
A strategic approach to improve cave access and conservation

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The 31st ASF Conference held in Devonport, Tasmania hosted a forum and panel discussion to raise awareness of recent developments in various States and Territories that impact access to caves for speleologists, including cave zoning and onerous permit systems.

It also sought to foster engagement, discussion and collaboration between speleologists and cave managers on matters of concern to ASF members.

To establish context, speakers representing cave managers, speleologists and researchers spoke about different karst areas and management systems from around Australia; they then formed the panel to discuss aspects relating to four key threads:

- 1 Common issues and challenges with existing cave conservation, management and access systems at state, territory and national levels;
- 2 Different perspectives and approaches on cave conservation and access management;
- 3 Opportunities for speleologists and cave managers to improve cave conservation practices; and
- 4 Strategic priorities.

The forum was very well attended and generated open and constructive discussions about key issues and challenges with existing cave conservation, management and access systems across most Australian states and territories. The panel responded to questions from the forum and from this public discussion, six key themes emerged.

Bronwen Prazak recording panel discussion points

Facilitator Steve Milner, with the panel (L-R): Stefan Eberhard, Greg Thomas, Andrew Baker, Susan White, Clare Buswell and Nick White (Steve Bourne is out of view)



Develop shared values and understanding with land managers and owners

There is no doubt that there are shared values between speleologists and land managers, yet these have generally been poorly acknowledged and promoted. Hence there is a need to commence dialogue in order to achieve alignment on values of caves, landforms, and the stakeholder groups who value them (i.e. general public, land owners, managers, researchers, speleologists, traditional owners, etc.), because each group has different perspectives and priorities. The panel recognised that the issue is further complicated as different parts of a cave and/or its environment may have different conservation values.

It was agreed that while the initial approach should be to develop and document common values, the question was raised who should this be with, as there is no single voice to deal with? A good start which was recognised was to develop a memorandum of understanding with the Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association (ACKMA)¹ and then follow this up with other organisations with similar values. A parallel approach should be to engage with land managers and owners on high priority conservation matters.

The forum acknowledged that there is a long way to go and the ASF has a responsibility to lead the conversation, including engaging with indigenous communities.

Build long-term relationships and trust

One of the challenges identified was that speleologists develop a long-term relationship with karst and caves, typically spanning decades per individual; however, over the same time periods, land managers in government departments typically change much more frequently.

The frequency of change results in a loss of corporate knowledge and trust in relationships (which is generally retained by an individual). This cyclical loss requires speleologists to rebuild relationships with new managers from scratch time and time again.

The panel considered that by raising the profile of the ASF and promoting the ASF's inherent knowledge and skills of its members, this would reinforce the status of members in the eyes of the land managers. It was thought that when supported by proactive communication, and a consistent approach from the caving community, relationships and trust could strengthen because it becomes more about the relationship between the organisations, as well as the relationship between the individuals.

To support this, the ASF has a role to ensure that its members are consistent in approach; techniques to do this include peer review of capability and the promotion of ASF Codes and Guidelines to guide its members.

Proactive, consistent conservation management

Across Australia there are layers of permits and a huge variability of access requirements; some regions have strong and lasting relationships, but others have *ad hoc* processes. Another problem is that there are conservative managers who choose to limit access (there are many reasons for this including lack of resources, or simply not knowing how best to manage their natural resources).

The panel discussed that on one hand, limiting access is a conservative conservation action but this limits legitimate exploration and science. On the other hand, unregulated access has the potential to damage the cave environment. Therefore, a balance needs to be achieved by the managers whose duty is to care for the land and the speleologists who access the land, and also care for it. The panel

ASF Values

- We are dedicated to safeguard and protect the cave and karst environment;
- We strive to bring together and represent those interested in caves and karst in Australia;
- We share knowledge; and
- We foster speleology in all its aspects.



The cave access, conservation and management forum at the 31st ASF Conference

conversation then moved to the work health and safety needs (employees vs. speleologists), insurance and the management of conservation.

