

The positive power of connection

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Abstract

This paper looks at the importance of building connections between people and show caves in order to increase productivity and profitability. It also considers the flow-on benefits of these connections in preserving karst and cave sites into the future.

Introduction

In 1957 Tilden Freeman (Freeman, 1957) wrote, in his seminal book *“Interpreting our Heritage”*, “Through interpretation understanding; through understanding appreciation; through appreciation protection.”

Tilden Freeman worked with the United States National Park Service and was one of the first people to develop the theories and principles of what we now call heritage interpretation. These principles are followed by all competent interpretive guides and by creators of interpretive signage and other media. If we wish to protect our natural and cultural heritage sites this mantra is worth remembering.

Substitute the word connection for interpretation and the mantra still stands, because interpretation is largely about creating connections. Our connections to a site lead to understanding, appreciation and eventually a desire to protect that site. In an era where governments and institutions are so heavily focussed on commercial interests and ensuring the economic viability of heritage sites, it is essential that we remember the crucial power of connection, and foster emotional connections to our sites, in order to help protect them now and into the future.

There is a broad range of people who should feel connected to cave and karst sites – staff, both present

and past; managers; commercial partners; cavers; scientists; visitors; the local community; those from other related cave sites and, crucially, the traditional custodians or first peoples of that land.

The traditional custodians have looked after the country for many thousands of years. It was, is and always will be their custodial responsibility, a fact which should always be respected by current managers and staff.

In Australia the Aboriginal people, traditional custodians of this land, connected to the land through living on their land and travelling through it; through ceremony and dance; and through passing on knowledge through storytelling and ceremony which were age and gender appropriate. The result is a familiarity with, and deep understanding of, the land and the knowledge necessary for sustainable management over millennia.

Current and future managers should ensure it is not only possible, but easy, for custodians to access their lands for ceremonial and other purposes and to participate in, and contribute to, management decisions. The benefits are significant. Firstly, the sharing of traditional knowledge with management will contribute to sustainability, for example the contribution of traditional fire management practices to ensuring the long-term viability of ecosystems on karst reserves. Secondly, it will lead to a deeper understanding of the environmental and cultural heritage values for staff and visitors. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it enables traditional custodians to remain connected with, or to re-connect with, their lands.



Figure 1: Learning about Aboriginal connections to the land at Jenolan

How can we build strong, protective connections to our karst sites in the present day that will help ensure their sustainability? We must always consider, and strive to act on, the power of connection when making management decisions. We must not be governed solely by economic rationale. Decisions

must be balanced by sustainability considerations and by how the decision will impact on those people who are, or should be, connected to the site – site advocates. Without long-term sustainability and without site advocates and custodians the economic future of any karst site is limited.



Figure 2: Barry Richard cooks the Australia Day breakfast BBQ at Jenolan

It is crucial that staff is connected to their worksite in order that they care for and protect the site in their day-to-day actions. On a daily basis it is staff who will notice when something is amiss and in the long term it is staff who can observe changes over time. Connected staff will act on issues as they arise. But more than that - passionate, knowledgeable staff deliver above and beyond their job descriptions. They can influence site visitors through their interpretation of the caves, karst and reserve; they are

well placed as advocates for karst values; and engaged staff are often also volunteers. For example the Jenolan Caves staff (and ex-staff) are members of the Jenolan Rural Fire Service, serve on the committee of the Jenolan Caves Historical & Preservation Society; volunteer their time on Weedbusting Weekends; organise the Jubilee Cave Restoration Project; contribute to the Jenolan Caves Show Cave Survey and work with other speleologists to survey the wild caves on the reserve.



Figure 3: Many Jenolan staff are members of the Rural Fire Service

So how can managers ensure their staff are strongly connected to the site? An obvious starting point is to ensure best practice training in karst geology, site history and interpretation. It is also important that staff have a sound understanding of the heritage values of the entire reserve, so familiarisations should be included in training schedules.

