

Why train adventure cave guides?

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Abstract

In 2000 the first nationally recognised training course for adventure cave guides was developed as a skill set within the Certificate III in Outdoor Recreation as part of the Australian Qualification Framework. The set of training modules has since been extended and modified on two occasions. It is used by both TAFEs and non-government Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) to deliver competency based training to adventure cave guides. This paper discusses the need for standardised training, continues with an overview of the current training modules and then briefly details the training options and how they can be tailored to meet the needs of different organisations.

Introduction

Adventure cave guides, those who are paid to lead clients through a wild cave, or who lead organised groups in a voluntary capacity, come to the job via a range of pathways. Predominantly they are drawn from the ranks of show cave guides, school teachers, outdoor adventure guides and cavers. The skills gained from these backgrounds are not insignificant, however none of these pathways will necessarily ensure development of the full range of skills required by an adventure cave guide. Standardised training ensures that qualified guides can do their job effectively, safely and efficiently.

It is important to understand that people who choose to join a caving club are often very different to those who come adventure caving. Club cavers are there because they are expecting to enjoy the activities - they have an active interest in caves and an adventurous spirit; adventure cavers typically have a more casual interest in caves. They may be there because they are school students with no choice, or their partner wants them to overcome claustrophobia, or their mates are doing it, they like extreme sports in general, or because caving appeals to

them but they want the security of handing responsibility to a professional. They may be there because it's the most expensive tour and therefore must be the best.

As paid professionals adventure cave guides have three major responsibilities; a duty of care to their clients, the need to uphold the professional reputation of their organisation and an imperative to protect the caves they are working in.

