

Tourism as Cave Conservation ?

- 90 Years of Photo-monitoring.

Elery Hamilton-Smith
Department of Leisure & Tourism
Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
Coburg, Victoria 3058.

INTRODUCTION

Cavers have often regarded the traditional show cave with some contempt, and seen the physical development of such a cave as damaging and counter to what conservation principles would demand. An opposite viewpoint has frequently been expressed, namely, that commercial development may be the most effective means of conservation, and this was enunciated formally over twenty years ago by Russ Gurnee (1971). There certainly are some occasions on which this has not been realised, and Gurnee (pers. comm.) now argues that the most damaged caves are often those which were developed as show caves, but then abandoned.

Another problem is that any one generation may well develop show caves according to the best understanding of the time, but that later knowledge, by which past actions are often judged, may well be very different. So, in Australia, most of our show caves were developed at about the turn of the century and according to a pattern established by the Wilsons of Jenolan. The aesthetic value of stalactites, stalagmites, columns and helictites was highly valued ; floors were not, even when covered in gours or pool crystal. Speleothems would be protected with wire netting which was tightly stretched over piping frames, and would be displayed to the public with appropriate lighting to maximise their attractiveness. Pathways would be concreted, and visitors only admitted under the supervision of a guide.

The result of this is that floor deposits were often damaged beyond reclamation ; where they were comprised of sediments, these were often removed with scant regard even for sub-fossil materials. Because there was virtually no recognition of the special character of cave climates, the extent to which karst systems were dependent upon hydrological integrity, or the significance of biota, these matters could not be considered. One fears that even to this day, many of these issues might not be properly dealt with ; the continued pouring of concrete into show caves is one example of continuing a tradition long after it has been widely recognised as dysfunctional.

Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which the apparent aim of preserving the aesthetic quality of speleothems has been achieved in Australia.

THE BASELINE DATA

It has only recently been recognised that in most cases, we have excellent photographic data on the state of most Australian show caves either at the time of their discovery, or at least prior to their commercial development. The photographers concerned were not taking photographs for this purpose, but rather for various commercial motives - sale to the press for news purposes, printing and sale of postcards, or promotion of the new tourist facility. It is the photographic prints, often in the form of postcards, which provide the best access to most of these images today and a reference catalogue of postcards is currently being prepared by Trevor Shaw, Ross Ellis and myself. However, it is fair to say that some, like Charles Kerry of New South Wales also appeared to have been driven by both exploration recording and aesthetic considerations. Kerry's own writings and reported statements are quite explicit about the joys of caving and the aesthetic satisfaction of capturing a fine image (e.g., Anon., 1903).

In New South Wales, both Kerry and Trickett (Middleton 1991) were outstanding contributors to early photography. The two were close friends, with a number of common interests, and so Trickett, in his capacity as Superintendent of Caves, was able to ensure that Kerry photographed the new discoveries at Jenolan within days of the first (officially announced) discovery, and that these photographs were then made available to the press of the day for publicity. Thus, the first photographs of Mafeking, River, Skeleton (now Cerberus), Orient and Temple of Baal Caves at Jenolan show the caves in pristine condition, and are readily available. Kerry also entered the Yarrangobilly Caves at an early stage of their history and even claimed, wrongly, the discovery and first entry of the Jersey Cave. His 'false' claim may well be a result of being accompanied by the manager of Thomas Cook's Travel Agency and a Sydney journalist.

For the caves which were discovered earlier, the data is less reliable. Certainly a number of photographers were active at Jenolan, recording the arches and in particular, the Imperial and Lucas Caves. These include Paine (actually under commission from the N.S.W. Government), King, Rowe, Bayliss, Beavis and Cooke. However, in most cases there is no record of the dates of their visits to Jenolan and these visits generally occurred long after the discovery of the caves concerned.

At Buchan, the first photographs by Harvey in 1889 were taken in Wilson's Cave and Dickson's Cave, when both were already well-known and far from pristine. The best data come from three later workers. Flynn ('of the Inland') photographed those caves which were known in 1906, but of these, only Kitson Cave was likely to be genuinely pristine, although most others had probably only been entered by a relatively small number of people. But Frank Moon's progressive exploration of the present show cave system was comprehensively recorded by Howard Bulmer within days of the first entry as Moon has a shrewd eye to publicity and each new discovery was widely reported, with photographs, in the Melbourne press. Moon actually tried to convince the then Lands and Survey Department that Bulmer should be granted a monopoly - but they wisely ignored his proposal. This meant that the ubiquitous George Rose photographed not only the present show cave system, but also Murrindal and Lilly Pilly Caves which Bulmer had not recorded (perhaps because their discovery and exploration was not by Moon !). Rose's work was in both monographic and stereographic forms, and is technically of a very high quality.

