

OPENING ADDRESS

TO THE 25TH BIENNIAL CONFERENCE OF THE AUSTRALIAN SPELEOLOGICAL FEDERATION

By The Honourable William Cox AC RFD ED
Governor of Tasmania
Monday 3rd January 2005

I would like to add my welcome to you all at this very important conference. I extend a special welcome to the many visitors from other parts of Australia, and those from overseas who have travelled from as far afield as the United States of America and Iran.

The organisers have certainly chosen a beautiful part of the state in which to hold your conference, home to some of Australia's most extensive and most interesting cave systems.

Although I know it will be hard to distract you from these, I do hope that you manage to find time during your stay to explore more of the state and perhaps indulge yourselves in some of the less arduous pursuits it has to offer such as the exploration of our magnificent wines and fresh foods and dry warm places such as our spectacular east coast.

Although not a caverneer by preference myself, I can make a vicarious claim to a first in the field. The first published record of a caving trip in Tasmania is of a visit in 1829 by Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur and party to an unidentified cave near what is now known as Mole Creek, where, relying only on the reflection of light from the entrance, they entered what the *Hobart Town Courier* reported to be –

"a cavern extending a considerable distance where they groped their slippery and obscure way onwards and downwards where at length they reached a torrent of water bursting through the cavities of this singular grotto, coming we know not whence and going we know not whither!"

Another vice-regal connection involves novelist Anthony Trollope and Sir Charles du Cane, Governor of Tasmania from 1869 to 1874. Anthony Trollope visited Tasmania in 1872 and was smitten. He spoke of *"this beautiful island, the sweetest in climate, the loveliest in scenery, the richest in rivers and harbours."* He concluded that *"were it my lot to take up residence in Australia – I would pitch my staff in Tasmania."*

Caverneering however was one aspect of the Tasmanian experience which he did not extol, as his recollections of a trip made in the company of Sir Charles Du Cane to the Chudleigh Caves in the north of the State record:

"We were cold to the marrow of our bones, wet through, covered with mud and assured that, if we did go on, the journey must be made partly on hands and knees and partly after the fashion of serpents. At last we rebelled and insisted on being allowed to return."

As Trollope discovered, caverneering is by no means a glamorous pursuit and I think that this could in fact be its saving grace.

There is simply no way in which overalls, helmet, boots and mud can be promoted so as to attract the new breed of glamour-seeking ephemeral sportsperson, and hence both the caving fraternity and the caves themselves are spared all but the most dedicated; those who are up to the challenge and the not inconsiderable dangers posed by the sport.

With over 2,750 documented caves containing around 950



The Governor of Tasmania, The Honourable William Cox, addressing the conference. Seated left to right are Alan Warild, Stephen Bunton, Mrs Cox and Rodney Dillon.

species of fauna, Tasmania really must be the speleologist's paradise – partly for what is known about our cave systems and even more significantly for what is not known – with vast areas awaiting thorough exploration, including the Juneee – Florentine, where I am told 30 new caves have been discovered in the last month alone.

It is no surprise then that Tasmania can boast the first caving club in Australia, the Tasmanian Caverneering Club established in 1946, brainchild of the late Professor Sam Carey who also coined the word *caverneering*. And there is a vice-regal connection here as well with Governor Sir Hugh Binney being the Club's first Patron. Binneys Chambers in the Newdegate Cave were named in recognition of his visit there



His Excellency, The Governor of Tasmania William Cox (L) is unofficially thanked by ASF President John Dunkley after his address.



Albert Goede talks with Jill Rowling (left) and Mara Silins at morning tea

PHOTO: JULIA JAMES

in 1950. When I say visit I understand that in fact to reach those chambers Sir Hugh was hauled by the legs through the 35 metre entrance tunnel now known as Binney Tunnel.

We have come a long way since Trollope's time when the visitors to the Chudleigh caves were encouraged to leave their moniker on the walls and formations, however your organisation faces an onerous task in protecting karst systems and their all important catchment areas from damage by development of all sorts including dams, quarrying and land clearing. It is always doubly difficult to convince the public of the need to preserve elements of our environment which they cannot see – a problem you share with those seeking to protect our marine environment.

Cave photography, which I notice is an issue to be discussed extensively during the conference, can play an important role here. Our caves are precious for just so many reasons

– not the least of which is the treasure trove of information they can supply about the past – plant and animal life, and climatic and geological events.

In Tasmania for instance fragments of thousands of animal bones and stone tools uncovered in the Kutikina Cave on the Franklin River may well hold the key to the lives of the Aboriginal people who inhabited the area over 20,000 years ago.

The Australian Speleological Federation has given practical expression to its stated aim to conserve karst systems. It has been at the world forefront in the development of policies to protect caves from over-visitation through its Code of Ethics, Code of Minimal Impact Caving and Safety Code which have all been modelled elsewhere.

Further, you have long lobbied for the importance of karst systems to be given proper recognition in environmental management plans. I congratulate you for your diligence and many successes in this area.

The scientific study of caves encompasses an extraordinarily wide range of the sciences. The organisers of this conference have managed to attract an impressive array of speakers who will cover many of the various aspects of your field including the biology, conservation, geology and exploration of karst systems, as well as caving techniques, cave photography and mapping and cave tourism.

Your speakers will cover karst systems across Australia and from as far afield as Madagascar, northern Iran and Hawaii. And of course you are ideally situated for some very interesting post conference field trips, with some of Australia's deepest and longest caves at your doorstep.

I congratulate the many sponsors for their valuable support. I congratulate the organisers, in particular your hosts the members of the Southern Tasmanian Caverneers, on putting together a fine programme which has such immediate practical importance as well as long term significance. I do hope you all find the next four days stimulating and satisfying.

It now gives me great pleasure to declare the 25th Biennial Conference of the Australian Speleological Federation open. ■