WOULD WE DEVELOP THE Imperial Cave NOW?

Ernst Holland 2000.

Introduction.

One of the most complex decisions a cave manager has to address is: what are the advantages of developing a new cave? The number of considerations that have to be addressed include financial viability, environmental matters, social and stakeholder perceptions.

The Imperial Cave at Jenolan was opened up for public inspection almost immediately on discovery in 1879 and development has been ongoing since then, with some restoration also taking place. One often wonders would this cave be developed today given the above matters that would need to be addressed?

If developed today would it be done the same way or would a tunnel be put in from the inner end to make a through tour exiting via McKeowns Valley?

The idea of this paper is to attempt to explore what may have happened then and what would happen today.

CONSIDERATIONS by the ADMINSTRATORS.

Costs of Services.

While they were experimenting with electricity at the time of the original opening of the Imperial Cave it was seen more as a novelty than the sole method of lighting a cave. Therefore one would imagine that the cost of lighting the tour would have comparatively been a lot cheaper than today. One would imagine the major costs would be the labour used to modify the cave for easier access. Most pathways were constructed from original material in the cave and it was not until the 1970s that the cement pathways were laid.

It is interesting to note though while today one is concerned with Lampen flora, visual and physical pollution caused by today's electrical fittings, Jeremiah Wilson was concerned about soot and smoke from candles and magnesium ribbon.

Revenue Generation.

There are two avenues that must be looked at when assessing financial viability for the development of a new cave. That is revenue generated when the cave is first opened and offered as a new product, and then the long-term return. This will often bring about conflict between the administrator and some other stakeholders (possibly when it is public property) as to what the charges should be for entry to the cave.

This is because a number of stakeholders often see that public property should have so called 'affordable access' with most political groups supporting this philosophy. The administrator is under pressure to make it pay while there is another view that as this is an environmental asset there should be higher entry fees to pay for the use of the natural environment. None of these considerations would have occurred to the administrators in 1879 even though the government would have set the entry fees for Jeremiah Wilson. It interesting that these entry fees are seen today as affordable for the higher end of the society.

Social Issues.

There are a number of social issues that come from the development of a new cave for tourism and the very first is the different perspectives on the need for such a cave. While the administrators see it as a new product (and this proved the case when they first developed the Imperial), and therefore attractive to the customers, stakeholders will sometimes see new development simply as a money-spinner.

Jeremiah Wilson simply provided a service that was already in demand from the visitors who could afford to get to Jenolan and he would make some money too.

Visitor Satisfaction.

Visitor satisfaction has different meanings to different people and even different cultures and if it is got wrong it can have implications for the viability of any new development.

Because Jenolan was something of a mystery at that time of the Imperial Cave opening, just by getting there and seeing a cave, visitor satisfaction was guaranteed. It may be assumed that by having that air of adventure and mystery that there would not have been any so called 'expectations' that can be instilled today by advertising and marketing.

Stakeholder Interests.

There are a number of stakeholders who are deemed as having a vested interest in the development of a cave. The interests are diverse ones such as transport, tourism, staffing issues, business people seeing the added attraction as being beneficial, conservation groups concerned with environmental issues, and scientists often wishing to protect an important feature.

EIS ISSUES.

Cave modification.

While there is a lot to learn about cave physics, research has given some insights to how cave visitors may interfere with and possibly alter those physics. Work done overseas and at Jenolan show three possible causes that may alter cave physics. These are: visitors; cave modification; and the cave furniture, or man made infrastructure.

The original tours, while low in numbers, by the use of naked flames for lighting may have caused temperature changes as well as the pollution mentioned by Jeremiah Wilson. While I have already mentioned the modification to the Imperial Cave, it is to be noted that this would have been the heaviest modification ever done to the internal morphology of any other at Jenolan. Not only would this have changed airflows in the cave but may have removed some very valuable sedimentary deposits as well.

The main modification has been the bypassing of the original entry via Kings Tableland. This was by digging of a tunnel through old cave fill that is now the entrance to all caves on the south side of the Grand Arch making it the first tunnel ever to be dug at Jenolan.

Today this would be a major issue with many parameters to be considered and as suggested in my conclusions there may even be the bigger issues of a tunnel from McKeowns valley to make it a through cave tour.

Hydrological implications.

