



THE CHRISTMAS CREEK COMPROMISE

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Resource Material supplied by Chillagoe Caving Club, Broken River Karst Index (Mick Goodwin), Department of Environment, Department of Mines, Greenloading Biostudies and David Mitchell Ltd.

The concept of this paper is to give details of the events, beginning in mid 1996, regarding the Christmas Creek Limestone area.

SUMMARY

The highly cavernous karst ridge became the proposed site of a major Limestone quarry. The mining company, David Mitchell Ltd had held a mining lease over approximately half the area since 1983. (ML 1445). None of the cavers involved, (including Chillagoe Caving Club) knew of this.

It was learnt that the Company had not gained approval to mine this particular lease from the Queensland Department of Mines.

When an approach was made to this Department by the Townsville Caving Group, the ASF Conservation Commission, Peter Berrill and the Department of Environment, via Mick Goodwin, the Mines Department immediately ordered the Company to stop work.

The entire situation was looked at by the Caving Group. Many aspects were investigated and much discussion took place. The following being considered:

- The preservation of the outcrop it's caves , flora and fauna
- Maintaining access to the area through the grazing lease holder
- The commercial aspects of the situation ie local employment in the mine and proposed kiln operation.

As a result of this consideration, a Compromise Proposal was put to the Mining Company to relinquish the portion of the Lease over the main cavernous part of the outcrop and (with the support of the cavers) , extend the Lease in the opposite direction, over a portion of the outcrop which did not contain many (discovered, enterable) caves. Bearing in mind, that there already existed a considerable quarry and a large disturbed area in this section.

David Mitchell Ltd agreed to this proposal and further conditions regarding environmental studies. As a result, an agreeable situation now exists to the satisfaction of all parties.

PROFILE OF EVENTS WITH REGARD TO THE MINING OF LIMESTONE AT THE CHRISTMAS CREEK KARST AREA

Location - West from Townsville

The karst outcrop is situated approximately 40km south of Greenvale and 6km east of the Gregory Development Road. The karst occurs on the grazing lease property "Christmas Creek", owned by Mr Viv Keen. It is a single major karst outcrop in the area with two smaller outcrops occurring adjacent to the Gregory Development Road just south of the Christmas Creek property turn off.



There are a series of smaller karst formations that lie in an arc to the west and south from this point to south of the Clark River.

The two outcrops on the highway contain a few minor caves. The south-west arc has not been investigated. The Christmas Creek karst outcrop is approximately 1.8km long; 500m wide and up to 150m high. The majority of it is cavernous. Forty caves have been tagged with the potential to go well over 100. One major bat maternity cave exists with the potential for at least two more.

HISTORY

During the early 1970's, the area was explored by the now defunct Charters Towers Speleological Caving Club. Some 20 odd caves were tagged by them. Unfortunately, most of their records have been lost and the remaining member (currently active with the Townsville Caving Club (TCC), has a very bad memory! It is presumed that many of the caves were explored by various people while the Greenvale Mining Town was functional. Carlisle, Sheean and Fraser were regular cavers, but it appears that no records were kept.

During the mid to late 1970's, the northern end of the outcrop was mined for ballast for the Greenvale Rail Line. Two considerable sized quarries were developed and much loose rock was left behind. It is known that the lease had lapsed.

The Chillagoe Caving Club visited the area in March 1986 and recorded and tagged 19 caves. These are documented in the Broken River Karst Index.

In July 1993, three of the Kersey family and the previous CTSCC member, visited the area. This was the beginning of the Townsville Caving club. Mick Goodwin of CCC supplied TCC with the Broken River Karst Index. Exploration, tagging and surveying has continued in accordance with the ASF Standards. TCC now has about 30 members and is currently considering joining CCC as a sub-branch. About 6 people are prepared to meet the ASF Horizontal Cave Leader Accreditation Standards.

MINING

On the 5 May 1996, heavy mining machinery was seen moving down the old haul road put in by the 1970 Mining Company. Inquiries revealed that this Company, Calcium Products, a subsidiary of Mitchell Mining Ltd, held a lease over a substantial portion of the karst outcrop and were indeed planning to begin mining operations. See CCC map.

Further investigations revealed that the Lease ML 1445 at Christmas Creek had been granted in 1983 along with several other leases at Calcium near Townsville where the Company has lime burning kilns. ML 1455 had been granted without an individual EMOS or EIS. John Kersey made representation to the Department of Environment and work was immediately stopped in the area.

Access to the caves via the property owner, Viv Keen, has always been tentative. Viv is a 'hard man' and he had problems with unauthorised people on his property previously, so the cavers had to treat him carefully. Viv was approached for his attitude towards the mining. His position is that, he doesn't want the caves destroyed but due to the downturn in the cattle industry, any compensation he would receive from the mining would be very desirable. Hence, he would not appreciate the cavers stopping the mining. From that the cavers deduced that they would no longer be welcome on his property.



That situation was compounded by the question of access to the Broken River area (40km further west), as the properties are close and property owners talk to one another. If access was lost to Christmas Creek, it was most likely that access to Broken River would also be lost. The situation called for some lateral thinking:

- How to keep the property owner happy
- How to save the caves
- The mining company did not really come into the question except for the possibility, that if it stopped here, they may go elsewhere and the problem would not go away.

A compromise proposal was evolved. It was made quite clear to the Mining Company that unless they agreed to relinquish a major portion of ML 1455, they would lose the lot. A thorough examination of the northern end of the Tower was conducted by the cavers. Following the on-site inspections and discussions, the Mining Company agreed to the compromise proposal and sought (and gained) approval to remove the loose rock (ONLY) left from the previous operation. They were also instructed to commission a preliminary report on the environmental aspects of the area with particular attention to the caves and bat populations.

The preliminary study has been carried out by a NSW based company, Greenloading Biostudies. Alison Martin, the representative involved, conferred with Les Hall (University of Queensland), before coming to Christmas Creek. Particular attention was given to the listed caves.

THE FUTURE

As this is the first bat maternity season since this began, it is vital that all possible data is gained now to determine the possibility of mining and if necessary, to restrict mining at time and or areas. TCC know of the sites listed but others may exist that have not been discovered, particularly, the southern end of 001 tower. A program of close monitoring will begin on the 19 October to determine:

- (a) If there are any more maternity sites in this area;
- (b) What is happening in known caves (whether they are maternity sites or not);
- (c) To find other maternity sites in the southern end of 002 tower. This is less critical at the moment due to a greater distance from the proposed mining area and will depend on caving persons resources. It is believed that there is at least one more major maternity site in this area, from old reports;
- (d) Inform relevant capable research persons of these findings and support them in a proper study of the bats during this season.

If mining is allowed to proceed, TCC will monitor the operations to ensure that they do the right thing. Now that the property owner has negotiated a satisfactory compensation agreement with the Mining Company, access (subject to normal terms and conditions), is assured and that goodwill will extend to other property owners in the area.

NB - Due to the size of John Kersey's presentation, we apologise that not all of his paper is presented in the proceedings. If anyone is interested in reading the full paper, please contact CQSS or John Kersey.



Looking in a north easterly direction across the former plant site of the earlier ballast rock operation - taken in 1993. The crushing plant and stockpiles of the current operation now occupy this area. On cessation of mining, revegetation will be encouraged.



Looking into the old ballast quarry from its entrance on the eastern side of the limestone ranges. Further mining will reduce the height of the main face and will remove some presently overhanging sections.