Voice training?

What’s this got to do with cave management?

If you’ve been a cave guide, managed cave guides or taken an interest in cave tours, you have probably experienced these problems.

Guides taking tours are an integral part of cave presentation and management. But how much interest do we give to the health issues associated with continual use of the voice? How much do we consider voice quality in relation to the visitor’s experience as well as the delivery of the guide’s message?

Voice training for Tasmanian cave guides

The Environmental Tourism Program has funded a voice training program for cave guides. This consists of two six-hour sessions at both Hastings Caves and Mole Creek Caves. Guides from Gunns Plains Cave have been included in the program.

The training sessions have included:

- Relaxation skills
- Neck stretches
- Humming to warm-up the larynx prior to talking to groups
- Sound exercises
- Playing with words
- Adding colour with words
- Pausing
- Tone
- Applying intentions to speech

All the guides attending reported that the first session was fun and that they were keen to attend the second session. The second session is to be held approximately eight weeks after the first, so guides can practise and play with what they were taught at the first session.

Who organised and delivered the training

The trainer is MICHAEL EDGAR from the School of Visual and Performing Art at the University of Tasmania, who has wide experience in the theatre industry.

CATHIE PLOWMAN from the Parks and Wildlife Service, Tasmania, made a successful application for money to fund the voice training program and is coordinating the program.

EXAMPLE: Port Arthur Historic Site

As part of the guide training program, Port Arthur Historic Site has recently employed a professional voice and drama coach. Weekly workshops are available to all guides and one-on-one sessions are available. All new guides are required to attend these sessions as part of their work and there are currently eight guides doing regular voice work with the coach. Existing guides have the choice to attend these sessions, with some doing so and others declining.

Voice coach ALAN ANDREWS says ‘It’s like taking your voice to the gym.’

One aspect of voice work that he coaches guides with is breathing. Alan says ‘that without good breath control, guides will restrict themselves to sentences that are always the same length. This makes for a monotonous presentation. With breath work, variety can be added to both voice tone and sentence length.’

Finding a lower register is another area Alan assists both voice tone and sentence length.

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EXAMPLE: Chronic laryngitis leads to guide’s resignation

A few years ago a colleague at the Mole Creek Caves in Tasmania had such severe laryngitis that she recorded her tour on tape and carried a portable cassette player through the cave playing her commentary. Not really the kind of quality visitor experience that most of us aspire to. And not a nice way for a long-serving dedicated guide to finish her career: unable to talk and giving up her job on medical advice to prevent permanent voice damage.

Is voice training an issue that cave managers should have to concern themselves with?

‘A guide using their voice for work every day without being taught how to use it is like a ballet dancer going onto the stage without first warming up.’

— ALAN ANDREWS, voice coach, Port Arthur Historic Site, Tasmania

Worries carry approximately seven per cent of the message, while the voice carries 38 per cent and physical use 55 per cent of the message (Hurt, 1993).

— FROM TALKING THE TALK BY LORRAINE MERRITT, CHOICE BOOKS, 2003

*Physical use here means physical presentation such as hand gestures, facial movements, eye contact and standing position.

If we rate issues such as guide health and effective message delivery to visitors as important, then we need to ensure that guides are equipped with good voice skills.

How do we do this?

There are no voice training standards included in the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), and there are no established training programs in this area. Perhaps things are different in New Zealand but I’m still to discover what’s happening in this country. Voice work is an established and integral part of the theatre and performing world where practices such as voice warm-ups, relaxation, postures, breathing exercises and facial exercises are as much a part of performing as learning a script and being on stage.