

SPORT AND SCOUT CAVING - THE PRESENT DILEMMA

Evalt Crabb

Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of organised caving as a post World War 2 phenomenon, and the changes in practice and attitude that have occurred. These practices are contrasted against stated behavioural codes.

Parallel to this, the development of caving as a scouting activity is discussed, with reference to the general principles and practice of Scouting.

The author has been working toward evolving policies and practices within scouting which are consistent with the needs of conservation and the underlying philosophies of scouting. Implementation of these new attitudes in one Area is fully detailed, with some comment on the success and acceptability of the programme. This training programme is contrasted against the foreshadowed NSW Branch Policy on Rock-Related Activities.

The sequential discussion highlights some weaknesses within clubs and ASF, particularly in our methods of communication. There are no firm proposals, but possible directions for future discussion are indicated.

It is the intention of this paper to give an historical perspective to some of the present perceived conflicts; in reality, the only conflict is between our oft-expressed aim of conservation of caves (i.e. safeguard the karst heritage of Australia), and our visible activity - use of caves for recreational activity. Both the intensity of expression of our concern, and lessening of self-constraint on recreational activity have greatly magnified with time; we are fast approaching a 'crossroads' scenario where our credibility is at great risk.

Caving in Australia as a semi-organised recreation is a post World War 2 phenomenon. From first settlement to the pre-war period, cave discoveries and exploration were usually tied to another activity, such as prospecting for mineral resources, development of tourist caves (due to transport limitations, these were often developed for a local market), accidental finds; in the later years of this period some bushwalkers visited caves as part of their excursions. Conservation as an ethic was seldom considered, and then only in the context of preserving some speleothems to maintain viability in tourist caves.

The immediate post-war period heralded a great change - motor cycles and cars became more freely available, freeing bushwalkers from the constraints of rail transport. By the early 1950's, a few walkers were becoming cavers, fascinated by the unique environment and motivated in part by a need for 'wilderness' or rather, 'wildness' experience. There were no tutors, available literature was extremely primitive by today's standards, leading to an intense quest for knowledge using perception, observation and deduction. Cavers were so enthused that many others were encouraged to share the experience. Groups merged to become clubs, and by 1956 clubs had corresponded, leading to the formation of ASF as a means of communicating nationally.

Most of the caves explored and re-explored during this period had been subject to earlier vandalism and damage; among the new cavers driven by their curiosity, a protective sense developed, wanting to limit cave damage to that sustained much earlier.

Recognising that only people damaged caves, a basic theme was developed - the difference between "them" and "us". "They" vandalised caves; "we" did not, in fact "we" protected them, and many cave owners or managers were persuaded of the correctness of this theme. The only criteria for being regarded as a responsible caver was membership of an acceptable club. Early attitudes to conservation were shaped around the policy that only recognised caving clubs should have the right of access to caves, and further, this was an inalienable right rather than a privilege.

Rapid industrial and commercial growth in the late 1950's and early 1960's created a massive pressure on limestone resources - building construction and steelmaking had a priority high above the need for caves about which little was known. A reaction from the caving fraternity was to claim "scientific value" and "preservation for future generation". The conservation movement was born, using hastily gathered information to support objections to any proposed changes to the status quo of limestone deposits.

People looking for a cause joined with cavers concerned for their freedom of access to caves, strengthening the club structure that existed. New clubs emerged, absorbing the messages of the new conservation culture; interest in caves was diluted by reaction to the perceived risk to rights of access.

The increased affluence of the boom period, the expansion of tertiary education facilities with their sports promotion and improvements in access roads led to a wider acceptance and demand for caving as a recreational activity. The earlier motivation of curiosity about caves gave way to giving caving a go because it was different - awareness of landscape and its components gave way to passing through landscape quickly to get to a unique site. This evolutionary phase was well developed by the early 1970's, when other factors came into play.

Scientific study had been a component of cave usage from the earliest days of the Colony - fossil bones were noted at Wellington, NSW in 1830. Subsequently, research work centred around geological studies for possible mineral exploitation, and individual workers from universities and museums.

