

MOUNT ETNA CONSERVATION

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Abstract

The Mount Etna, Limestone Ridge and Karst Glen karst areas in Central Queensland contain more than 150 known caves. Many of the caves in the Mount Etna area are threatened by quarrying operations. A brief history of a fifteen year old conservation conflict is given with special emphasis on interpretation of government and public responses to tactics used. In particular, attention is focused on the local response to a land use plan developed for the Mount Etna region and on the Queensland Government's response to an economic report stating that mining at Mount Etna is uneconomic.

Introduction

The Mount Etna region, just north of Rockhampton on the Central Queensland coast, consists of three karstic areas:

1. Mount Etna contains 46 documented caves on its northern face and is perhaps the most densely cavernous area in Australia.
2. Limestone Ridge contains over 80 documented caves including Johannsens Cave which is the seventh longest known cave in Australia.
3. Karst Glen with 26 documented caves.

The region, which is relatively small, has a history of limestone and guano mining, the latter dating back to early this century. Mining has now ceased on Limestone Ridge and all mining leases on this area have been relinquished, pending gazettal of a national park covering a major portion of the Ridge.

Unfortunately the Limestone Ridge national park proposal has been used as an excuse by the Queensland Government to justify continued mining of mount Etna, possibly leading to its eventual destruction. Such action is wrong as major bat colonies occur in Mount Etna caves including the Bat Cleft maternity cave which is critical for the survival of an estimated 300,000 Little Bent-winged Bats (*Miniopterus australis*). Also an important portion of the region's population of the extremely rare Ghost Bat† (*Macroderma gigas*) uses caves at Mount Etna as maternity sites. The Ghost Bat is currently being studied by John Toop under a grant from the federal Department of Environment, Housing and Community Development.

Mount Etna's northern face and a major portion of Limestone Ridge are covered with a rare semi-evergreen vine thicket broken by well developed karren-fields often of spectacular proportions. The vine thickets are believed to be crucial for the foraging flights of young bats.

For a more detailed survey of the resources of the Mount Etna region see Sprent (1970) and Hamilton-Smith and Champion (1976).

History

A detailed history and interpretation of the Mount Etna conflict was presented at a previous ASF conference (Brown 1975). I refer you to that paper and to Sprent (1970) and Hamilton-Smith and Champion (1976) for further information.

Important facets of Mount Etna's history are summarized below :

1. Mount Etna was gazetted as a Recreation Reserve in 1920. The spirit and perhaps the letter of

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† The Ghost Bat is currently under consideration for inclusion in the official endangered species list. The application is expected to be successful.

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this gazettal have been breached by the granting of limestone mining leases to the Central Queensland Cement Company and to others.

2. In 1968 a Queensland Government interdepartmental inquiry, which included representatives from the Mines Department, recommended that 31 acres on the cavernous face of Mount Etna be gazetted as a national park. Little, if any, effort was made to implement the recommendations of this inquiry.
3. Limestone mining leases were granted over large limestone deposits at Bracewell south of Rockhampton early in 1976. A geological report of the limestone deposits in the Central Queensland region prepared for the University of Queensland Speleological Society (UQSS) suggests that alternative limestone deposits to Bracewell, and indeed to Mount Etna, may exist. The significance of the Bracewell deposits will become apparent below.

Economic Report

The Capricorn Conservation Council applied for and received a \$2000 federal Department of the Environment grant for the preparation of "An Economic Study of the Queensland Cement Industry" by Mr J. Ware, Lecturer in Political Economy at Griffith University, and by Dr M.M. Metwally, Reader in Economics at the University of Queensland. The report, released late in 1976, revolves around a new large-scale clinker plant to be constructed at Gladstone, 100 km south of Rockhampton, to be supplied with limestone mined at Bracewell. Clinker will be shipped to the Bulwer Island (Brisbane) plant where the clinker will be crushed and made into cement. The new operations are owned by Queensland Cement and Lime Company or its subsidiaries. Currently the central Queensland region is supplied with cement produced at Rockhampton from limestone mined at Mount Etna, these operations being under the control of Central Queensland Cement Company. Due to the economies of scale in cement production the proposed Gladstone plant, which will optimally produce two million tonnes per year, will be able to produce cement at a much lower price than the Rockhampton plant which optimally produces only 200,000 tonnes per year. This means that the

