

# COINS in CAVE POOLS: IS it a PROBLEM? SHOULD it be MANAGED?

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## Abstract

Throwing coins into pools of water for good luck, having a wish granted, to receive a religious blessing and as a charity fundraiser, is a widespread practice across many cultures. Sites where this regularly occurs includes pools in gardens, fountains, memorial pools and caves. While this practice historically occurred at several show cave sites in Australia and New Zealand it has largely ceased in these two countries due to management actions. However, the practice of throwing coins into pools of water is widespread in many other countries including the United States of America and many Asian and European countries. This paper will raise and consider some issues regarding the practice of throwing coins into pools in caves, including why people do it, are there issues for cave conservation and management, should the practice be managed and is more study required re this issue. This paper specifically seeks to raise discussion on this issue, rather than to criticise the practice. Therefore, except for some historical examples, specific caves will not be mentioned in this paper and photos showing examples of coins thrown in caves will not include the name of the cave.

## Coins in Cave Pools

Coins being tossed into pools of water is a widespread and long-standing human practice. We see it regularly: in pools in gardens and natural areas, in fountains, memorial pools and gardens, in front of religious statues. Coins being thrown into cave pools has traditionally occurred in Asia, many parts of Europe, North America, South America, New Zealand and Australia.

This short paper will consider:

- Why people might throw coins into water?
- Should the practice be managed in caves?
- Is more study required on this issue?
- Issues regarding what happens to the coins.

This paper does not set out to criticise any current practice occurring in caves but to raise some questions and promote discussion.

## Why do people throw coins into pools?

The author has not been able to locate any detailed research on this practice. The varied reasons commonly given for throwing coins include:

- Receiving good luck.
- Having a wish granted.
- Receiving a religious blessing.
- Following the lead set by others.
- Fun or challenge to have a coin land in a given place.

- A traditional fund raiser, and there are many impressive examples of this in relation to wishing wells in caves.

## Are there issues with coins in caves?

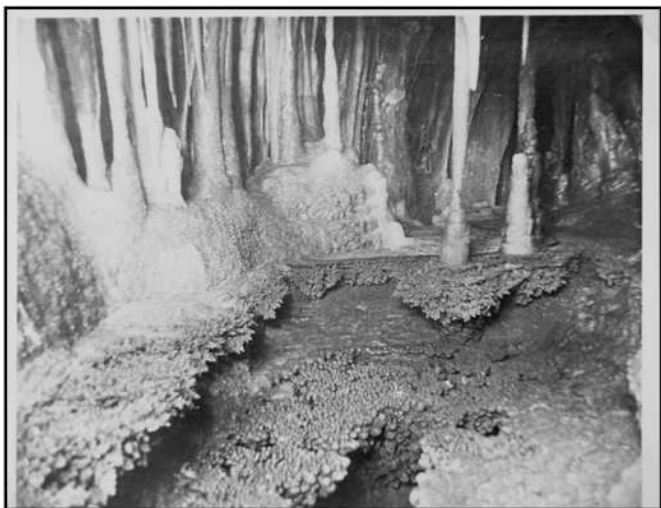
The research is limited but coins do change the natural appearance of the places where they are thrown. This may be a stream or pool, mud walls or ceilings. Blue-green staining from coins is common. Water chemistry can be altered and there can be changes to aquatic life. The pool and its surrounds may also be damaged if the coins are collected.

Thrown coins also change the aesthetics of caves. However, beauty is in the eye of the beholder and while some may find changes to the natural appearance distressing, others may find the blue-green stains left by coins add to the beauty of the cave.

Following are three examples from Australasian show caves where 'wishing wells' have caused alterations to the cave appearance and ecology.

## Example 1: Jillabenan Cave at Yarrangobilly Caves in New South Wales.

This cave was opened as a show cave in 1914. At some stage a pool known as the Bath of Venus was modified and became a wishing well. In approximately 1967, the caves were closed to be redeveloped as part of a prisoner workforce project, and were reopened in approximately 1970. Since then the pool has not been promoted as a wishing well and any 'tossed' coins have been retrieved by staff. However today, more than 45 years after the pool was last used as a wishing well, the blue-green stains from past coins remain.