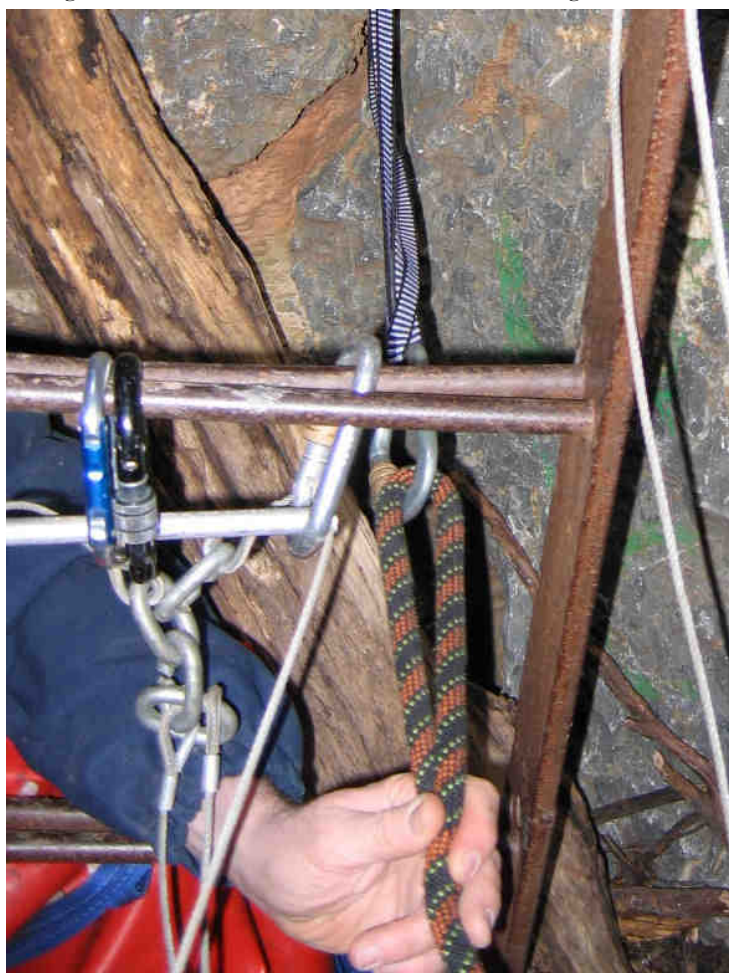
Duty of Care

To ensure that we meet our duty of care to clients we must deliver a product that meets industry standards, ideally we should deliver "industry best practice". This begins with gaining informed consent to participate in the activity. Without this formality taking place the organisation can be in deep water in the event of any incident leading to injury. Guiding students are taught the importance of fully explaining the risks involved in an activity and how to do this without causing undue concern to clients. They should understand the importance of carefully studying any medical issues noted on the consent/waiver form and following up with further questioning of the client, showing due respect for privacy. They should be frank about any concerns they have and not underplay any risks.

Consent needs to be followed up by clear, concise and comprehensive briefings delivered at appropriate times; gear briefings, briefings on what to expect of the trip, safety briefings, minimal impact briefings and briefings to deal with specific situations as they arise. A good briefing looks effortless, but nevertheless requires good communication skills. Trained guides have learnt how to best structure and deliver briefings and have an understanding of the important role briefings play in an activity. Briefings are frequently overlooked or poorly delivered by untrained leaders.

Industry standards on safety, rigging and dealing with emergencies have been established to ensure the safety of clients partaking in adventure activities. Without training it is not possible to ensure that these standards are met. For example only locking carabiners should be

used in rigging and a carabiner should be used between the ladder clips to prevent it “unzipping”; there should be two stand alone anchors, no single point of failure and two points of contact at all times; so a belay should be used when climbing a cave ladder.



three carabiners – all unsafe

Standing in contrast is the ladder rigged by a well-meaning school teacher leading a group of schoolgirls through B4-5 Cave at Bungonia. Having utilised three carabiners he obviously thought he was being pretty cautious, however the carabiners were connected to a rung of the cave ladder, where they could easily be pulled to one side as the ladder was weighted, putting undue strain on the connection between the rung and the wire. All three carabiners were connected to the paired treads of an old iron tourist cave ladder (ships ladder), one at the back, so when the caving ladder was weighted that carabiner would be forced against the front tread. One of the front pair of carabiners was

larger than the other two, so it was taking no weight, and the gate was not locked, anyway. This left a clip-lock carabiner as the only one to rely on. The pitch is over 10m so any ladder failure would have the potential to cause a spinal injury or worse. The problem was that the school teacher did not have an understanding of rigging principles. He was relying on his previous experience, not on standard safety practices.

Of course there are many ways to rig ladder pitches, which will still be safe as long as proper rigging practices are applied. In accredited courses students are taught the principles behind

the practice, ensuring safe practice at all times, not just on pitches they have seen rigged.

It is industry standard for all clients using ladders to be belayed at all times. The teacher at Bungonia did not use a belay. This was the first caving experience for his students. They were at the end of a reasonably challenging cave, on a 10m pitch, with some decidedly tricky sections of climb, where it is difficult to get fingers around ladder rungs and a degree of skill is required to get toes through rungs also. Regardless of his goodwill in providing this experience for his students, this was an accident waiting to happen.

There are many ways in which common caving practices differ from industry practice, not because industry is right and cavers are wrong, but because their needs are different and the duty of care factor is also different. Examples include cavers using lightweight, compact gear where industry best practice would recommend “failsafe” gear; cavers typically carry their own first aid, whereas a comprehensive first aid kit and hypothermia kit should be within reach at all times when adventure caving.

Stops or racks are the descenders of choice for cavers, being kinder to the rope and more sensitive to handle, but for commercial use figure eights are preferred, being simpler for beginners to manage. In a commercial situation all climbs must be spotted, belays must always be used and clients are, typically, more dependent; whereas in other caving situations self belaying is the norm and group members tend to be more self-reliant.

Different backgrounds tend to equate with a pattern of skills and skill gaps in untrained adventure cave guides. There are, of course, many exceptions to the general trend. The gaps are not a reflection on the guide as a person or caver, merely a result of their accumulated experience, or lack thereof.

