

## General Presentations

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### ***Where are the Cave Conservation Projects in Australia?***

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#### **WHY CONSERVATION PROJECTS?**

While examining the papers presented at the last Australian Speleological Federation (ASF) conference, it was clear there was a distinct absence of papers relating to cave conservation issues. The thrust of caving activity was clearly in some other direction. Did this mean there were less conservation issues in Australia?

Looking at the annual reports of ASF conservation commissioners, it is quite clear that the number of issues affecting caves and karst areas in general is on the increase. As development heads out from our major cities and as high grade limestone becomes a highly sort after commodity, the threats on our karst areas is escalating rapidly.

A great deal of voluntary work time is being consumed by vast quantities of paperwork, required to respond to Environmental Review and Management Programme (ERMP)'s, development proposals, mining proposals, and general requests for information from government bodies and consultants. This work is tedious but necessary to ensure that correct information about caves and karst regions is provided to appropriate authorities. See <http://www.edo.org.au/edowa/fact5-EIA.html> for information on ERMP's in Western Australia.

However it is vital that a significant amount of our efforts are directed at hands on, work that is required to ensure that caves are protected from visitors, managers, land owners or mining interests.

#### **WHAT'S HAPPENING?**

To determine what projects were happening around Australia I requested, via the internet, those cavers undertaking cave conservation projects to tell me a little of the projects they are conducting.

The responses are tabulated below.

<b>Project/Group/Person</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Project Coordinator</b>	<b>State</b>
Arthropod ecology in the maternal chamber of Bat Cave, Naracoorte.	Investigation of the seasonality in populations and correlations of arthropod diversity and abundance with guano deposition	Tim Moulds	SA
Pitch rebolting of the more popular vertical sporting Caves	To prevent ropes getting stuck in Midnight Hole, muddy ropes wearing away the bolts and even the rock below the anchor as well as the proliferation of spits in some caves.	STC	Tas
Deb Hunter	Working on a range of conservation issues and politics.	Deb Hunter	Tas
Graffiti project	Subject of paper at this Conference	Nicholas White	Vic
Friends of Buchan Caves and Friends of Mt eccles & Mt Napier Parks	Various projects relating to conservation, better interpretation and better management.	Friends Groups	Vic
The bats of Quinninup Lake Cave	A 12 month project to monitor the bat population fluctuations, predation, breeding and movements within the cave.	Ric Brown SRGWA	WA
Data-logger Project	To monitor cave visitation number in caves within the Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park (LNNP)	WASG	WA

## General Presentations

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Golgotha Cave Work – (LNNP)	To upgrade track and replace trackmarking. Flowstone protection and rehabilitation. Data logger monitoring of unauthorized trips.	CALM	WA
Carabooda Area	A number of issues relating to land development.	??????	WA
Karst Issues	A number of issues relating to land management/development.	??????	WA
Yanchep Rehabilitation project	Regular work trips to various caves to sample water, photomonitor selected sites, measure tree root mats, track mark and clean formations.	??????	WA
Drovers Cave Project	Attempting to reverse the vandalism inflicted on the cave's entrance.	??????	WA
Jurien/Lancelin Area	Changing of plan for areas of local development	??????	WA

### WHAT DOES THIS SAY ABOUT CONSERVATION PROJECTS AROUND AUSTRALIA?

The outcomes from this minor exercise are as follows:

- The number of large projects is non-existent.
- The number of projects involving groups is small.
- The majority of projects are undertaken by a handful of individuals.

### WHAT IS THE SITUATION IN THE USA?

The USA has ten times the number of cavers in their grottos (based on the 2002 NSS members manual) than the ASF has in its total membership. As a result you would expect a higher number of conservation projects in the USA. However they also have a structure which encourages the creation of Conservation Task Forces (CTF). In 2002 there are ten CTF's in the USA.

The CTF's are presently based on either individual cave conservation or regional karst conservation and management issues. The CTF is a group of NSS members who focus on major local-level cave conservation issues. As a CTF they enjoy a tax-deductible status that assists them in raising funds for their CTF. They may also apply for grants from the NSS for funding to assist them in their CTF work.

