

Scrubby Creek cave acquisition

Nic White and Daryl Carr

VSA and Rimstone Cooperative Ltd.

Abstract

Scrubby Creek Cave was an exploration focus in the late 1950's by the Sub Aqua Speleological Society who tried to dive the resurgence. It was not until 1961 that entry to the cave was gained by bypassing the resurgence. This revealed an initial section above the water until a difficult section was found which required immersion and very little breathing space. The cave continues along the stream for more than a kilometre and the cave has excited cavers for the last 50 years. There are a number of related caves on the Scrubby Creek Property and the neighbouring properties. The caving community has worked with the owners to control access because of the caving difficulties and in doing so developed a very strong conservation ethic for what is a very beautiful and complex cave.

Several cavers were advised that the property was on the market in late 2011 and quick action was needed as this was a once-a-generation chance to acquire the property. Rimstone Cooperative Ltd was started in 1973 with speleological aims and it acquired the Homeleigh property in Buchan. This has provided accommodation for Rimstone members, their friends and families and has always been open to cavers. Rimstone Cooperative is a Community Advancement Society and cannot make or distribute profits to its members. This fulfilled the requirements of compliance for the ASF Karst Conservation Fund to support the acquisition of the Scrubby Creek Cave Property by Rimstone. We thus signed contracts to purchase it and set about raising the funds. We were able to settle in May 2012 with the donations and a few loans.

Rimstone is now preparing a Management Strategy, which involves protecting the cave and karst, particularly the tufa banks and continuing the grazing regime.

The ownership structure will be discussed in relation to private versus public cave conservation of karst resources. The support of all the donors from across the caving community

and their friends is acknowledged in this the first such purchase in Australia.

Introduction

Scrubby Creek Cave, M-49 is in the Murrindal area of the Buchan District and is on the western side of the Buchan Basin at the contact with the Snowy River Volcanics and Buchan Caves Limestone (Mill 1979). The cave is some 1.7 kilometres long. The cave was first entered in 1961 but was known from the Scrubby Creek resurgence at the foot of a limestone bluff