There are other important factors which contribute to staff engagement and connection. Fair and equitable treatment, recognition and celebration of staff contributions and a sense of job security are all crucial

if staff are to fully connect to the site. Without these many will see their job as a stepping stone to something better, rather than a future career path and a current passion.

Where possible, on-site accommodation has the benefit of allowing staff a deeper insight into the individual species, ecosystems and natural cycles, which contribute to the heritage values of the reserve. It also fosters connections between staff, which in turn contributes to staff well-being.



Figure 4: Grant Commins in Coronet Cave

As with staff, managers also need to build a deep connection to the resource they control; natural resource managers need to be hands-on managers. Not only does a sense of connection have the same benefits to be seen with connected staff, but it also prevents an unbalanced view of the bottom line developing. Managers who are distant from the site, in any sense of the word, are less likely to advocate for its heritage values and more likely to concentrate on the career enhancing benefits of economic rationalism. It is perhaps no surprise that our economically fixated governments are favouring this management style, but in the long term it is not a financially viable option. A resource which is not

valued by the greater community will eventually and inevitably lose its economic viability.

A connected manager is an advocate for their site – one with a powerful voice. A connected manager understands that the best way to protect the site (and its future economic stability) is to build connections between the site and as many other advocates as possible. A connected manager is not threatened by the connections others have to the site; they understand that their karst site is actually enhanced by these connections.



Figure 5: Richard and Stephen Kennedy picking up some tips from John Callaghan

In Aboriginal and other indigenous cultures the elders are respected and highly valued for their experience and wisdom. In our current culture the opposite is often the case. In a world where technology is advancing so swiftly and knowledge appears to be so easily attained, the role of the elders is frequently overlooked or dismissed. Their knowledge is frequently seen as out of date; their wisdom undervalued. But if we hope to learn from history and utilise the full scope of expertise when making decisions for our sites we need to value our elders – retired staff and previous managers - for their long connections to our sites, and we need to heed their advice. This is not to say that we should always be in agreement, but it does mean that when weighing up options we should include their opinions in the decision making process. We should encourage their participation on advisory committees and their roles

as mentors to current management and staff. We should include them in our social gatherings and celebrations wherever possible.

Our tourism and commercial partners also need to feel connected to our sites if they are to deliver the best possible outcomes for us. Respect and warmth of welcome, familiarisation visits and invites to special events all contribute to building a connection between our partners and our sites. Connected partners are like roving ambassadors for the values of our sites. When they begin to understand, appreciate and even share our values they can instil a minimal impact ethic in our visitors before they even arrive. They can also be advocates for our sites in difficult times. As commercial operators they may have access to powerbrokers that managers of government owned sites do not.



Figure 6: IEC Oceania tour in Orient Cave, Jenolan

Along with good commercial relations, good neighbourhood relations also bring a range of benefits. Community members are often volunteers in organisations that help protect karst reserves including bush regeneration, rural fire services and clubs which provide support for special events, such as Rotary and Lions clubs. It is also worth considering involving local garden clubs in your site. Gardeners are often quite competitive, so having two groups looking after different garden areas could be even better value! Voluntourism initiatives can stretch your neighbourhood beyond the seas by emotionally connecting local and foreign youth, the leaders of the future, with your site.

Locals can often provide a degree of asset protection, merely by being observant when passing through or passing by. They are also a source of excellent word of mouth recommendations and return visitation through bringing visiting friends and relatives to favoured sites. You can help them to connect more strongly by assisting with fundraising for local causes

and becoming involved in community initiatives. A rewards card which offers discounts to returning locals or a great site café can also enhance relationships between your site and the local community.

Like traditional custodians, cavers will likely have a significant depth and breadth of knowledge of your site. Significant contributions made by cavers include exploration, surveying, making connections, asset protection, reportage of changes in fauna, flora, hydrology, and cave conditions and, both as individuals and through speleological associations, karst advocacy. Clearly they are very important assets for your site and, as such, you should encourage connections between the site and the cave community. Strengthen ties by sharing facilities, being welcoming and encouraging interactions between cavers, staff and visitors. Encourage your guides to include aspects of local caving endeavours in their interpretation.



