

# ***The Thailand Project: 25 years of Progress, a Personal Retrospective***

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## **Abstract**

Many, if not most of the caves of Thailand were known locally for centuries, but not much recorded in speleological sources. In 1982, after several private trips to Thailand, the peripatetic Austrian caver Heinrich Kusch published a list of 94 known caves, some known to Australians such as Andrew Pavey and Mike Bourke. In that same year I made a reconnaissance trip to the north of the country. The project blossomed after a paper at the 1984 ASF Conference, and over the next 15 years a sustained effort resulted in 18 small and 8 large Australian expeditions, with up to 15 participants. As local residents were gradually attracted, several further expeditions followed with Australian participants, and other foreign expeditions arrived, mostly from France and the UK. John Spies and Nopparat Naksathit received ASF Awards of Distinction for their contributions. The superb and highly recommended book "Caves of Northern Thailand" drew heavily on the work of these expeditions.

Major achievements included:

- an increase in the number of documented caves from 94 in 1982 to over 2,000 in 1997 and about 4,000 today.
- developing a national cave numbering and documentation system.
- exploring and surveying the then two longest caves in mainland South-east Asia.
- surveying over half of the then 34 longest caves in Thailand.
- discovering the tallest column in the world and the discovery of two new species of blind cave fish, which eventually starred in the Planet Earth TV series.
- locating numerous unrecorded sites of prehistoric coffin sites.
- about 60 publications, including 5 books, 10 management reports, 24 speleological articles, 15 scientific papers in *Helictite*, *Cave Science*, *Australian Archaeology* etc. and an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Cave and Karst Science*.
- assisting and inspiring local interest in cave exploration, documentation, conservation and sound management.

In the last decade the Australian work was continued by British expatriates Dean Smart and Martin Ellis along with Shepton Mallet Caving Club (UK). Working partly with Dean's records, Martin has a prodigious fund of information on Thailand's caves. The project is an exemplar of what can be achieved by a sustained effort, and there are still numerous leads to be followed throughout the country. Despite the many publications and now several valuable websites (notably Martin's), this is the first overview of the project other than a privately produced, lighthearted retrospective produced only for 30 or so participants.

## **Introduction**

Twenty-four years ago I presented a paper at the ASF Conference in Hobart on the potential for speleological exploration in Thailand. While there have been over 60 publications deriving from the ensuing Thailand expeditions, this is the first overview of the whole project other than for a nostalgic record printed privately in 1999 for expedition participants only. This is a summary of a more comprehensive account of the Project to be published in *Caves Australia* in 2009 with a complete bibliography.

Not that we were first on the scene. Many caves in Thailand have been known to the local community for more than a thousand years, and monks explored deep within caves such as Tham Tab Tao north of Chiang Mai, but until very recently there was little indigenous interest in systematic documentation of caves and karst. As late as 1982, the efforts of Austrian caver Heinrich Kusch, who had travelled widely in Thailand, resulted in a list of only 94 recorded caves. By 1997, when I produced *The Caves of Thailand*, there were 2,000. We now know of about 4,000, still a fraction of the potential. Kusch didn't appreciate that even then there were probably more than 100 caves at least partially developed and open for a form of tourism in Thailand. Nor did I, until I witnessed the arrival in 1983 of 4 large tour coaches at the great cave at Chiang Dao, north of Chiang Mai, where perhaps 10 or 12 souvenir and noodle shops were reliant on the domestic tourist trade.

But further out in the remoter provinces there were vast tracts of virtually unexplored limestone. This paper summarises how the Australian-led Thailand Caves Project contributed over a 25-year period, so it's inevitably personal. Indeed, there's nothing new here. I have to emphasise also that the Project was an idea and an ideal, not an institution. It grew organically, shooting branches from exploration to surveying, geomorphology, archaeology, prehistory and to conservation and management.