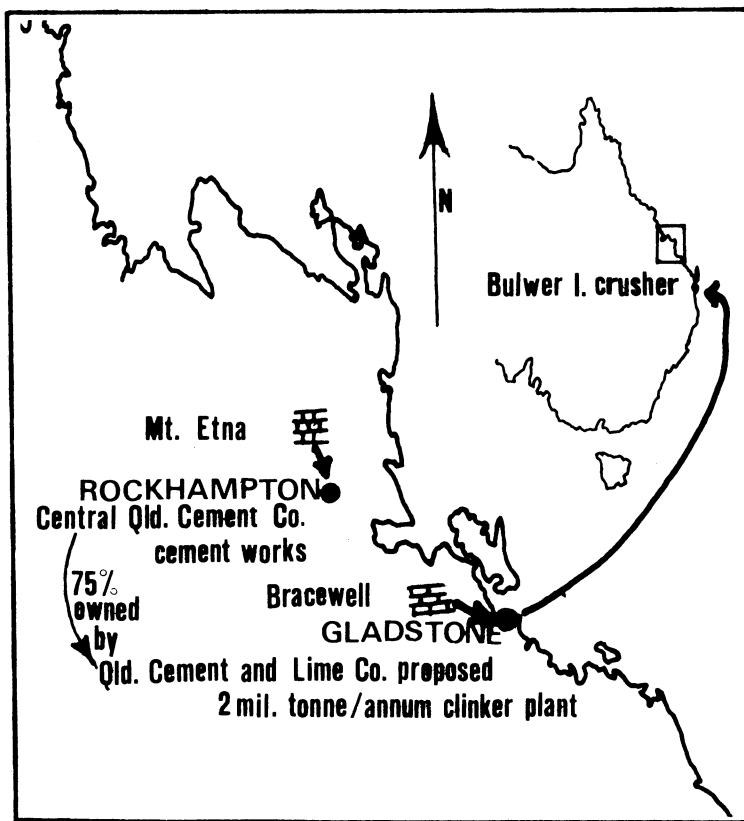


Fig. 1. The Central Queensland Cement Industry.

Rockhampton plant will not be economically viable once the Gladstone plant becomes operational. Even with the Gladstone plant operating below capacity it is estimated that it will be able to produce cement \$7.00 per tonne cheaper than the Rockhampton plant.

But the story goes deeper than that. The economic report has also revealed a monopoly in the Queensland cement industry. Central Queensland Cement Company, operator of the Mount Etna-Rockhampton plants, is 75% owned by Queensland Cement and Lime Company, which will operate the Bracewell-Gladstone plants. This means that the Rockhampton cement production complex need not be forced to close by economic pressure as capital can flow into Central Queensland Cement Company from its owners, the major one being the Queensland Cement and Lime Company.

Central Queensland Cement Company has made public statements that it will not close down its operations and that the proposed Gladstone plant will have no effect on its operations. In fact the Company may be planning to close down after the Gladstone plant begins production but it has made the above statements for several possible reasons:

1. To maintain confidence, in a financial sense, in their company (so that the Company need not close prematurely).
2. To avoid any outcry from employees if they were to learn that they would lose their jobs in a few years.

At this stage it is still impossible to predict what the Company is planning.

