



OPENING ADDRESS

by John Toop

Mr President, fellow cavers, it is with great pleasure that I accept the honour, along with my colleague Lana Little, to officially open the 22nd Biennial Conference of the Australian Speleological Federation. The first time that this biennial event has been staged in Central Queensland.

To those of you who do not know us, I may say a few words by way of introduction.

We both employed by the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service. Lana, a member of the Chillagoe Caving Club since 1984, is currently District Ranger at Chillagoe and has managed the caving areas of Chillagoe, Undarra and Mitchell-Palmer since 1988.

For myself a former member of the now disbanded University of Queensland Speleological Society since 1970, on graduation, I joined the Commonwealth National Parks and Wildlife Service in 1975 to work on the conservation of the cave dwelling bat colonies here in Central Queensland. This work was subsequently taken over, despite some State Government opposition by the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service in 1980 and I have been with them ever since, working on management of bat colonies throughout Queensland.

I will not bore you with the times I have spent inspecting bat caves with Lana, let's just say, we both enjoy our caving and have both extensively, through Australian and overseas.

I take this opportunity to welcome fellow cavers to Central Queensland. Some of you will have been here before and for others it will be their first visit. Even for first timers however, the area will not be unknown. The Mt Etna are recognised by all Australian cavers.

For cave conservationists, this area is hallowed ground. It was here that a bitter, twenty-three year conservation battle was fought to conserve these caves and their associated bat colonies.

At first, the University of Queensland Speleological Society carried the conflict forward. The convenors of this Conference, the Central Queensland Speleological Society, in the final years, carried the fight to a successful conclusion.

During this time, I saw this controversy hurt a large number of people. I saw marriages break up, professions and businesses ruined and careers damaged. I saw the Rockhampton community and even the caving club split apart by conflicting ideologies. Even today, ten years after Mt Etna was declared a National Park with some 69% of the caves conserved, some of these rifts and bitterness still remain.

As we move toward the new millennium however, I see the process of healing slowly gaining ground on both sides. I see the anger of the conservation movement subsiding and on the other, I see the cement company, Pacific Lime sponsoring the Australian Bat Society Conference in Rockhampton last year and I see them becoming involved in cave conservation.

This climate of reconciliation, augers well for the future of this area. The theme of this Conference, "Taking Caving into the Next Century with Fun, Unity and Fellowship", I would suggest, will be achieved. A sense of unity in cave conservation and cave management is slowly gaining ground.



The fun and fellowship part of the equation - we will start on in earnest at five this afternoon, as the first stubbies are broached.

Before handing over this Official Opening to my colleague, Lana, I would like to personally thank the Central Queensland Speleological Society for their assistance to me over the years and in particular in light of our gathering here, I would like to congratulate them for organising this Conference. As part of a four-member Committee, who put the Australian Speleological Federation's Brisbane Conference together I can assure members here, that it is a soul-destroying task. It is a task however, that has to be faced in the future, by cavers, some of you here, if we are to create the unity which, is so required on the part of cavers, to ensure that our sport is not unduly hampered by unthinking, unworkable regulations in the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen - Lana Little, District Ranger, Chillagoe.