

Children's and youth activities at Jenolan – an (R)Evolutionary tale

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Abstract

Cave tours have been running officially at Jenolan Caves in New South Wales since 1867, with adventure tours added to the mix in the 1980s; in 2004 Ted Matthews, Jenolan Caves guide, developed our first child focused activity - 'Stones 'n' Bones', a paleontological and geological treasure hunt for kids. The popularity of this tour alerted us to visitor interest in activities specifically aimed at children. A range of tours were developed and trialled with varying success; activities were modified and more added to the school holiday program. In 2010 activities aimed specifically at the youth market were developed and were an instant hit with high school students. This paper looks at the philosophy behind the children's and youth program at Jenolan and charts the evolution of those activities.

Introduction

Cave tours have been running officially at Jenolan Caves in New South Wales since 1867, with adventure tours added to the mix in the 1980s; in 2004 Ted Matthews, Jenolan Caves guide, developed our first child focused activity - 'Stones 'n' Bones for Dr Jones', a paleontological and geological treasure hunt for kids. The popularity of this tour alerted us to visitor interest in activities specifically aimed at children. A range of tours, known as the *Discovery Series*, was developed and trialled with varying success; activities were modified and more added to the school holiday program. In 2010 activities aimed specifically at the youth market, called Beyond the Boundaries, were developed and were an instant hit with high school students.

Together the Discovery Series and Beyond the Boundaries have constituted both an evolution in the way we deliver tours and activities for these age groups, and a revolution in our thinking about products aimed at children and youth. But with such a major shift in our perspective, sometimes it has felt, to those of us

running and developing the tours, that we've also been fighting a small revolution.

In the Beginning

In 2004 Andy Lawrence, Visitor Services Manager at Jenolan, asked guides for any ideas they had to increase family visitation. Ted Matthews, a long standing guide and previously a science teacher, developed the instantly popular *Stones and Bones for Doctor Jones* tour, later abbreviated to Stones & Bones. The activity was welcomed by guides; it followed a familiar pattern, being much like a normal tour, but following a treasure map and visiting some off-track sections of the caves. The tour ran sporadically, sometimes being limited to children staying with their families at Caves House, in the hope this would build overnight visitation.

In 2008 Rebecca Lewis developed two more children's tours and an evening craft activity and the Discovery Series were born. The first activity, *Animal Discovery*, was based on a workbook that the children were intended to fill in as they went along. The workbook also included some puzzles to do at home and some pictures to colour in. Children were given a free drawing pack at the conclusion of the tour. While the tour sold well, the kids saw the workbook as being too much like school and were distracted by the puzzles and games.

The next activity, the *Kids Photographic Tour*, never really took off; kids arrived without cameras, without knowing much about how to use them or without much interest in photography. It was a mismatch of good activity with the wrong demographic. The guides struggled to find a way to make it work, but without success, and the tour was dropped.

The *Crafty Kids Club* also proved problematic. Some kids, typically little girls, would put a great deal of effort into their craft works while their brothers would throw something together as swiftly as possible and want to do something else other than craft. After this, the group was intended to go for a torch lit walk to the Blue

Lake, but invariably nobody had a torch and often not enough warm clothes. In addition the activity clashed with family movies run by Caves House, splitting the audience. Numbers remained low. It too was dropped. However we had the beginnings of a program that we could build on.

Discovery Series

Ian Eddison, Rebecca Lewis and I developed the program of four tours that now constitutes the *Discovery Series*. *Stones 'n' Bones* was brought back into the mix and remains highly successful. Animal Discovery was adapted as a more

involving, activity based tour and two new interactive games were included.

The aims of the program were to engage children in a new and exciting way; to interpret our above ground karst and to increase visitation by giving families a reason to return. The tours covered areas and ideas that could not be fully investigated on a normal tour.

Two of four tours run on alternate days, with the longer 3 hour tours in the mornings, when the children are fresher. *Stones 'n' Bones* runs with *Junior Guides* and *Bats, Bugs & Beasties* runs with *Junior Explorers* to avoid covering any of the same locations on any one day.



Stones 'n' Bones – treasure map leads to understanding

In *Stones 'n' Bones* children follow a treasure map to locate the amazing geological and paleontological treasures found by a fictitious scientist, weaving on and off the tourist routes. As it progresses the children try to solve the puzzles of how these things came to be in the cave. Helmets and lights are required for off-

track sections. Finding Dr Jones' treasure chest provides an opportunity for kids to touch and feel things they normally cannot. With appropriate guidance they come up with their own answers to scientific problems. Participants learn some map skills, enticed by the classic concept of a treasure map. The tour lasts for 1.5 hours.



