

The ACKMA Conference at Tākaka, 21-26 May 2023

by Mary Trayes

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ACKMA stands for ‘Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association.’ It differs from both NZSS and ASF (Australian Speleological Federation) which, by and large, represent recreational cavers, in that it also represents those involved with show caves and their management, and has a number of karst scientists within its ranks. Whilst members are chiefly drawn from Australia and New Zealand, the Association has also had members at different times from several Pacific Rim countries, from British Columbia to South Korea, Malaysia, Sarawak and New Guinea. It also has strong links with ISCA (International Show Caves Association) and UIS (Union Internationale de Spéléologie). To learn more, see <https://ackma.org/about.html>

Like many other groups with overseas members, the period 2019 – 2022 was a difficult time for ACKMA, but through Zoom meetings, emails and a couple of online competitions (photography, Cave Animal of the Year, etc.) the ACKMA Committee has been able to keep people connected. Planning for this year’s conference began in 2021 after NZ members based at Waitomo (Pete and Libby Chandler, and son Kieran) and Te Anau (Neil Collinson), were given the nod to run a conference at Tākaka. The organising team then made a flying visit there in September 2022, where they met local schoolteacher and caver, Chris Stephenson, just the man to assist them with the thousand and one questions about the logistics of running a conference in small town, including where to base the daily programme from. Golden Bay High School Hall, where else?! This worked out very well as did accommodation and meal arrangements.

Tākaka, with both limestone and marble karst and caves readily at hand, was the ideal place for a conference which had the theme, ‘Water Underground’. It was also an ideal base deal for hearing from local people and karst specialists about actions being taken to further protect Te Waikoropupū Springs. After being welcomed on the first day by local Māori, Ngāti Tama, Ngāti Rārua and Te Ātiwawa, conference delegates then heard from a representative of each about the application they’d made jointly with local man Andrew Yuill, to the Tasman District Council for the placing of a Water Conservation Order placed on the Tākaka River Aquifer which feeds the springs.

These explanations were followed by two keynote speakers, the first by Emeritus Professor Paul Williams, about the geology of the Tākaka aquifer and how it works, and the second by Andrew Yuill from ‘Friends of Golden Bay’ about some of the cave systems feeding the aquifer and his part in the joint application for the Water Protection Order. All of this was very good food for thought when delegates paid a leisurely visit, with Māori welcome, to Te Waikoropupū Springs that afternoon.



Figure 1: ACKMA delegates enjoy Golden Bay sunshine at Te Waikoropupū Springs (left)

That evening local caver, Phil Castle then gave a slide talk entitled: ‘A Decade of exploration of Golden Bay Marble - Many Caves or Tiny Fragments of a Vast Network?’ This made it obvious that a lot more cavers need to move to Golden Bay if all the cave networks are going to be found in our lifetimes. Fragments found to date are clearly only parts of a much larger puzzle still waiting to be found.

That first day set the pattern for the week, evening meals being a mix of ‘arranged’ (Sunday, Wednesday and Friday) and find / make your own, not hard in Tākaka with some great eateries and a good supermarket. In general papers (most of them slide talks), were made in the morning, on a wide range of topics from mine about our karst drainage exploration at Inangahua Junction to others on Australian cave flora and fauna, the geomorphology of Kangaroo Island (South Australia) and the difference between formations derived from concrete and limestone/marble (most enlightening!) The only day without papers was Thursday where a very early start was made for a day up on Tākaka Hill where it was cold but very fine. Activities there included admiration of the views with morning tea, trips through Ngarua Cave in groups, a visit by some to Kairuru Cave, lunch at the Woolshed Café then all afternoon out at Canaan Downs.

Figure 2: ACKMA group enjoying lighting effects in Ngarua Cave, Tākaka Hill (right)

En route we stopped off for Dave Hobson, Woolshed Café proprietor, local farmer and lessee of part of the Downs from DOC, to explain to us how that came to be, after which Kieran McKay explained to us that whilst a good number of caves on Tākaka Hill were now well known, there were still leads to follow up and working out which side of the mountain the various cave systems drained to, e.g. toward Riwaka or toward the Tākaka Valley.



No major caving was done, but there were walks to Harwood’s Hole and/or the ‘Lookout’ down Gorge Creek or up to the old Sixtus homestead and cave entrances nearby. I walked back from there in beautiful autumn sunshine, with diversions to look down every sinkhole by the track on the way, wishing I was years younger and off on some expedition again to help sort out some of the karst drainage questions.



Figure 3: L- R: Andrew Yuill and Paul Williams listen as Kieran McKay explains about the karst and caves of Canaan Downs area (left)

With Oz Patterson along on the day to provide explanations, there was a stop-off on the way back to look at the 21 hectare Greenlink Cave property, which NZSS has recently bought thanks to contributions from both cavers and organised groups like ACKMA (significant donation made). Delegates had learned a bit about this when Bruce Mutton gave a talk on the previous evening about exploration of the Greenlink – Middle Earth cave system and most of those at this stop-off took the opportunity to go up to Greenlink’s main entrance, courtesy of some recent track clearing by Keith Dekkers.

All of this fits well with ACKMA having made greater commitment in recent years to working more closely with representatives of recreational caving groups, and to that end a 'Memorandum of Understanding' with terms agreed to by both groups, was signed by Ian Eddison, ACKMA President and John (Oz) Patterson, NZSS President over the week.

On the last day, Golden Bay's own cavers were again to the fore with Rob Davies giving a great talk about the use of LIDAR in cave exploration and in the afternoon, we visited his and Michelle Allison's property at East Tākaka to look at a resurgence which drains from the Pīkikirunga Range (mostly marble) to the north of Gorge Creek. Their resurgence is one of many along the west side of this range, all contributing water to the Tākaka River Aquifer. After this short excursion, most of those present then spent some time in Woolshed Cave, also on their property. This cave is a dry, level section of the 10 km long Tōtara Cave, the remainder of which was in flood after Golden Bay's long bout of autumn rains.

Figure 4: Rob Davies, at right with back to camera, explaining to ACKMA delegates the origins of the water which exits from this resurgence on his and Michelle Allison's property at East Tākaka



There were a number of other highlights to the week including a scrumptious afternoon tea at the Bainham Store, a visit to a cave not usually accessible, Van Watson's talk about his 'Adventures in New Guinea', Kieran McKay's Ironstone Cave movie and last but not least, an impromptu but well patronised Photo Competition at the final dinner thanks to Kieran Chandler.

There was also a riveting but sombre talk on the last day, delivered by Prof. Dave Gillieson on behalf of Dr Claire Buswell (both ASF members). Entitled 'The Windmills of our Time – the Industrialisation of the Nullarbor' it outlined a proposal, endorsed by the Western Australian State Government, to cover large tracts of the Nullarbor Plain (on the W.A. side) with solar panels and wind farms, the power to be sold to Singapore. As the Nullarbor is one of the world's largest karst areas, with many caves, those representing cave and karst conservation interests, including ACKMA and ASF, are busy girding their loins for what looks like a long battle over this issue (see more on the ASF website, there's a petition you can sign).

In conclusion, I'd like to acknowledge the support given to the conference by the wider Nelson and Golden Bay caving community including the guiding of some Australian visitors on pre-conference caving trips at Patarau and/or their attendance at conference activities over the week. They include Oz Patterson, Greg Pickford, Martin Grinsted, Chris Stephenson, Bruce Mutton, Phil Castle, Rob Davies, Michelle Allison and Kieran McKay. Ian Millar was also there as a conference delegate. Apologies to anyone I've missed.