Figure 7: Four Jenolan guides caving with other members of Sydney University Speleological Society

As Tilden Freeman said “Through understanding appreciation; through appreciation protection”. Scientific interest in your system should be sought after and strongly encouraged. If scientists are investigating aspects of your karst you should engineer opportunities for staff to work with these scientists and assist where possible. In addition create chances for staff workshops and seminars in order to build your staff knowledge base. There will be an advantageous flow-on not just to staff but also to your site visitors. The science at your site can provide a valuable point of difference between your site and other karst areas, but only if it is interpreted effectively.

Given the many attractions and distractions available to fill our leisure time you may only get one chance to build connections between your site and site visitors.

Exceptional and authentic experiences which include best-practice, engaging, entertaining and informative interpretation can build these connections in just one visit. If connections are built, through a well-presented environment; genuine, caring customer service and interactive interpretation, visitors will be inspired to protect your site; even one-off visitors can become site advocates.

Of course, return visitors will continue to build stronger connections, so return visitation should be encouraged. Some passionate visitors will continue to return without much effort on your part; by providing meaningful experiences which enrich visitors’ lives and refreshing the interpretive experiences on offer on a regular basis, you can provide strong incentives for others to return.



Figure 8: Catering to the youth market; Breaking the Boundaries tour, Jenolan

To build connections through return visitation managers need to ensure they are catering to all their market segments from children to adults and not forgetting that frequently overlooked market - youth. Our traditional custodians understood the importance of age-appropriate learning. They utilised storytelling,

challenges and games successfully for millennia to pass on knowledge from generation to generation. Children not only grow into advocates for sites which hold a place in their hearts from childhood, they are also very good at educating and influencing their significant adults. The future resides in our children.



Figure 9: Junior Explorers children's activity, Jenolan

Connections between our sites and their staff, visitors, management and community are clearly important. However they are not the only powerful connections we need to forge if our sites are to receive maximum benefit. Connections between people are also crucial.

Connections between staff contribute to staff well-being, which lowers stress levels and improves Workplace Health and Safety outcomes. They create informal opportunities for sharing ideas and knowledge. They also strengthen commitment to the site.

Connections between staff are more easily maintained in a well-informed, fair and secure workplace. Social events can help build camaraderie. When staff live on or near the site it becomes easier for social connections to be built.

Social events also strengthen connections between management and staff, as do acknowledgement of contributions, opportunities for staff development and celebrations of achievements. Connections between staff and management build trust and

goodwill which encourage the search for a win-win situation if disputes occur.

Both staff and managers need to be protective of their site, but not territorial. If we agree that to build connections with others is a good thing for the site, then we must be inclusive. When all stakeholders not only feel connected to the site, but feel that their contribution and connection is valued, great things can happen.

To ensure this inclusiveness occurs, staff need to show their passion for the site and be protective of it, but also share it with generosity and treat visitors as individuals. They should respect and understand the needs of tourism partners and ensure they feel part of the team. Good relations will be obvious to the visitors they bring to your site, who will then be confident in their own welcome. Trust will encourage initiatives to be considered and ensure they get an airing. As with connections between staff and management, if partners' personal connections with staff and management are strong any issues will be more easily resolved.



Figure 10: David Hay, as James Wiburd, discusses the Binooemia Cut with Bill Mark at a Jenolan Historic Weekend

Opportunities should be provided for previous staff to return to site. This allows for the passing on of knowledge and connects present staff to their heritage. Likewise, staff and community should be encouraged to build connections through participation in community organisations including bushcare and rural fire services and through the opportunity for local community to utilise the site, on occasion, for ceremony and celebration. The connections built in this way are more valuable than any income which may be received for the hire of the site to valued community organisations.