The creation and the ongoing financial requirements of NSS CTF's are described by Jo Schaper (pers. comm.), the NSS CTF coordinator from 1997-2002 as:

“Creating an NSS CTF is done by contacting the CTF coordinator with a summary of the problem to be addressed, a proposed solution or plan of attack, a list of personnel, and an NSS contact person. This is often as informal as an email. Not all members have to be NSS members, but some (including the contact) must be. The CTF coordinator decides if this is a reasonable application, he or she passes it up to the Conservation Committee chairs for official approval, but this is often pro-forma; the CTF coordinator acts as the screener. If approved, the CTF may use the NSS name and non-profit umbrella. The NSS has a mechanism for startup loans (not grants) to CTFs, (never applied for in my 5 years) and the CTF can apply for NSS Conservation grants same as any other internal organization. In general, the CTF is expected to be financially self sufficient.”

The size of CTF's vary from one person, to well organized groups of several dozen people. NSS CTF's are under the obligation to do quarterly and annual reports to maintain their status.

## General Presentations

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There are basically three time frames for CTFs-- crisis action teams, with a definite end-date; ongoing CTFs where the concerned cavers do not, and cannot own the land (eg. Oregon Caves CTF, which keeps an eye on the actions of a US federal karst national monument) and CTFs where there is a lease agreement with a private cave owner. The latter have been encouraged to become actual corporate conservancies called cave preserves, (NSS internal organizations which are also incorporated legal entities independent of their CTF status).

As of 2002 the NSS has ten Cave Preserves ranging from individual caves to karst areas containing multiple caves. Generally these Cave Preserves are donated to the NSS to ensure the protection of caves and, in some cases, cavers.

This level of structure provides a method of coordinating cavers to address conservation problems as a group rather than try and complete tasks single handed. The CTF's also receive state and federal recognition.

### HOW CAN WE IMPROVE THE SITUATION IN AUSTRALIA?

The ASF now has a "Gift Fund" whose purpose is to "support the environmental objects/purposes of the Federation" (<http://www.caves.org.au/administration/constitution.htm> as at 30/12/2002). The "environmental objects/purposes" are not defined within the ASF constitution so it is not clear what the objects and/or purposes are.

However it is envisaged that the purpose of the fund is to provide assistance to ASF members and/or clubs who are attempting to ensure the protection/conservation of caves and/or karst areas.

In order to provide a structure for members to work within it would therefore be appropriate to create distinct "named conservation projects" to which funds can be directed.

The creation of distinct conservation projects will also force those individuals and groups involved in conservation work to carefully prioritise the needs of individual conservation projects. Volunteer groups such as the ASF and its member clubs have provided a large quantity of "free work" to cave and karst managers. The time available for direct contribution to cave and karst conservation projects by volunteers is very precious and a declining resource, as individuals are placed under greater pressures by work and home related activities.

Further value would be gained if the ASF built web pages describing each project and providing readers a simple method of donating monies directly to specific projects. These pages could also provide details of the plight of many caves and karst areas in Australia under threat or already in dire need of assistance.

At present, it is very difficult to impossible, to determine the conservation needs across Australia as there is no specific resource that details all of the current cave/karst conservation projects.

It is hoped that the ASF can appoint a Conservation Project Coordinator and establish the required structure to support Cave Conservation projects throughout Australia. At present it is clear that the non-coordinated approach does not ensure a focus on caves or karst areas that are in urgent need of attention.

### WHERE IS THE MOST URGENT REQUIREMENT?

At present the most urgent requirement are the caves of the Western Australian section of the Nullarbor plain. This is one of the largest karst areas in the world but has no on-site management. Visitation to many of the sensitive caves of the Nullarbor can cause significant permanent damage. Caves in this area are receiving considerable visitation from cavers and the general public. With the South Australian portion of the Nullarbor requiring permits to visit caves, the Western Australian portion of the Nullarbor is receiving higher visitation from cavers throughout Australia.

A conservation project is required to hasten the establishment of sustainable on-site management for the caves of the Nullarbor karst.