

Capricorn Caves, Cyclones, Caves and Conferences

Ann Augusteyn

Capricorn Caves

Email: annaugust@bigpond.com

Abstract

Capricorn Caves, just north of Rockhampton in Central Queensland, will be hosting the Cave Guide School and ACKMA annual general meeting in May 2016. The team at Capricorn Caves look forward to showcasing the range of guest experiences, education programs, the new solar powered LED cave lighting and recovery from cyclone Marcia. The theme for the Guide School will be delivery of guest experiences not to be missed by any tour guide. See you in Capricorn!

Introduction

In February 2015 category five Cyclone Marcia tore her way through Central Queensland. The eye of the cyclone passed over Capricorn Caves and the destructive 200 kph winds left a tangled mass of fallen trees and vines. Amazingly no buildings were destroyed but electrical poles, cables and connections were flattened. We were without power for several days which meant no water, no sewerage, no refrigeration and of course no cave lights.



Fallen trees and tangled semi ever green vine thicket blocked cave paths.

But with the use of a generator we opened to the public just 11 days later. So when everything seemed weakened by this powerful cyclone, two things stayed incredibly strong. First, and not surprisingly, our 400-million-year-old caves proved very resilient! And

secondly, and very importantly, the people of Capricorn Caves stayed strong — our passionate team and their families pulled together in a momentous recovery operation.



Staff cleared paths and roads and removed fuel for bush fires

The staff were amazing. Two days after the cyclone they organised a staff volunteer day to clear roads into the property and paths into the caves. They and their partners turned up with chain saws, rakes and wheelbarrows. It was exhausting work, hacking through the “mongrel vines” loaded with very aggressive green ants. The 35 degree heat felt like 45 degrees with the humidity. This recovery work continued for many weeks after the cyclone: 80 semi-trailer loads of green waste were removed from the property.

It is this team that underpins our “Caring for Country”, our conservation, social and economic endeavours. The same passion and commitment that

pulled us through the cyclone, drives our everyday success.

This is also why we are looking forward to hosting the 2016 Cave Guide School followed by the ACKMA Annual General Meeting in May 2016, so that we can all share our collective experiences and aspire to delivering inspirational cave presentations.

So first where are we and how do you get there?

Located half way between Brisbane and Townsville, we are easily accessible off the main east coast touring route. By air we are only one hour from Brisbane with frequent services by Virgin and Qantas. Emirates also code shares with Qantas from Auckland.



Map of Queensland

Secondly what are we?

The caves are different to the underground wet and highly decorated systems in the south. Of Devonian

origin the limestone has been uplifted over millions of years to form a ridge with an interesting surface karst.



Beautiful and fascinating surface karst

The many daylight entrances allow air to circulate through the connecting passages which, together with

the lack of rainfall, has limited the growth of cave speleothems.



Daylight entrances and many passages with limited speleothem growth

Scientists are still debating the formation of the caves: are they formed from water flowing in from the

surface or underground water from below? Meanwhile we stay posted!



Dr Armstrong Osborne from Sydney University conducts research in Capricorn Caves

The other significant difference is that Capricorn Caves are the only privately owned show caves in Australia on freehold land. This also brings with it a deep responsibility for the conservation, social and economic management of the caves and property and this responsibility is shared among owners, managers and cave tour guides – our team. We are all guardians in a moment of time. The issues remain constant – just the people change.

Conservation

Olsen era

The caves were found by the Olsen family in 1881. As far as we know the local Darumbal tribe knew of the caves but did not explore the inner darkness – no artefacts or art work have been found in the caves. So Johannes Olsen claimed the 80 acre selection and opened the caves to visitors in 1885. Timber stairs and bridges were constructed to facilitate access and candles were used to light the passages through the caves for many years. For a while they operated an unsuccessful Olsen Guano mining company and recorded that the cleaning out of the caves was beneficial for visitors.

