



Conservation Column 4 DISMAL SWAMP – Model Development or Karstic Fun Park?

- Rolan Eberhard

After passing Dismal Swamp on several occasions without stopping, I finally decided that I should make an effort to see this most recent of Forestry Tasmania's tourism ventures.

My baggage on the day included knowing that some environmentalists and members of the karst community had been highly critical of the development, to the extent that they had challenged it through the Tasmanian planning appeals tribunal. Obviously, I wouldn't be writing this article if the challenge had succeeded in quashing the development.

I know only one other person (an ACKMA karstie no less) who has been to Dismal Swamp post-development. His response was not altogether negative, although he commented on the lack of any serious attempt to interpret the karst, and what he regarded as some deficiencies in the site map provided to visitors.

In visiting the place I made a conscious effort to muster an open mind, in order to avoid prejudicing a potentially enjoyable experience that I was paying for and to try and be objective in responding to the content and style of the development.

First, some background, from Forestry Tasmania's web site <www.forestrytas.com.au>. Skip the section in italics if it feels like free advertising; however, it is useful in establishing FT's objectives in developing the site.

What is Dismal Swamp?

Dismal Swamp is an intriguing eco-tourism experience developed by Forestry Tasmania and set in the evocative surrounds of a giant blackwood sinkhole. The attraction provides a contemporary interpretation of an ancient environment.

It features a thrilling 110-metre slide down to the swamp floor, a series of 'maze-like' paths and fascinating art installations inspired by the swamp ecology. The stylish Visitor Centre satisfies the other senses with a brasserie serving delicious meals and beverages, and stunning, not-to-be-missed views of the blackwood swamp from a cantilevered look-out.

Puzzling name

Dismal Swamp is the area's historical name, believed to date back to colonial times. While there are a number of stories about its origin, the most credible is that it was named in 1828 by Government Surveyor John Wedge who was exploring the area at the time under the instruction of Governor Arthur.

It is recorded that the group had a 'dismal' experience surveying the swamp. They were constantly wet and had to sleep on fallen logs and in trees to try and keep dry at night. The neighbouring swamp apparently offered some respite from the damp and hence earned the name Welcome Swamp.

Sarah Joyce about to disappear
out of sight down the tube



Environment

Covering 600 hectares, Dismal Swamp is believed to be the only blackwood sinkhole in the world, formed over thousands of years by dissolving dolomite. It is registered as a National Estate Area based on its importance for understanding the ecology of blackwood forest communities.

The forest is thick with blackwood, myrtle and tea tree. Swamp flora also includes sassafras, native laurel, fungi and man ferns. The swamp is home to creatures such as the burrowing crayfish, spotted-tailed quolls, pademelons, ring-tailed possums, snakes, blue wrens, robins, green parrots and grey goshawks.

Forestry Tasmania's Tourism Vision

Forestry Tasmania is a Government Business Enterprise, responsible for the sustainable management of Tasmania's 1.5 million hectares of State forest for wood production, recreation and conservation. Forestry Tasmania aims to create innovative forestry and timber experiences that combine our heritage with inspiration to provide for a sustainable timber and tourism future.

In 2001, Forestry Tasmania opened its first commercial eco-tourism development, the Tahune Forest Air Walk, in the southern forests, which quickly became one of Tasmania's most popular attractions.

Forestry Tasmania's second eco-tourism venture, the Forest EcoCentre opened in 2002 at Scottsdale. Dismal Swamp is the third major development, but others are in the planning stage including the Forestry Hauler at Maydena in the Derwent Valley, west of Hobart and Hollybank in the State's north.

Supporting the local economy

The \$4 million Dismal Swamp attraction was developed by Forestry Tasmania, with funding contributed by the State Government, the Federal Department of Transport and Regional Services' Dairy Regional Assistance Program and the Cradle to Coast Authority.

Forestry Tasmania has a policy of working with local businesses and using local materials where ever possible to ensure the economic benefits of the project flow to the local community. The policy

extends to the daily operations of the Visitor Centre which specialises in Tasmanian food, beverages and crafts.

