

## PETER BERRILL, THE CAVES, CENTRAL QUEENSLAND

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*Peter Berrill (right) at a dinner in Brisbane with Stephen Comino AM, solicitor for the Mt Etna case. Peter was being treated for leukemia at the time. Photo: John Dunkley.*

One of Australia's leading cave conservationists and stewardship managers, Peter Berrill died on his 59th birthday on 27 February 2012 after several years battling cancer.

He will be forever synonymous with Mt Etna Caves near Rockhampton. A member of Central Queensland Speleological Society for 36 years, its President for 30 years to his death, Life Member of the Australian Speleological Federation, ASF President for over 5 years, and living in the village of The Caves just 1km from the mountain, Peter was the driving force behind a determined campaign to resurrect the faltering campaign against the Mt Etna quarrying and to establish a National Park over all the karst and caves. Lasting from 1962 to 1999, this epic was the longest environmental campaign in Australian history.

University of Queensland Speleological Society (UQSS) and Central Queensland Speleological Society (CQSS) cavers themselves funded the initial purchase from a local farmer of 80 acres of Limestone Ridge karst, but Queensland Parks & Wildlife Service for many years resisted placing this in public ownership. Meanwhile there was no progress on Mt Etna. After 20 years of legal and other setbacks, and emboldened by the success of the Franklin River case and a personal visit by Bob Brown, in 1986 key CQSS members led by Peter decided that both the Government and the mining company were intransigent and direct action was the only way forward. It is impossible to do justice here to the role he played in the remarkable conclusion to the long saga, but there is great reading in a whole issue of Australian Caver no. 151 (2000), devoted to a lengthy chronicle of colourful reminiscences from those associated with the campaign.

In December 1987, cavers filled drill holes above Speaking Tube Cave to forestall blasting, “occupied” Speaking Tube and Illium Caves, announced a blockade, and called the bluff of the miners. Five members including Peter soon found themselves in court, enjoined against further entry to Mt Etna. The company destroyed the caves, and instead cavers took action against it for breaches of the Fauna Conservation Act (blasting killed the protected Ghost Bat). After the Supreme Court of Queensland held that CQSS lacked the necessary legal standing to do this, special leave was obtained to appeal to the High Court of Australia as an important legal principle was at stake. CQSS was unable to raise security for costs, was forced to discontinue the action, and the 5 members were left with an order for company costs estimated at \$213,085.

The costs order remained hanging over cavers’ heads for 8 years but in 1998 new management in the company began to relent, and Peter sought to negotiate a settlement of the matter with them. In time a truly remarkable reconciliation was effected and in 1999 the company agreed to release the cavers from the costs order and to help purchase Cammoo Caves for addition to the National Park. However the Parks Service was not prepared to consider converting the mining lease over Mt Etna Caves into a National Park. The mining company thus turned to Peter and Australian Speleological Federation (ASF), offering to gift the property to ASF. Peter effectively became an advisory cave manager as the company began to wind down its operations, removed the ugly infrastructure, began rehabilitating the quarry faces and eventually surrendered the leases. Nevertheless a National Park was always the preferred solution of Peter, CQSS and ASF, and in 2008 this was achieved.

Politicians prevaricate, academics consult, and managers frequently pass the running to outsiders. In the end it is vision, energy and enthusiasm coupled with dogged and uncompromising determination that brings about real achievements. Peter never lost sight of that ultimate goal, which was to see all of Mt Etna and its caves in a National Park. He always said it was a team effort, and it was, but someone had to lead the team.

Peter could be abrasive, authoritarian and an irritant, but this and his accomplished verbal persuasiveness levered governments, managers and supporters alike out of their comfort zones. The fact is that in several places in Australia there would not be caves left to manage other than for the tireless efforts of people like him, and their role has been ignored, discounted or undervalued by some managers and cave management authorities. Peter said this was why, despite his role at Mt Etna, he was never a member of ACKMA, and he was invited to, and attended its 2008 AGM at The Caves only after last-minute intercession from ASF members.

In a recent book about Australia’s 27 Prime Ministers, journalist Mungo MacCallum concluded that our most significant leaders have been those who were “the most

courageous, the ones who burst through the roadblocks not only in society but within their own parties”. Peter ran a successful business but both this and his family suffered from his championing of Mt Etna against Rockhampton’s then social norms. Without him the mountain may have fallen into the hands of the local Council or a private developer, both of whom had also expressed strong interest. But we now have that National Park, and Australia needs more people like him. To paraphrase a cliché, perhaps cave management is too important to be left to cave managers.

It was his great satisfaction in the last weeks of his life to see one of his initiatives, the ASF Karst Conservation Fund mounting a special appeal to fund the purchase by speleologists of Scrubby Creek Cave at Buchan and in support of research into his beloved Ghost Bats at Mt Etna that were pivotal to the conservation campaign. ASF has decided to commemorate him by prefacing its Award of Distinction for Cave Conservation with his name.

Peter is survived by his wife Diane and sons Luke and Nathan and their families.



Top. At the 2008 ceremony transferring the mining lease to Mt Etna National Park. Mine Manager Chris White (left) hands Peter Berrill a cheque for \$12,500 for the ASF Karst Conservation Fund. Photo: John Dunkley  
Bottom. Mt Etna, ACKMA AGM 2008. Photo: Steve Bourne