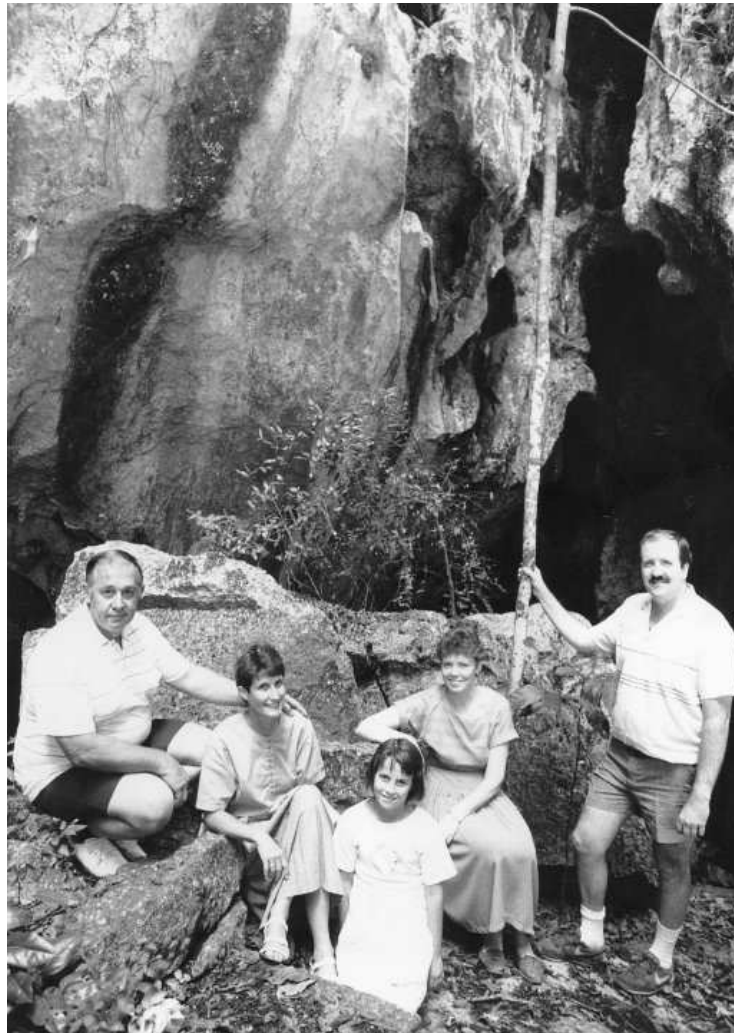


Johannes Olsen seated in the Main entrance to Olsen's Caves 1884

Augusteyn era

In 1888 the caves were purchased by the Augusteyn family. Three conservation issues quickly became

apparent in relation to cave infrastructure, cave lighting and the management of flora and fauna on the surface.



New owners on the left, the Augusteyn family, face the same issues as Annette and Rodney Olsen on the right.

Timber infrastructure

We inherited a cave with timber stairs, bridges and board walks. Some were constructed in 1883 and

have been preserved as the heritage of the Olsen family. There does not appear to be any impact from these structures on the limestone; probably due to the “dry” nature of the caves.



Timber bridge constructed by the Olsens in 1883 and used by visitors for 122 years until 2005.

In 1992 my late husband Ken installed a timber ramp into the cave for wheelchair access. He carefully cut the timber around the rocks. We observed no impact from the timber but when some of these boards were replaced in 2013 to my absolute horror we noticed timber stains running underneath an external rock

face. I was mortified as believed that we had taken all precautions for ordering the environmentally appropriate timber. I have been advised from a well-respected source to pour milk over the rock to minimise the impact. I invite inspection and feedback.