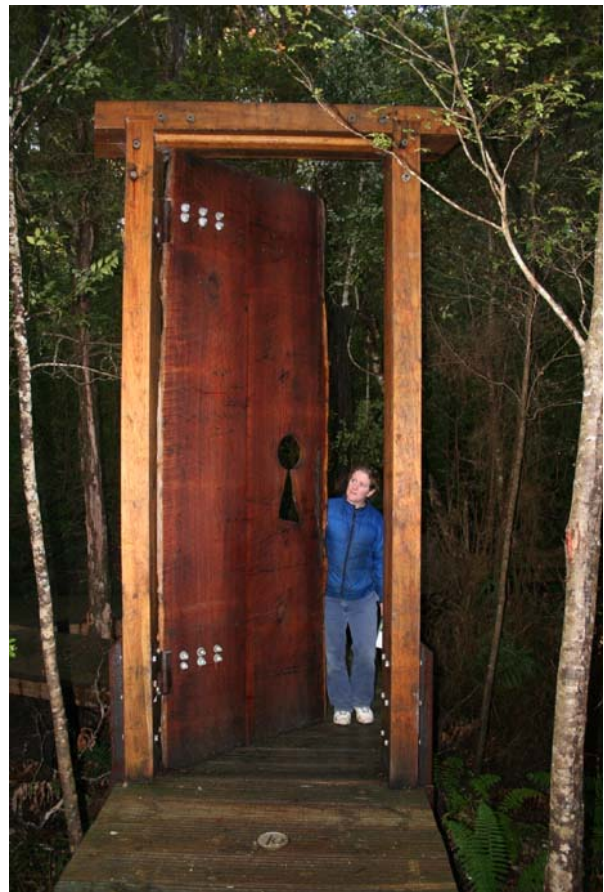
The construction phase provided employment for 30 people. A further 22 new jobs have been created to operate the business. Tasmanian firms involved in the construction include: [architects, artists, builders and suppliers listed].

Promoting Tasmania's fine Timbers

Dismal Swamp showcases Tasmania's sustainable quality timbers growing in their natural environment. The timber is also featured in the furniture and fittings in the Visitor Centre. The ceiling in the Visitor Centre is clad in beautiful blackwood veneer panelling, supported by ingeniously curved laminated blackwood beams. The floor is Tasmanian oak, while the tables contrast blackwood's rich hues with lighter tones of Tasmanian oak. Laminated celery top pine is utilised in the 25 metre-long viewing platform extending from the Visitor Centre.

History

Blackwood was harvested at Dismal Swamp for almost half a century, from the 1930s until 1975. The first timber lease was held by Norm Hay, who built a tramline into the Swamp to transport the timber. He sold the lease to J.S. Lee and Sons (later Kauri Timber) in the late 1940s. Small volumes were cut by stave-getters, who used horses to bring the staves out from the Swamp. Blackwood stave production for beer barrels continued in Circular Head until 1962.



Artistic installation at Dismal Swamp

Walkway access to Dismal Swamp



Over the past half a century there have been several moves to clear Dismal Swamp for farmland for dairying, the latest occurring in the 1980s. This was opposed by local sawmillers, environmentalists and the District Forester, Wes Beckett. Mr Beckett succeeded in having Dismal Swamp declared State forest in 1976. In 1978, 100 ha of the Swamp was declared a Nature Reserve.

Well, that's the blurb. Some key points:

- Dismal Swamp is one of five major tourism developments undertaken or planned by FT, which it regards as a practical expression of a concept of multiple use forest management whereby forests are managed not only for timber production, but also conservation, recreation and tourism.
- Commercial aspects do not necessarily underpin the development, which is also concerned with promoting Tasmanian timbers, invigorating local communities and disseminating FTs views about sustainable forest management.
- Beyond trivial claims that it is the 'only blackwood sinkhole in the world', karst is not a major theme in interpreting or promoting Dismal Swamp.

It is relevant to note that most of Dismal Swamp was formally protected as a Forest Reserve under the 1997 Tasmanian Regional Forest Agreement. This extended the area of blackwood forest already protected within the Dismal Swamp Nature Reserve. The latter reserve is managed by the Parks & Wildlife Service and encompasses about 20% of the swamp.

Reservation of the remainder of Dismal Swamp under the RFA triggered a vigorous response from elements of the mining industry, evidently due to a misapprehension that the area was reserved because it had been included in a database of sites of geoconservation significance being developed at this time.

The issue attracted public hearings before Tasmania's Resource Planning and Development Commission, which was all rather a waste of time because the geoconservation database had no bearing whatsoever on the reservation of Dismal Swamp.

But to cut to the chase, it was late in the day when geomorphology consultant Sarah Joyce and

I turned up at the Dismal Swamp car park, which is set well back from the visitor centre.

There is a short walk to the main structure: a flattened cylindrical building set on pylons 10 metres or more off the ground, which slopes steeply at this point. It's an impressive piece of engineering and architecture. The main area is in an open plan style, comprising a sales area, restaurant and office. At 4 pm closing time was looming, so we didn't have much time at the visitor centre. The place was deserted except for staff.

A quick glance around for interpretive material revealed very little, although some large letters on the wall dogmatically insisted that 'Blackwood swamp forests have played an important role in the development of the Circular Head community'. Allusions to karst were not much in evidence, although I noted the following:

- a rather curious production called 'Dismal Swamp Experience Book', which included a schematic geological cross section of the swamp and some highly succinct text eg. 'Dismal Swamp is a Polje (pron. Polya)' and 'A Polje is a self-draining sinkhole';
- brochures stating, amongst other things, that sinkholes are 'a dramatic sign on the earth's surface of an underground world of caves, springholes [!] and streams';
- certificates on sale as proof that you had ventured into the 'world's only blackwood sinkhole'.

