

AUSTRALIAN SPELEOLOGICAL FEDERATION  
PROCEEDINGS 10TH BIENNIAL CONFERENCE

MT. ETNA CONSERVATION - A HISTORY OF ARBITRARINESS

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ABSTRACT

The caves of Mt. Etna and Limestone Ridge in Central Queensland, collectively known as the Mt. Etna Caves, are being quarried for limestone by Central Queensland Cement Company. The case for the inclusion of Mt. Etna and Limestone Ridge in a National Park is briefly outlined. The history of quasi-protection, pseudo-protection, proposed protection, promised protection, and destruction of this cavernous area is traced. Though originally gazetted as Recreation Reserves, mining leases now cover these areas. In 1968 a Queensland State Government Committee recommended a National Park over 31 acres of Mt. Etna. Present indications are that a National Park may soon be announced over at least part of Limestone Ridge but that Mt. Etna will be destroyed. The arbitrary basis of this action is challenged.

The conflict is not insoluble, but no solution can be contemplated which would allow any further violation of either of Mt. Etna or Limestone Ridge.

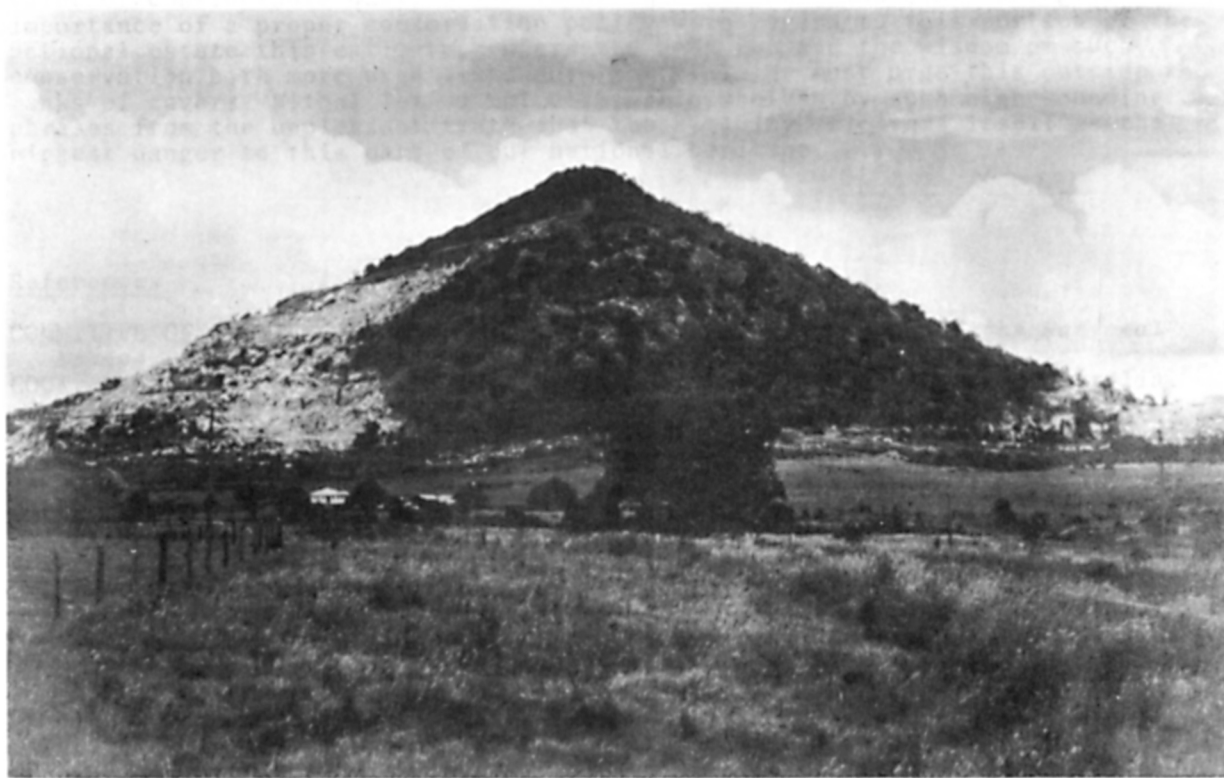


Figure 1. Mt. Etna, viewed from the northern side.

