

Impacts of caver groups in Tasmania.

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The impact of traditional and recent caving club activities are familiar to most ASF cavers, yet many of the problems continue to evade universally acceptable solutions. As is appreciated there are various types of caving club in Australia with different aims and standards of ethics. The ASF is in the midst of further encouraging certain standards through accreditation of club leadership schemes.

Casual inexperienced visitation to caves has always been a problem at Mole Creek since settlement. There has been a small increase recently, largely due to unled revisiting members of "outdoor experience" groups (see next section). Thankfully most occur at readily accessible sites such as Wet, and do not venture very far into the darkness. It is common for MCCC members to retrieve rubbish (beer cans etc) from the first 100 m of this cave. Some more malicious visitors pilfer speleothems and/or engage in vandalism. The management response to this type of visitor has been to lock well-known decorated caves, suppress locations of other caves, and leave one or two "sacrifice" caves for unfettered use of the yobbos. The club response is to encourage anyone who wishes to go caving "into the fold".

The main purpose of this discussion is to draw attention to other high impact groups that have appeared in the last decade or so.

The most alarming type of group is the emergence of Outdoor Recreation, Youth Clubs, and School groups onto the caving scene. Most of these "outdoor experience" group organisers are actively promoting caving as a sporting pursuit for (often immature) novices without addressing issues of ethics and conservation. These groups are automatically insured for all outdoor activities undertaken. These groups are taken by "professional" guides (in that they are paid), often with little grounding in caving and safety, much less in ethics and conservation. Recent experiences at Mole Creek suggest these groups are of very high risk to the caves and to themselves. Increased occurrence of poorly controlled groups has been noted in both Honeycomb and Wet. Some of these groups have been known to penetrate deeper, take the wrong route, tracking mud into Georgies Hall and then emerge at the top entrance, then to trespass across the land of a hostile landowner to get back to their cars (and buses). Within the last two years similar groups have wreaked havoc in the highly decorated, previously intact My Cave; throwing and trampling mud, trampling and breaking decorations, and entering during times of high flood danger. It is small wonder that Tasmania's only caving disaster occurred with this type of group, viz Mystery Creek. Members of "outdoor experience" groups are well known to surreptitiously return to the caves with their friends and wreak even more damage to the caves and risk to themselves. The organisers (policy makers, headmasters, scout commissioners etc) of these activities need to be rigorously educated (by ASF in particular) as to why they should curb recreational activities in the non-renewable cave environment. It is clearly unethical to encourage the attentions of otherwise uninterested youths towards caves, particularly in large numbers. At present Tasmanian authorities are attempting to address issues of leadership of these groups through an accreditation scheme. This process has failed adequately deal with the need for ethics and conservation, rather it concentrates on the ability to safely process large numbers of novices through caves. It also assumes access. Such groups are presently allowed unfettered access to all but locked caves. Clearly, Tasmania urgently needs to see this situation reversed, to see stringent access and licence controls brought onto what is

evidently the highest risk type of group entering caves.

Commercial operators, on the other hand are mostly under far greater scrutiny. There are two variants of two types of operations: the variables being whether they are licensed or not, and whether they provide clients with experiences based on adventure, or on education about karst and ecology. Unlicensed operators are (in essence) similar to those described above, with no restrictions on access, safety, ethics or conservation, they are also unlikely to have insurance, and therefore are unlikely to attract a large clientele. Adventure providers may suffer access and safety restrictions as a result of licence conditions or insurance constraints. They may attract large numbers of clients, while lacking ethics and conservation background. The licensed karst and ecology education provider is insured, restricted in access and safety, and operate accordingly with ethics and conservation (by virtue of the experiential aims), and is likely to present less impact than the average caving club group. While rejecting the accreditation approach that Tas authorities are attempting to impose, commercial operators develop operations manuals which are subject to licence renewal and insurer scrutiny. It can be seen that there are different types of commercial operators, with impacts likely to be inversely commensurate with their restrictions and experiential aims.

One significant, though less frequent, type of high-impact party worthy of comment in Tasmania is the helicopter-lifted/heavy-weight/Himalayan siege-style expedition to remote, pristine locations within the World Heritage wilderness. The stated reasons for such adventures include exploration and scientific study. The 1980s saw attention focussed on Mt Anne, culminating in the 1987 Australian Geographic - sponsored trip of enormous size and duration. The legacy of tonnes of equipment and extended base camping has been devastation of the fragile alpine ecosystem, minefields of toilet and other waste, littering of dolines with spent caving equipment and so on in what is one of the last few pristine corners of the world. Despite explicit contraindication by the World Heritage area's new draft management plan, Departmental approval was forthcoming to a similar expedition to the much more remote and untouched Vanishing Falls area in April 1992. It was only fortuitous for the environment the party number ended up much smaller than intended. While these parties are often based on highly experienced cavers, there are often included visitors of other disciplines. These parties are seldom motivated by environmental and ethical concerns, rather more by thirst for adventure and personal glory. If cavers find themselves unable to enter and leave such a pristine, precious part of the planet by their own personal endurance and present no discernible impact to the area; ethically they should look to other places for their egotistic fulfilment.

Not unrelated are the biological surveys performed in Tasmanian caves in the last 20 years. Caves are extremely low energy environments, and support rather tenuous ecologies with very small spatial distributions. While the principle of learning about cave ecology is sound, in practice the commonplace sampling (and preservation in alcohol) of up to 12 individuals of a given species from such restricted enclosed distributions is deplorable. This rate of removal often represents a significantly large proportion of the entire genetic population of such species, is totally unjustified and ethically unsound. Extinction may easily result from the remaining genetically unviable population.

References:

- D.Hunter and M.Lichon 1993, The emergence of new caver groups in Tasmania and an assessment of their cave impacts. *Illuminations 2*, in preparation.
- M.Lichon 1993, Impacts of exploration and scientific expeditions in World Heritage karst areas, *Illuminations 2*, in preparation.