

# Cave Guide – Interpreter or Storyteller

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## Abstract

*“There is virtually universal agreement that the quality of a tour experience depends more than anything else upon the quality of the guide”* Elery Hamilton-Smith (1985)

Thirty-three years later the Australian tourism industry has identified that “experiences are the heart of contemporary tourism development” and Tourism Events Queensland (TEQ) has hosted workshops to assist guides develop their stories and bring them to life. Our presentation will highlight the various stages of storytelling based on TEQs “Extraordinary experiences through storytelling: unlocking the secrets of successful storytelling”. We will challenge guides to analyse their tour delivery and demonstrate the power of storytelling in relation to the interpretation of the ghost bat.

## Ghost Bat Data Dump

Here is an example of a “Data Dump” of information about the Ghost Bat.

Ghost Bats, or *Macroderma Gigas*, are the largest microbat in Australia. It is readily identifiable by its relatively large size, with a body length between 98 and 118mm and weight 74-144g. The colour of ghost bat fur varies with increasing distance from the coastline. The populations closer to the coast tend to have pale grey to brown fur, while populations further inland are almost white. This species also has relatively large eyes, a long, simple nose leaf, and no tail.

Ghost bats occur in a wide range of habitats, from rainforest, monsoon and vine scrub, to open woodlands in arid areas. The favoured roost sites for this species are undisturbed caves or mine shafts. Ghost bats are only found in Northern Australia.

Ghost bats feed on large insects, birds, and small mammals, including other bats. Prey is detected by echolocation, vision, or hearing. Once caught, the bat will take its prey back to its perch or roost site to eat, and any parts it does not want to eat it rips off and throws on the ground.

## Setting the Scene

The above is a comprehensive interpretation of one of the most precious cave creatures in the country, perhaps a contender down the track for Cave Animal

of the Year! But I wonder how many guests will retain much of that information. How many cave visitors will care about the ghost bat? Who will remember the ghost bat when the next presentation starts in ½ an hour? Although factual, it is unengaging and an unacceptable way of presenting information to our guests. So, what does engage them? Why should they care what he has just said? Why should they pay \$32 to hear what they can read on google?

In 2014, my first visit to show caves outside of Capricorn Caves was to Postojna Caves in Slovenia, a place I am sure many of you have visited before. Now the caves were something I had never dreamt of. Comparing Postojna Caves to our system at Capricorn Caves, I was absolutely blown away. We took the amazing train ride through the first few km's before we got out to do the rest on foot with our guide. For the first 5 minutes of the tour, I stood towards the back of the group, freaking my wife out because I knew what the lady was going to say next.

We described the formation of limestone, the speleothems and so on. I spoke word for word with her, because this lady was saying my tour from back in Australia! At the time I thought it was funny. As time went on though, I realised it was terrible guiding, no personality, no exciting or engaging delivery, just data dumping the facts. Of course, if it was terrible guiding by her, it said the same thing about me.

## History of Interpretation in ACKMA

Cave guides are responsible for people's perception of caves, their significance and the way they are treated. I never had the honour of meeting Elery Hamilton-Smith but am aware of his passion for the guests' experience. These are some of his words from 1985: *“there is virtually a universal agreement that the quality of the tour depends more than anything else upon the quality of the guide”* (Hamilton-Smith, 1985). Twelve years later, he was beating the same drum; *“Guides have a demanding and highly skilled job; they are the real managers of visitor experience; they should have ready access to development opportunities and their expertise should be properly recognised”*. (Hamilton-Smith, 1997)

In 2016 at the guide school at Capricorn Caves, wonderful presentations from Cathie Plowman and Jon Pastorelli, focussed on engaging our guests and

improving the overall visitor experience. Changing your tour by 1% every time and your tour will never be the same.

Moving forward to 2017, Tourism and Events Queensland are saying: *“Today’s travellers are increasingly looking for something more than just participating in an activity that has little connection to the meaning and significance of a place. The sights are not enough. They are looking for a higher level of engagement that connects them with the essence of the place and its people”*.

TEQ’s research is telling us the same thing Elery Hamilton-Smith was telling us over 33 years ago. ACKMA has been talking about the importance of visitor experience all this time; we have determined that the guides are the most important people at delivering the experiences the guests are searching for. So where are we today?

## Introduction to Storytelling

Over the last 18 months, Tourism and Events Queensland has been pushing the notion of storytelling. From the front reception to the guides to the managers and owners, everyone has a story to tell and as a tourist attraction in Queensland, we are urged to *“bring the Queensland brand to life; the experiences we offer and the stories we share are what creates a memorable experience for our guests”*. So, what is storytelling?

For over 60,000 years, Australians have been the ultimate storytellers, sharing their culture and the dreamtime through, song, dance, art and stories. The quintessential Australian today is still the storyteller. Someone who can spin a yarn and keep people entertained with their humour and larrikinism. There is more to it though than spinning a yarn. We are in the business of cave tourism, we need to ensure that the stories we tell are meaningful, engaging and authentic.

Let me share with you a small section of a storytelling workbook from Tourism Queensland. These are the 4 steps to successful storytelling.