## **Beginnings**

I first visited Thailand in 1969, noting the limestone outcrops near Kanchanaburi from a sedate wood-fired steam train, but it was late 1981 before a friend in Canberra teamed me up with some Thai contacts for a visit to northern Thailand's caves. Not so long ago, but mass tourism had not yet arrived: we travelled by local bus, motor-bike and the ubiquitous *songthaew*, visited tourist caves in Lampang and Chiang Mai provinces, and stayed in hill tribe village houses and local Chinese hotels. Only later did we move on to aircraft and 4WDs. But in the shadow of Doi Chiang Dao, a solid limestone peak towering 1,700m above the plains north of Chiang Mai, I first heard the rumours of vast limestone plateaus and sinking streams near Mae Hong Son to the west.

It was time for some research. Caving is full of the joy of discovery, moments of elation, a certain amount of obsession, and maybe the reflected pleasure

of publication. Many of us have experienced moments of serendipity or perhaps even epiphany in our caving careers. One of my serendipitous moments came in the National Library in Canberra in the winter of 1982. Poring over their maps for potentially karstic areas of northern Thailand, I searched for depression contours. Well, there they were. Four of them. One hundred metres each. A four hundred metre deep doline draining over 400 square kilometres!

Around the same time an article appeared in Geo Magazine about the drug trade in far north-west Thailand. I made the acquaintance of the author, John Spies, and in late 1983 we reconnoitred the area, discovered Nam Lang Cave and explored 3.5km of its massive passages in a single day. From there it all developed. Still suffering an adrenaline rush, I flew straight back from Bangkok to Melbourne, ferried across to the 1984 ASF Conference in Hobart, and gave a talk. Four people came out of the audience and signed up for an expedition: Kevin Kiernan, Dorothy Nichterlein, John Taylor and Kerry Hamilton. We left 4 months later, in May 1985. It was the beginning of a long and fruitful era.

### Outcomes

In all, there were 8 major expeditions and 18 smaller ones emanating directly from this Project and led from Australia. Most took place before 2000 but individuals who had participated joined or led other expeditions later in a few cases. The earlier trips concentrated on Mae Hong Son province which, except for a seminal archaeological dig by Chester Gorman in 1969, was then virgin territory for westerners and difficult of access. Shorter side-trips expanded to the better-known but still little documented provinces of Kanchanaburi and Phangnga, and later to Phitsanuloke where Australian cavers were instrumental in surveying Thailand's now longest cave, and to Nan with Thailand's deepest. We even diverted to Myanmar, still the only significant caving expedition to that benighted country.

In the early trips we discovered and surveyed over 50km of new caves including the deepest, 10 of the then 17 longest in the country, and the tallest column in the world (61.5m).

In time 7 books, 22 research papers and about 30 articles were published as a direct outcome, along with 6 unpublished reports to management authorities. Kevin Kiernan alone published 14 professional papers, primarily geomorphology and archaeology, notably drawing attention to the coffin sites which proved to be between 1,000 and 2,000 years old. But there were lighter, less focused side trips to places such as to Phangnga and Three Pagodas Pass.

Kerry Hamilton and John Taylor discovered two new species of troglobitic cave fish in the genera *Nemacheilus* and *Homaloptera*, one of which eventually starred in the Caves episode of the BBC's Planet Earth TV series. The 30 seconds of included footage of the "angel-fish" as the Thais called it, or "waterfall-climbing fish" (*H. thamensis* n.sp.) as we referred to it, involved perhaps a couple of man-months of work for just 30 seconds of broadcast footage! John Spies made his own video of the production of this segment of the program.

As a base we used the renowned Cave Lodge at Ban

Tham ('Cave Village') in Pang Ma Pha district. We owe a great debt to its owner, Australian expatriate John Spies and his then wife Diu Wilaiwan Intikat for organisation of the early expeditions. John insists he 'converted' to caving as the result of our trips. Aided largely by their enthusiasm, linguistic skills and local knowledge we surveyed caves, documented coffin sites of Mae Hong Son province and encouraged professional study and management which had previously been totally lacking. When we started there were no published records of the existence of the coffin sites in northern Thailand, although several studies had been made of those along the Khwae Noi (River Kwai) in Kanchanaburi Province. John later put huge foot-slogging effort into locating new coffin sites in particular, promoting scientific research, conservation and sound management of Thailand's caves and karst, and gaining wide respect from Thai authorities for his expertise and advice. This eventually led to a grant of \$300,000 from the Thai Research Fund for professional research and protection of the sites in the province's Pang Ma Pha district. In 1997 ASF honoured their work with Awards of Distinction to John and to National Parks officer Nopparat Naksathit. John's Award can still be seen hanging in Cave Lodge.