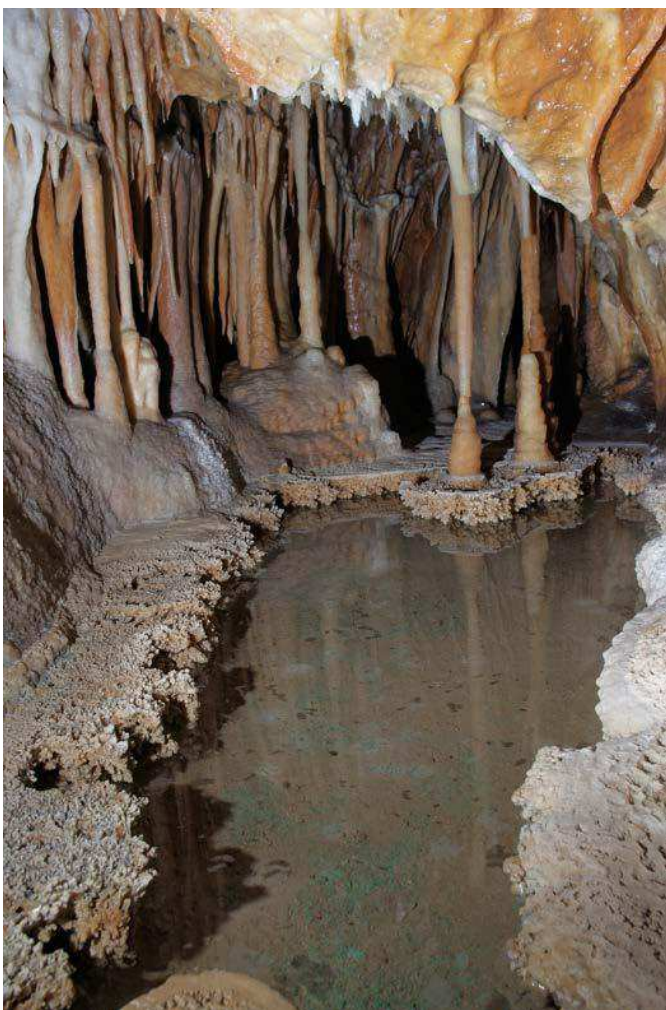


*Bath of Venus prior to 1928. The photographer is unknown. John Brush re-photographed this photo which is now part of the historic collection at Yarrangobilly Caves.*



*This photograph was taken by Leo Hoad in 1928 and was part of a postcard series. It too has been re-photographed by John Brush. The photo shows that the floor of the pool has been altered and raised and the pool is now being used as a wishing well.*

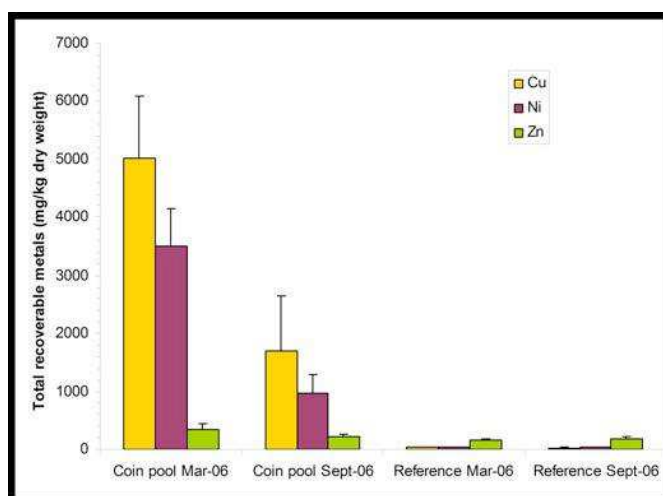
*Below. The Bath of Venus in 2014. The blue-green stains from past coins remain more than 45 years since the pool was used as a wishing well. The 'splotches' in the pool are shadows cast by the calcite rafts which have now formed on the surface of the pool.*



### **Example 2: Aranui Cave, Waitomo, New Zealand**

Dr Mike Scarsbrook and colleagues did some water sampling in the cave in March 2006. Samples were collected at the wishing well site and at a reference location elsewhere in the cave. Copper and nickel (prominent in New Zealand coins) were significantly higher at the wishing well site than at the reference site. All coins were removed from the wishing well in April 2006 (1.7 kg dry weight). At that time a fauna survey showed only microbial fauna at the wishing well site with lower biodiversity than at the reference site.

Further water samples were collected from the two sites in September 2006 and the copper and nickel content at the wishing well site had dropped since the March sampling. The reference site measurements had not altered.

