

MOUNT ETNA CAVES
THE FIGHT TO SAVE MOUNT ETNA CAVES FROM LIMESTONE MINING

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Abstract

This treatise is a record of the dates and events, heavily condensed, of the history of Mount Etna since The Caves area was first settled. I hope to show that since the fight to save Mount Etna was first joined, seriously, in 1964 or there about, that the Central Queensland Company and the Queensland Government has had no intention to voluntarily release Mount Etna from limestone mining. Even in the event that conservationists took the Queensland Government to court, the Government had plans prepared to counter such. That was clearly shown when the Government rescinded the Recreation Reserve, R444, on Mount Etna and refused to give a fiat to prosecute the Government. The next event, the passing of a law stating that any mining lease inadvertently granted illegally will now stand and be legal, was aimed at any mining lease granted illegally including Mt. Etna. At this point in time there is very little that is being done to save Mount Etna. I hope that this paper will create new interest and revive the flagging "Fight To Save Mount Etna", with input from ASF member societies and individuals. If the treatise does not have the desired effect of renewing interest in the fight, and if Central Queensland Cement Pty. Ltd. starts mining the main cavernous northern face of Mount Etna, the next ASF conference, or possibly the following, will have a "Letter of Requiem" read to them. If the Australian public can save the "Gordon-below-Franklin" area and the "Lindeman Island National Park", surely something can be done for Mount Etna.

HISTORY

1882: John Olsen found the first caves in the Rockhampton area in 1882; they are the present day Olsen's Tourist Caves.

1884: He started guiding tours for the public through his caves, Olsen's Tourist Caves, in 1884.

1886: Although no record exists at this time, the discovery of Johannsens Caves by John Olsen occurred around the year 1886. (Theodore Olsen, deceased, personal comment 1967). Theo Olsen, son of John Olsen, did not call the caves on Limestone Ridge "Johannsens Caves", but called them "Mount Etna Caves". This name also appeared on Lands Department maps.

1892: A report regarding the feasibility of mining guano from Olsens and Johannsens Caves was prepared by the assistant Government geologist, Mr. William H. Rands (Rand 1892). Mr. Peter McLean, Undersecretary Department of Agriculture, collected guano samples for analysis in 1892. Guano had therefore been removed from Olsens and Johannsens Caves by 1892 (Rands 1892).

1919: The Lands Department granted P.H. Ebbott a special lease of thirteen years duration for guano mining on 9 December 1919.

1920: On 21 February 1920 Reserves R444 and R272 were gazetted in the State Government Gazette, reference page 724, as Recreation Reserves. Mount Etna was covered by R444 and Limestone Ridge by R272. At that time a Recreation Reserve was the highest form of protection given to Crown Land. It could be mined providing no damage was done to the surface area.

1925: On 11 November 1925 Mining Lease 200, which covered Mount Etna, was applied for by G.J. Twine, J.W. Heatherington and J.J. McAuley. This appears to be the first limestone mining lease granted on Mount Etna. On 21 November 1925 an application was made by J.H. Hart for a further four leases for limestone mining on Mount Etna and Limestone Ridge: ML201, ML202, ML203 and ML204.

1926: In February 1926 Mr. F.W. Whitehouse reported on the "Limestone and Guano Deposits of Mount Etna". He stated that "The prettiest caves seen from their display of stalagmites and stalactites were those of Mount Etna". In the same year Mount Etna Fertilizers Pty. Ltd. set up a fertilizer processing and packaging plant on Portion 118.

1935: Mr. B. Pilkington, on 11 April 1935, applied for ML236, an area of 10 acres on Limestone Ridge.

1939: Three years later in 1939, Mr. Pilkington applied for a further lease of 51 acres on Limestone Ridge, ML243.

1948: Mr. Pilkington set up a research laboratory in 1948 and employed a chemist to prove the quality and extent of the limestone deposits on Limestone Ridge for cement manufacture.

1951: Two large international cement companies were attracted to the area in 1951 and sent representatives to inspect Mr. Pilkington's leases. This event moved the local cement company, previously contacted by Pilkington, to re-examine the area.

1954: E.M. Pilkington applied for ML281, an area of twenty acres on Mount Etna, on 1 June 1954.

1958: On 1 July 1958 Mr. B. Pilkington applied for ML307 on Mount Etna, an area of 4 acres.

1959: On 30 July 1959 Hartley Investments Pty. Ltd. was formed and on 21 October of that year the name was changed to Central Queensland Cement Pty. Ltd. (Central Queensland Cement Pty. Ltd.).