In 1995 John Spies, Elery Hamilton-Smith and I ran probably Thailand's first workshop on cave and karst management at Erawan National Park in Kanchanaburi province (Fig. 1).

In 2006 the Thai Research Fund sponsored a superbly illustrated book called "*Caves of Northern Thailand*", available in both Thai and English versions. Drawing on some of our earlier work, this is a far more comprehensive and enlightening book than the name suggests and is highly recommended to the general reader. Though not available in Australia, it can be obtained through Amazon. It includes ASF's Minimum Impact Caving Code and should go a long way towards raising consciousness of the cultural and natural heritage significance of Thailand's karst resources.

The exploration of the caves of Mae Hong Son province paralleled the march of Thailand's economic development. In 1982 the dirt track from Pai and Mae Hong Son had not been improved since it was built by the Japanese in the 1940s, huge bamboo completely covered its narrow footprint in places, it was often impassable in the wet season, there was no sealed road within 50km,



Figure 1: Thai Cave Tourism Workshop





dah of Cave Lodge.

The wonderful seafood lunch buffet at the Talay Thong Restaurant in the Siam Intercontinental Hotel, sadly now demolished for a shopping mall.

Breakfast at sunrise and drinks at sunset on the riverside terrace of the Oriental Hotel in Bangkok (not that we ever stayed there, although Martin Ellis tried it once!)

Floating down the Nam Khong, cooling off under the travertine waterfalls below Susa Cave, or basking in the river below Nam Lang.

Kevin's ability to write (and publish) a 20-page paper on mangroves, mountains and munching molluscs, based (so it seemed!) on 20 minutes of field work

On seeing the Spirit Well for the first time and being told by the Lahu that we were the first foreigners ever to go there.

Staggering out of Nam Lang Cave at 3am to an instant nourishing meal and hot drinks prepared by the Thai camp assistants.

The infamous Miami Hotel on Sukhumvit 13 in Bangkok. Readers might be interested to know that this historic relic of the Vietnam War R&R days is still operating and unchanged, although the ghastly air-conditioners were replaced in the 1990s. I have even heard that the transvestite at reception is still there!

### Finally ...

I eventually tired of the Project; just grew out of it. By the turn of the century the forest, the hill-tribe villages, the caves, the coffin sites, the atmosphere and the excitement remained but were now shared with and enjoyed by many more people, and in that sense diminished. Mass tourism arrived and others took over the exploration. I felt a bit out of place. The obsession had faded and the Great Adventure wasn't quite the same. But I wouldn't have missed it for quids. It was a high point in my life and, I know, of others who went, and therefore were bitten or smitten.

One of the reasons for giving this talk is to emphasize that the world still has plenty of karst areas where similar results could be obtained by motivated speleologists without the strictures of China. Exploration doesn't have to be of the gung-ho hard-man variety evidenced in Abkhazia, Mexico and Patagonia. In our region I investigated Myanmar and the Philippines in the wake of the early Thailand expeditions. In 1988 four of us published a report on what remains the world's only real speleological expedition to Myanmar, but the country is still largely undocumented despite widespread limestone occurrence. Indonesia and the Philippines still have massive potential notwithstanding logistical and political problems. Laos is now relatively easy to visit, with some truly huge caves and massive potential despite several major expeditions. There are local sensitivities to take into account, but several Pacific Islands beckon: only a little and nothing definitive has been published on Niue and the extensive caves in the Cook Islands where there have not been any strongly focused expeditions. The more daring might turn to the Solomons or rethink New Guinea. For something really exotic further afield, very little attention has been given to Central Asia since the end of the Soviet Union, despite greatly improved access. There is some impressive looking limestone in the Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan.

In Thailand, though, there is still huge potential.

Photos by the author

**Figure 4:** (Below) One of the expeditions waiting! Who can you recognise?