Bats, Bugs & Beasties – on platypus watch

Animal Discovery, rebadged as *Bats, Bugs & Beasties*, looks closely at Jenolan's fauna, past and present. It is a chance to utilise different parts of our beautiful karst environment; dark caves, a twilight cave and the Blue Lake. It meets one of the major aims of the kids program – above ground interpretation. The workbook has been dropped in favour of interactive games, such as the Echolocation Game, which illustrates bats' adaptations to living in the dark and the specifically developed Jenolan Biodiversity Game, a guessing game without winners or losers, which reinforces learnings, but is totally non-threatening. We also visit fossil sites in the caves and discuss the different animals found in different parts of the karst system. The tour finishes with a platypus spotting stroll around the lake. The platypuses seem to understand the

importance of getting kids interested in nature and frequently make an appearance, even though it is the middle of the day! The activities run for two hours.

Junior Guides, a three hour session, is shaped around the activities a guide may be involved in; a look at a section of show cave, a matching game that is water themed, a chance to be the guide, map reading, a twilight cave visit, sound mapping in two locations and real caving (involving a treasure hunt). The activity includes a morning tea break, usually by the lake, and is another opportunity to interpret our above ground environments. A range of other activities and games may be substituted or added, according to kids' abilities and interests. Flexibility is essential to the successful outcome of the activity.



Junior Guides – on an underground treasure hunt

The theme of *Junior Explorers*, our other three hour activity, is that cave exploration is cool. In this activity the kids both learn about our explorers, past and recent, and become explorers themselves. After considering what it might be like to be the person to discover a cave the kids learn how to draw cave maps as they move through the caves, using the base layer of the Lucas Cave and River Cave maps developed by the Jenolan Survey Group. The Jenolan maps are layered, so you can select what information you want to print. The version we use includes just the cave outline and tracks. The children add features, names and a key. This is followed by the Explorers Matching Game, where when the kids match a pair of explorer pictures, they get to draw out of a bag photos of what the explorer found. They then follow their own maps out of the cave by headlamp, becoming inspired by the thought that they too can become real cave explorers. After morning tea by the lake we do some sketching of natural objects, to reinforce the idea that explorers need to be observant.

Beyond the Boundaries

Inspired by the success of the *Discovery Series*, and aware that youth is a largely overlooked section of the tourism market, we decided to try some youth adventures. In order to appeal to the target market we named it *Beyond the Boundaries*. It consists of two complementary activities, plus a discounted package for both, and was launched early in 2010.

The morning activity, *Pushing the Boundaries*, lasts for 2.5 hours and includes similar activities to Junior Explorers but is off track by headlamp all the way. It moves gradually into less developed and more challenging sections of the show cave system. Again, options are built in according to the ability and interest of group members. Participants learn about Jenolan's explorers, map making, landmarking and pick up some basic caving skills. Plus they have the thrill of being seen to go where others cannot, as they pass show cave tours on their way from one untracked section to another.



Pushing the Boundaries – map making

Pushing the Boundaries is a great activity for less gung-ho teens and those with limited cash or time. It is also an excellent stepping stone to *Breaking the Boundaries*, our longer afternoon adventure.

Youth are natural risk takers. They come to the caves with their families, but like to do things independently. *Breaking the Boundaries* provides the perfect means to test themselves out in a seemingly daring activity, develop a range of skills and build self confidence. The activity lasts for four hours during which the teens have to

find the cave in McKeown's Valley, using a topographic map with bluffs marked, and then use a very complex cave map to find their way through the cave. There are frequent encounters with wildlife and, in the cave, opportunities to interpret fossils, inscriptions and cave features. The tour operates on the principle of challenge by choice, with easier and harder options available. There are some very tight squeezes for those who really want to break their mental boundaries.



Breaking the Boundaries – challenge by choice

The combined package, *Totally Beyond the Boundaries*, makes for a truly memorable day and is also suitable for youth groups and schools.

The Learning Curve

The *Boundaries* adventures were welcomed by staff. The only change required was a change of timetable to slightly increase the time for Breaking and to ensure a full lunch break for guides. Most adventure guides are happy to work on Breaking, as it feels much like any adventure tour, with the bonus of being in a beautiful cave. Pushing is marginally less appealing to guides as it requires more facilitation and a high degree of flexibility.