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## JUSTIFICATION OF NATIONAL PARK PROPOSAL

The photograph, Figure 1, shows what we want included as a National Park. Depending on one's point of view, it might be regarded as either a rather good quarry, or as the scarred remains of what was once a very prominent cone - in its context as proud a feature as its namesake Mt. Etna in Sicily. Obviously from this photograph, Central Queensland's Mt. Etna is no longer in its natural state. Its aesthetics appear to have been rather drastically destroyed. The proposal then, that Mt. Etna still be proclaimed as a National Park (or included in a larger National Park) needs more than a little justification.

Geographical Unity

Firstly, Mt. Etna can not be considered alone. It is one part of a larger geographical unit including Limestone Ridge and several other limestone outcrops in "The Caves" region. Destruction of Mt. Etna would destroy something around a third of the known caves in the area. Its preservation is essential to the integrity of the region; geologically, biologically, visually - and if you allow speleological hopes to run a little high, the possibility of a cavernous connection to Mt. Etna underneath the plain should not be discounted. This geographical relationship will be discussed later.

Superficiality of damage

Secondly, despite the superficial damage, Mt. Etna and its caves are basically intact. Figure 1 shows the northern face of Mt. Etna with the eastern quarry on the left. A road passes under the northern face and leads to another major quarry on the western flanks. The Central Queensland Cement Co. began mining in the eastern quarry in 1967 and extended operations to the western quarry in 1971. The area in the middle - the northern face - is the significantly cavernous area. Actually the whole of the Mt. Etna cone is not limestone, only the northern half. There are 40 known caves on Mt. Etna, and another half dozen or so opened by quarrying operations. To date Central Queensland Cement has breached 5 of the known caves, three on the eastern quarry, and two on the western. We have information of their breaking into, and subsequent destruction of, several previously undiscovered caves as well. Damage to formations in the breached caves is extensive, and though structural damage has occurred in these and other caves near to both quarry faces, the vast majority of caves are by no means destroyed. Not yet - that is!

The western quarry can not be extended eastward without the destruction of major caves, and similarly, the eastern quarry is in dangerous proximity to Main Cave, Winding Stairway and Bat Cleft. It is Bat Cleft - the maternity cave for Central Queensland's *Miniopterus* sp. - which is the cause for most concern.

Any claim that Mt. Etna has been too badly damaged to be protected as a National Park shows an excessive concern for the superficial scarring of the surface, and little understanding of the cavernous nature of the mountain. Most of the caves are as yet intact, but those which are not, will, given time and the immediate cessation of blasting, generally be able to disguise much of any blast damage they have sustained. Even the quarried surface could be subject to restoration. A few months "cleaning up" action by the cement company could round off the contours, and a long term and difficult program of revegetation begun. Two old quarries on adjacent Limestone Ridge show that scars become less blatant with time - even though in these cases their revegetation has been undertaken by lantana.

Biological value

The third warrant for inclusion of the scarred Mt. Etna in a National Park is the need to protect the biologically important Bat Cleft. Bat Cleft is the maternity colony supporting an estimated 400,000 *Miniopterus* species in the Mt.

Etna area, and it is highly unlikely that an alternative to the traditional maternity site would be found by the species in the area if this cave were destroyed. As mentioned earlier, Bat Cleft is precipitously close to the eastern quarry and it has sustained some structural damage. There has been no measurement of the size of the bat population since 1970, and it is hoped that one can be made soon, so that an accurate indication of the effect of the blasting on the numbers of the bats inhabiting Bat Cleft can be obtained. (See footnote ).

Those three points; the geographical unity of the area, the fact that Mt. Etna's caves are intact, and the irreplaceability of Bat Cleft as a maternity site, provide the basic justification why Mt. Etna must be included in a National Park despite its surface scars.