While it would be safe to say that there has not been any major hydrological impacts to the main northern stream (the Imperial River) by the development of the Imperial Cave (There was a major impact to that stream when the small wall was built for the Leffel Wheel), there has been a definite impact to natural water flows in the Imperial Cave above the stream level. The building of pathways and the blocking and removal of pool rims caused this, and water quality can be affected by rubbish off the pathway.

It is worth noting that, world wide, pool deposits were often sacrificed for pathways as they were perceived as not what people wanted to see.

Today an Environmental Impact Statement would have to give major consideration to water quality and hydrological changes because of Jenolan location at the top of a very important catchment. Today one would look at suspended pathways to overcome this problem.

Cultural impacts.

While there has never been any evidence that the indigenous people either used or had culture significant attached to the Imperial Cave there would be a need for a qualified person to have a closer look. What is interesting here is that by developing the Imperial when they did, there have been major cultural and heritage items added to Jenolan.

Paleontological impacts.

Anybody going through the Imperial Cave today would either notice or have pointed out to them the many bone deposits. At the time of the original opening the bones may have been seen as an added attraction to the cave without any thought to their importance and would not have been considered as a reason not to open the cave.

An Environment Impact Statement would consider the importance of such bones and either suggest that they be studied before the cave was opened and then the pathways and lighting so designed to minimise impact or that the cave not be developed at all.

This is an example of where stakeholder power could be the deciding factor.

Ascetics or Amenity.

In any development ascetics is a very controversial issue with many different points of views as to what it really means. The Imperial Cave without any doubt was originally developed to maximise the view of the speleothems, the underground streamway and possibly some of the bone deposits.

Today the placing of pathways and lighting would have to be looked at, not only the placing to give the best view of the features but also in relation to them impacting on the visual attributes of the cave. The morphological aspects of the cave would also be seen as important so as to give the public a concept of the geomorphological processes that formed the cave.

CONCLUSIONS.

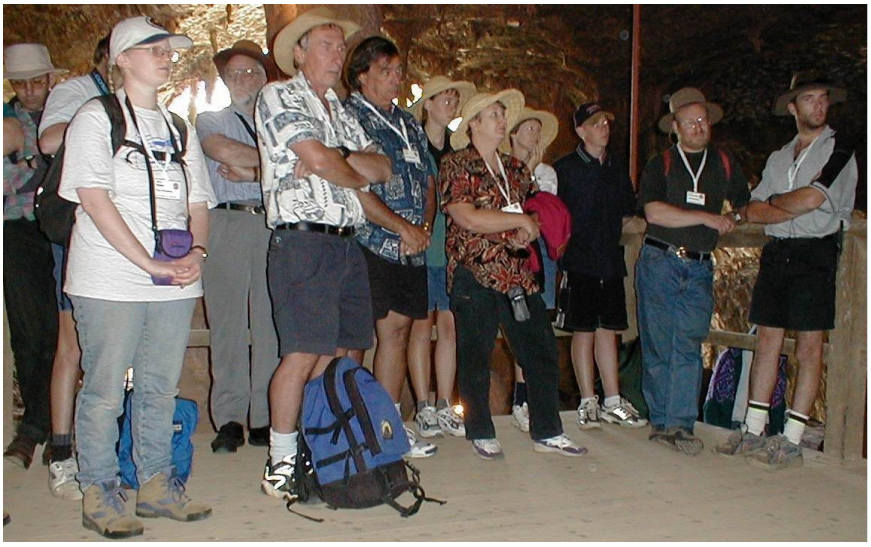
In conclusion, if the Imperial cave were to be developed today it would cost a lot more to develop even comparatively. Also it would be essential to have a good rapport with stakeholders and a clear understanding between all groups as to objectives and outcomes. There would also be the possibility that the cave would be developed in a different manner than is seen today because a

decision would have to be made as to entry points, length of tour and most important as to whether it would be a through or return tour.

It is hard to make a judgement as to whether the cave would be developed today but what is sure is that it would be a lot more controversial and cost a lot of money.

A lot of us today accept the fact that because a cave was developed over a hundred years ago there is nothing we can do about it. All old show caves that have been closed have been for the reason that a better one has been developed or the cost of maintenance and the lack of revenue. Not one cave that I know of was closed because the cave was important from a conservation or environmental perspective.

Outside Abercrombie cave Arthur Clarke



Inside Abercrombie Cave, listening to Pat Larkin open the Conference Arthur Clarke