Neither the Mines Department nor the Company, in my opinion, have been able to deny, satisfactorily, the conclusions of the economic report. After the Queensland Mines Minister (Mr Camm) was sent a copy of the report he replied . . . "Any decision on the future of operations by Central Queensland Cement Pty. Ltd. on economic grounds is, of course, a matter for that Company. In the meantime, I must reiterate that it is this Government's policy to allow the Company to continue its operations at Mount Etna in terms of its legal entitlements on those mining leases granted to it." (Even the Company's entitlements are questionable.) In other words, he is saying that the Mines Department's only interest in the issue now is to protect the leases which it originally granted irrespective of the damage such mining is causing.

The Bracewell leases cover many farms in the district and the outcry from the landowners developed into quite a controversy when they learnt of the lease proposals. Of course the leases were granted just the same. The Mines Department has attempted to turn the farmers against the Mount Etna cause by saying that we want to see mining go ahead at Bracewell so that Mount Etna can be saved. This is untrue. In fact UQSS has objected to mining at Bracewell because of the social disruption it will cause. We have pointed out that any decision to mine limestone at Bracewell is the responsibility of the Queensland Government and the Company. If mining at Bracewell and cement production at Gladstone are allowed to go ahead then there is no reason why mining at Mount Etna and cement production at Rockhampton should continue.

The publicity given to the economic report and the fact that State Parliamentarians were petitioned three times during 1976 has placed considerable pressure on the Company and the Mines Department. The pressure will hopefully work to our advantage.

Mount Etna and the Caves

Fifteen years of conservation activity at Mount Etna by UQSS has seen the accumulation of files several feet thick and the production of many publications including two books. The first was *Mount Etna Caves*, edited by J.K. Sprent, published in 1970. The second book was produced in response to a need for a more updated and integrated approach to survey the resources of the Mount Etna complex. The book, entitled *Mount Etna and The Caves*, was written by professional planning consultants Mr Elery Hamilton-Smith and Mr Randall Champion. The study was financed by a \$9500 National Estate grant and was published at the expense of UQSS early in 1976.

The logical and organized nature of the study culminated, at the end of the book, in a set of proposals for the development of the Mount Etna karst region for recreational purposes. This included suggestions for park boundaries, management proposals, recognition of fragile sites and even went to the extent of proposing walking paths, picnic areas and scenic drives.

The book was a very valuable addition to our campaign and indeed was the first time we have had a well organized set of proposals for the protection of the area. We can now place the onus back on the Queensland Government to investigate these proposals.

However one small section of the book created more interest than anticipated. This section is

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only several pages long and covers acquisition of land for park purposes. A huge stir appeared in the Rockhampton press over the mention of compulsory acquisition of freehold land. I will make it clear that the study did not recommend compulsory acquisition but mere mention of these words caused a hypersensitive reaction amongst landholders involved.

The emotional arguments of these landholders struck a strong chord in the local community. At one stage it was estimated that 50% of the landholders involved were against the proposals presented in the book. As the issue developed it also became apparent that some of the landholders opposing the proposals were on-side with the Company. This would seriously question the motives of these people.

After several months of bitter struggling over the issue, opposition died out or at least went underground. Eventually I think that the book came out on top and it has been pointed out that the publicity given to the incident probably did us a world of good. However at one stage it was touch and go whether we could successfully fight the opposition and, at one stage, one of the landholders involved threatened and then actually bulldozed vine thicket on his property so that his land would no longer be worth incorporation in the proposed park.

In a letter to a local paper one Rockhampton resident aptly pointed out that the Company was the one doing the damage and that fighting amongst ourselves could only work to the advantage of the Company in the long run. The despoiling of the local landscape should have been more of a threat to local landholders than a set of park proposals.

In any event, the issue has highlighted a possible problem area and the lesson learnt will be of value should a similar study be undertaken in the future.

As a closing remark I would like to mention that now that the Texas Caves have been lost (flooded late 1976) caves are even scarcer in Queensland and hence the decision to allow continued mining of Mount Etna is even more irresponsible.

Acknowledgements

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