

Digital Media

“A Modern Conundrum in an Ancient Landscape”

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Abstract

The last ten to fifteen years has seen an increase in the use of digital devices to record images. In 2013, it is not uncommon for all family members to be carrying at least one device capable of capturing digital images. This paper will explore what impact, if any, this exponential increase in image generation capability has had on the conduct of a guided show cave tour. It will also seek to explore ways of mitigating any identified impact in order to strike a balance between visitor satisfaction and profitable tour operations with conclusions drawn from personal experiences guiding the Lucas Cave tour at Jenolan Caves.

Key Words: Digital Media
Image Generation
Show Cave
Visitor Satisfaction
Profitable Operations

Introduction

Jenolan Caves, located approximately 180 kilometres west of Sydney in the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, is an award winning show cave destination. Jenolan Caves has been part of the Australian “psyche” for over 150 years and millions of visitors have visited one or more of the ten guided show cave tours on offer. As such, it would be impossible to even estimate the number of images captured both on film and by digital media. It would be conceivable to say however, that the majority of these images have been captured in the last 10 years by digital media. Personal experience from twenty years of guiding tours at Jenolan Caves has shown that despite a decrease in the number of visitors on a Lucas tour (from 75 to 60), it can often take longer to complete the tour with much of this slowdown attributable to an increase in the use of digital media. On a recent tour of the Lucas Cave, 28 visitors had 35 devices between them capable of capturing digital images. These devices included phones, cameras and tablets.

The Early Years

For an excellent account of the early days of photography at Jenolan Caves, the 2010 publication “*Click go the Cameras at Jenolan Caves 1860-1940*” by Elery Hamilton Smith (Hamilton-Smith, 2010) is recommended reading. This publication outlines the development of photographic services at Jenolan that were offered by various commercial operators and contains an excellent selection of the early works of photographers such as Charles Kerry and Frank Hurley.

A popular souvenir of a visit to Jenolan Caves was a group photo taken at Hartley Court House with the driver and his Charabanc (an early form of open topped motor coach).

This was only the beginning of things to come however...

The Post War Years

The decades following the Second World War saw an increase in visitation to Jenolan Caves as more people could afford to travel. To cater for the needs of photographers, special photographic inspections were conducted at 11.00am and 4.00pm. These tours however, were phased out by the 1960’s. Camera technology evolved and by the mid 1960’s, small compact cameras were affordable for the majority of visitors and were commonplace on tours (B. Richard, pers. comm. 2013). A downside of these cameras however, was the external removable “flash cube” which, once expended, was often discarded along the pathways within the caves. A large number of these were located in the Lucas Cave by Dan Cove and Russell Commins during the relighting project in 2003-2004 (D. Cove, pers. comm. 2013).

During a fifth class school visit to the Lucas Cave in 1977 as an 11 year old, my mother would only buy me one four shot cube as she wanted me to take photos of places other than Jenolan Caves. The wisdom of mothers as none of the four photos taken in the cave turned out...

Early experiences as a Guide

I commenced guiding at Jenolan Caves on Boxing Day 1993. At the time the Lucas Cave had a limit of 75 visitors although I would often take 80-90 people on a tour. Even so, it was still possible to visit the well decorated Mafeking Chamber and finish the tour on time.

On tours, it was common for visitors to ask what scenes they should save their remaining photos for given that most rolls of film were either 12, 24 or 36 exposures. In addition, a typical family would only have one camera. Popular photographic subjects in the Lucas Cave included the Cathedral Windows, the Lace Curtain, Mafeking, the Pink and White Terraces, Underground River and the Coloured Lights in the Bone Cave – a typical average of six photos only. I would also offer to take photos of visitors with the Lace Curtain as a backdrop; which was an offer which many people availed of.

The Digital Revolution

In the space of the last 10 to 15 years, the capturing of images of the Lucas Cave has changed significantly. From a film roll of 36 where possibly 6 photos may have been allocated to the Lucas Cave, the introduction of digital cameras and the San Disk (SD) Card, amongst other devices, has allowed almost unlimited generation of images. For example, on my own digital camera, a 4GB SD card can conceivably hold 2700 images dependant on the pixel setting. This has allowed visitors the ability to capture more of the cave but – to what extent has this impacted on the tour?