### 1. Know your guests!

No matter who you are or where you are from, understanding your guests’ background is important to any tour delivery but is **essential** to successful storytelling. It is little things like questioning their background and their current knowledge. Why are they here? What are their interests? Understanding your guest will help you tell your stories in a way that is impactful and memorable. *(Probably the greatest story commandment is to make me care –*

*emotionally, intellectually, aesthetically – just make me care).*

### 2. Discover your story

This can be the tricky one. Every single one of us can find a story about our caves back home that matches everyone else in the room. What is YOUR story? Why are your caves unique, what is special about the places you guide in? We can very easily fall into the scratched record guide that has played a thousand times. If you have authentic, genuine and personal stories about your caves, the guests will feel that, and they will connect with what you are telling them.

### 3. Deliver your story

Empowering your storytellers with a little training will build confidence and add quality to their delivery. Everyone has a different style, and this is where it is upon the managers to allow some freedom of delivery. We don’t want to be sending out robots to deliver cave tours. Guides who are trapped in a set style will always fall back into the same old routine. Storytelling allows the delivery to be free formed, fun, emotional and authentic.

### 4. Keep Evolving

Society and therefore our guests’ expectations will continue to evolve, meaning as managers it is important that our guides are encouraged and enabled to evolve as well. Providing opportunities to stay up to date in guiding techniques and providing learning opportunities will help your guides deliver on the expectations of the guests. The guests’ experience is what we are in this for after all.

## Case Study

Over the years, fossil discoveries have been made at the Capricorn Caves. From the research led by Dr Scott Hocknull from the Qld Museum, who presented to ACKMA in 2016, it was found that the fossils are quite significant with the Capricorn Caves having the longest palaeontological record of faunal change in a cave in Australia. From 500,000 year old rainforest fauna, through 200,000 year old arid fauna, to modern times. We have a HUGE scientific asset here and we want to get this information to the masses. What is the point of Scott’s years of research if it is not being shared with the world?

As a result, we developed a tour called ‘Fossil Tour-Bringing Lost Worlds to Life’.

In the 6 months leading up to June 2017 we employed palaeontologist Rochelle Lawrence to start converting the ‘heavy’ scientific texts and papers into simple and easy to understand reading for our guides. Along with Scott Hocknull, Rochelle then delivered several workshops to ensure that the guides understood the content.

We spent a week inside the caves with them, discussing theories and gaining an understanding of the natural history of our area and the fauna and flora that once existed.

The challenge then was to convert all this content into a one hour tour! How do we deliver this scientific interpretation which could very quickly become tedious and unrelatable? It was content that if not delivered well, would just become “data dumping”.

This is where we incorporate storytelling. We wanted to integrate this incredible scientific information with the concept of interpretation through storytelling. Amanda worked hard to develop a workshop for all our staff with the focus on continually finding unique and interesting ways to interpret the information. How can we paint the picture of these amazing ancient worlds with our words? Imagine the killer marsupial lion dropping from the trees or coming face to face with a giant venomous goanna. We wanted to live up to the name of the new tour – Bringing Lost Worlds to Life! We also took the content that was being regurgitated on our other tours and worked to give the interpretation new life. Tell the story in 5 minutes. Now tell it in 2, now tell it in 30 seconds. Amanda’s goal was to get the guides to stop data dumping. Discover what it is we truly want our guests to take away and deliver it in a way that was captivating while being authentic.

## Conclusion

Everyone knows the saying; don’t let the truth get in the way of a good story. That is not at all what I am saying today. We want to ensure the stories we tell are backed up with truth, with science, and with facts. We need our stories to not only be exciting but credible.

We have a responsibility as cave guides to a high standard of interpretation and we cannot let a good story replace the truth, however use our stories to let the truth be heard, be felt, be remembered. These caves are places we know are so very special but

through stories we can create some special cave experiences for our guests that are everlasting.

## Ghost Bat Story

Here is an example of a “Story” about the Ghost Bat.

Ghost Bat fossils have been found dating back 500,000 years in the Mt Etna Caves area. It has been discovered that throughout the last half a million years, the area has gone from dense lowland rainforest, to an incredibly arid environment, to the environment you can find around Capricorn Caves today. These drastic climatic changes sent many species to extinction, but not the Ghost Bat. The Ghost Bat was one of the lucky animals that could survive in the perpetual darkness of the caves. Being the largest of the microbats in Australia, they used their echolocation, vision, and hearing to continue their dominance in their niche environment. It was only until about 100 years ago that the ghost bat was relatively undisturbed in its habitat. Then, of course, the humans arrived. A cement company found out about the huge amount of exposed limestone and took to work destroying it with explosives and crushing the limestone into dust to use for cement. As they destroyed many caves, they also destroyed the roost sites of the Ghost Bats, and in the process killed countless bats. One of the longest running conservation campaigns ever run in Australia finally succeeded in stopping the mining. Although it was too late for the Ghost Bats, their population, once the largest in Australia, is critically low. Today the Ghost Bats are on the Endangered Species List and it is believed there are less than 50 left in Central Queensland. Through palaeontological research we have been able to find out the story of this incredible creature that witnessed the extinction of countless animals around it, and although we are now witnessing its own extinction, it will live on through storytelling

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