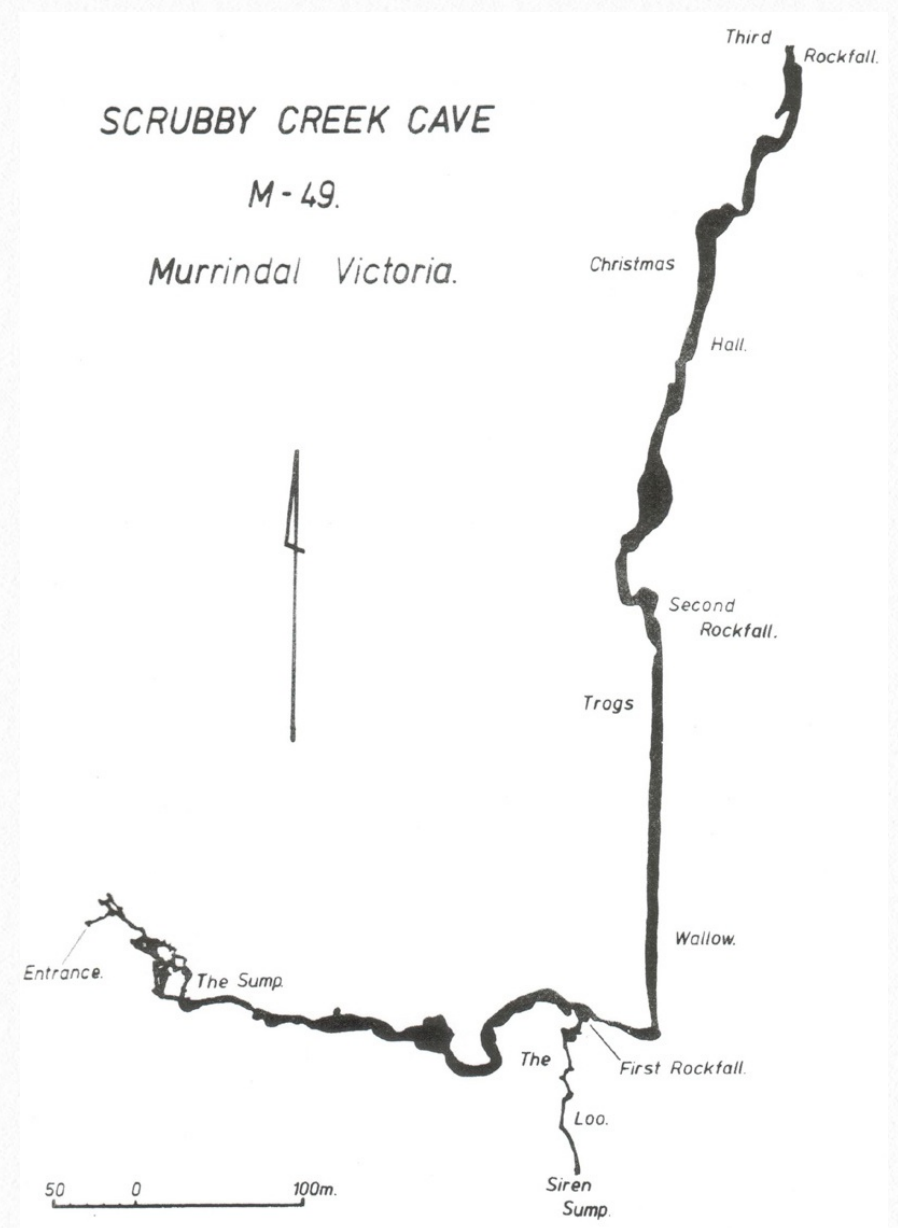


FIGURE 1. Scrubby Creek cave survey

much earlier. The exploration of the cave has a rich history because of the challenging obstacles in the way such as sumps, mud and rock falls. There is still much to explore and investigate.

The caving community has enjoyed good relations with the Woodgate family since the first successful entry into the cave. Daryl Carr and Lou Williams were offered the Scrubby Creek Cave property when John (Grub) Woodgate's daughter Lauren decided to put the property on the market in October 2011. They were not able to purchase it themselves and put it up as a proposition that cavers through Rimstone Cooperative Ltd could buy the property. I need to fill in some background here because in 1974 the Victorian caving community established Rimstone Cooperative Ltd to support cave conservation and the aims of the caving community. Rimstone Cooperative is a Community Advancement Society which cannot declare a dividend and has to pass on its assets to a like-minded organization if wound up. The first objective was to resolve a problem with caver accommodation at Buchan and Rimstone purchased the Homeleigh guesthouse shortly after being established. This had become necessary because there were no suitable premises suitable for rent and the alternatives of camping were not good for year round caving. At the time the purchase price of \$12,000 seemed enormous. Funds from accommodation fees have been used to renovate the property ever since. At several stages we have investigated purchasing caving properties but we did not have the money or resolve at the time. However, we have successfully operated in Buchan since 1974.

With Rimstone Cooperative Ltd we had both an organization and structure applicable to acquiring a cave property and experience in managing property. The Scrubby Creek Cave property had one of Victoria's iconic caves with other prospects as well.

Property Acquisition

During November and December 2011 the directors of Rimstone established that there was sufficient support for us to negotiate with the estate agents to acquire the property but



FIGURE 2 *The Homeleigh guesthouse*

we needed the support of the wider caving community to do so. This is where the ASF and the ASF Karst Conservation Fund came in. We needed to have the acquisition as an approved project of the Fund to firstly have tax deductibility and secondly to pull in the support of the wider ASF caving community. On behalf of Rimstone, I made application to the Directors of the ASF Karst Conservation Fund with background on the Cooperative as being a suitable body to acquire the Scrubby Creek Cave Property for posterity. This hit the summer period and the Fund Directors were on holiday that necessitated some prevarication on my part in negotiating with the estate agents until the Fund Directors approved the



Figure 3. *Scrubby Creek tufa terraces*

project. There was also the problem of holding the property from being sold out from under us. I placed a deposit of \$200 on the property, not the usual 10% of contract price, to prevent it being snapped up by firstly a group of motorcycle riders and then a builder who liked the area. The ASF Karst Conservation Fund Directors approved the project at the end of January and established conditions for the project. The Rimstone directors immediately signed a Contract of Sale for the 105 acres with the cave entrance, the spring and tufa terraces and paid a full 10% deposit with settlement in early May 2012.