Initially, this discussion has been concentrated on Mt. Etna alone, because it is the limestone outcrop at present subject to mining, but as mentioned, the mountain is not to be considered in isolation. Limestone Ridge and Mt. Etna are shown in Figure 2.

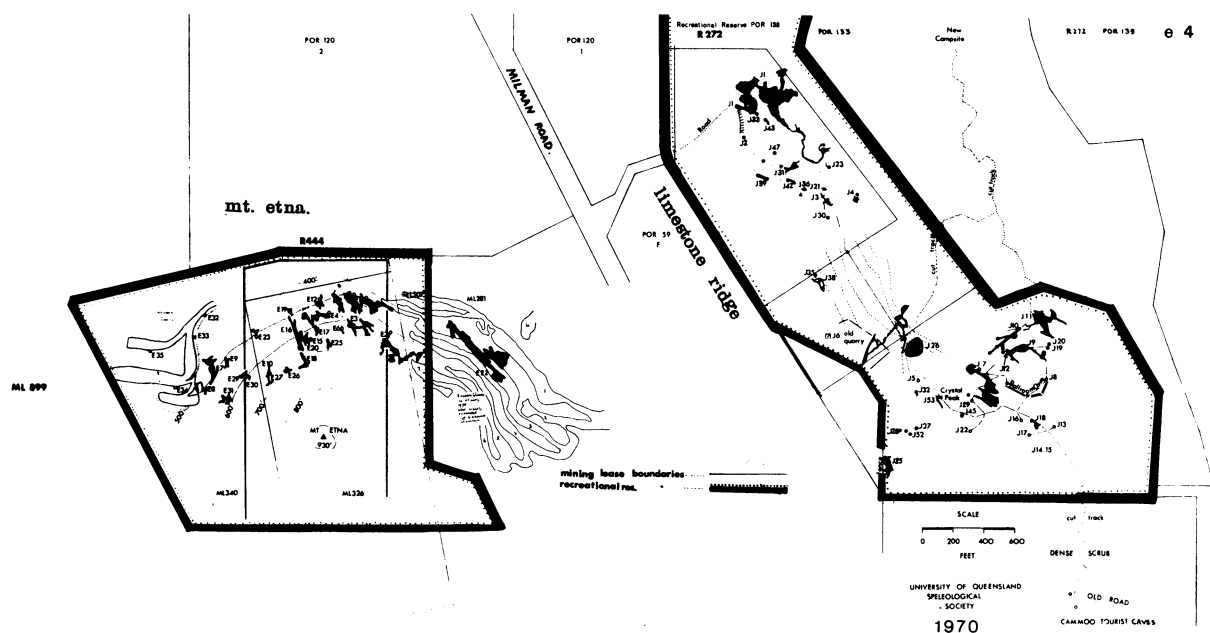


Figure 2. Part of parish map, showing Mt. Etna and Limestone Ridge.

Limestone Ridge is less than 500 metres across a valley from Mt. Etna. Mount Etna is situated on a portion of land known as Recreation Reserve R444, and Limestone Ridge is on Recreation Reserve R272. The area would be most widely known from the two show cave developments, Olsen's Caves, and Cammoo Caves and "The Caves" township which is situated on the main north coast highway and rail link, 22 km north of Rockhampton. Recreation Reserve R272 consists of two portions of land separated by an area known locally as "The Valley", which contains no limestone. Several other smaller outcrops of cavernous limestone are scattered throughout this area.

Figure 2 does not include all the most recent caves found, but it does give some indication of the distribution of caves on Mt. Etna and Limestone Ridge. In particular, it can be seen how the eastern and western quarries on Mt. Etna

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have, to date, avoided the most cavernous area.

