

# Jenolan looks at challenges of interpretation into the 21st century

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## Background

Jenolan Caves has recently added a self-guided tour to its product range. The Nettle Cave stands prominent at the gateway to Jenolan Caves and would certainly not have gone unnoticed by the traditional occupants of the area. Since its discovery by Europeans in the 1840s the Nettle Cave has been witness to the onslaught of exploration, tourism, infrastructure development, abandonment and now re-development. Its beauty was enjoyed by many in its early history then closed and hidden away for 73 years. Its recent reopening has been generally welcomed but also subject to some criticism and controversy. From as early as the dreamtime to the present day the cave has been subject to “interpretation” by humans.

Using the Nettle Cave as a backdrop we will look at interpretation at Jenolan as it has progressed into the 21st century and the challenges ahead of us.

## The Past

Jenolan like many other cave sites were remote areas and presented access difficulties. The railway across the Blue Mountains in the 1860s saw the beginnings of serious tourism but still a long haul by horseback or on foot from the railheads. Access improvements brought horse drawn carriages and then motor vehicles to the caves but it was still a long journey in those early days, with a large number of visitors taking advantage of the guest accommodation available. Visitor demographics would have generally been people of European descent, probably mostly British, well educated, reasonably affluent with similar values and expectations of their visit.

Jenolan’s Nettle Cave with its relative easy access fulfilled the expectations of visitors into the early 1900s.

By the 1930s Jenolan was boasting presentation to the public of what can be argued some of the best-decorated caves in the

world. The River Cave, Temple of Baal and the Orient Caves were leading interpretation into the era of “Cave Fantasy”. Story telling revolved around European/ British themes. The Nettle Cave appears to have lost its popularity to these “prettier” caves and was closed in 1934.

Roads have now improved and the caves are a popular day trip from Sydney. Alternate transport has been considered with cable car access first proposed in the 1970s and again in the 1990s but never progressed.

Following the Second World War the large wave of non-English European migrants from Italy, Greece etc saw a change in visitor demographics. In the 1970s/1980s many immigrants from Asia began to make up a large proportion of visitors and through the 1990s to the present day we see many family groups descendent from the Sub Continent and the Middle East. This on going change in demographics has been a constant challenge to managing and interpreting the caves

## Today’s Challenge:

Cave site managers are at present going through a most challenging era. They carry the legacy of the tradition guided tours and the romance of the past into an era of regulations, demands and constant change. A site manager needs to be aware of and alert to the environmental issues of their individual sites and carry the responsibility of maintaining the operation within the codes of our own ASF guidelines and, like any other business manager, they need to meet customer expectation in an ever changing society of cultural backgrounds and client demographics. They must also remain on top of human resource laws, risk management, OH&S and possible litigation etc. The business must also perform within the parameters of a business plan and meet competition including electronic media not previously encountered.

We believe there will be a place for the traditional guided cave tour for a long way into

the future however for all the reasons stated above there has been a need to move with other ideas: -

**Self-Guided Tours:** The self-guided tour has been around for a long time. However at Jenolan it has been introduced to the product range for the first time during December 2006. It was in the planning for over 10 years and the subject of much debate as to its need and location. The decision was finally made to “re-open” the Nettle Cave, a twilight cave not shown to the public since 1932. Very different to the “dark” caves we all know and love at Jenolan. Many were concerned the Nettle Cave may be inferior to the other caves and not representative of Jenolan Caves. Quality of interpretation was seen to be essential for the success of the new product.

When addressing the interpretation it was decided to proceed with a high quality audio presentation. While contractors were employed to implement the system input and material came from scientific and industry expertise including our own team.

The opportunity was also taken to involve the local aboriginal people who have given a valuable contribution to the indigenous interpretation of the district. We believe this recent contact has also given our guides a much clearer understanding of the indigenous background of the area.

Still concerned about client acceptance of a self-guided tour it was decided to package the tour with the traditional guided tours. This combination of interpretation medium seems to have found success.

Since its introduction over 30,000 people have visited the cave with excellent feedback and only one recorded expression of concern about the product. The positive comments on combining the guided and self-guided products have been encouraging.

**Meeting Customer Needs:** The expectation of visitors to a cave site varies considerably and not all patrons will appreciate what **our** aims and objectives are.

Diversity of nationalities, often non-English speaking, with a broad range of religious and cultural backgrounds may all end up on the one tour. The self-guided tour with its multi language audio guide helps but tour guides must adapt to this multiculturalism with

acceptance and enthusiasm as this has been and will remain an ever-increasing part of this country's society.

We provide specialised tours or adapt to cater for several sub groups within the one tour.

The way we deal with photography on our tours has changed in recent years with the introduction of digital cameras.

**Theme Tours:** Historic tours, Ghost tours, murder mysteries, musical performances and even the old fantasy based tours can play an important role in interpretation by focusing on special interest groups.

The recent upgrading of the lighting in the Temple of Baal has created an atmosphere where the interpretation is through the medium of light and sound.

**Adventure Tours:** Adventure tours attracted over 3000 visitors to Jenolan Caves during 2005/2006. Many of these people have experienced other forms of skill based adventure activities and interpretation is probably not a priority to them.

The expectation of these visitors can present a challenge and I believe cave site managers providing adventure tours throughout Australia are leaders in incorporating good interpretation into their caving and adventure activities.

**Quality of delivery comes at a cost:** Whatever the medium of delivery the quality must be maintained and this comes at a price. We all know the expensive nature of cave infrastructure, which in itself plays an important role in providing access and support to the interpretation at any site. Effective signage is also necessary and expensive.

