

THE CLEANUP OF WEEBUBBIE CAVE

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Abstract

For many years Weebubbie Cave had been used as a water resource.

This utilisation ceased somewhere around 1984.

Although the active pump and piping were removed, the debris of previous exploiters remained. The description is given of the methods employed to remove the debris based on experience gained from an earlier cleanup in the Yallingup tourist cave.

Weebubbie Cave 6N-2 is a large collapse doline located on the Hampton Tableland of the vast Nullabor Plain some 14 km north of Eucla near the Western Australian border. The region is arid with an average rainfall of 125mm per year, although it has been known to fall (all) in one day. With summer temperatures sometimes reaching 50 degree C, water is essential for survival. The predominating vegetation of saltbush and bluebush is well suited as stock feed.

HISTORY

Although now an acknowledged Aboriginal Site, Weebubbie was not sighted by European Australians until Clayer and Juncken, employees of the South Australia Telegraph Department, chanced upon it early in 1900 and lodged an application in June of that year for an 80,000 acre (32,375 hectares) grazing lease which included the cave. In their telegram of application they mentioned the discovery as a:

"large subterranean lake 200 or 300 feet below the surface near Eucla".

A deposit of five Pounds accompanied the application.

With a rare display of governmental speed and foresight, the Surveyor General, on 2 August 1900 placed a temporary reserve of 5000 acres around the cave while at the same time granting Clayer and Juncken a lease of 40,000 acres that bordered the reserve.

Citing a South Australian graziers opinion that the cave's saline water was suitable for stock, Clayer and Juncken stated that their find would be of immense value for potential grazing in the region and with all the ornamental language of the period therefore asked (as compensation for the 'loss' of the cave) for a reward, the amount respectfully left to the Surveyor General's discretion.

Inter-departmental correspondence indicated that the Government favoured a reward for the discoverers and suggested to them that they nominate a suitable sum subject to a favourable report by a government appointed inspector as to the quality of the water.

Much gasping and eye rolling must have resulted when Clayer and Juncken duly applied for a reward of 500 Pounds, approximately \$26,300 by today's value.

Not surprisingly, the well oiled wheels of government suddenly froze and despite much telegraphic prodding from Clayer and Juncken as to when a government inspector was going to visit the area to sample the water, no one was forthcoming. Not to be daunted by the government's un-explained apathy, Clayer and Juncken persisted, but to no avail, until circumstances placed a seemingly suitable government employee in the area.

From March 1901 John Muir (Inspector of Engineering Surveys PWD) led an expedition to examine the country between Kalgoorlie and Eucla in relation to either constructing a future transcontinental railroad direct to Eucla (from Kalgoorlie thence to Tarcoola SA) or sending a 50 mile (80km) spur line south from the railroad to Eucla. The main reason behind such a plan would have been to carry supplies for the railroad construction utilising the already existing Eucla jetty.

The mind boggles as to what would have happened to the region (and the caves) if such a railroad came to fruition. Imagine though, going caving at Weebubbie by air-conditioned train.

Muir was persuaded by Clayer and Juncken to inspect the water and forward his opinion to his superiors. Muir duly inspected the cave, concluding the lake to be a:

"small underground reservoir" due to the
"impervious character of the surrounding strata."

Much to the disgust of Clayer and Juncken, Muir's October 1901 report, accompanied by three interior photographs of the cave, claimed the estimated three million gallons of highly mineralized water not suitable for stock.

No doubt a much relieved Surveyor General telegraphed the luckless pair that on the strength of Muir's report - there would be no reward.

Despite protests from Clayer and Juncken that Muir's observations were no more than casual and that he was not qualified to pass judgement on such an important issue, the government remained deaf and shortly afterward Clayer and Juncken faded from the scene.

But the needs and attitudes of government are manifold and change with time. On 23 December 1927, a proposal was made that the temporary reserve be given permanent status and leased (for watering stock) in an effort to raise money from the resource.

Subsequently, on 4 January 1928, Water Reserve #19713 (2560 acres) was leased to JD and O. D. Jones for grazing purposes under section 41a of the Land Act 1898. The fee was 10 shillings per year subject that the general public have free access to the water.

The lease to Jones was cancelled on 24 December 1930 due to non-payment of one Pound five shillings lease fees. The cave was re-leased to M. O'Sullivan of Kalgoorlie shortly afterwards. The period of this lease is not known.