Fundraising was the next stage. Raising over \$100,000 for the property was a challenge as only some of it was promised and only a small amount was available from Rimstone Cooperative funds as these have been needed to upgrade and renovate the Homeleigh premises. The Rimstone directors resolved that all new membership fees should go to the capital purchase. Publicity was immediately set in place with an appeal brochure and article in Caves Australia (White 2012); follow-up contact with VSA and Rimstone members and an ASF Website appeal notice. Many friends of VSA and Rimstone members additionally were asked to donate to the project. It is remarkable that close friends preferred our appeal instead of their usual charity donation this year. Additional to this we investigated obtaining a loan or part loan to purchase the property. It was instructive to learn that despite Rimstone Cooperative always showing a small profit for over 30 years, our advisor said after looking over five years of audited accounts that “we were not a lendable entity”. This advice came within 24 hours and we then knew that with a contract to meet we had to obtain personal loans for any shortfall on the fundraising side.

Donation source	Number of donors	Proportion of total
Rimstone and VSA members	47	79
ASF members	13	11
ASF clubs	6	4
Friends	14	6
Total	80	100

Figure 4. Donation analysis

By the end of March 2012 we had raised or had in place the funds to pay the full Contract price for the property. I was able to go on the VSA Nullarbor trip comfortable that settlement could be met in early May. This was made up of over \$60,000 raised through the ASF Karst Conservation Fund and about \$15,000 donated directly to Rimstone Cooperative. The balance was from Rimstone’s consolidated accounts and loans from individuals. I will record here that VSA and Rimstone members contributed 80% of the raised funds; ASF members interstate 11%; ASF clubs 3.5 %; other non-caving friends 5.5%. We always knew that the funds would come mainly from Victoria but it we were very heartened by the support of individuals and member clubs directly. The fund raising is not finished as we have loans from a number of individuals which still need to be acquitted. The Contract was acquitted in early May and we now have the Title to the property.

Scrubby Creek Cave Property Management

Farming properties need management. It is a “rough” grazing property. Buchan was settled following drought on the Monaro in NSW during the 1830’s. The limestone land in the Buchan district had grassland and box woodlands suitable for grazing. The adjacent Snowy River Volcanic lands were not arable or suitable for grazing. The good limestone land was taken up early and later broken up. We have now leased the property for grazing but retained access and responsibility for weeds.

A caving access agreement is broadly in place with VSA and is based on a continuation of the Special Leadership for Scrubby Creek Cave which was in place with the previous owners. This is based on cave leaders with a familiarity and knowledge of the cave, in particular the sump. Caving access for Scrubby Creek Cave and the other caves on the property will require each trip to be on the VSA trip calendar and participants will require ASF insurance cover or similar. Similarly, cave exploration and investigation involving digging will require a full plan approved by VSA and Rimstone. Rimstone Cooperative Ltd is the property owner and cavers need to realise it is not VSA, although there are close links.

Rimstone is currently planning protective works for the tufa terraces. This may involve fencing, the installation of run-of-stream water troughs and some enhancement work on the