The *Discovery Series* has set us on a much steeper learning curve, as we developed and adapted this ambitious set of activities aimed at children.

While bookings were reasonably strong for *Animal Discovery*, client satisfaction was not as high as we had hoped; to the kids the workbook seemed more like school than fun in a cave. The solution was simple yet complex; drop the

workbook and focus on interactivity. This required the development of a range of games and props. It worked a treat with very positive reactions from the children. Unfortunately it still did not sell to the same degree as Stones ‘n’ Bones, though we knew it was a good product. The solution was to swap to a catchier name. Bats, Bugs & Beasties did the trick, with tour participation jumping from 54% to 94 % almost instantly.

When we began the kids tours we bought some miners helmets, which were cheap, but it turned out they could not adjust to a small enough size for little heads and the visor got in the way. So we used some old caving helmets. They were not only too big, but very heavy for children. The helmets were a constant source of distraction and discomfort. We tried using some dense foam as padding, but it was hard to keep attached and did not solve the problem of the weight. Probably one of the biggest improvements we have made to the kids’ tours was to invest in lightweight, smaller caving helmets. The kids are

much more engaged and the activities run far more smoothly.

A tougher problem to solve was where to set the age range. It was originally set at 6-12 years of age, trying to ensure a big enough demographic to fill tours and to allow all kids from a family to participate. All participating guides felt this was possibly too young a starting point but bowed to pressure from others, especially ticket sellers, to lower the age range for shorter activities, dropping the starting age to 4 years at one point. This was a total disaster, as the younger kids were not developmentally able to participate fully. Guides had to lower expectations and levels of information, with the tours now less suitable for the older kids they were designed for.

Younger kids tended to have parents attached, which was also undesirable. In addition the constant changes got a lot of staff offside, as they lost confidence in their knowledge of the tours; parents were inadvertently told the wrong age range and then would see others permitted to do the tour their similarly aged kids had been denied. Though the confusion was understandable, it was not helping build the tours. Eventually it was decided to raise the age range to 7-11 years for all tours. Older kids are generally in high school and thus eligible for the *Boundary* activities, though we will include them if requested. Younger children still have a range of cave tours which they can attend with their family.

When we began the *Discovery Series* it was decided, after much debate, that parents would be allowed to participate, but would not be encouraged to do the tours, instead being offered show caves with coinciding times. Many parents were keen to attend, which created major issues for the guides. Firstly we often ended up with more parents than children, which somewhat took the adventure out of it for the kids. Parents who had been talked into a show cave tour would get upset when they saw other parents on the activity. Helicopter parents would disturb the flow of the activity, giving different instructions to those of the guide, and interested parents would be asking questions they wanted answers to, which were not necessarily of interest to the kids, or relevant to the activity.

In addition, some parents would lose interest after they had photos of their child doing

something different, or when they realised it really was aimed just at kids. These parents would sometimes then depart, taking their children with them; sad for the kids and bad for the image of the activities. Meanwhile some ticket sellers persisted in selling it as an ideal family activity, a role more suited to a traditional show cave tour.

We have now decided to keep the activities strictly child only, as they were originally designed. Numbers have declined initially, but we expect they will build up again as word of mouth spreads. The activities are running more successfully. Kids are more focussed, the activities can be aimed more directly at them and they are working better as a team.

The exception to the no parent rule is if a child has a disability and would benefit by having a known adult with them. This will ensure that no children are excluded, without taking away from the experience of the group.

There is no doubt that parents are keen for cave based activities, other than traditional tours, that they can do as a family. Our next job is to develop activities to meet this demographic; something that will have them working together as a group but that will involve the whole family. However, it is important that we acknowledge that the activities we have developed with a primary school age demographic in mind are not suitable to fill this role.

When the *Discovery Series* began, the morning activities did not sell as well as their afternoon counterparts. The belief among guides who did not run the activities was that this was because there was not a market for three hour activities; the belief among most of those running the activities was that it was partially due to some ticket sellers not feeling confident in the activities and partially due to less interesting, catchy names. The success of the newly renamed *Bats*, *Bugs 'n' Beasties* confirmed this second conviction. Luckily over time the positive feedback from participants has built seller confidence. Unfortunately, though we have tried, we still haven't come up with names that we think are better and still give a sense of what the activities involve. As we do not wish to chop and change things any more than absolutely necessary we have decided to stick with the original names

until we come up with ones that really hit the mark, rather than something marginally better.