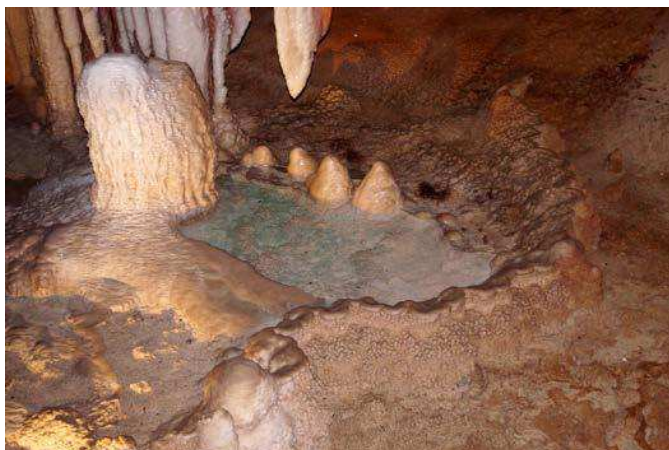


*Recoverable metals, Aranui Cave. Illustration by Mike Scarsbrook and provided by Andy Spate*



### Example 3: Jenolan Caves, New South Wales

At Jenolan Caves money was traditionally collected in two caves at sites known as hospital boxes and distributed to the hospitals at Lithgow and Bathurst. In 1910 alone £66 was collected from these 'boxes'. A significant amount of money for the time and an example of the long-standing relationship between 'wishing wells' and charity fundraising.



*Former hospital box in the Mafeking Chamber, Jenolan Caves. It is uncertain when the practice of coin collection here was ceased but the blue-green colour remains today.*  
Photo: Sasa Kennedy.



*Above left. Coins collected from a 'hospital box' at Jenolan Caves.*  
Photo: Julia James.

*Above right. Scoop used historically to collect coins from the hospital boxes at Jenolan Caves.*  
Photo: Sasa Kennedy.

*Right top. Coins in a cave pool in Europe.*

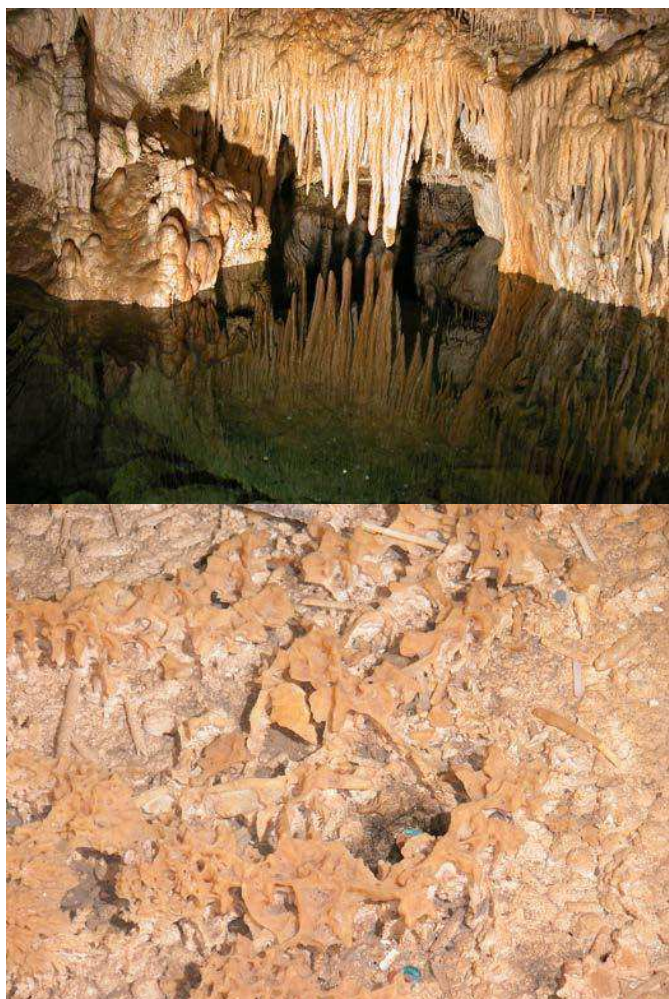
*Right bottom. Close-up of the pool floor.*  
Photos: Steve Bourne

### Wishing wells and coin throwing; some international examples.

The following photos show some examples of coins in caves from different international sites. The specific sites will not be named as the intention is to raise discussion on the practice rather than focus on individual cave sites.



*Wishing well in cave in Korea.*  
Photo: Andy Spate.