The case for the inclusion of both Mt. Etna and Limestone Ridge in a National Park has been argued in depth in the book *Mount Etna Caves*, and there is little need to reiterate that case here. Today, no one - except perhaps the cement company - would argue against the legitimacy of a National Park in the area, but what is in question is which portions will be protected, and which will be thrown to the wolves. We are confident that there will eventually be a National Park over at least some of the area. In fact an announcement of a National Park over only Limestone Ridge before the recent State elections was expected. But what no one is confident of, is the processes by which the boundaries of the park will be determined, or more probably, have already been determined. This author's thesis is that arbitrariness, rather than any legitimate form of enquiry is the chief factor in the Queensland Government's forthcoming National Park decision. This arbitrariness, with a significant component of insincerity, has characterised Government attitudes over the long history of the Mt. Etna caves dispute.

Throughout the years, the area has been afforded quasi-protection, psuedo-protection, proposed protection, temporary protection, and most recently promised protection. One would hope that any forthcoming permanent protection in a National Park might be the result of a rational investigation, and, hopefully have more luck than any of the preceding forms of "protection" in preventing the destruction of the Mt. Etna Caves by limestone quarrying.

## HISTORY OF "PROTECTION" OF MT. ETNA AND LIMESTONE RIDGE

Quasi-protection

"Quasi-protection" was afforded Mt. Etna in 1920 when it was gazetted as Recreation Reserve R444. Limestone Ridge was similarly gazetted as R272 in 1934. A Recreation Reserve is defined as land set aside for public recreation. The wording of the 1934 Order in Council was "shall be permanently reserved and set apart for Recreation purposes." These Recreation Reserves stand today. The only hitch, of course, was that mining leases could cover such reserves, and there will be precious little left to recreate on when the miners have finished on Mt. Etna. The spirit in which both of these Recreation Reserves were declared can be honoured today only by re-gazetting them as National Parks.

The history of guano and limestone mining leases on the two Recreation Reserves is long, and is adequately documented in *Mount Etna Caves*. In fact, 1975 will be the fiftieth anniversary of the first application for limestone mining on Mt. Etna. Until late this year (1974), the situation was that Central Queensland Cement held leases over the whole of Mt. Etna, and the southern half of Limestone Ridge, while Mt. Morgan Ltd held the lease over the northern end of the Ridge. The leases have recently been relinquished over Limestone Ridge, presumably in preparation for a National Park, but all leases over Mt. Etna are still operational.

Pseudo-protection

The late 1960's saw the "pseudo-protection" of Mt. Etna's caves - the elusive "66 foot" agreement. After many representations, it was learnt that an agreement had been made by the Cement Company and Mines Department, not to mine within a 66 foot radius of known caves. This has been variously worded as "66 feet from any known cave entrance" and "66 feet from any known cave which is a habitat of *Macroderma gigas*". Questions have been asked in Parliament about breaches of this agreement, with a reply in March 1970 by the Acting Minister for Mines..... ".....if these promises have been breached inadvertently, there can be no legal redress and the actual distance of encroachment which allegedly occurred is not relevant." In any case, the concept of providing a 66 foot barrier around only the entrance of a cave is a negative one. Virtually the whole of

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the cave could be destroyed while still maintaining this barrier. Neither does such an agreement provide protection for caves which will be discovered in the future by normal speleological activity.

Surveys existed for at least two of the caves broken into by quarrying operations. Also as late as 1972, the Mines Department forwarded the Society a plan of Mt. Etna showing only 6 cave entrances, and one chain barriers around these six entrances. This has been typical of the Mines Department and Central Queensland Cement Company's refusal to recognize the extent to which the limestone outcrop is cavernous. The 66 foot agreement has been meaningless in the past, and is obviously going to remain meaningless in the future.

### Proposed Protection

Then came the "proposed protection". In November, 1967, in a reply sent to the University of Queensland Speleological Society by the Minister for Local Government and Conservation, it was stated that "approval was given for a Departmental Committee consisting of officers of the Lands, Forestry and Mines Departments to investigate the future of the Mt. Etna caves system and the question of mining thereon."

In 1968 this interdepartmental committee recommended: *".....Having regard to all the facts, both from a mining and a conservation viewpoint....."*

- 1) *That the Mines Department approach the lessee Company to obtain the surrender of about 31 acres (on Mt. Etna).....*
- 2) *That upon completion of the surrender action, the area be proclaimed a Scenic Area under the Forestry Acts, 1959 to 1964."*

(Scenic area was the former nomenclature for a National Park less than 1,000 acres. The 31 acres referred to is some of the as yet untouched northern face of Mt. Etna).