Impacts on Tours

So the obvious question is – what impacts has the increasing use of digital media had on the conduct of a guided cave tour and what are the ramifications, if any, for managers/owners of these sites? The following potential impacts have been identified:-

- Perceived slowing of tours.
Nowhere is this more evident than in the Lucas Cave where ten years ago a tour could be completed with 75 clients where as now it can be a struggle with a number reduction to 60. This may cause tours to run overtime with clients possibly missing other tours or even coach connections. This may detract from the reputation of a site.

- Blocking Pathways.
With an almost unlimited ability to take photographs, visitors will often stop in narrow sections to take photographs with little regard paid to fellow visitors. The guide may be placed in a situation where they are continually asking the group to move on (getting visitors to move into the Anteroom in the Lucas Cave is a prime example) which may cause the group to perceive the guide/site in a negative manner.
- Guest irritation with photographers.
Guests may become irritated with photographers without purpose taking photos of non subject specific matter. In other words, people taking excess photos (for example “selfies”) simply because they can. This may create a negative impact in the minds of visitors of a site. However, it should be pointed out that photos of family members are important in many cultures.
- Excessive use of flash.
This can have several ramifications. Firstly, it can reduce the ability of the guide to present the cave as there is an excess of light generated by digital devices. Secondly, clients can use this excess light to move forward from the group, risking injury to not only themselves but also the resource. Thirdly, clients may inadvertently fire the flash in the eyes of visitors and/or guides creating possible safety issues.
- Trip Hazards.
Visitors looking at the cave/site through the view finder may trip and fall, risking injury to themselves and/or the resource. This could lead to compensation claims.
- Inattention to Commentary.
How often have you just spent five minutes explaining cave geology only to have a visitor who has been taking excess photos ask you – How does a cave form? Clients may also miss important safety information from the guide.
- Photo Editing
Many clients will edit their photos during the tour, either to delete failed photos or often to remove photos to make room for new ones. Again, this can delay tours unnecessarily.

These are just some of the impacts that have been identified that can potentially affect a tour and, given the right circumstances, could also have more serious consequences for cave managers/site owners. Before discussing what can possibly be done about mitigating these impacts, perhaps it would be best to look at policies (if any) in place at other cave sites.

Photographic Policy at other Cave Sites

Discussion with colleagues at Jenolan Caves and at other sites has indicated the following policies are in place:-

Mole Creek Caves

Haydn Stedman of Mole Creek Caves in Tasmania advises that they do not have an official policy regarding the use of digital devices on tours. They do not allow tripods and do not allow photography in the glow worm areas. They allow visitors a reasonable amount of time before they turn the lights out (H. Stedman, pers. comm. 2013).

Naracoorte Caves

Frank Bromley of Naracoorte Caves in South Australia advises they too do not have any official policy regarding digital device use. They do ask people to stand still when recording. Frank also advised that video recordings were banned in the past but that rule was discontinued due to all devices now being able to record (F. Bromley, pers. comm. 2013).

Wellington Caves

Barry Kelly of Wellington Caves advised that they have no specific policy. (B. Kelly, pers. comm. 2013).

Cave Works

Supervisor Heidi of Cave Works in Western Australia advised that they have no ban other than the use of tripods. On larger tours they ask visitors to restrict photography to the main platforms only. (Heidi, pers. comm. 2013).

Mammoth Cave National Park

The policy in place at Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky USA when I participated in a guide exchange in 2001 was no video recording. This policy was in place before the increase in the use of digital devices so it would be interesting to find out if this policy has been modified since then.

Jeita Caves

ACKMA member Dr. Julia James advises that Jeita Caves in Lebanon has a strict no cameras policy and even goes so far as to provide lockers for people to store cameras. (Dr. J. James, pers. comm. 2013).

The Spanish Experience

ACKMA member and Jenolan Guide Sasa Kennedy advised the following from her recent travels in Spain (S. Kennedy, pers. comm. 2013):-

- Grotte de la Maravilles - No photos allowed
 - Cueva de la Pileta - No photos allowed
 - Cueva de la Nerja - Photos allowed but no flash
- Has anyone ever been told you cannot take a flash photo in a cave as it will fade the formations?