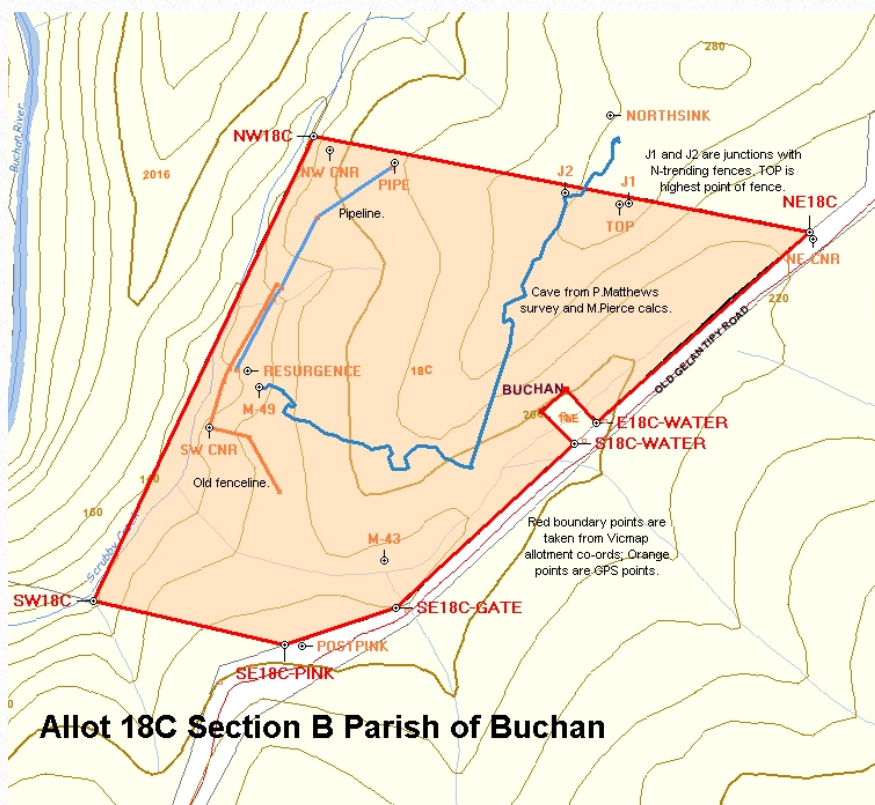


FIGURE 5. Scrubby Creek Property with Cave Outline

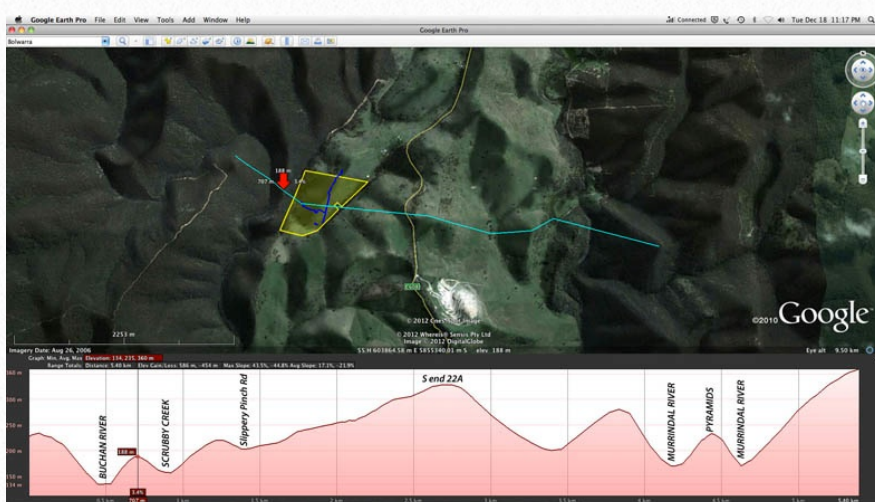


FIGURE 6. Profile Buchan to Murrindal

terraces. These have suffered from trampling and clay buildup due to cattle access. Scrubby Creek has remnant rain-forest species typical of East Gippsland. This stream riparian vegetation will be further investigated as it is in very good condition and deliberate protection may attract funding support. Little is known of the cave biota but this needs studying particularly for the any stygofauna.

Weed control planning is underway for blackberry, thistle (several species) and horehound etc. This will involve a serious amount of work initially and then will be ongoing.

In October 2012, we had a formal launch on the property to celebrate becoming the new owners. This was attended by

adjoining land owners, Buchan community members and VSA and Rimstone members. The East Gippsland MLA for Victoria Mr Tim Bull attended and officially opened the event with an acknowledgement of the part cave tourism contributed to the local community and our part in this. We then had lunch followed by tours of the property including the cave entrance and tufa terraces. In the evening we had a barbeque at Homeleigh and a Scrubby Creek Cave trip the next day. This was all reported in the local community newsletter (Buchan Bulletin 2012).

Reflections on the Acquisition

Before and after becoming Chair of the ASF Conservation Commission, I have made a point of trying to have caves protected. Certainly a large proportion of cave areas have now been reserved around Australia through State Government processes and because of conservation pressures exerted by the caving community and others. This process of adding cave areas to National Parks and Reserves is coming to an end. In Eastern Australia, most arable land was taken up at the time of settlement and this included limestone areas often with significant caves and karst. These areas are now part of the privately owned cave estate.

In USA, the NSS have responded to need by establishing Cave Conservancies (White 2009). These provide for protecting a range of caves important for recreation but also significantly for their wider cave values such as bat habitat. In Hawaii the Cave Conservancy of Hawaii has been purchasing properties with lava tubes in a serious way with annual purchases of allotments with caves.

