

CAVES AS A RESPONSIBILITY

by

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Caves are now widely recognised as an important element within the National and World Heritage. More importantly, they are one of the least replaceable of all elements.

It is argued that the responsibility of governments for the protection and management of caves must extend beyond the boundaries of parks and reserves. Care must be taken not to trivialise this responsibility by shoddy, inept or in-appropriate tourism or park management.

Others, including landowners, cavers and other visitors, can best be regarded as having a responsibility which arises out of their degree of knowledge. Those with knowledge should stop moralising about the less informed and should act themselves, or seek government action when necessary, even where this may mean refraining from visiting specific caves.

Text taken from audio record of the Conference.

Nearly 30 years ago several of us sat one night around a flagon of claret here in Adelaide and discussed a problem. Our problem was that we had walked over most walkable parts of the State, we had savoured the whole of the coastline and we were running out of really interesting things to do in our spare time. We decided on two possibilities. One was to go skin diving and the other was to go caving. Then someone found out the price of skin diving equipment and we very quickly agreed that caving was what we wanted to do.

We set off with no knowledge of safe caving techniques, in a couple of vehicles - one of which stopped every few miles and you had to take the cover-plate off the side valves and bang them with a hammer to get them moving again. The other was a peculiar monstrosity called a Bradford Station Sedan that basically consisted of a 1,000 C.C. motorbike with a large tea-chest mounted on it. We did find that it would hold up to 16 cavers. The only trouble was that when you got over 40 kilometres an hour with such a load the front wheels lifted off the road.

Today I am here talking about caves and responsibility. Now, either I've lost my sense of fun and been around too long or I've learnt something in the meantime. I'm not sure which. I don't think we started caving in a very responsible way, but it was the best we knew at the time. I leave it to you to judge whether I've lost my sense of fun or whether I've actually learnt something useful. What I want to do is talk mainly about the question of who should be responsible for caves.

There has been a lot of discussion and a lot of literature about why caves are an important environmental and social responsibility for our society. I'll spend a few minutes on that first to clear some ground.

It is commonly agreed now that caves are a very important part of our heritage. There are already a number of caves and cave areas on the world heritage list, not just on the Australian list. For instance, the Mammoth Cave National Park and the Nahanni National Park are both on the world heritage list. Now, one of the points I want to make about why we should be concerned about caves and feel a sense of responsibility for them, is that our answer to that question is beginning to change. In the past our answer has always been in human-centred terms or what a philosopher would call instrumental terms. Thus, we have argued for the preservation and care of caves because of their value to human beings, not because they might be valuable in themselves but because they are valuable to us as people. And those sort of arguments have been applied to all wild places. Godfrey-Smith says that you can classify the arguments into four, and I like his terms. He says there is the 'cathedral' argument which argues that wild places are places of beauty and spiritual renewal; the 'laboratory' argument which says they are important to us because of their research value; the 'silo' argument which says they are important to us because of the extent to which they conserve the genetic stock; and the 'gymnasium' argument which says they are valuable because of the extent to which they provide us with opportunities for healthy recreation.

Now all of these are essentially instrumental in character, and are all about the value of wild places, including caves, to human beings. I believe there is now evidence that we are gradually beginning to move towards a non-anthropocentric view which says that wild places are important in themselves. I do not think this realisation has yet hit many of our political leaders nor many of our businessmen. I think it has, however, impacted on the thinking of a very large proportion of the general population. If you look at the research evidence, summarised in the 1981 National Estate Report of our own Federal Government, (pp.12-17) I think you can sense something of that shift towards a non-anthropocentric view. If you talk to people around the community, you can sense something of it. Certainly it has been around in the environmental literature for some time. It is now clear that such an idea is no longer seen as highly eccentric as it was 30 years ago and is becoming much more broadly accepted.