The Jenolan Policy

Other than a ban on tripods on tours, Jenolan does not have a firm policy regarding the use of cameras on tours. Various guides do ask people to be mindful of their camera use at the start of and during their tours. At the start of my Lucas tours I request the cooperation of visitors not to take photos in the narrower sections of the cave and advise them that there will be times on the tour where I will ask for all devices to be turned off for presentation reasons (cave darkness and the music presentation in the Cathedral). Generally I receive a good level of cooperation from visitors.

What can we do about it?

What can we do, as cave managers/guides about this exponential increase in digital device use? Perhaps the most obvious answer is to accept the status quo; that is to accept the problem which leads to the obvious question – does anyone not see a problem? This would appear to be the easiest and least confrontational solution. This will of course require tolerance and acceptance on behalf of both guides and management as we need to bear in mind that the overriding factor is the satisfaction of our guests as it is after all their experience.

The following however, may be alternative solutions/suggestions with any potential issues arising noted:-

- Ask visitors to restrict photographs to the main platforms only.
- Decrease tour commentary to accommodate more photography time.

This could however, lead to a decreased perception of the professionalism of a tour/site.

- Give visitors a ten second warning and then turn the lights out in order to move on.
- Take photos and sell them to visitors.
This was the practice in 1988 at The Lost Sea in Tennessee but had been discontinued upon my return visit in 2000. When I asked the guide why he stated that there are now too many cameras in groups! A similar set up was trialled at Jenolan Caves in the late 1990's in the Lucas Cave but was not a success with a very limited uptake by clients. We do however, take photos of visitors on our Plughole Adventure Tour which they can download for free from the Media Fire website and this is a popular value added service.
- Ban the taking of photos altogether.
This would solve the problem but would be almost impossible to police in this digital age and would of course lead to customer dissatisfaction and a possible reduction in visitor numbers.
- Specialist Photographic Tours.
Would visitors be willing to pay the price required to offer such tours?
- Reduce Tour Numbers.
This may be an option but could result in increased costs and possible reduced viability for the business as extra staff would need to be employed.

There is no easy solution and what could work at one site may not necessarily work at another site. Perhaps the time has come for cave sites to develop a digital media use policy in conjunction with an organisation such as ACKMA or ISCA (International Show Caves Association).

References

Hamilton-Smith, Elery (2010). *Click go the Cameras at Jenolan Caves 1860-1940*. Jenolan Caves Historical and Preservation Society, Jenolan, N.S.W.

Conclusion

The capturing of images at Jenolan Caves is not a recent phenomenon; from the days of Kerry and Hurley to the current digital age, photography has always been an intrinsic part of the cave tour experience. While this paper has documented the issues and impacts that the increasing use of digital media can have on tours and business success, it has also explored several ways for potential mitigation of these. A cave visit can mean various things to different people and cultures and as guides/managers, we need to be adaptive and take these factors into consideration during our presentations. As cave managers/owners we also need to be mindful of the benefits that these images will bring for us in the form of promotion of our sites. As the saying goes – a picture is worth a thousand words. However, the issue is perhaps best summarised by Jenolan Caves guide Tina who said “*as people can take almost limitless numbers of photographs to document their experience, they may in fact be missing their experience through their own actions. However, perhaps as guides we need to be accepting that photographs of their visit will provide meaningful memories for them*”. (T. Willmore, pers. comm. 2013).

Who knows where technology will take us in the future...

Acknowledgements

After returning home to Australia I downloaded my SD card to the Harvey Norman photo lab – all 1359 photos...!!! After eight hours and jamming their system four times, 1242 photos eventually ended up in my photo albums. Photos are a great way of documenting your travels and it is certainly much easier (and cheaper) than even 20 years ago to do so.

Sure enough, on my first public Lucas Cave tour upon my return to Jenolan, I had five “escapees” who used their camera lights to move ahead through the cave and catch up with the group that was half an hour in front...!!!