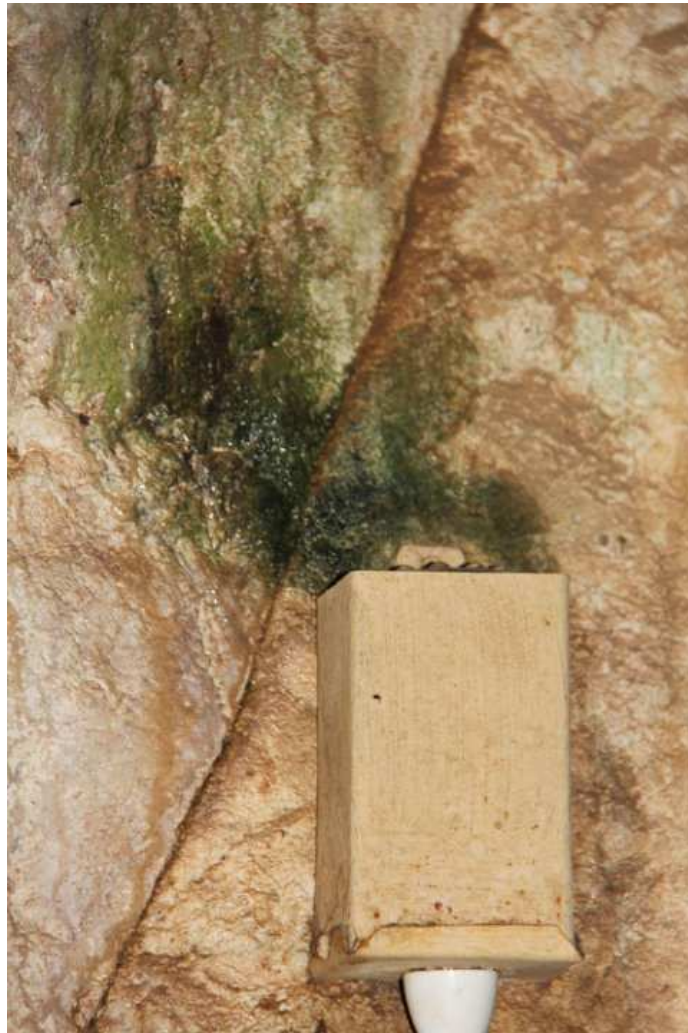


Wheelchair ramp constructed by Ken Augusteyn in 1992 with no visual impacts of timber stains.

Cave Lighting

In the Olsen era visitors used candles and for a while to the delight of our guests we replicated the experience with household candles in a holder through the Zig Zag passage. I am pleased to report that we now use battery operated lanterns – to the dismay of repeat visitors.

In April 2015 we launched a complete relighting of the caves project. This replaced the 32 volt tungsten bulbs installed in the 1960/70s. These lights were not only failing but visitor safety was in jeopardy, lampenflora was forming on the cave walls from the heat of the tungsten bulbs and some caves were no longer accessible for the general public due to inadequate lighting.



Lampenflora from the heat of the 32v tungsten lights installed in the 1970s.