I was told that the main interpretation panels are still coming. Even so, I'd be surprised if karst gets more than a passing mention (but would be happy to be proved wrong on this point).

The staff were helpful and polite, despite the lateness of the hour. They could have suggested that we come back another day to partake of the swamp experience proper.

They didn't, however, and we paid \$20 each and were given a briefing on protocol for the giant slide. It is a major work of engineering: a 110 metre long suspended tube that descends from the visitor centre to the swamp floor. A helmet and protective sack are mandatory.



Artistic installation at Dismal Swamp

Artistic installation at Dismal Swamp



It sounded like fun but 3 or 4 seconds into the ride I started to have doubts. In retrospect, hurtling out of control down a steeply inclined metal tube while trussed up in a hessian sack is a pretty questionable thing to do. No doubt some enjoy the experience.

Anyone thinking they might glimpse the forest canopy whizzing past at 40+ km/hr is likely to be disappointed, due to condensation and lower order plants on the originally transparent plastic cover top.

The ride lasted less than 20 seconds. In fact I slowed to a stop before reaching the large foam 'stopper' at the bottom and had to walk the last few metres. It seems that the slowing down was due to dampness in the tube and the slide had been closed for most of the day for the same reason. Frosty conditions have the opposite effect, and have contributed some record runs – reputedly 110 m in 6 seconds.

The slide is closed unless conditions allow a more stately descent, ideally in the order of 14-17 seconds. Staff told me they check this by timing a run every half an hour or so. A lot of hassle but they take it seriously for good reason – the slide was closed due to injuries shortly after Dismal Swamp first opened. Experiments with different types of matting in the search for an ideal balance between speed and safety are still underway.

There is an alternative for visitors who wish to see the swamp but are disinclined to 'shoot the tube'. This is a walkway benched into the slope below the visitor centre – the normal route back up. It comprises an inclined ramp with occasional cantilevered viewing platforms. These were nicely done in timber.

The main development at the level of the swamp is a maze-like network of raised pathways where one can tour the swamp and an array of artistic installations. Art is a matter of taste and I won't go into my response to individual pieces – I found some interesting and others less so.

However, my principal reaction was that Dismal Swamp does not need a bunch of sculptures to make it an interesting place. To my way of thinking the ferns, mossy trunks and squishy mud are reason enough to go there, not to mention that it's a karstic curiosity in this part of the world.

This does not reflect on the merit or otherwise of the art; it just doesn't belong there. Unfortunately, sculpture trails and the like seem to be in vogue at the moment. Other examples exist in northern Tasmania, not always in the most appropriate settings in my view.

I have similar sentiments regarding the maze. When it comes to short walks for tourists I'm quite happy with ye olde conventional loop track. A few bench seats and a sign or two is about as far as you need to go with the enhancements if you ask me.

Clearly, FT is seeking anything but conventional experiences at Dismal Swamp and its other tourism ventures. Hence the slide, the maze and the sculpture trail – novelties to attract customers who get the company line about sustainable forest management while having fun. Efforts to win hearts and minds are clearly an important consideration on both sides of the forestry debate. Managing Director Evan Rolley, puts it like this in a statement attributed to him on the FT web site:

Artistic installations at Dismal Swamp



Our tourism attractions seek to tangibly express our philosophy of multiple use through the axiom of 'Access, Activity and Adventure'. Through contemporary Tasmanian design and innovative approaches to interpretation, we encourage visitors to engage with the forest in a way that is inspiring, enlightening – and fun. We provide a window into

our unique and sustainably managed native forest timbers.

So, what's new? Everyone has an agenda.

On a positive note, the development at Dismal Swamp sets a high standard environmentally. The precinct occupies a minor portion of the total area of the swamp and adjacent slopes, maybe a few hectares at most. In this regard the maze concept has some advantages, confining the track to a smaller area than might otherwise be the case.

The main structures, such as the visitor centre and the slide, are elevated above the ground. Their construction required trees to be cut down but as far as I could see from our rather rushed visit did not entail major disturbance to the landforms.

As I understand it, the sewage goes to holding tanks that are periodically pumped out for disposal off-site. This is all good of course. On the other hand, the fun park approach is completely at odds with the setting.

Moreover, unless karst receives a higher profile in the still-to-come interpretive material, the cursory treatment it gets at present is underwhelming to say the least.

All the material is on hand for a great story that interweaves the human history of the area with the natural history of an outstanding karst landform, with the added poignancy that Dismal Swamp is a remnant of native vegetation surrounded by other karstic valleys that were cleared for agriculture.



The upper part of the slide, viewed from the visitor centre.