In my experience as a trainer of adventure guides, cavers generally are very good at navigating through a cave and at abiding by minimal impact practices; rigging, safety and leadership standards vary greatly between individuals and clubs but are often not up to industry standards. For example a single point of contact on a rope is not unusual in caving –

using a self-belay is often looked at as a strange deviation from standard practice.

School teachers have variable caving experience when they take on outdoor education roles in a school; often caving may be something they do because it is another option at a site they have chosen primarily for its other attributes. Rigging, safety and minimal impact specific to caves tend to be areas where training is required, though leadership qualities are usually strong.

Show cave guides who move on to adventure guiding frequently have no roping experience at all to begin with, so they have little understanding of industry standards for rigging or safety. They may not be experienced at finding their way through an unlit cave and minimal impact may be limited to what is needed to guide an on-track tour. Group management skills are often very good, though leadership required is of a much higher level when off-track.

In contrast guides coming from a background in outdoor education or adventure guiding including climbing, canoeing and bushwalking generally have very strong leadership skills and frequently excellent roping skills, but very little experience in a cave environment.

In order to provide industry best practice duty of care to clients there are skill areas in each group which need strengthening. Standardised training is the best way to address this.

Professional Reputation

After duty of care to clients a guide’s next responsibility is to uphold the professional reputation of their employer or organisation. Reputation stands or falls on word of mouth from clients. For good word of mouth a client needs to enjoy themselves and to feel they have got value for their money. Therefore a guide needs to attend to more than just safety. Guides must facilitate opportunities for social interaction before, during and after the caving. At Jenolan one way we do this is by taking photos during the trip and posting them on the web for free download, but facilitating interaction must be in response to a particular group dynamic. Facilitation skills are a further component of accredited training courses.



Challenge by choice: knowing he can back out assists this client cope with fear of a tight squeeze

Nervous beginners often need encouragement to overcome their fear of exposure, heights or getting stuck. Confident cavers sometimes cannot see this fear that others may be hiding. When we follow the principle of challenge by choice enjoyment is greatly increased. People who pay to go with a guide are often more risk averse than your average caver and this is something that training helps guides to understand and to deal with. Sometimes people actually come on tours in the hope of overcoming their phobias. Guides need to use high level interpersonal skills to help people get past their fear of heights, the dark or the unknown. Panic attacks are not uncommon in adventure caving situations. This can put group members at risk. The skills to deal with these situations are not instinctive; they need to be learnt.

Though not a central feature of adventure caving, interpretation of cave formation,

features, fauna and history can add another layer of meaning and enjoyment to the experience. Show cave guides sometimes need to be restrained in this aspect of their adventure guiding, but for outdoor adventure guides, cavers and school teachers, with the notable exception of science teachers, this aspect is often neglected without quality training.

When all of these aspects of your operation are running smoothly you can be assured you are providing the requisite value for money which guarantees excellent word of mouth publicity. Until, that is, the dreaded “major incident” occurs.

In the case of a death occurring both guide and employer can find themselves in front of the Coroner’s Court with the threat of a charge of negligence, or worse, hanging over them. To be charged with negligence three things must be proven:

1. You had a duty of care to the injured party
2. You breached an industry standard
3. An injury or loss must result from that breach

Without an understanding of industry standards how can you be sure you are not in breach of them? Lack of knowledge is not an acceptable defence in this situation. This in itself is a very strong argument for nationally recognised training in adventure cave guiding.

Cave Protection

For those of us with a passion for caves an even stronger argument is the need to protect these fragile, precious environments. Historic graffiti must be protected, without being added to; fragile decorations and bone remains must be preserved, cave creatures must not be disturbed. The Australian Speleological Federation (ASF) has comprehensive standards for minimal impact in caves, but adventure participants who are not led by someone with this background, or by a qualified guide, are unlikely ever to learn of these standards. It is clear from the damage done in caves which have unlimited access that this is the case.