In Australia, significant privately owned karst areas deserve our attention as it is becoming much more difficult to persuade State Governments that particular pieces of land need acquisition for features such as caves. Sand Cave at Naracoorte was considered for caver acquisition but it was out of our price range. We provided cave information to the Naracoorte Caves staff which enabled the property to be acquired by the State and this property has now been added to the Naracoorte Caves National Park. A significant property at Mt Sebastopol near Kempsey NSW was out of our price bracket but is high on a NSW Government acquisition list. Pungalina Station on which VSA has been exploring caves was purchased by the non-government agency the Australian Wildlife Conservancy in 2008. Other properties at Mole Creek Tasmania

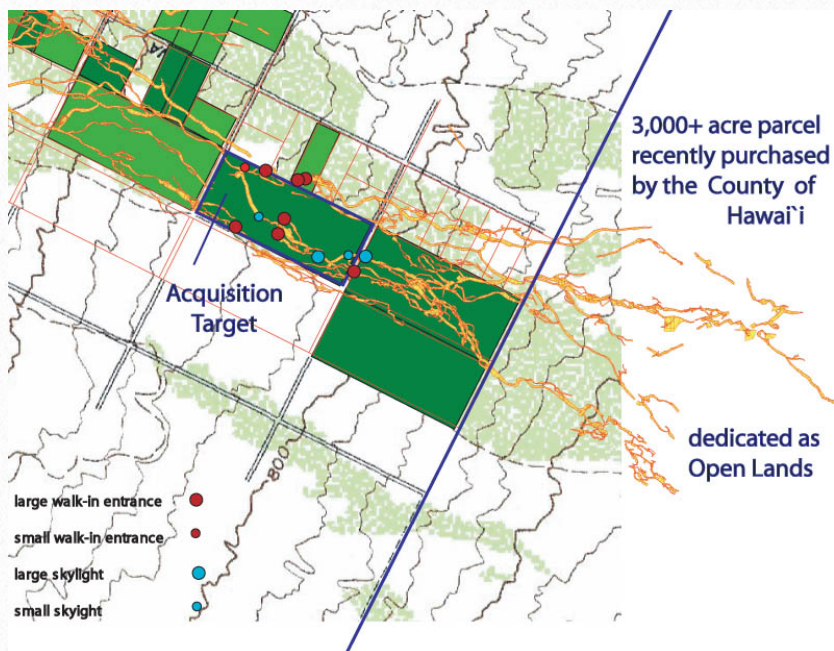


FIGURE 7. *Hawaii Bigelow Purchase*

might deserve caver interest. There is a very significant cave property in Western Victoria that warrants evaluation but Victorian cavers need to recover and consolidate after the Scrubby Creek Cave purchase before contemplating another such venture.

I did not expect that having talked up the proposition that cavers acquire caves in Caves Australia in 2009 that it would be Victorian cavers that would be the first to do so. At least we have a very suitable organization in Rimstone Cooperative with right aims and objectives and the management experience to purchase a cave property. ASF member clubs and ASF itself are now incorporated and can acquire property but as in Victoria it would be extremely useful to have ownership and management of cave properties at arms length from cavers. In fact, during several years of negotiations with Cement Australia regarding part of Mt Etna Quarry in Queensland ASF Inc itself was to be gifted the land on the basis it was not wanted by the Queensland Department of the Environment for addition to the Mt Etna Caves National Park. Details of how ASF was to manage the land were never worked through by ASF because the land was gifted to the State instead of ASF.

Conclusion

Rimstone Cooperative Ltd purchased the Scrubby Creek Cave property with the support of its members, cavers, friends and ASF itself. This purchase was a once-a-generation opportunity to acquire it for cave protection and recreation purposes. The chance would have been lost in a matter of weeks without

prepared minds able to commit to the project immediately. We still owe money but we have an iconic cave to manage together with the weeds! Acquisition of Scrubby Creek Cave is the first of what should be further purchases to protect caves by the ASF community.

References

- Brain, Rob. Rimstone Co-op Celebrates Scrubby Creek Purchase, *Buchan Bulletin*, No. **55** p 5, Nov 2012.
- Mill, Lloyd. Scrubby Creek Cave *ASF Newsletter*, No. **85**, 1979.
- White, Nicholas. Cave Conservancies, Conversation on Conservation, *Caves Australia*, No **179**, p 36-37, 2009.
- White, Nicholas. Scrubby Creek Cave M-49, Conversation on Conservation, *Caves Australia* **188**, p 7, 2012.