It was also recognised that the quality and accessibility of access information is important, as usually one has to be a local speleologist to know access conditions in state-controlled parks and reserves. While this is a local or regional matter, each management authority has a duty to ensure that caves can be reasonably accessed without overly obscure, complicated or bureaucratic processes. In a practical sense, the sharing of values and building relationships and trust by the ASF, combined with consistent and user-friendly permit application processes put in place by land management authorities will benefit access and cave conservation.

State of caves, monitoring, and regional liaison

It was recognised that understanding of the overall 'state of cave environments' in Australia is inadequate. There are some local / regional patches of strong knowledge, but from a nationwide perspective there is no consistent approach, nor an examination of risk and threats to cave and karst environments at local levels.

The panel discussed that for the ASF to have one voice is difficult, but this may be addressed by State- or Territory-based cave access or advisory committees. In Western Australia for example, speleologists are well represented on the Cave Management & Access Committee (CMAC). In other states and regions however, speleologists are poorly represented or excluded. The panel postulated that an ideal outcome would be to have ASF representatives whose role it is to; (i) safeguard and protect their region; (ii) have a standing role on land and conservation management; (iii) be able to influence policy effectively. The ASF has a long way to go to achieve this.

The requirement to monitor the condition of caves was considered essential in managing conservation values of caves, to assess whether or not management actions are effective, or indeed whether or not the ASF's Codes and Guidelines are achieving intended outcomes e.g. Minimal Impact Caving Code.

The approach to assess, monitor and respond to environmental changes and threats requires coordination at the national level and commitment and energy by the ASF to deliver strong conservation outcomes.

Speleologists are citizen scientists

There is a distinction between recreational caving in the sense of a leisure activity, and (generally) what ASF members do, that is to explore, survey, research and document caves

and their values. ASF members are speleologists who are almost always self-funded, they explore, map, record their findings and contribute to scientific knowledge. The panel reinforced that, by their actions, speleologists are citizen scientists and contribute thousands of hours every year to building knowledge about the cave environments, which ultimately assists professional scientists, land managers and conservation.

The value of speleologists as citizen scientists is under-played; the ASF has a role to communicate this valuable inherent capability of its members as speleologists first and foremost, and, the ASF as a federation of speleologists versus leisure-seeking cavers. The ASF has a further role to bring awareness of the Federation's scientific capabilities to professional scientific disciplines and encourage scientists to engage more with ASF members.

Preserving knowledge and mentoring

ASF members collectively have a deep resource of knowledge, yet this is currently inaccessible to many. The panel discussed that while existing knowledge is in the process of being preserved, it needs to become more accessible if it is to be useful for improving the conservation and management of caves.

Strategies to make speleological knowledge more accessible include digitisation and cataloguing; but this needs to be promoted to all stakeholders to ensure that the information is readily available when needed. This is particularly important as the aging demographic of speleologists passes its knowledge on to new generations of speleologists. At the same time, respecting and acknowledging intellectual property and protecting sensitive information (e.g. some cave locations) are big challenges both now and in the future.

The ASF has a role to improve leadership in this area, to have succession planning and mentor the next generation of speleologists.

The future — strategic measurable outcomes

How does one measure success? The panel identified that the priority **goal** is for the ASF to be front of mind when land managers and other stakeholders consider aspects of cave access, conservation and management. The measurable **outcome**, therefore, is for ASF representatives to be invited to the table as part of the process before change occurs.

The ASF Strategic Plan 2019–2024, which was approved by the ASF Council on 3 January 2019, has identified a range of pertinent actions to address cave access, conservation, and management. These include: access to knowledge and information (Actions #3 to #7 inclusive); integration of speleological research (Action #8); and the requirement for proactive advocacy (Actions #11 to #15 inclusive).

<http://tinyurl.com/y2rn7jcn>

As evidenced by the forum, there is a long way to go for the ASF to achieve measurable outcomes in the area of cave access, conservation and management; this will require a significant commitment of energy and resources, and leadership on all the points above, if we are to be successful.

We hope this article will stimulate further constructive discussion about cave access, conservation and management, including articles in *Caves Australia*, from the panellists and other contributors.

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