1960: W.R. Thompson applied for ML340, an area of 36 acres and 34 perches on Mount Etna in 1960.

1962: On 1 April 1962 Central Queensland Cement Pty. Ltd. bought ML340 from Thompson. The other three leases on Mount Etna and Pilkington's two leases on Limestone Ridge were bought between this year and 1965.

1963: In 1963 Mount Morgan Ltd. acquired ML306 on the northern end of Limestone Ridge and began to quarry limestone at the entrance to Johannsens Cave.

1965: On 25 March 1965 Central Queensland Cement Pty. Ltd. negotiated a major contract with Noyes Pty. Ltd. for the erection of quarry equipment and installation was to commence in 1965.

1966: The Central Queensland Cement Pty. Ltd. quarry on Mount Etna was begun in 1966 and a crushing plant, storage bins, workshop and mine office were erected.

THE FIGHT

1962: The first trip by the University of Queensland Speleological Society (University of Queensland Speleological Society) to Mount Etna was in 1962. The large colony of Little-Bent Winged Bats (Miniopterus australis) in Bat Cleft was discovered late in 1962.

1964: In August 1964 Mr. John McKean of the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research visited the area and wrote to ASF expressing his strong concern that the Johannsens Caves, which house a large colony of Ghost Bats (Macroderma gigas) were being quarried. In reply to enquiries the mining company stated that "they didn't know which were Johannsens Caves". In December 1964 a report was prepared by E. Hamilton-Smith for discussion at the Perth ASF Conference 1964 - 1965. University of Queensland Speleological Society members prepared data for this report. The report was sent to the ministers of the departments involved and the National Parks Association. Following these representations operations at Johannsens ceased.

1965: University of Queensland Speleological Society published a letter in the Brisbane "Courier Mail" concerning the proposed quarrying of Mount Etna in 1965. In reply the manager of Central Queensland Cement Pty. Ltd., Mr. Woodcroft, denied claims that quarrying would destroy caves.

1967: Easter Sunday 1967 Resurrection Cave was first entered by the University of Queensland Speleological Society. This cave is situated under the first and second benches of the eastern quarry on Mount Etna. On 28 August 1967 the late Mr. L.J. Jones, general manager of Queensland Cement and Lime (parent company of Central Queensland Cement Pty. Ltd.), stated that the company had an agreement with the Mines Department to limit quarrying to areas outside of 1 chain from exposed caves, ie. caves with natural entrances. In October Mr. P.C. Caffyn of University of Queensland Speleological Society had a meeting with the man replacing Mr. Jones. Mr. Walker said that he had put the matter in the hands of Mr. Woodcroft, general manager of Central Queensland Cement Pty. Ltd. On 27 October Mr. Woodcroft stated that his intention was to mine the whole mountain. In December Mr. Tichner, manager of the mine, said that the northern edge of the quarry, as it stood, would form the boundary of the quarry.

1969: The agreement between Central Queensland Cement Pty. Ltd. and the Mines Department not to work within 1 chain of a known cave entrance was breached in 1969. The distance between Winding Staircase Cave and Number 4 Bench was 57 ft. In July a report was prepared for R272 on Limestone Ridge to be declared a National Park. A 31-page submission was passed on to Mr. Sullivan, Minister for Lands. Attempts to gain interviews with company directors were unsuccessful. In August workings were found within 76 ft of Main Cave's lower entrance and blasting had occurred within 141 feet thereof.

1970 - 1971: Central Queensland Cement Pty. Ltd. started mining on the western toe of the northern flank of Mount Etna.

1974: In April 1974 the National Party candidate for Capricornia Mr. Connor said that "... the Premier, Mr. Bjelke-Peterson, has given me an assurance that mining of Mount Etna would cease in the near future". In May 1974, National Party candidate Mr. Connor said, "... the Minister of Mines has assured me that a new national park will be dedicated on not only Mount Etna, but also on the main cave system on Limestone Ridge". Organised tours to view the emergence flight of the Little-Bent Winged Bats from Bat Cleft commenced in December 1974. Estimated numbers of visitors per season: 400 average - signatures are available in the visitors book. On 24 November 1974 another politician jumped on the bandwagon. Deputy Premier Gordon Chalk said that he was "sympathetic to the gazettal of a national park on Mount Etna". On 25 November 1974 a letter to the Labor Party candidate for Port Curtis from the Minister for Mines, Mr. R. Camm, vindicated claims made that there were alternative economic deposits of limestone available other than Mount Etna. A company was surveying mining prospects in the Bracewell - East End area of Mount Larcom. The company had applied for four leases and Mr. Camm, Minister for Mines, said that the lease area aggregated 5,612 acres for the mining of limestone and clay.