It is understood that this approach was made by the Mines Department, but Central Queensland Cement Company refused to relinquish its leases. Apparently nothing more has been done, and the proposed protection has never been implemented.

In summary, a Queensland Government interdepartmental committee has recognised that Mt. Etna is of National Park status even despite the scar of the quarry. It is regrettable that this recognition has not resulted in more definite action (However, the University of Queensland Speleological Society regards the proposal of only 31 acres for a National Park as inadequate ).

### Temporary Protection

The northern face of Mt. Etna, between the eastern and western quarries, has only remained inviolate because of an agreement between the cement company and the Queensland Government Mines Department not to mine part of Mt. Etna for a three year period while investigations of alternative limestone deposits were made by the Mines Department. That agreement, made probably about 1969, has long expired, and the company is now free - if in fact it was ever bound by such a gentlemen's agreement - to join up their eastern and western quarries and completely obliterate Mt. Etna's caves. It is understood that Central Queensland Cement has recently agreed to relinquish its mining leases held on Limestone Ridge, adjacent to Mt. Etna, on the understanding that it be allowed to quarry all the limestone on Mt. Etna. As a result it is envisaged that an attempt will be made by the company in the immediate future to extend their operations into the most cavernous areas. Such a move to quarry the northern face of Mt. Etna would have to be construed as an attempt by the company to despoil as much of the surface as quickly as possible, rather than a legitimate need to extend the quarry. In the western quarry being worked at present, a conservative minimum of 20 years supply of limestone is available by downcutting

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in an already destroyed area. Should political and legal methods fail to prevent the unwarranted despoilation of any more of the surface of Mt. Etna, this author believes that direct action would have to be contemplated at the first sign of any attempt to extend the quarry.

Promised Protection

The latest protection - promised protection - for Mt. Etna and Limestone Ridge was offered by the Queensland Premier, Mr. Bjelke-Petersen, at a political meeting in Rockhampton in May 1974. The Premier promised that Mt. Etna Caves would be protected. A few weeks later the Rockhampton National Party candidate affirmed that the Premier's promise meant protection of both Mt. Etna and Limestone Ridge. The performance of the Premier's promise is eagerly awaited, but this author believes that the promised protection will have the same fate as all the other bogus protections.

Limestone Ridge and Mt. Etna were gazetted as Recreation Reserves early this century; recognized by Queensland Government officers as possessing requisite National Park qualities in the 1960's; in part temporarily protected from mining (which further illustrated recognition of these qualities); subject of political promises of protection in early 1970's - but the fate of Mt. Etna and Limestone Ridge is still undisclosed.

However, this author believes that the arbitrary decision has been taken to mine Mt. Etna and propose a diminutive national park on Limestone Ridge. At no time has any recreational or biological study of the Mt. Etna-Limestone Ridge complex been undertaken by the Queensland Government. Their decision will be based solely on the results of an economic geology survey.

The arbitrary and short-sighted basis of this decision is deplored.

Footnote (February 1975):

Since the 10th Biennial Conference, there have been further developments.

(a) Counts of the number of bats in Bat Cleft in January 1975 indicate little change in the numbers using the maternity colony. Despite continuous blasting over many years (a rockfall has occurred in Bat Cleft) the tenacious hold that the species has on this single cave indicates their inability to locate or develop an alternative maternity site.

(b) In January 1975, the Queensland Mines Department Minister officially announced that the mining leases on Limestone Ridge had been removed, and that the Queensland Government intended to make Limestone Ridge a National Park. Central Queensland Cement is to be allowed to continue to mine Mt. Etna, implying Mt. Etna, all its caves, and the bat colony are to be destroyed.

But the issue is not closed. To date there have been 13 years of conservation activity centered on this area. The battle for Mt. Etna is only warming up.