

CYCLONE MARCIA HITS CAPRICORN CAVES, QUEENSLAND

Ann Augusteyn



*Caravan Park
Photo: Ann Augusteyn*

In the early hours of Friday 20 February 2015, Cyclone Marcia escalated from a category two to category five cyclone as it crossed over the Queensland coast. At 11.30am the eye of Marcia passed over Capricorn Caves, Queensland just to the north of Rockhampton.

Emerging from our bunker unscathed we gingerly walked out to inspect the aftermath. What a roller coaster of emotions. Trees had fallen like match sticks, covering the caravan park and blocking the roads but missing all the buildings. Tracks, paths and board walks into the caves were impassable, blocked by thick clumps of vine thicket and fallen trees. In one cave entrance an uprooted tree was held up by a vine over a suspension bridge. The forest floor was a sea of green leaves glistening after the rain in the evening sunlight. It was surreal — a calm quietness hung over the amazing shapes of trees stripped of their leaves. Surprisingly, no buildings were damaged except for dents in the gutters but the mass destruction to the dry rain forest was overwhelming and soul destroying.

The clean up began the next day. Hacking through the jungle of vines, and chain sawing the iron barks to open up essential roads and path ways was “hard yakka”. High humidity, temperatures over 35°C, green ants attacking, snakes slithering away and thorns from the vine thicket piercing every limb of your body made the whole recovery process incredibly challenging.

The staff have put in three weeks of hard labour but on Monday 23 February, they magnanimously volunteered their labour and brought along partners and family members yielding rakes and chain saws. Such a day was very emotional.

Later a Rotary Youth Leaders Award group (RYLA) which was staying in our Lodge, volunteered two hours of its time every morning before breakfast to help clear tracks. This not only produced amazing results but lifted the morale of the Caves’ staff.

With no electricity to pump water and treat waste water, no communication systems, no refrigeration for 11



This water tank saved a building from destruction

Photos: Ann Augusteyn



Cables entangled in vines

days, we were closed to visitors. The caves reopened on Monday 2 March.

Unfortunately the 240v cables supplying the cave lighting remain tangled in the vine thicket and the solar power supply was decommissioned as unsafe to use. We are currently running our brand new LED lights and CBus computerised system on generator power with fingers crossed that there is no long term impact.

Organising quotes for insurance companies, insisting on responsible clearing of the vine thicket to reinstate the power lines , not to mention the weeks of removing fuel for bush fires from the forest, continues to be challenging but we hope it will be business as usual by Easter. Please - no more cyclones anywhere in Queensland as that puts a blanket cover over the whole state in the eyes of the tourist.

As for the caves, there is not a single piece of evidence that the eye of Marcia had passed over the limestone ridge.



Cave guides Lucas and Kegan clear the track (note extensive safety equipment (Ed.))



Jordan Wheeler pulling away the vines

Photos: Ann Augusteyn



Above. Main visitor path to caves was inaccessible.

Right. Uprooted tree caught by a vine prevented it from crashing onto the suspended boardwalk.

Below. Arborist working up a tree to clear loose branches hanging in the canopy.

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