During 1964 there was a minor panic when, on reference to Army 1:250 000 survey maps, it was discovered that the cave was no longer in the centre of the reserve that had been thrown around it. In fact - it was quite a respectable distance outside the boundary.

The pantomime that must have resulted from that revelation would have done justice no doubt to a latter-day 'Yes Minister' script before the error was rectified later in the year.

Before we leave this historical gem of comedy and for those who may be interested in precision surveys, below is the official 1967 description of the cave reserve boundaries:

"All that portion of land (being about 2560 acres) with (Weebobby) cave as its centre bounded by lines starting from a point situated about 987 chains and 53 links west from north east corner of pastoral lease 393/512 (Moopina) and extending south about 160 chains; thence west about 159 chains and 98 links thence north about 160 chains and thence east to starting point".

In July 1976 the reserve was metricated to approximately 1035.9952 hectares. Up until 1964 the cave had been periodically referred to as Weebobby. The name Weebubbie did not appear in official correspondence until 15 February 1967 when F.E.B. Gurney sought permission to use the cave to water stock on his nearby Moopina Station property. Formal approval of the name Weebubbie was granted on 8 April 1968 following representation from David Lowry, then of the W.A. Geological Survey.

On 3 July 1967 the PWD Under Secretary for Lands advised the Lands and Survey Department that they had no objection to Gurney leasing the Weebubbie reserve provided that the public still had free access to the cave.

However, there is no record that Gurney took up the lease, suggesting that he utilised the water for the Eucla Roadhouse illegally. In April 1985 the Gurney lease at Moopina Station (valid to the year 2015 at \$283.99/year) was cancelled due to non-compliance of conditions and the Gurneys left the region.

THE CLEANUP

Weebubbie Cave was in use supplying water to the nearby Eucla Roadhouse (legally or otherwise) until 1983-4 when the current owners sank a bore within the confines of the Eucla complex obtaining better quality water, thus enabling, with the aid of a \$30,000 reverse osmosis process to advertise fresh water - ordinary soap lathers in the 20c per minute showers. Presumably, at much the same time, the managers removed the pipe casing from the roof of the cave, casting that had long marred many a picture of Weebubbie's main lake.

The surface debris, in the form of water tanks, pump house, timbers and other miscellaneous junk still remain. Most, if not all of the rubbish actually in the cave is reputed to have been used and later dumped there by the Main Roads Board when they sealed the Eyre Highway during the 1960's.

It had long been known that both lakes of Weebubbie Cave contained debris of past water pumping and tourist operations and it was this rubbish that SRGWA was concerned about when it became obvious during the SGR Nullarbor Expedition of Sept. 1986 that the cave was no longer used as a water resource. It was then speculated that a multi-society Christmas cleanup trip was possible.

Such a plan was put to the Dept. of Conservation & Environment Cave Working Group in mid-October along with the view that the status of the cave be changed so that it could be re-vested from the Lands Department to the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM). The cleanup proposal was endorsed and invitations for assistance sent out. The response, although not overwhelming, was sufficient to allow the project to proceed.

Material assistance was solicited from various government bodies and the management of the Eucla Roadhouse. The Western Australian Water Authority built and supplied a transportable tripod/sheer legs complete with guy ropes and a 3:1 block and tackle as well as some grappling hooks. The Eucla Roadhouse provided an additional hacksaw and pulley while the Eucla Police loaned a well worn length of rope.

The cave cleaners whose names appear elsewhere assembled at Weebubbie on 28 December 1985 spending most of that day setting up the sheer legs and lowering gear into the cave - the most important of which was the diving gear and Norm Poulter's 5m canoe.. Preliminary dives later in the day revealed that there was much more debris beyond snorkel depth than first thought.

To make the canoe a stable platform from which to raise heavy objects from under water, the canoe had wooden spars lashed to it forming an outrigger frame. Two vehicle inner tubes were inflated and lashed to the outer framework thus acting as pontoons.