Changing Perceptions

Surprisingly, the major issue for the activities was actually gaining the support of the guiding staff. Being familiar with linear, information-based tours, it was difficult for many to comprehend that a three hour cave activity could work. As many are very good at keeping children involved on their tours they also could not see the necessity of running separate activities for them, especially longer ones. This led to under selling of activities. The number of new tours added to the confusion, with sellers being uncertain of what each different activity entailed. In addition, some staff found the activities difficult to facilitate and blamed this on the length of the sessions.

To solve this problem we put copies of the Standard Operating Procedures on the lunch table, in the ticket office, in reception and on links on the desktops. Summaries were also supplied, for swift referral. We offered the opportunity for anyone to come on the activities to observe their operations and we suggested they look at the feedback in the Visitors Book. Unfortunately, as the activities only run in school holiday periods, most people were too busy or not interested enough to take us up on the offer to observe. Information sheets placed in prominent positions frequently went missing. As changes were instigated the info sheets sometimes became out of date.

Another issue was regular selling of tickets to underage children. The solutions listed above should have reduced the incidence of this, but initially did not. The problem has dropped off over time, as staff become familiar with the new, permanent age range and also due to memos sent by the manager. The activities are running more smoothly and children are getting more out of them as a result of the higher age range and more consistent selling to visitors.

Late selling of tickets by well meaning ticket sellers trying to fill activities disrupted the crucial stage setting at the beginning of activities and led to a lot of wasted time as rules and initial concepts were repeated. Parents watching as activities set off observed all of this and were not

impressed that their children, who were there on time, were disadvantaged by latecomers.

Some Harsh Realities

The problem of some staff being unsuccessful in running the longer activities also turned other staff off trying. We attempted to overcome this problem by shortening the activities to two hours, a move strongly resisted by those staff who were successful at running the longer activities. They asserted that their success indicated it was not the length of the activities that was the problem, but lack of training for staff members who were having difficulties. There was quite a strong feeling amongst a large number of guides that this was a criticism of the guides who were not having the same degree of success which caused a degree of bad feeling. Eventually a trial was agreed. Feedback from the majority of guides running the program was that, while they could be run at two hours, they were not meeting their objectives and were not as successful as they had been. The activities have been timetabled back at three hours and will now stay **at** that duration.

Lack of guides interested in running the activities has led to burnout in guides involved in the program. There is no doubt that a high energy output and flexibility is required in order to run child friendly activities. It is therefore not ideal for guides to run them day after day; far better to intersperse them with other duties. This needs to be taken account of when rostering for school holiday periods. More guides need to be enticed to be involved. Once involved the rewards are high, as would be attested by most of those running the program.

Running activity based programs has proven to require additional skills than those required to run cave tours. There is also a new spectrum of knowledge that the activities require guides to have. When guides were asked why they did not want to train on the program many said they were interested, but as they already had plenty of work in school holiday periods they could not see an advantage in giving up paid work to train on them. As a result we have now instigated paid training on the program. Initially it is for guides who have an interest in running the activities; when this need has been met the training will be open to other guides to assist in their understanding of the activities. This should

overcome much of the resistance and lack of interest that we have been experiencing. Already, having just started paid training, we have two definite new activity guides and another quite interested to do more training.

As an additional incentive, financial benefits are being developed for guides who run the children's and youth activities, commensurate with the higher level of skills required. This recognition will reward the efforts of staff who build their skills base and also assist Jenolan by developing a more flexible workforce.

Sadly, financial constraints have meant that we have not had a budget for promoting either the youth or kid's tours. We are hoping that improved children's and youth information pages on our website will assist in building sales. We also use our weekly local radio spot to promote them in the lead-up to holiday periods. We are developing better on-site signage to

encourage families to stay longer once they have arrived, or return to do the activities.

Conclusion All Hail the (R)Evolution!

The children's and youth programs are definitely meeting their objectives. They are selling well and enabling us to better meet the needs of distinct market segments. We are utilising our above ground karst more effectively and adding depth to our interpretation.

We are now entering a period of consolidation of the kid's and youth programs; increasing our guide base and building word of mouth publicity. Once it is firmly bedded in we look forward to beginning work on our family activity program.

In the current financial climate cave tourism, like other tourism, needs to be creative and innovative. Building on the success of the children's and youth programs, the Jenolan team is ready to take on the challenge.