

One of the many roadside memorials. Photo: Elerly Hamilton-Smith.



## JOY AND SADNESS IN THE BALKANS

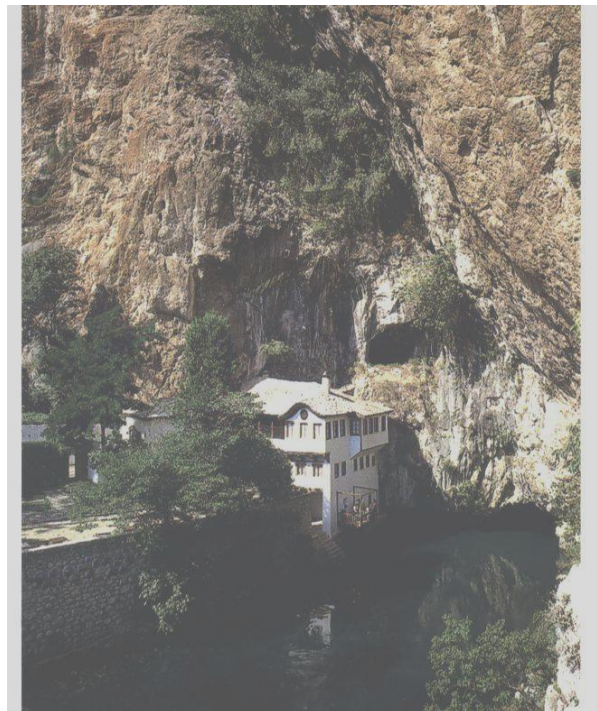
– Elerly Hamilton-Smith

The Karst Research Institute of Slovenia offers an annual Karstological Summer School and this year I was honored by an invitation to deliver the opening Keynote address. I accepted immediately, knowing from previous experience that it would be a wonderful event. Some 140 people attended, and it certainly lived up to my expectations.

There were 2½ days of presentations, and most of those present provided either a brief address or a poster, many of them reporting on exciting work. Although we have abstracts, I am truly looking forward to the published proceedings as a great review of current speleo research. Then we had two days of excursions, primarily led by Andrej Mihevc with his usual energy and enthusiasm.

My address focused upon spatial planning as a basis for karst protection, and hence, largely upon protected areas. It seemed to be well accepted, and has led me into many follow-up discussions.

To me, although there were many great presentations, I found Nico Goldscheider's paper on his project of vulnerability mapping to be one of the more interesting. He provided a great account of his methodology and his presentation was distinguished by its clarity. One of its values is that in covering Europe as a whole, it will potentially provide a basis for trans-boundary cooperation in management of karst. Regrettably, much karst management of the continent is still constrained by thinking within both political boundaries and disciplinary boundaries. In Australia, some states may well find it also provides a useful way of assessing priorities for action.



Buna Cave at Blagaj. Photo from Tekija.

We also had several presentations on a visionary and forward-looking project called the 3KCL project – three karstic cultural landscapes. Three areas, located respectively in Slovenia, Italy and France were selected and in each a thorough holistic and multidisciplinary study was carried out and published. These studies then provided the basis for special community education programs about the nature and values of karst.



Inevitably, the published accounts cannot fully capture the sense of environmental communities that clearly resulted.

There were other topics too numerous to detail, but including the use of GIS technology, sustainability in management, presentation of caves to the public, gypsum karst, a wonderful site on Soqotra Island (Yemen) with ancient writing on the walls, human impacts on karst, the turloughs of Ireland, aspects of speleogenesis and various studies from Cuba, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, India, Egypt, Canada, Lebanon, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Germany, China, Morocco, Algeria and Cyprus. It was indeed regrettable that I was the only person from the Asian-Pacific and Australian regions.



Elery at Hum – the village and the hill.  
Photo: Ivo Lucic.

But then, I took off to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ivo Lucic is leading the restoration and redevelopment of Vjetrenica Cave – a wondrous and spectacular cave that rivals Postojna in the richness of its subterranean biodiversity. Neil Kell has already done a great deal of planning there and his work is highly regarded by all.

My own visit was not so much focused on the restoration but much more on national policy issues in protection and management. But first of all, let me review the itinerary. I flew into Dubrovnik where Ivo met me and after a pleasant lunch on the seafront, we drove across the karst to Vjetrenica.

The first notable sight was the village of Hum. Geomorphologists use the term Hum to denote residual hills (inselbergs) of limestone arising out of a flat area – a common sight in the Balkan karst with its multitude of poljes. Currently, I am trying to find whether the village was named after the nearest Hum or the landform was named after the excellent example at the village!