The ongoing provision of a quality audio system for the self-guided tour at Jenolan has a budget of around 10% of the business operating expenditure.

Training plays a critical role. Staff involved in interpretation activities progress through a competency based training programme using both internal and external training resources. Through an alliance with the local TAFE College staff obtain nationally accredited qualifications in Tourism and Outdoor recreation including specialised training in interpretive guiding. Higher levels of

competency are recognised by progression through a grading/ remuneration system.

This programme has supported a high level of professionalism and self esteem among the guiding staff at Jenolan.

### **The Future:**

The human spirit of adventure and thirst for knowledge will always make caves a place of interest and we will need to continue to adapt to change. Perhaps the future may see a cable car or monorail, better road access, advances in technology. All this places even further pressure on the environment and how we approach its interpretation. Will the “Guided Tour” become a thing of the past and fully automated processes take over?

To provide a valuable interpretive experience to our clients in the future we must: -

- Continue to focus on understanding the cultural diversity of our customers.
- Involve representation from other cultures including the traditional landowners. This will assist us to “get the message right” for both the deliverer and receiver
- Keep training up to date using current best practices in interpretative guiding.
- Use technology, but make sure it remains an interpretation aid and not the subject.

**Access:** Access into Jenolan Caves will be improved through either: One way road access and circular departure; multi-tier parking over existing car parks; multi-tier parking on the tops with a gondola, shuttle bus or light rail, monorail or transport pods on rail to the valley floor.

Determining factors will of course be cost but also energy changes for the transport industry, caused through environmental demand to fight greenhouse effects.

It is perceived that “Access to all” will be a goal of cave redevelopment and great attempts will be made to provide more access for the disabled, coupled with new innovations in

people moving within caves to minimise visitation impact.

**Aboriginal Culture:** The Devils Coach House & Nettle Cave self guided tour at Jenolan Caves, includes commentary of a female Aboriginal elder. In the future, employment of Aboriginal staff is likely to occur; Aboriginal acknowledgement at the commencement or during each tour is very likely to become mandatory of guides.

The challenge for interpretation of Aboriginal culture in the future is the potential to over emphasise the Aboriginal culture to the point it becomes part of the product, therefore paid for, and in turn the importance of the culture and its role in the landscape is potentially lessened for the sake of tourism.

**Photography:** Photography is becoming a high demand component of tours and affecting time constraints and tour content. Photography in the future could even be banned.

The challenge for the future here is balancing the need of visitors to capture mementos of their visit and not restrict the important interpretive components of the cave tour. A memory stick containing cave images included in the price of each tour is a possible solution. The memory stick may even incorporate the temporary entry to the cave rather than a ticket as well as retained by the visitor for its images. Souvenir photographs of visitors at a major cave feature, is a likely new product; Photographic tours may be another product; There would likely be more structured photographic opportunities.

**Demographics of tour groups:** The multicultural structure of Australia’s population is likely to continue and tolerance of other cultures will improve due to the sheer weight of a diverse society. Human nature however will isolate and persecute certain minority groups.

The challenges of interpretation in caves such as Jenolan will be due to rapid improvement to current impoverished countries leading to increased multicultural visitation growth. These visitors will require continued education and reinforcement of how to care for and minimise impact while visiting caves.

Multi lingual interpretation devices are likely to be used even more.

**Training:** Interpretation of caves will be more automated through advanced technologies. Challenges will revolve around maintaining standards but keeping the human element.

**Ticketing:** Ticketing will likely become linked more to souvenirs and packaged into the pricing structure. A cave ticket could become a memory stick with temporary access to the cave via scanners and modern turnstiles and images of the cave will be incorporated in the memory stick as a tour souvenir.

Loyalty programs may be linked with national identification cards and may even take the form of microchips inserted under the skin in the wrist of visitors.

**Development:** To minimise long standing challenges such as lint in caves, our Management Plan indicates a desire to implement overalls for visitors and research is likely to continue to develop solutions to minimise this known impact of visitors. They may eventually walk through a vacuumed doorway prior to the first chamber of each cave. This would aim to remove lint, hair and dust particles from each visitor at each cave entrance. New access developments are likely to be researched and may eventually take the form of magnetic levitation devices, devised initially for the disabled but adopted for general public tours.

Built caves are likely to be considered for “New Product” such as the Glowworm cave in Mt Tamborine in Queensland. Cave sites such as Jenolan will likely form cooperatives with zoological societies and museum fauna and entomological departments and have built caves with habitats for captive breeding programs for cave biota, mammals, and human visitation.

**Refurbishment:** Refurbishment of caves will take two distinct directions, contemporary and historic.

One will head down the modern methods of visitor sensory stimulation, lint minimisation devices, and people moving systems. Interpretation may become very technical with lesser need for guiding staff.

Another direction will be based on maintaining caves that are in their original developed condition. Heritage views will be paramount and any development will follow the strictest heritage standards to maintain the cave in its originally developed form. Interpretation may follow traditional guided methods.

**Technology:** Futuristic engineering developments in holographic imaging, are likely to interpret caves instead of guides, demonstrating re-enactments from discovery through to fauna deaths. Technology will enable management to structure tours so precisely that the product is as consistent as a Big Mac at McDonalds. Tours will run on time every time and more tours will be able to be structured increasing product availability, accommodating more visitors and increasing gross revenue.

Creative cave tour guides will be employed for the heritage caves and cave fantasy will form a basis of the heritage cave tours. Other avenues for interpretative cave tour guide employment will be the merging of this role with that of zoologist in the “habitat for cave biota” built caves.

## Synopsis

Economics however, will dictate less staff, more structured technical resources to present caves. Consideration of constructing caves such as a glowworm cave is likely.