

## A VERY IMPORTANT WORD

David Summers

**Editor's Note:** *This is the address delivered by David Summers at the International Show Caves Conference 4 November 2012. David kindly provided me a copy to share with ACKMA members.*



*ISCA President David Summers*

I would like to take a few minutes to address one very important word that we have in the name of our organization, and our lives. There is a single word that differentiates us from virtually all other worldwide organizations concerned with caves. That one entity is the single word “show”. It is this word that sets us apart from all other international bodies concerned with caves.

The smallest word in our name is, in fact, the most important word in this title.

We are an international organization comprised of members from all six inhabited continents, with members from thirty four countries around the globe. We are not alone in being an association that straddles the world. Being able to call ourselves international does not make us different from other worldwide bodies.

As mentioned, the most critical word in the name of our Association is the word “show”. It is this word that sets us apart from all other worldwide bodies that are concerned with caves. In addition to having all of the interests of conservation and preservation of caves, a show cave must also function as a viable and successful business. It has to be profitable.

The importance of the business of a show cave being profitable cannot be overstated. If a show cave is not profitable then the first two items that are removed from the expenditure list are invariably those classified as environmental and scientific pursuits. If the economic performance declines further then the veritable nightmare of having to cease operations totally can become a reality.

It is generally accepted that the worst thing that can happen to a cave is for it to be discovered by mankind. There is virtually no practical protection afforded to a cave once it has been discovered. It is invariably susceptible to abuse, whether by malicious vandals, or even by those who claim to be skilled cavers. Even the pursuit of science, whether by amateur or professional scientists, can result in irreparable damage being caused to a cave once it is discovered. A lot of damage can be caused to a cave in the name of science.

One of the best things that can happen to a cave once it is discovered is for it to be properly developed, and used, as a show cave. This invariably means that the entrance to the cave is sealed by some form of gating, which restricts access to only those who are authorized to enter the cave.

There can be little doubt that the worst fate that can befall a cave is for it to be developed as a show cave, then for it to fail as a business entity, and be closed. When a show cave fails economically, it is inevitable that there is no money available to seal up the entrance of the cave so that it will last for centuries. The usual method of sealing a failed show cave is to install a locked iron or steel entry gate. The ravages of time invariably cause the lock to fail and / or the metal of the gate to erode away, leaving the cave open with trails to make entry easy for those unauthorized persons seeking to enter the cave. The cave is then very vulnerable to misuse.

Yes, a show cave is a business. If the business is not viable, then it is inevitable that it will fail, and we have already dwelt with the ramifications of the consequences of that. There is a responsibility, that can be equated to a duty, for all of us to ensure that the business of the show caves, that we own or manage, are successful.

What then makes a show cave different from an undeveloped cave? It takes a long list to describe this difference, but let us start with the beginning of such a list. The list for a show cave includes the payment of taxes, payroll, supplies, development costs, maintenance, repairs, utilities, staff training, accounting services, vehicles, security, promotion, environmental aspects and scientific needs. In addition, inflation, and occasionally deflation, must be coped with as well as economic recessions and even depressions.

The need for a show cave to be properly managed and successful is a requirement that is rarely understood by scientists and spelunkers. All too often they adopt the view, albeit that it may be well intentioned, that a show cave is a golden goose that cannot stop laying golden eggs. Oh, wouldn't we all like that magical image to be true.

A show cave needs all of the operators business knowledge and acumen in order for it to be operated successfully and this is in addition to having all of the knowledge and awareness regarding the physical needs of the cave to ensure that the underground world is preserved and conserved. It is a very large responsibility and a vital one.

A well managed show cave is one of, if not the most effective, ways of educating the general public of the importance of preserving and conserving caves. In virtually all show caves today there is a growing emphasis on education as a focus, as opposed to the pure entertainment of the visitors.

The education of our visitors is considered to be of such great importance to a body such as ours that we have established a whole commission devoted entirely to interpretation. The pursuit of quality interpretation can even be justification, all by itself, for a show cave to become a member of ISCA.

The number of caves that have been developed, and used as a show caves, is an incredibly small number in comparison with the number of caves that have been discovered around the world. This number is a minuscule fraction of one percent. Despite this extremely low number it is advanced that the experience of a member of the public, being guided through a show cave, will always be the best method of instilling the need to preserve and conserve all caves, in that person. The opportunity for a member of the public to tour a show cave will always be the most effective way of educating the public about caves.

The importance of show caves cannot be overstated. When addressing organizations, where interests lie predominantly in speleology, whether comprised of recreational cavers or scientists, one of my favourite questions is to ask how many of the audience had their first cave experience through a show cave. The response is usually so overwhelming in the affirmative that there is never any need to conduct a count to confirm the result.

Occasionally, I find myself assailed by individuals who claim that the only thing that the members of ISCA care about is making money out of their caves. When I encounter these claims my response is always that their claim is virtually correct and the only thing that is incorrect is the inclusion of the word only in their statement.

Of course, show cave owners and operators have to be concerned, not only about making money, but also to ensure that their business operation is profitable. Not just profitable for the short term, but perpetually. We are all in difficult and challenging economic times, regardless of where your cave is located. The rules of yesterday do not always create the same result as they used to. Today requires even more focus on economic performance than it did in the past.

Inflation must be combated and unpredictable visitation rates responded to. All of these problems must be successfully overcome. Do not be swayed from this awesome responsibility.

It is important that ISCA becomes a veritable think tank. Friends ready to share their experiences of what worked, and what did not work, with each other. Thank you, and may good fortune be with you all.



*Protective infrastructure in a show cave.  
Marakoopa Cave, Tasmania.*