At Vjetrenica we walked into the gale-force wind coming out of the entrance and then some distance through the spectacular main tunnel. It is a distinctive and striking cave, well worthy of proper development to highlight its very special features.

We talked with the team working with Ivo, and I did the first of a multitude of television and other media interviews. We stayed at the township of Ravno over the next couple of days, drove through the enormous Popovo Polje and then to a number of townships.

Remarkably rugged karst landscape above Vjetrenica Cave. Photo: Ivo Lucic.



We visited a fascinating cave at the village of Blagaj. Buna Cave is a major groundwater spring emerging from a relatively short river cave.

A gracious old building overlooking the entrance is known as the Teknija and is a wonderful visitor centre, operated by the Muslim Community and providing an experience of the peace and beauty which usually characterises that community (in spite of the current appalling demonisation by Bush and Howard). Amongst other sites, we also went to Mostar – a wonderful and very old city with a beautiful bridge.

The sadness of the experience lies in the awful and unescapable record of war. Thousands of bodies have been excavated, often from the caves, and there are thousands more still to found.

We saw many monuments and chapels that marked some of the sites from which bodies have been discovered and identified. The aftermath of the war still rests very heavily upon the National Consciousness.

As a speleological expert I was asked to meet and talk with the members of the Federal Commission for Tracing Missing Persons – again a truly different speleological experience, and one that will certainly remain in my memory.

Then we drove to the capital city Sarajevo – again a beautiful city. On the first night we presented a seminar to a group of conservation-minded people, cavers and others at the National Museum.

Fortunately this building was left unscathed by the war; it is wonderful example of a nineteenth century museum with its immense display of stuffed, or otherwise preserved, large through to very small animals. Personally, I would hate to see it “modernised”.

The next day commenced with a lengthy (and I hope successful) meeting with the Minister for Conservation and Environment and her senior staff. Finally, after lunch, I addressed a gathering at the Academy of Sciences and Arts.

I have returned both saddened by my increased awareness of the truly awful and barbarous war that had so devastated the country and elated by the good cheer and determination of those who are trying to re-build and redevelop the nation. They need our caring support in their efforts – personally, I plan to return.



An overview of Popovo Polje. Photo: Elery Hamilton-Smith.



## COMING EVENTS

In particular, this list covers events of special interest to researchers and managers. If you are interested in any listed events, contact Elery Hamilton-Smith on: <elery@alphalink.com.au>. If you plan to visit North America or Europe, we can probably also provide details for some of the local meetings that take place there.

### 2006

Sept 6-10	National and Regional Conference on Geomorphology, Goiania, Brazil
Sept 17-21	2nd International Conference on Geoparks, Belfast, Northern Ireland
Sept 21-23	8th Conference on Limestone Hydrology, Neuchatel, Switzerland.
Sept 22-24	Hidden Earth – UK National Caving Conference, Staffordshire, U.K.
Sept 8-10	National Cave & Karst Conservancies Forum, Lewisburg, W Virginia
Sept 14-17	EuroSpeleo Forum, Seville, Spain
Sept 24-27	International Symposium on Environmental Geochemistry, Beijing, China
October 9-11	All About Karst and Water, Vienna, Austria
October 21-26	5th International Show Caves Association Congress, Bermuda
Oct 20-25	Protected Area Program Workshop, Jeju Island, South Korea.
mid-Oct	Dwight Deal will be running a tour of the China Karst.
December 3-6	Sustaining Social and Natural Capital, Australia New Zealand Systems Society Conference, Katoomba, New South Wales.

### And Looking Ahead:

2007: January	26th ASF Conference, South Australia, celebrating 50 years of the Australian Speleological Federation. Mt Gambier, South Australia.
2007: April 9-12	CAVEPS – Conference on Vertebrate Evolution, Palaeontology and Systematics, Museum of Victoria, Melbourne
2007: April 29 – May 4	<b>17th ACKMA CONFERENCE, BUCHAN CAVES.</b> This will be part of the celebration to mark the centenary of the discovery of Fairy Cave.
2007: May 15-18	International Cave Rescue Conference, Aggtelek-Josvafo, Hungary
2007: August 13-19	International Conference on Karst Hydrogeology and ecosystems, Western Kentucky University (and a cast of hundreds)
2007: September 17-21	UNESCO International Conference on Geoparks, Belfast, Northern Ireland
2008	European Speleo Congress, Vercors, France
2008: February	19th International Symposium on Subterranean Biology, Perth, W.A.
2009: January	27th ASF Conference – venue & dates to be announced.
2009: May	<b>18th ACKMA Conference, Margaret River, Western Australia</b>
2009: July 19-26	International Congress of Speleology, Texas, USA