*An ice cave in Europe. While coins are often thrown into a single pool or 'wishing well', in many caves coins are thrown spontaneously so that the coins are scattered in several places in the cave. Should we be concerned about the possible impacts of coins in an ice cave like this when the impacts of climate change are already altering the cave environment?*  
Photo: Steve Bourne



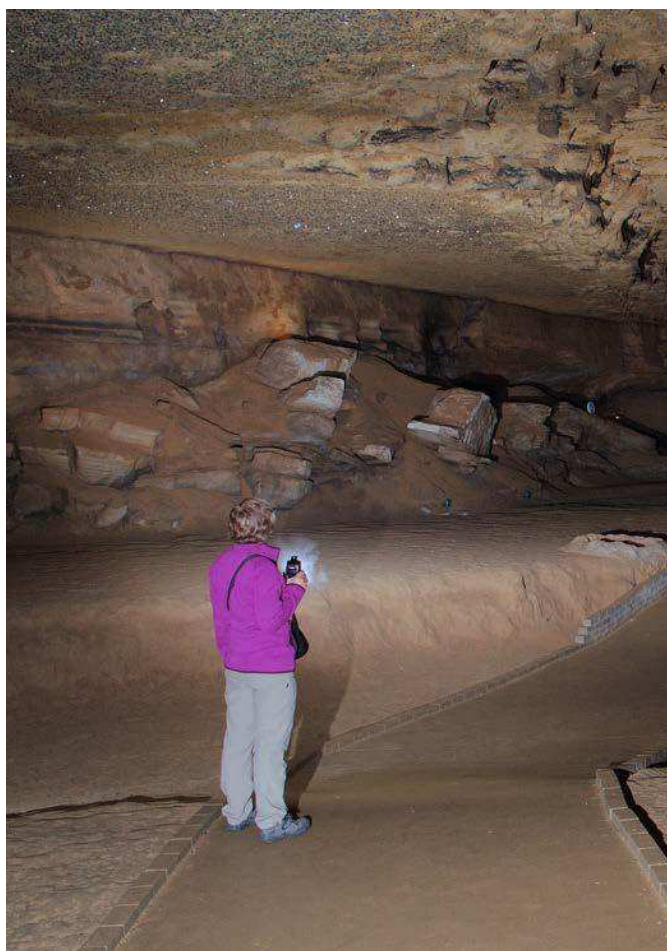
*Cave in Europe.*  
Photo: John Brush



*Wishing well in a cave in Europe.*  
Photo: John Brush



*A small pool in a cave in Europe. There are three coins visible in the pool. This small pool included some exquisitely beautiful cave pearls. For the author, the sight of the coins marred the natural beauty of the pool and started her considering the issues of coins in caves.*  
Photo: John Brush



*Cave in the USA. The throwing of coins into the ceiling is encouraged in return for making a wish. The cave owners apparently clean the cave ceiling of coins annually and donate the money to charity.*  
Photo: John Brush









*Wishing well previously at Tantanoola Cave, South Australia. This was built by the service club Rotary International. Former cave manager Steve Bourne reports that when the entrance to the cave was being redeveloped he contacted the local branch of Rotary regarding the relocation of the wishing well. No current active members of the club were aware of the wishing well and no one could remember when it had last been cleared of coins. Two 10 litre drums of coins were subsequently collected from the well, but the money had to be discarded due to degradation from being in water for so long.*

*Photo: Steve Bourne*

### **Some additional input**

Since presenting this paper at the ISCA conference 2014, the following input on this issue:

Nurul Hidayah from Dark Cave, Malaysia reports that a decision was made not to encourage any coin throwing in the cave and that, any coins are collected as soon as they are noticed. However, as coin throwing is not encouraged, very few coins are actually thrown in the cave. Coin throwing is a common practice at nearby caves.

Allen Mathis from DeSoto Caverns, Alabama USA, advised that they had recently commenced a wishing well. It has a net-liner in it that can be lifted out once a week so coins do not accumulate in the cave. The money collected is used for a staff support fund to assist staff in times of illness and sudden crisis. Allen added that 'today's wishing well utilises a shallow well dug by Confederate soldiers in 1865 to get water for the process of leaching nitrates from the soil of the cave to make gun powder.' He proudly concluded 'now the well is used to help people not to help kill them.' Al's input widened the author's perspective on the social side of wishing wells.

In Australia we have a national health system. No so in many countries, including the USA, and the funds raised in wishing wells can provide significant and necessary financial support.

### **In conclusion**

There is a long history of people throwing coins into pools of water both in and outside of caves and also a long history of money collected in cave wishing wells being donated to charities. But are these traditional practices in tune with current thinking on best practice show cave management? Is it time for further discussion and thinking?

### **Acknowledgements**

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