If we want to protect our caves, including isolated wilderness karst, from intentional vandalism or unwitting damage we need to educate as many people as possible on this aspect of caving and the values of cave preservation. This responsibility is stressed in accredited training courses.

Additional Incentives

If you still feel additional incentives are required to train adventure guides it is worth considering that the ASF insurer wants clubs to meet to Victoria's Australian Activity Standards (AAS) for caving. AAS stresses that workers must conform to requirements of Training Packages, or nationally recognised qualifications.

Earlier this year Blue Mountains region of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) added a new condition to canyon licenses for commercial operators in the park; all guides must have a minimum qualification of Certificate 3 in Canyon Guiding. The licensees were given only three weeks to meet the new requirement. It is

highly likely that the same requirement will be made in other parks, for other activities, including caving.

Training Packages

So what training provides a nationally recognised qualification that meets industry best practice? The base level course is the Certificate 3 in Guide Horizontal Caving. This is suitable for caves with no vertical pitches and allows the guide to work in familiar environments or under supervision.

The Certificate 3 in Guide Single Pitch Vertical Caving is suitable for caves with single ladder or rope pitches. It includes simple rescue skills for vertical situations. At Certificate 3 level the guide must still be working under supervision or in familiar environments.

The Certificate 4 in Guide Multi Pitch Vertical Caving is a higher level than is needed in most commercial situations. It is suitable for caves with multiple ladder or rope pitches and includes training in complex rescues. Guides with this qualification are qualified to work unsupervised in unfamiliar environments.

For a comprehensive grounding in all basic aspects of guiding a full Certificate 3 in Outdoor Recreation is suggested and for those required to act independently a full certificate 4 in Outdoor Recreation is the standard. These courses will comprise core modules such as risk assessment, logistics and client service, plus two or three skill sets, one of which would be caving. Other suitable skill sets are bushwalking and abseiling or climbing.

A further qualification that should be considered essential to all adventure cave guides is the Remote Area First Aid Course (RAFA). It is considered a necessary qualification in other sections of the outdoor recreation industry, but seems to have been largely ignored by the caving fraternity. Senior First Aid is only suitable when medical help can be expected within fifteen to twenty minutes. This is clearly not the case in most caves. RAFA provides a framework for ongoing patient care. For adventure guides to be without this qualification is breaching an industry wide standard.

Training Pathways and Training Providers

If all this training is sounding way too extensive, expensive and difficult, fear not! There are many pathways to achieving the qualifications. Course work is best for those who are setting out on their career. It gives a thorough grounding in all aspects of adventure cave guiding. For those already in the industry or those with caving experience, who feel they have all the necessary skills, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is available. Training providers will also provide skills gap training, where RPL is given for skills already attained and training is provided where there is a need to fill in any gaps. Assessment only pathways are also available. Basically there is an option available to suit every student.

The major limiting factor is the relatively small number of Registered Training Providers (RTOs). Currently the only providers are Blue Mountains College of TAFE, Chillagoe Caving Club and Above and Below Adventures. As

demand for training grows within the industry, more RTOs will supply training opportunities.

Conclusion

The Australian caving and cave management fraternity needs to embrace the concept of nationally recognised qualifications for adventure cave guides. We need to do it so that we meet our duty of care requirements to our clients by providing skilled, versatile guides. We need to do it to protect our individual, corporate and industry reputations. We cannot afford to lag behind the rest of the outdoor recreation industry when it comes to safety standards.

Perhaps most of all, we owe it to our cave and karst areas, including wilderness karst, to inspire as many people as possible to treasure them. We can do this by encouraging them to follow minimal impact practices and leading by example, but most of all we can do it by ensuring that every cave experience they have is a memorable one – memorable for all the right reasons.

Acknowledgements

Bungonia rigging and first aid scenario photo Allie Fenton.