One of the pioneers of that viewpoint, Aldo Leopold, in his essay, "The Land Ethic", argued that accepting the intrinsic value of wild places was both an evolutionary possibility and an

ecological necessity. As an analogy he pointed out that Odysseus on his return from his wanderings saw himself as being utterly free to hang a number of his slave girls because they had misbehaved during his absence. And at the time no-one would have questioned that. Human life was not valuable in itself. It was only valuable as a tool for the master to use. Today we would abhor that viewpoint and say that human life, any human life, is valuable in itself. Leopold argues that we will ultimately extend that thinking to include the land. So the point I am making here is that we can see now the beginnings of a shift towards the way in which we justify the conservation of wild places, or the proper husbanding of other natural resources. We are beginning to see our environment and natural resources as intrinsically valuable in themselves and not just for our purposes.

Now against that background, let me turn to the question of who might be responsible for caves. Here I do get into perhaps what could be called an exercise in moral philosophy of trying to sort out a rather complex set of ideas. One of the interesting things is that I find very little in the literature which argues why Governments or anyone else should be responsible. There is a lot of comment which says "of course governments should be responsible because they have got the power". Or "of course governments should be responsible because they have got the money". Now they are not arguments about what the government should do, they are only arguments about what it can do. It is very dangerous to assume that any argument for what can be done is an argument for what should be done. That is the argument the Hydroelectric Commission uses in Tasmania.

They would argue that the Franklin River can be dammed, therefore, it should be dammed. Power and money are certainly not real arguments about who should have responsibility. They are only statements about who can bear the weight of responsibility. Now I want to suggest that if we think about what we mean by the word 'responsibility', we do in fact answer the question of who has the central focus of responsibility. Responsibility cannot be defined just as duty. Duty is the obligation to do what should be done and while you talk just in terms of duty, well obviously it is everybody's duty to look after the environment. And we all know that what is everybody's duty becomes nobody's. So that is not a very adequate definition of responsibility. It is in fact a tautology and it cannot be operational. We somehow have to get a better definition of responsibility. The philosopher called Charles Frankel has, I think, put this in the best and most useful sense.

He says a decision is responsible when the person or the group that makes it has to answer for it to those who are directly or indirectly affected by it (p.203). In other words a decision, Frankel says, can only be a responsible one when you have to answer for it. Now he is at some pains to point out that he doesn't guarantee whether the decision is good or bad, or right or wrong. His definition only helps us get to grips with the notion of responsibility. And it leads us to the position that in our kind of society, responsibility for a broad social concern has to rest with the elected government. That is what we elect a government for. The electoral system is a means, admittedly a very blunt instrument, to ensure the kind of accountability Frankel is concerned with. Let me explore some aspects of that.

To use a modern term, when we talk of responsibility we talk of accountability. Now we know the electoral system is a pretty blunt instrument for all sorts of purposes, not just securing accountability. As one of my favourite bits of graffiti says, 'It doesn't matter who you vote for, you get a politician anyway'. Namely you get a government that tends to think and operate to the next election. So there are some real blunt instrument problems here. They become a larger problem if the voters are not interested enough or cynical enough and so have short political memories which fail to call governments to account for their actions. We have a long tradition of apathy in this country which has not called our governments to account.

However, in the long run it seems to work. Now let me look briefly at the Franklin River issue which might illustrate a couple of the points I've made so far. I think it is fairly clear that in its discussions the Federal cabinet has thought of responsibility purely in duty terms, not very much in accountability terms, and certainly not in legal terms. And they have said, 'Well it's our duty to be nice to the State and not to interfere'. They have, in fact, defined the Franklin issue as not their responsibility.

However, if you think for a moment about Frankel's notion, the Federal Government cannot do that, because in fact, the Federal Government is responsible. They have made, what on his terms, is

a responsible decision, even though it may very well be a wrong one. But it is a responsible one and hopefully they will be accountable and answerable for it at the next election, providing people's memories are long enough. If not, it will certainly be called to account by later history. Now I am not suggesting that a Liberal Government is automatically anti-conservationist and Labour automatically conservationist, I think that is utter nonsense, and the record of both parties is not good. But I would certainly go so far, in respect to the present government to paraphrase another bit of graffiti, and say that anyone who cares about the environment and votes for the present Federal Government is like a chicken voting for Colonel Sanders.