1975: On 7 January Minister for Mines, Mr. Camm, said, "...at no time have I, as Minister, ever indicated that Mount Etna would be preserved as a National Park".

23.1.75: The State Government cabinet gave approval for the continued mining of Mount Etna and gave their endorsement to the decision to make Limestone Ridge into a National Park.

24.1.75: The decision by the Queensland Government to continue mining Mount Etna came one day ahead of a report by the State Ombudsman. He agreed that there was an anomaly in the Government's decision on a course of action while he was still investigating complaints of such a course of action.

1.2.75: Electrical Trades Union members asked the Queensland Trades and Labour Council Conservation Committee to authorize bans on the supply of electricity to the crushing plant of Central Queensland Cement Pty. Ltd. if mining commenced on the main northern face. Also in that year the Queensland Conservation Council obtained a Queen's Council's opinion that the leases on Mount Etna may have been invalidly granted. To take the Queensland Government to court the Attorney General's Department must grant a fiat, ie. permission to proceed. No such fiat was granted.

1976: In 1976 the Department of Mapping and Survey changed the names of the caves on Limestone Ridge from "Mount Etna Caves" to "Johannsens Caves". Also in that year the book "Mount Etna And The Caves" was launched.

1977: In 1977 the Queensland Government rescinded the Recreation Reserve (R444) on Mount Etna. The Attorney General's Department refused to grant a fiat to prosecute the Government.

1978: In 1978 the Ghost Bat (Macroderma gigas) was listed as an endangered species in the Mammal Red Book.

1980: Central Queensland Cement Pty. Ltd. broke into Elephant Hole cave in the western quarry.

1981: Mount Etna Caves were placed on the National Heritage List on 25 August 1981.

1982: In June 1982 mining opened an entrance to "Crystal Palace Cave", a cave in the western quarry. Its main chamber's dimensions were - 30m x 10m x 10m high approx. This cave had the most helictites ever seen on the Australian mainland. Literally millions were destroyed when the company blasted the cave in July. It is now a flat plain. In November 1982 the company erected a 2m high barrier in the bottom of Bat Cleft Cave. This barrier obstructed approximately 50% of the passage to the nursery area. Had this barrier been allowed to remain it would have resulted in the catastrophic destruction of a large number of that season's juveniles.

1984 - 1985: Mid 1984 the company started lowering and widening the road from the crushing plant to the western quarry. It was completed in early 1986. There is now a 20m cliff face at the bottom of the Bat Cleft Track.

1986: Estimated supply of limestone in the western quarry is approximately 3 years at the present usage.

1986 onward: Considering the supply of limestone in the western quarry and the widening and lowering of the road, and in view of the monies and manpower spent on same, the conclusion can only be that the company will start mining the main face in the near future, at the most in two to three years.

CONCLUSIONS

In view of the little success conservationists have had in the past on saving Mount Etna by legal means, and in view of the previous points raised for 1986 onward, the only hope I can see for saving Mount Etna is a large concerted effort by conservationists, such as the Tasmanian "Gordon-Below-Franklin Dam" issue or the "Lindeman Island National Park" issue. The local clubs, both the Central Queensland Speleological Society and the University of Queensland Speleological Society, are too small in numbers, also the Mount Etna issue has been dragging on too long and has become stale to be able to do much good by themselves. I BEG OF YOU TO GIVE US YOUR PHYSICAL SUPPORT to regenerate the issue and save Mount Etna.

In my opinion, and I stress my opinion only, what is needed is:-

1. Either a change in the Queensland Government, or
2. About 200 persons or more to stage a "Cave Sit-in" on Mount Etna for 12 months or longer and therefore force a relocation, or
3. Sufficient money to buy out or relocate the quarry.

As at the time of writing points 1 and 3 do not seem possible, it does not seem to leave any other option but a "Cave Sit-in". If anyone can think of any other method of saving Mount Etna that has not been tried in the past, please let me know. THANK YOU.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Theodore Olsen, deceased, personal comments 1967.

REFERENCES

- 1882-1969: Mount Etna Caves, University of Queensland Speleological Society 1970.
1970-1976: The Explorer, Newsletter of the Central Queensland Speleological Society.

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