With the development of caving clubs, "scientific study" became an all-embracing catch-cry to justify access to caves, to oppose quarrying operations, and even for clubs to claim exclusivity to sites. If we examine this "scientific study" closely, we would find that it usually amounts to little more than interested observation; interpretation is usually incomplete and hypotheses are seldom tested. Publication is random and usually irretrievable.

Although these comments seem harsh, no criticism is intended to the practice of observation of cave phenomena by members of caving clubs; such behaviour is to be praised.

Comparison can be drawn to the actuality of recognised cave research. Although the various workers may be members of caving clubs, they are seldom "active members". Their field work is usually with a few non-club companions; their behaviour usually causes minimum impact on the cave environment.

Conservation campaigning continued well into the 1970's, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. Arguments presented were emotionally charged; the scientific reasoning could be questionable. It took the non-caving fraternity to bring conservation and environment awareness to its present advanced state in such aspects as plant community integrity, genetic diversity, habitat, etc. Caving, per se, has been left behind in this gathering and dissemination of environmental knowledge.

The most dramatic change in caving practice and attitudes started during the late 1960's, and is still evolving. This was the swing away from using ladders for vertical descents and ascents, initially to abseiling into caves, then the later development of single rope ascending techniques. It is undeniable that these newer techniques are far safer and more convenient when used appropriately. Gruelling 14 hour trips into deep caves could be accomplished in 4 or 5 hours, minimising risk of exhaustion or hypothermia; a far greater vertical range could be covered in expedition caving with the same weight of equipment; the dimensional limit of endurance is greatly extended.

Through the availability of reliable lightweight rope and a range of equipment, abseiling as a sport was developed and promoted through the 1970's, up to the present day. The thrill of abseiling could be enjoyed anywhere, from the use of cliffs to buildings, bridges and inevitably caves. The intrusion of abseilers into caving clubs, and cavers almost universally adopting abseiling has completely changed the character of caving activity. Caves are no longer observed and cared for - they are merely used as a site for thrill activity and as such suffer massive human impact.

It is possible to draw an analogy between many cavers and novice photographers - most novice photographers buy the most technologically advanced camera that they can afford, spend endless hours crooning over the features of their toy and waste endless film taking meaningless snapshots. The camera is never seen simply as a tool toward graphic communication with other people. Similarly, nowadays cavers are equipment minded but do not know very much about caves.

Scout caving echoes the evolution that has occurred in mainstream caving, and that is particularly sad because of the traditional basis of Scouting's programmes.

Until the mid 1970's, scout caving did not constitute a major pressure on caves. Certainly, Venturers (formerly known as Senior Scouts) did go caving, and all degrees of responsibility to caves, the environment and other people were displayed. Participation level was low due to the limitations of distance/travel cost, the low level of cave awareness, and the limited capacity of voluntary leaders.

The growing affluence of young people and the development of abseiling enabled many more Venturers to undertake activities with a higher risk than simple hiking and camping. Within the community, there were fewer people with enhanced outdoor skills prepared to volunteer for scouting leadership, and this tended to lower standards. The relatively brief training given to scouting leaders can never be a good substitute for life

experience in outdoor skills.

As the accident rate grew, the automatic response was to introduce more qualifying and behavioural rules. Thus NSW Branch policies were promulgated for abseiling, caving and rock-climbing. These policies were drawn up within the Scout Association with virtually no outside consultation, and seemed to be based on the premise that caving was dangerous because abseiling was an integral part of the activity. It was, because scouting made it so.

With some notable exceptions, scout caving progressed along the previously mentioned lines - using caves as an activity site, using an internally assessed leadership qualifying with outside reference point.

Inevitably, by 1985 the quality of scout caving had declined to a stage where NSW Branch called a halt until new policies could be prepared. Over this period, the accident rate was quite high; to be fair, many accidents (not notified) occurred on phantom trips. Again, to be fair, many good leaders gave Venturers a positive and worthwhile caving experience.