Let me talk about another broad-scale shift and that relates to government accountability and responsibility. I believe we are seeing a shift where we are not only calling the elected government to account but increasingly calling the executive branch of government, the public service, to account. Along with that, we are gradually developing mechanisms which are making the public service more accountable. Examples include the administrative accountability procedures being established, the freedom of information legislation that is developing here and there around the world, the development of ombudsmen and administrative review tribunals. All of these are ways in which people are passing responsibility more and more to the executive branch rather than merely the legislature. Of course, this has gone hand in hand, perhaps regrettably, with denial of ministerial responsibility by various of our ministers. In practice, this means that we will see the agencies of government, including the public service departments, come to be held much more directly to account. We should recognise this shift which does effect the strategy of people who are outside the government and who want to bring about greater accountability.

Next issue. There are problems about the way in which governmental responsibility becomes bureaucratised and split up into components. At the moment, no matter how hard any National Park Service tries to carry out its responsibility on the lands for which it is legally held accountable (namely the parks themselves), it can have very little impact outside of those lands. There are all sorts of problems arising because of these boundaries within which land is parcelled. We have all seen the example in NSW of the environmental integrity of the Wee Jasper Caves being utterly destroyed because no-one took any responsibility for it or made any decision about it (and that includes speleologists as well as land managers). This arose very much because of bureaucratisation and the fact that the Wee Jasper Caves were in a gap where no-one was taking any responsibility. It is one of the more dramatic examples that we have in this country of that sort of thing happening.

There are also some much harder problems to overcome with bureaucratisation of actual land management. Bureaucracies develop their own criteria for decision making, about staffing, and the actions of staff, and these may not be in terms of the integrity of land which is being managed. It is much more likely, being slightly cynical, to be in terms of the integrity of the paper work, which may not have any relationship to the land. It is not the public servants' fault; it is the fault of the systems of accountability we have developed, which place very high premium on the paperwork that can go across the minister's desk or be tabled in the House. If the paper-work is in order people seem to be moderately satisfied. And I am not suggesting our land managers are necessarily being careless or stupid in this, but their job is defined by someone else. I am not at any point in this criticising the people who are struggling in a government authority to do the best they can, but looking at the broad-scale system.

The bureaucratisation of management certainly leads to the phenomenon we all know well and could best be described as the game of musical rangers. No ranger stays long enough anywhere to really get to know his park as well as he should. It's inevitable within the present system. But if you look at our parks, and look at the people who have made significant contributions to the development of those parks, it is very hard to see many of them in very recent years. The real development and real vision has often been a way behind us. And it has been people like Lynch and Reddan and Wiburd, men who stayed for many, many years on a park and who came to know every millimetre of that park every hour of the day and every season of the year. I think we need some time to look at whether public service systems of land management can be changed in a way which will effectively lead to really stable staffing of parks and all the benefits which come from that. Certainly this has been looked at in one of the management plans prepared by the Federation, where the decision made by the responsible authorities was to, as far as possible, aim for long run stability rather than for management of a cave park being part of a

general musical rangers game. However, even that raises problems because I do not think this problem is limited to cave parks at all; I think it is true of many parks, and probably most.

Finally, governments tend to trivialise environmental management and that is partly a historical burden that we bear from the 19th century. Parks were originally conceived as monuments and as centring around monumental features. So the notion was to find particular features and to show them to the public so that people would go oh! and ah!. Appreciation of the environment was seen not in terms of a holistic eco-system but rather singling out of particular features, isolating them from their ecological context. The traditional practice in show caves and cave parks has been to do just that. So we are still struggling against that idea. Not, of course, because the park managers might not understand the problem (although sometimes they do not) but more because there is a lot of the public who do not understand the problem and who demand the old monumentalism. Again, I'm looking at society and the way in which we, as a total society, look at the responsibility we place in the hands of our government.

Now let me briefly say a bit about those who one also hears of as having some responsibility for cave conservation - the land owners and the cavers.