The first priority with the underwater debris was to recover the unsightly lengths of pipe. Great difficulty was experienced in raising the 60mm diameter steel pipes that were in some cases in excess of 20m long, extremely heavy and bent into crazy, pretzel-like shapes. It is suspected that a government department (or subcontractors) must be responsible for this dumping as no one in their right mind should willingly consume such vast quantities of time and energy bending the pipes and then dumping them in the lake - far from shore, rather than the obvious and much simpler task of dismantling the pipes and carrying them out of the cave. Such are the minds of men.

The amount of effort required to raise the long, bent lengths of pipes was incredible. Two to three people worked in the canoe with ropes attached to a pipe, part of which was then raised the 10m to the surface and cut into manageable lengths that were hauled ashore with much difficulty. To help raise the pipes to the canoe for cutting, the ropes were wrapped around canoe paddles for greater leverage. The strain exerted on these ropes was so great that they compressed the timber paddles leaving deep and permanent grooves. The amount of pipe removed, mainly because of the long lengths, would not have been possible without the aid of the modified canoe. Two shorter lengths of pipe remain to be recovered. This can be done with the aid of air bags.

One curious thing that amazed everyone was that although the pipes had been submerged in the lake of 20 years or more, they were in remarkably good condition with little rust, while adjacent 60 litre oil drums disintegrated on touch. In fact, where lengths of pipe had been joined using screwed sleeves, these joints, in most cases could be un-screwed with little difficulty. It did appear however, that most of the zinc coating had been dissolved from the outside of the pipes. Most pipes had air trapped inside.

The most distasteful part of the cleanup was the removal of timber debris from the lake. The timber was extremely heavy and covered with slime. Most of the recovered timber was removed from the cave in polyester agricultural bags. The area where the timber was brought ashore, broken up and bagged was badly stained as a result of this activity but as it is where most people congregate for swimming and diving operations, the area should be eventually cleaned. This proved to be so, as the area was much cleaner when the author had the opportunity to re-visit the cave four months later.

A quantity of timber remains underwater for later removal. Unfortunately, it appears to be all below snorkel depth.

During the course of the cleanup it was estimated that about 80% of the rubbish was removed from the cave. Time and depleted energy reserves did not permit completion of the project. That must be left for other like-minded people. Go to it....

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As with many major undertaking, assistance, both active and passive is required lest the project fail to materialize. The Weebubbie Cleanup was no exception and due to the tremendous physical effort involved all participants have more than earned the right to have their names associated with this paper. No less a right goes to those who lent equipment. My grateful thanks to one and all for a tremendous job well done.

Participants - passive

Jim McKenzie - SRGWA	Datsun truck
WA Water Authority	Custom tripod and lifting equipment
University of W.A. - Botany - Physics	Diving compressor (not used), wet suit Plumbers vice
Eucla Roadhouse	Hacksaw and pulley
Eucla Police	Additional rope

Participants - active

WAIT Outside Club	Alan Noonan - diver
Action Outdoors Association	Beverly Foden Julian Yates Steve Allen
Mofflyn Child & Family Care Services	Cecil Holmes Ivan Managhetti
SRGWA	Marjorie Sargeant Duncan Sargeant (at camp) Nicholas Christodoulou Robert Poulter (at camp) Norman Poulter

LITERATURE SOURCES

Lands & Surveys Department	Roads & Reserves, Weebubbie Cave file #5431/00 Roads & Reserves, file #741/63
Battye Library	Proceedings of Parliament, 1st session 4th Parliament 1901-02/3 Report on Preliminary Examination of Country between Kalgoorlie and Eucla. John Muir

AN APPEAL

As mentioned above, about 20% of the rubbish remains in the cave and is listed below. It would be appreciated if other cavers and divers took it upon themselves to remove some or all of this rubbish when they visit the cave.

Dry passage ----- at the northern end of the small lake

one diesel motor	would need dismantling, may be able to work again.
one metal frame	ownership unknown but does not belong to Eucla. don't forget to drain the oil out of the motor.
some 60mm dia. steel pipe other junk	hacksaw and bags needed.

Main lake ----- divers territory

2 moderately short straight lengths of pipe	much easier to handle than bent ones, could be raised with air bags and hauled ashore for cutting if need be.
various sections of timber	ropes best for removal from lake and bags to remove from cave. They can be heavy when first removed and they will be slippery.
miscellaneous PVC pipe & other junk in isolated parts of lake	all the junk is below snorkel depth unfortunately, polyester ropes and bags again for removal from lake and cave.