Connections between staff and cavers should be actively encouraged as they connect your staff to the wider speleo community and their vast knowledge base. Caving experience and caving connections also increase guides' job satisfaction and make for more informed interpretation. Another valuable aspect of guide-caver connectedness is that it creates access to a

capable and willing source of volunteers and can serve to strengthen minimal impact practices, a major facet of which is giving something back to the environment.

An example is the Jubilee Cave Restoration Project, the initiative of a Jenolan guide (ex) who has worked with a number of caving clubs, a few guides and many TAFE students to remove over 6.5 tonnes (so far) of builders' debris from the cave, where it had been dumped on flowstone and other crystal. As this debris was not on the route of the tour it was, of necessity, never going to be a priority for cave maintenance. Volunteers can focus on worthwhile projects that do not connect directly to the financial needs of management, but contribute significantly to karst preservation.

Similar connections between staff and scientists can increase the odds of developing innovative solutions to management issues.



Figure 11: Connecting traditional custodians to staff and visitors, Yarrangobilly Caves

While traditional custodians will always maintain their connections to the land, it is important that we do not overlook the importance of connections between traditional custodians and staff, or traditional custodians and visitors. Managers should create opportunities for staff and custodians to meet, to take part in ceremony together, to tell stories, to share and learn from each other. Karst sites will benefit enormously when traditional custodians and staff custodians are given the opportunity to build meaningful relationships and genuine respect through understanding and shared vision.

Likewise visitors will enjoy learning from traditional custodians, building their own connections to the site

and also to traditional culture. “Through interpretation understanding; through understanding appreciation; through appreciation protection”. Your cave site can be a bridge for building connections and goodwill between people.

Connections across sites, such as those fostered by ACKMA, can lead to fresh perspectives, fresh solutions and innovation through sharing of experience and knowledge. They also build professional advocacy. The sense of belonging to something bigger, along with exposure to a range of perspectives, can encourage innovation and development. Professional associations also provide strength of numbers when advocacy is required.



Figure 12: ACKMA builds connections across karst sites which benefit all

For sites under one agency their shared heritage can lead to valuable connections through staff exchanges, training assistance and resource sharing. Rather than seeing each other as competitors they can support each other to achieve better outcomes for both. Personal connections make achieving these outcomes far more likely than personal competitiveness.

Even between similar sites under different agencies, connection and friendly competition can lead to better outcomes. Each site can benefit from exposure to different ways of doing things and from shared promotion and advocacy. Friendly competition can encourage best practice operations.

Another exciting possibility when connections are sought and welcomed between karst sites is the chance of developing mentoring connections between the strong and the small, the established and the developing sites. In such connections we can share knowledge and perhaps resources to help protect the more vulnerable karst sites, not just in Australasia but also in the developing world. We can encourage best environmental practice and advocate not just for vulnerable sites, but for vulnerable people.

The traditional model of Caring for Country seems to me to have been based on three major precepts – presence on land, performance of ceremony and passing on of knowledge. These three forces built strong connections to land and protected that land. In the modern era the best practice model of

sustainable management is also based on three precepts – development which takes into account people, place and profit. In both cases it is connections which preserve our precious sites for the future.

Conclusion

Traditional Caring for Country is based on building connections to the land through presence on the land; performing ceremony for the land and passing on knowledge through storytelling, music and dance in an age and gender appropriate manner.

To Care for Country in the modern era we also need to build connections by being physically and emotionally present on our sites, sharing age-appropriate knowledge and inspiration through targeted interpretive activities and ensuring opportunities are available for others to connect to the site in meaningful ways.

Rebuilding an emotional connection to our natural and cultural heritage is the sustainable way into the future. We must aim for, balance and respect the triple bottom line – people, planet, profit – in equal measure if we hope to maintain our sites for future generations. To do this we need to nurture the connections between people and place, and strengthen the connections between the people who Care for Country.

Dedication

*In memory of John Callaghan,
Jenolan guide and custodian,
who instinctively understood
the positive power of connection
and generously shared his knowledge
through storytelling and ceremony*

References

Tilden, Freeman (1957). *Interpreting our Heritage*. University of North Carolina Press.