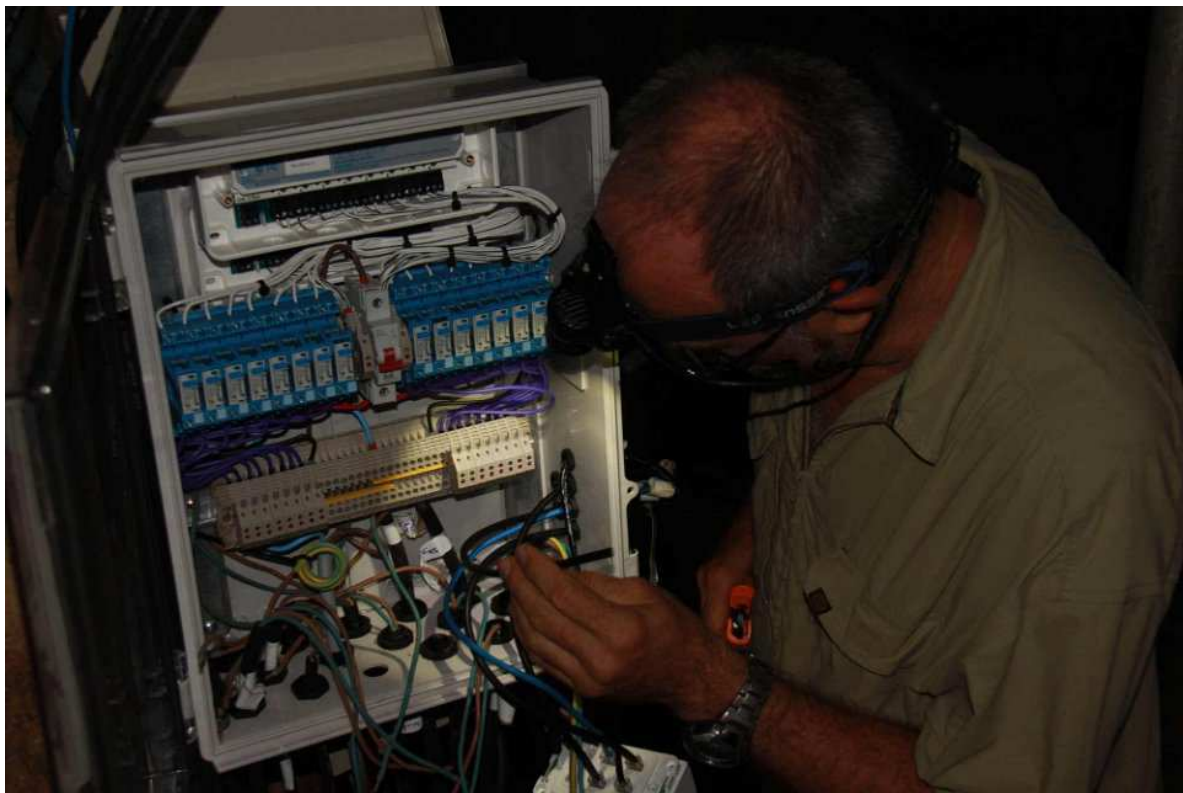
Old switch boards installed in 1970s and used into the 21st century

The new solar powered Weidmuller LED lights operate through a Cbus computerised system. We are delighted with the results. New features are illuminated, more caves are accessible for the public, power bills have decreased and unsightly cables and light fittings have mostly disappeared. The guides enjoy the use of remote controls for visitor management but the average life of the remote is 6

months. We are coming to the conclusion that our caves may not be as dry as we believe. Three sources of power are available to run the whole cave system: solar for daily use, 240v when solar batteries are depleted and generator when both solar and 240v power sources fail. We were most thankful for the last option during cyclone Marcia.



Colosseum Cave illuminated with solar powered Weidmuller lights.



Bus system which facilitates remote control of the switches.

Management of flora and fauna

To maintain a cave in excellent condition, management is required not just of the cave but also of the area above and around it. Management of the fauna and flora is ongoing and often overwhelming. We rely on the guides to implement weed and feral animal control in the low tourist season, with special

responsibility for the rare fern *Tectaria devexa* that grows nowhere else in Australia. Seeds are collected from the dry rain forest and germinated in our bush nursery for replanting in buffer zones or cyclone devastated areas.



The rare fern *Tectaria devexa* thrives on limestone rock and sustained rainfall.

Our caves provide a habitat for five species of insectivorous bats and the endangered ghost bat. Visitor management prioritises the bats and cave access is closed where possible when bats are present. Research is limited but numbers appear to have declined: in December 2013 John Augusteyn's ghost

bat survey revealed a population of only 35 in the region. Through DNA testing of the scats there appears to have been a catastrophic event one hundred years ago that impacted on ghost bat numbers. This coincides with the guano mining industry activity.



Releasing Ghost bat (*Macroderma gigas*) after tagging.

Caves and the Community

Socially caves have an important role in the community. Caves not only preserve the record of geological change but show caves document the pages of the local community history and the development of tourism. Our township is named The Caves with strong links to the longest running conservation battle in Australia, namely the fight to save Mt. Etna. The history of the Capricorn Caves focusses on the story

of the Olsen family, pioneer settlers from Norway in the 19th century.