At Naracoorte, W.P. Francis (and a horde of others) photographed both Victoria and Alexandra Caves at the time of their discovery. Francis and others also photographed various stages of the development in Blanche Cave, while Rose and Davidge provide a record of the remarkable garden development surrounding the caves. In Western Australia, one of the first acts of the newly appointed Caves Board in 1901 was to have the South-western caves photographed by a Mr. Morison of the Lands Department. Although some time after first discovery, these images were at least contemporaneous with the commencement of commercial development and taken prior to extensive entry. Similarly in Tasmania, Stephen Spurling III photographed the Mole Creek Caves, particularly King Solomon, at a very early stage.

So, this provides a surprisingly extensive series of baseline data on the spelothems of Australian show caves. I have commenced a systematic review of the present status of the various scenes depicted, and can now provide a preliminary report on this work.

THE SHOW CAVES TODAY

The most important point to make is that overall, the spelothems of Australian show caves are in a remarkably good state of preservation. The Wilson strategy has served well and some remarkably beautiful and often fragile scenes remain to us as a result of their work.

However, although cave managers always express deep concern about damage being done by visitors, this rarely happens in caves developed soon after discovery and according to the Wilson model. One example can be depicted here : the destruction of a major shawl at Buchan. In this instance, the offender was successfully prosecuted. I am aware of other incidents e.g., at Wombeyan and Yallingup (Poulter 1987). There was also some damage at Naracoorte, although it appears that this was done during a period when visitors were allowed into the caves without a guide.

But, the major depredations are by managers or their agents. Some of this may well have involved a deliberate decision, e.g., in the Mafeking Cave or the Temple of Baal at Jenolan, where the compromise to improve access at the cost of some speleothem features was made. But the installation of electrical services using heavy piping at Buchan led to some accidental damage, but the fact that it was accidental does nothing to reduce either its disastrous impact upon the cave or the ultimate irresponsibility of the managers. Crassly planned and implemented redevelopment of the Victoria Cave, Naracoorte during the late 1960's destroyed whole scenes.

Another form of destruction of pristine caves was the enhancement of scenes by moving 'surplus' decoration to new locations. Examples occur in probably most show caves but I note as examples only the 'Twelve Apostles' at Buchan and the 'Shower' at Naracoorte. The latter scene has recently been restored to its original state by removal of the transplanted stalagmites and the artificial pool, but most other examples remain. This scene was also the location of the infamous 'fish in the pool', where toy celluloid had been fixed to the ceiling in such a position that their reflection would be seen in the pool but that was taken out many years ago.

There are numerous examples which show the much worse fate of caves which are not placed under the show cave management regime, but left to the good will of cavers. The Chevalier Cave at Jenolan, Honeycomb Cave at Murrindal are conspicuous failures, while even such glorious places as Mullamullang and Kubla Khan are well on the road to disaster.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although the focus of earlier managers upon the aesthetic quality of speleothems is, to us, a very constrained view of what good cave preservation might involve, there is no question that many managers have achieved excellent results in this. As Andy Spate and myself (1992) have argued elsewhere, cavers have (probably inevitably) been far less successful in their stewardship of caves.

At present, however, we face a very different set of challenges to those dealt with by the Wilsons and their followers. We know a great deal more about the cave environment, and at least some managers are successfully dealing with much more complex issues than the beauty of speleothems. But, managers are still using far too much concrete in caves ; cavers are still far from adopting even a skeletal low impact ethos ; commercial 'wild' tours are adding to the despoliation virtually unchecked. Worst of all, most cavers find the idea that a specific cave might be placed 'off limits', or that it might even be sealed up to make further entry impossible, to be totally unacceptable. Yet none offer effective alternatives which will prevent the gradual degradation of new discoveries. I sympathise with the position that people should not be excluded, but short of massive changes in the ethos of recreation or tough action by much better resourced management agencies than we currently have, I see no solution to the problem.

REFERENCES

- Anon., 1903, Photographing in Caves - Jenolan, N.S.W., *Australian Photographic Journal*, 12 (10) : 217-220. [Reports an editorial interview with Charles Kerry.]
- Gurnee, Russell J., 1971, Conservation through Commercialization, *Proceedings 4th. International Conference of Speleology*, Ljubljana, Yugoslavia, 1965, 6 : 109-114.
- Middleton, Gregory J., 1991, *Oliver Trickett : Doyen of Australia's Cave Surveyors : 1847-1934*, Sydney : Sydney Speleological Society.
- Poulter, Norman, 1987, Restoration of the Jewel Casket, Yallingup, *Helictite*, 25 (2) : 54-57.
- Spate, Andy & Hamilton-Smith, Elery, 1992, Do Cavers Have an Impact, *Australian Caver*, 131 : 12-19.