

## CAVE RESCUE (MOIRA'S HEROIC WALK)

Deborah Carden

On holiday in Punakaiki, NZ's South Island West Coast, I was dog-and-cat sitting while one daughter and her partner were holidaying too. As I was closing up the house to drive to Reefton to see my other daughter and her family there was noise at the door - voices calling, dog barking.

My visitors were 82-year-old Canterbury caver and ACKMA member Moira Lipyeat and my partner's son Nick Wright. Moira said that Derek, her husband, had gone into Kubla Khan Cave the night before and had not returned.

Kubla Khan is part of the five-kilometre Xanadu system in the Bullock Creek polje, Paparoa National Park comprising Cairns Catacombs, Kubla Khan and Xanadu caves. Xanadu is a fascinating system and one of the great recreational hard rock karst areas in the South Island, with sections suitable for beginner cavers to others experienced. One critical aspect to watch with regard this system is that it is regularly flushed with floodwaters when Bullock Creek fills and overflows into the myriad of its subterranean streams. This of course also opens and closes entrances and gives cavers new places to explore. As a result Kubla Khan currently has two entrances - Derek had taken to exploring via the lower, newer one.

The weather had been fine for two days before Derek and Moira visited and was forecast to remain so for another day. Derek loves Kubla Khan. Virtually every time they visit the coast he'd make a beeline for it, searching for new passages and for connections into the adjacent Xanadu Cave section. This time they arrived in the afternoon and he went in twice. Just before dinner (Lipyeat's motor-vans have provided more cups of tea to more cavers than any other worldwide) Derek decided to collect his ropes but said he'd have a quick look at something he'd seen.

That was 6pm. "If I'm not back by 9pm", said Derek (83). "Get help".

9pm - no sign of Derek. Calling, calling, no response. Moira waited in the van. Moira called at the cave mouth. Fitful sleep. At 4.30am Moira called again. No response.

She went back to the van, dressed in warm clothes, took her stick and set off for Les Wright's house. Moira can't drive these days. Moira walked the longest six kilometres ever, on the narrow winding rough gravel road down the valley to the highway. She stopped a young woman in a car who drove her to Les's house. Les was away. But Nick was home. He made her a cup of tea and insisted she drink it while they decided what to do.



*Xanadu and Kubla Khan Caves entrances are in the shadow on the right of the photo.*

The decision was to go and find me. To reach me they had to walk nearly a kilometre up the steepest driveway on the West Coast.

On hearing Moira's story I called emergency services, explained the situation to the police and gave them SAR co-ordinators details. An unhappy dog was locked in the house, Nick took Moira back to his place, I called in to the Conservation Department's Punakaiki base to find the police talking to the Visitor Centre Manager on the phone, arranging to use the DOC workshop as the SAR base.

I had a hunch about Derek. I went up to Kubla Khan, called down the 8(ish) metre abseil entrance and got a reply. I could see the LED light on his helmet. He wanted me to pull up his 10mm rope that was attached to a 12mm rope, tie it off and he'd climb up.

However his voice was slurry and he admitted he was cold. He had gone caving with no extras - no spare clothes, no food, no water, no first aid kit. I told him a rescue party was on its way. He agreed food and water would be nice. I went to the van, put water, chocolate slice and a woollen jersey into a bag that I threw down to him. After he had had a drink and eaten the slice I insisted he get the jersey on. We debated this. I was getting anxious as his voice was clear one minute and not the next. I decided to go and see where the rescue team was.

One of the rescue team was at the DOC workshop so I said Derek was alive and extrication would not be difficult. I drove to tell Moira that Derek was alive, got more water and a banana and twenty minutes after leaving Kubla Khan I was back. By this time Derek had



*The 'Derek Access'. The abseil entrance is to the left over the log at the edge of the photo. Debris from previous floods shows the risks associated with this cave.*

his cave suit off and was putting the jersey on. Another anxious moment upon hearing him saying he was undressed but he said his suit was filthy and he wanted to put the jersey underneath. I got a blanket and sleeping bag from the van, and with the water and banana in another bag, threw them down.

We conversed. He said that in the afternoon he had spotted a new hole in the floor and new passage high up and he wanted to check out the hole. Turned out that the hole didn't 'go' – it just got narrower and muddier as he descended till he decided he should stop. The rope was muddy, he had difficulty getting leg loops working and the ascent was slow. Out of the hole Derek returned to the entrance pitch and made to go up the rope to the surface. But the ascending gear would not grip the muddy rope and somehow he tipped upside down. Fortunately he was not too far off the bottom and he said he managed to get out of his harness.

Anyway – the rescue team arrived, set up rope systems, a medic was guided to Derek via a higher-up non-abseil

entrance and after getting the go-ahead Derek was lifted out of the cave attached to Warren Smith. Derek was taken to the waiting ambulance and into Greymouth Hospital. He recovered from the mild hyperthermia sufficiently to be discharged to a relieved Moira and daughter that evening.

Once Derek was on the way to hospital the rescue team went their various ways though some who know Lipyeats well joined Moira at Les' house for a celebratory cup of tea.

The SAR team comprised Greymouth and Westport police and cavers. Nelson and Canterbury cavers were on stand-by. One search and rescue in NZ is free, after that you pay

Derek is very lucky. A very competent SAR team, most of whom were caving friends, rescued him. The weather was in his favour. Next day the rain came in.

It could have been a very different story.