Capricorn Caves also offer a smorgasbord of socially engaging experiences in the real outdoor world. We cater to a wide cross section of the community from the elderly to families and children, mobility impaired guests and have custom made adventure tours. We are an educational centre for schools and provide an opportunity for social and cultural gatherings from weddings to Underground Opera.



Underground Opera perform biannually in the Cathedral Cave.

Underpinning everyone's experience is personal engagement or connection and a sense of discovery. Again the role of the tour guide delivering the experience is crucial to guest satisfaction and what a challenge in a cave with few stalactites and no glow worms!

Economic Management

“Not only is a show cave a business, it must be a continuously successful business. Why? Because the cave is the very basis of the business.” David Summers. Past President International Show Caves Association ISCA (Summers, 2013).



David Summers Past President of International Show Cave Association with the staff of Capricorn Caves

None of this is possible without good economic procedures; these underpin the whole management process from conservation of the natural resource itself, product development and refurbishment to employment of quality guides. The guides are the key to delivering diverse, engaging experiences, which in turn maintain and increase visitor numbers and visitor yield.

Product diversification

Since there is no large population base in our regional centre, we have diversified our product to encourage repeat visitation by introducing adventure caving, rope courses, conferences and events. Apart from the free independent visitor (FIT) our best target market is educational tourism with fully catered accommodated school camps. The Queensland Museum's palaeontology dig site provides a basis for many geotourism experiences.



Rockhampton Grammar School students gather round the dig site.

Promotion and packaging

But the product alone does not guarantee patronage: it must be promoted and marketed strategically. The geotour was a prime example of the difference promotion makes. The geotour, which incorporated a walk of discovery through undeveloped caves and the dig site, received minimal bookings; renamed Bats and

Bones for families saw improved patronage but the real winner was Poo and Spew. (Referring to the guano deposits preserving the bones and spew the vomit from the owls that regurgitated the bones of their prey).



Examining 80,000 year old bones from the dig site in the Discovery Centre.

Partnerships

We take every opportunity to engage free promotion and work with likeminded professional organisations such as ACKMA and Savannah guides. We enjoy advanced ecotourism accreditation and are very proud to be a Savannah Guide site with several of our guides

gaining Savannah Guide accreditation. We play in the tourism sandpit with a recent success at the National Tourism awards taking out the bronze award for Australian Tourist Attraction. Possibly one of our most successful marketing tools is our website and the use of social media – YouTube, Facebook and Instagram.



Bronze winners of Australian Tourism Award for Tourist Attraction.

The role of the tour guide

Underpinning all aspects of cave conservation, management of flora and fauna, delivery of guest satisfaction and experiences is the cave tour guide. It is crucial that we acknowledge their role, maintain their passion through professional development workshops, involve them in research projects and encourage them to travel to other attractions and

experience other guiding techniques. Just as we learnt so much at Waitomo, Winton and Yarrangobilly, so we hope that you will come to the Cave Guide School in Rockhampton in May 2016. We plan to have guest speakers, workshops and deliver presentations on guest experiences and interpretation.



Capricorn Caves guides at Waitomo Caves, New Zealand.

Equally we welcome all cave managers – I have matured from being a petrified host in 1993, when the ACKMA conference was deemed to be more like a

visit from a dozen mother in laws. Now I look forward eagerly to sharing your ideas and suggestions on difficult issues of cave management.



Life Members of ACKMA 2009 ACKMA conference Margaret River

Also for your information we have a range of accommodation on site: a Lodge with 12 rooms quad

share, self- contained two bedroom cabins and a caravan park for tents and camper vans.



Two bedroom self-contained cabin.

Just in case I have not given you enough compelling reasons to attend, we plan to include a trip to the totally unspoilt Great Keppel Island, the jewel in the crown of the Southern Great Barrier Reef.

See you at Capricorn Caves in May 2016.

References

Summers D. (2013). *The Business of Operating a Show Cave*. Address to the Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association Conference, Waitomo, New Zealand, May 2013 Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association.