourself and develop your own style. As a long time advocate of having new staff explore show caves by themselves (after some basic introduction of course) and develop their tours without the influence of experienced guides, I agreed with many of the principles she was advocating. This was followed by Anne Musser who has been developing a palaeo themed tour, and presented her concepts to the group. I thought the proposed tour had merit and have asked Anne to provide a more comprehensive write up. Even if factors prevent the tour from being implemented, the process and the thinking behind developing a new tour is valuable. Michael Collins gave his impressions on the adventure caving program at Jenolan and his passion for providing visitors with a memorable experience came through in his talk. As managers and guides, it should



*Ted Richards in Royal Cave*

never been forgotten how important a first caving experience is and to ensure each visitor leaves with a love of caves, even if they never do another adventure tour. Ted Matthews completed the Jenolan presentation with some thoughts on structural controls on cave development.

I spent the afternoon inspecting Fairy and Royal Cave and was impressed by the work that had been done since my last visit. Dale did not have the luxury of a complete overall and refit of all infrastructure, but used his resources wisely and has achieved an excellent result. Delegates also had the opportunity to visit Federal Cave, which only has spasmodic visitor use at present, but has been a labour of love for the Friends of Buchan. I spent part of the afternoon attempting to photograph lyrebirds – unsuccessfully.

The conference concluded with a dinner at the Buchan Caves Hotel, which had done a wonderful job of catering for us, as had the whole local community. On a personal note, the efforts of Dale Calnin and staff are much appreciated. The sharing of knowledge, appreciation of how the experience at each cave site may affect visitation to other caves, understanding challenges and how these are managed, and overall skill development are valid reasons for management agencies to support staff attending. I sincerely hope that the next gathering (whatever it is called) at Yarrangobilly Caves will attract representatives from many cave sites around Australia (and maybe beyond!). To all managers - you get value for the financial input!

Two Yarrangobilly Caves' staff provided me with their thoughts on the conference - the title says it all!

**The Yarrangobilly Caves crew had a Buchan good time at the 14th Cave Guide Conference.**

**Melinda Judd, Yarrangobilly Caves Interpretive Assistant**

After twelve months of working at Yarrangobilly Caves I still consider myself a very new employee (especially when you consider that most of us are used to contemplating things on a Geological time scale). So as a newcomer to the caving world, I arrived at my first Cave



*Top. Anita Edison  
Bottom. Michael Collins*



Guide Conference hosted by Dale Calnin and his skilled crew at Buchan with no preconceived notions of what our time there might be like. However, even if I'd arrived with the highest of expectations, they would have been exceeded. The knowledge gleaned, not just from presenters at the Conference, whom were exceptional, but from each dedicated cave enthusiast attending the conference, was invaluable. The presentation by Helen Wood on the research she is conducting on deducing climate history from stalagmites amalgamated my understanding of similar research being conducted at Yarrangobilly Caves and will endeavour to be critical in understanding our climatic history and help to model future climate change. David Head provided a fantastic light show and informed us on the advancements of lighting systems in caves. Sue White enlightened us all with her presentation on Karst environments and Steve Bourne tantalised us with exotic photographs of caves in foreign countries which all those that attended the conference have now pencilled in to their diaries to visit.

These presentations were only exceeded by the caves themselves. An opportunity to visit 'Shades of Death' with hauntingly lovely music playing softly as we were drawn down a vintage steel staircase onto the platform

towards the bottom of the main chamber, was almost missed when we missed the congregation point for our group departure. Our ever patient tour guide, Danny, was out hunting for us until we finally stumbled upon the rest of the group after a slight detour to 'W tree' (only 20kms or so past our destination). At the entrance to Lilly Pilly cave the trees stood like centaurs at the opening to the cave and the continuing tour through the cave was deserving of such a grand entrance. Fairy Cave and Royal Cave are undoubtedly beautiful and it was wonderful to see the hard work that has gone into lighting Fairy cave and Federation cave.

So if asked whether attendance at the Cave Guide conference was beneficial and if it is worthwhile new staff attend, my answer is a resounding yes. Not only because it was a fantastic opportunity to network, see some incredible caves and hear some wonderful presentations also because it has been rumoured that the next cave guide conference is going to be at Yarrangobilly and we are going to need all the support from the caving community we can get after Buchan caves have set the standard so high.



*The obligatory conference photo.*





*Top. Impressive flowstone in Royal cave.*

*Right. Helictites in Royal Cave*

Thank you everyone for looking after this newcomer at her first (of many) Cave guide conferences.

**Margot Bulger, Acting Caves Assistant, Yarrangobilly Caves**

The recent Caves Guide Conference at Buchan Caves was a wonderful experience. The hospitality of the Buchan crew and the generosity of all present in sharing their knowledge and experiences ensured a beneficial conference for all. I have been working as a guide at Yarrangobilly Caves for the past four and a half years and have enjoyed caves and rocks all my life. I would like to thank management for supporting my attendance, I am confident my guiding and interpretive skills were strengthened through my experiences. Personally I had a wonderful time exploring the caves and the countryside around Buchan, maybe explored a little further than need be on our wayward trip to the Shades of Death Cave....apologies to Danny and Phil.

The trip home through the beautiful Snowy River National Park, guided by Danny of Buchan Caves topped off a wonderful few days.