I only want to look at these two very briefly. Landowners firstly: often landowners do not own the caves. The title may be of limited depth so that the landowner only owns the land above the cave and perhaps the entrance to it, but not the cave itself. In this situation the cave is the property of the Crown, although there is some divided legal opinion as to what that really means. I am not going to explore that one at the moment. However, even if the landowner has a centre-of-earth title, a title that runs all the way to the centre of the earth, as we do have in the Buchan area in Victoria, where it is clear that the landowner has actual title to the cave itself, then I think there is still an issue. We have constraining legislation, both planning legislation and pollution control legislation, which constrains the right of the private landowner. I believe we need constraining legislation to restrain the right of the private landowner to destroy features of environmental value. An example of where we more adequately do have that legislation in this country is in regard to Aboriginal relics. Some of you may be aware of the legislation which does constrain the landowner's right to destroy Aboriginal relics on his property. I believe that principle should be extended. I would even suggest to you that we will ultimately rethink our concept of private ownership of land, as some European countries are beginning to, or have done so for years. We might then see that private ownership is the equivalent of human slavery. I talked earlier about Aldo Leopold's analogy of Odysseus murdering his slave girls because they had misbehaved, because at that time there was no value placed on human life. Today, we do not believe people can own people. If you extend that to the land ethic, you should be asking some very serious questions about the right of any one individual to see himself as owning a bit of land. But, of course, in this country with its tradition of squatting, that's a very sacred cow. I am only giving it a tentative kick, but someone needs to give that cow very hard kicks, because the concept is outmoded and it is environmentally unsound. The present day legislation of Sweden or Yugoslavia, to quote two countries that are politically miles apart from each other, suggests to us that perhaps we should be looking at issues of land tenure in a new way and we should be saying there is a responsibility upon landowners to care for that over which they have temporary guardianship. That is really what it is, but at the moment, we do not really recognise that.

Cavers: Cavers do have a knowledge, as Dr. Sue Barker has pointed out, of a particular sector of the environment. I think that knowledge confers upon us at least a duty. I do not think it can be a responsibility in Frankelian terms. I do not think we can be held to account for it, perhaps unfortunately. But I do think we have a duty to act upon the knowledge we have. We have a duty to be amongst those who try particularly hard to call governments to account for the decisions they make. We cannot, as I and others were doing 30 years ago, just load ourselves up and go off to have a glorious weekend grovelling in a cave without thinking about the implications. Through our grovelling we learn a great deal about that bit of the environment. We do develop a love and a care for it and I believe that confers upon us, at the very least, a duty to try to see that our caves are well conserved. It may mean that we find ourselves excluded from some caves because of that. I think there are far more important issues than whether or not we can have a good time in a particular cave. I think those far more important issues are to do with the intrinsic value of the cave environment and its importance to future generations-that we guard that intrinsic value. To be very specific about this, in the last few

days I've tried to assess the size of the bat population in Bat Cave at Naracoorte Caves as part of the work we are doing towards the draft management plan for the park there. That population of bats is as healthy numerically as it has been in any time of my 30 years acquaintance with it. The population is still in very good shape. That is not true of any other bent-wing bat population in South Eastern Australia. Now I think a very important element in the health of the Naracoorte population is the fact that the park service has closed that cave to visitors, including cavers. Cavers have accepted that and respected it and I think it shows the responsibility, both of the cavers most concerned and the Parks Service that such action was taken and that the population of bats at least is still in good shape. I do not think it says much for our concern about or duty to the environment or that of the management authorities concerned that the equivalent bat populations in Victoria and NSW have been decimated. Someone hopefully one day will start to call at least governments, and perhaps us, more to account for it.

I have really enjoyed discussing these issues that I have raised with you. To me it is an exploration in trying to sort through why it is that we commonly assume governments are responsible. It is useful for me to think about that and try to clarify my own ideas on it and I only hope it helps you to a clearer idea of how you see your responsibility for caves, and your role in cave conservation, viz-a-viz the role of your elected government and how you put the two together.

Thank you very much.

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