

Workshop summary: responding to change in cave management

Steve Bourne, Elery Hamilton-Smith and Andy Spate

Many feel the quality of cave management is falling; we found ourselves in a number of informal discussions on exactly this at the recent Australian Speleological Federation Conference in Mount Gambier. When the broader context is examined, it is not just caves, but parks in general, even at the highest level of World Heritage. Presumably, World Heritage sites should be the best managed, as the sites with outstanding universal values to be showcased to the world. A National Geographic survey of 415 World Heritage sites, undertaken by over 400 independent, suitably qualified people, found the standard of management across these sites had declined significantly since 2004. Identified causes for this decline were mass tourism, inappropriate tourism products and commercial and industrial development. There is a strong conflict between tourism and heritage management on one hand and a focus on economic return on the other.

The discussion raised a number of specific issues relating to cave management in Australasia

- Funding, and in particular, funding mechanisms; funding is usually dispensed on an annual basis with little chance of carryover into the next financial year. Long-term plans are difficult if not impossible to implement with current arrangements so we are failing to encourage a holistic management approach.
- Leadership - political aspirations influence direction, with this influence flowing through to administration.
- Training - training of staff to enable them to deliver professional customer service has, like all education in Australia, suffered in quality and availability.
- Communication - clear lines of communication are not always maintained.
- Directions of government - in some cases the environment is now low on the political agenda, and is being overshadowed by industries such as logging and mining.

- Geodiversity is low on the political agenda - environmental concerns are dominated by biodiversity and failure to recognise the importance of geological heritage in holistic landscape management.
- Public versus contracted management or private ownership

Some successes in cave management in Australasia

- Some valuable trans-boundary cooperation – e.g. Alpine Parks Committee in Victoria, NSW and ACT, including development of indigenous involvement and the legal authority across SA and WA border.
- The increase of the Department of Conservation budget in NZ to \$380M has lifted the value of the environment.
- Community input is being achieved in several areas in a variety of forms, including Friends groups, stakeholder committees
- Increasing awareness of the environment through interpretation although difficult to measure effectiveness. However many areas are using a “grass roots” approach, focussing on a educational approach with clear environmental messages e.g. Wee Jasper
- Controlling development in catchment areas eg Waitomo, Tasmania
- Training successes- Jenolan Caves has industry accredited training through TAFE; WA sharing training across three agencies
- Redevelopment of caves in recent times- eg Temple of Baal, Nettle Caves (Jenolan) Ruakuri Cave (Waitomo), Wollondilly Cave (Wombeyan), South Glory Cave (Yarrongobilly) with others in planning phase, eg Jewel Cave (Augusta Margaret River), Orient and River Caves (Jenolan)

It was noted that Australasia is still leading the way in cave management, but we recognise and share with some excellent overseas examples;

Skocjan Caves in Slovenia and Carlsbad Caverns in US.

The issues raised can be summarised into three areas;

- Governance - Australia has three tiers of government, but governance – “the art of working out the best way to manage things”, is lacking. Governments work in political term cycles and a lack of continuity reduces effectiveness.
- Holism and openness - a lack of clear direction and understanding of principles. A lack of finance and support.
- Ambiguities of roles – many conservation agencies have been forced to raise much of the costs of protection and conservation through tourism development, and often suffer in quality of both resource management and visitor experience.

A theoretical commentary from Elery:

This is very much a personal perspective growing out of my professional experience on policy analysis and development – don't blame Steve or Andy for it!

The political environment of modern western countries has come to be dominated by a set of ideas generally known as the Neo-Liberalist hegemony. This has a significant influence on conservation policies and we are only just learning to develop an effective response to it.

It all developed at the time when, soon after becoming prime minister, Margaret Thatcher said,

“We must recognise that the world is changing. There is no such thing as society. There is only people and they are either winners or losers”

If there is no such thing as society, this makes government pretty redundant. Governments have moved to increasingly fragmented decision-making and petty regulation. To quote Zygmunt Bauman, relying upon government “is like taking a flight from Paris to New York, and half way across the Atlantic, discovering there is nobody in the cabin up front”

So, social capital and social responsibility is being subsumed into an individualised society, managed by a market-based economy; public

responsibility, e.g. environmental management, is increasingly being transferred to the private sector. Having an individualised (Thatcherite) society means that it is up to individuals to ensure they become winners rather than losers

So: the gap between rich and poor is widening

Even the winners are out on their own, particularly if anything goes wrong, so

There is great concern about risk. Risk Management is now the world's biggest industry ...

It is not just about excessive and often ridiculous over-regulation but “it now includes all the bureaucrats who must spend their lives filling files with evidence that neither they, their organisation nor their political masters can ever be held responsible for anything” (Ulrich Beck)

So, the bad news is that the common good of our parks and other aspects of our environment is suffering from our economically fundamentalist, risk-obsessed and often-inept governments who fight for the next election but not the next generation.

The good news is that . . .

- The private sector is now accepting and turning to a much greater sense of social responsibility, and
- The community sector can develop, and is increasingly developing, skills in governance, and from that are able to move back to genuine quality of management

Conclusion

Despite the issues raised, it is clear that individuals can make significant impacts. This may be at a local or site level, a regional level or at a political level. The long-term sustainability of Australasia's cave and karst will be determined by the impact of these willing individuals and their abilities combined for more effective management. Development of this capacity is a key role that ACKMA can and often does play.

(if anyone wants to read more widely about the issues raised here, particularly the nature and influence of Neo-liberalism, Elery can provide an annotated bibliography)