During 1985, I was able to run a caving trip for Venturers, and this subsequently developed into a scenario where I was able to contribute to development of scout caving in an Area. The basic programming tenets of scouting were used as background; learning by doing, in small groups, with an outdoor orientation; developing one's skills to be able to help others, improving perception and observation, looking after natural resources. This was codified into policy form, the proposed Area policy having as its aims:

1. To encourage caving activity with an emphasis on observation, understanding and recording of cave-related phenomena, in diverse caving areas.
2. Using deliberately selected caves, provide primary training in physical aspects such as body use, total darkness, foul air, fatigue, climbing skills, helping each other and environment awareness. It is expected that this primary training would occur in the field, in small groups.
3. Develop leadership skills in leaders in such aspects as recognition of the leader's role, sense of responsibility and a continuum of cave education.
4. To ensure the safety of Venturers, for whom caving is only one of a broad range of activities, develop a cave/leader classification system, limiting exposure to extremely hazardous caves or techniques more appropriate to specialist speleologists. To this end, any climbing technique without secondary safeguards should not be used.
5. For conservation reasons, to limit practice and enjoyment of abseiling and use of mechanical descending and ascending devices to non-cave sites.

For sake of brevity the enabling procedures are not detailed here; also, point 5 has since been diluted by user demand.

I abandoned the previous concepts of pre-caving lectures in halls, on the basis that young people are not in scouting to go to school. I chose instead to simply visit Venturer units and explain what the camping conditions would be, what basic equipment is required, etc.

These concepts were tested on trips with Venturer units - party size was kept to a maximum of five, and descriptions of the origin of caves, hydrology, structure of the caves, biology and sedimentology were the subject of yarning on the way to caves and slowly moving through caves. Safety precautions were taught by example, such as finding your way using whatever secondary source of light was available.

This was the approach for beginners; where Venturers had previous and showed impatience with the concept, they were persuaded to act as party leaders of a small group, assuming responsibility for instruction and safety. This action thrust a sense of responsibility onto young people who had previously been blind followers in higher risk situations. Naturally, these exercises were carried out in a sequence of known caves with identifiable and avoidable hazard spots.

The results were far better than expected - the young people responded by wanting to know more and more, and were learning to work as a close team. A checklist of cave observation was produced and distributed on trips, greatly extending the range of phenomena to be observed. As an example - postulating on the source of different sediments led to a greater understanding of cave processes. Noticeable improvements occurred in increased self esteem, and person-to-person communication.

The next step was to develop a similar, more advanced programme for leaders. This was more difficult; the activity motivation for many adults had been to try and be a leader of "indian file" scenarios. Patience was required to convert that attitude to one where the leader's role was as resource - the explainer, the first-aider, the encourager - allowing the young people to develop themselves among their peers.

Meanwhile, NSW Branch will shortly promulgate a new policy for Rock-Related Activities, drafted with little or no outside consultation, and with little opportunity for submission or discussion. These draft policies appear to offer no change of philosophy, being merely a re-arrangement of older material, modified communication lines and the deletion of "ASF" as a prefix to a few caves. Further communication is occurring.

This experience of the last year has highlighted many perceived weaknesses in our own structures and behaviour.

How often, on club trips, do parties of whatever size simply "trog a cave" and/or go on to "do" another cave, etc.? We read this constantly in club newsletters - seldom do we read of action following aims and objectives stated in the many constitutions. Yet we resent the tag "hypocrite". Prospective members in many clubs are expected to do so many hours caving to become a member. The quantity is defined, but what about the quality? And who would be the judge?

The structure, role and recognition of clubs is untouchably sacred. Yet every advance that is made philosophically, scientifically or in communication has been developed and promoted by individuals - the club is irrelevant. An ingrown, tightly bound club structure serves to inhibit development, and evolves ultimately to the level of the lowest common denominator. We may have such clubs.

We encourage groups to become Associates of ASF so that they may be positively influenced. By what? By the codes that have been developed, published once many years ago but now not easily retrievable? We should, but apparently can't decide to, ensure that any material of any value remains easily available. Nor can we find simple authoritative explanations of the origin and evolution of caves, a simple outline of many features such as sediments, fossils, bone material, biology, meteorology and many others. We pretend to promote an interest in cave observation or science, but haven't ensured that resource material is at hand.

We need to think out what we are doing, and at what cost. We may need to re-define our aims. Most of all, we must first recognise our complacency.

In conclusion, I pose the rhetorical question - Why did we work so hard to save Colong from the bulldozers - was it so that we could slowly kick the cave to death ourselves?