

Balancing access and conservation through collaborative relationships

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“... cavers find, explore and map caves. Their efforts make research possible for the scientists. The scientific results prove that caves have value and need to be managed properly ...”

Dr George Veni, President International Union of Speleology (Caves Australia 206, December 2018)

This article follows on from the preceding article and provides additional context and personal perspectives, and tables the key points recorded during the forum discussion on cave access, conservation and management, held at the 31st ASF Conference in Devonport, Tasmania, January 2019.

It then addresses the questions: What did the forum achieve? and ‘Where to from here?’

Across Australia, a tension exists between speleologists and land managers. This is because land managers have the challenging task of protecting caves and cave values, while speleologists, by their calling, visit caves. People visiting caves may cause impacts which lead to irreversible degradation of cave values. Land managers typically respond to this potential threat by imposing limitations on access. This involves permit systems, which are sometimes onerous, and which discourage and even prohibit speleologists.

Speleologists appreciate caves. They explore, map, photograph, document and celebrate caves. Like land managers, speleologists want to protect caves. Speleologists use various methods to regulate their activities and impacts in caves, including codes of practice such as the ASF Minimum Impact Caving Code, and lightweight “infrastructure” such as string-lines, route markers, small signs and boot-wash stations.

Speleologists are the first and primary source of knowledge and expertise about caves, for both scientists and land managers. Speleologists provide scientists and land managers with maps of caves, and they identify sensitive values, such as speleothems, fauna and bones that need study or protection.

Ironically, the maps and knowledge that speleologists provide to land managers may ultimately result in onerous access restrictions being imposed on speleologists. This results in tensions in the relationships between speleologists and land managers, however both parties have the shared goal of protecting cave values (Figure 1).

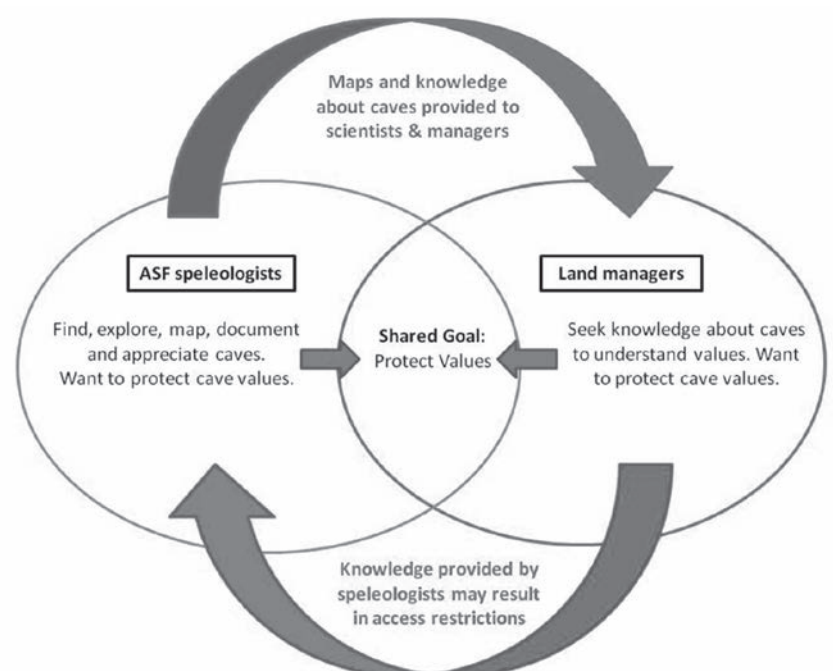


Figure 1. The maps and knowledge that speleologists provide to land managers may result in onerous access restrictions being imposed on speleologists, which results in tensions in the relationships between speleologists and land managers, however both parties have the shared goal of protecting cave values.

While acknowledging that access restrictions may be part and parcel of protecting cave values, across Australia in recent years there is a disquieting trend by land management authorities towards ever tighter and onerous controls on recreational caving and speleological activities (Figure 2). This reactionary shift in the policy climate rides on a two-pronged fork; one prong touts environmental protection, the other prong touts public safety, duty of care, risk management and litigious fear. Occasionally these two policies appear to be confused and misapplied, with putative safety concerns used as a rationale to prohibit access while indirectly protecting environmental or cultural values. These developments are unsettling because they are disproportionate, occasionally misguided, and they impact legitimate recreational and speleological activities.

The growing regulatory threats to access are spotlighted in the ASF's Strategic Plan 2019-2024 which was released in December 2018 and approved in January 2019. The development of the Strategic Plan included a contextual analysis to capture the factors that influence the organisation, both from an internal perspective and from an external perspective.

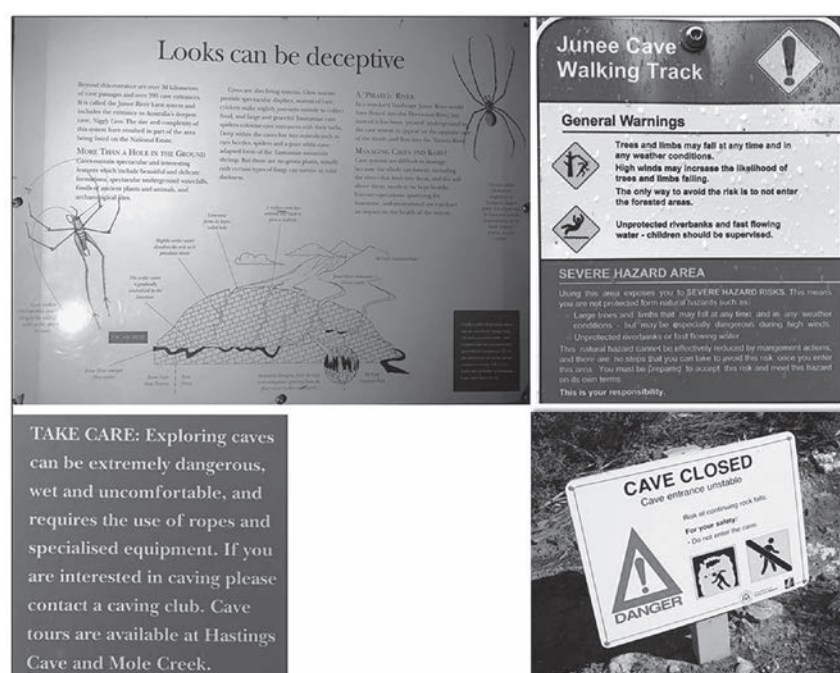
The contextual analyses identified two key threats facing the ASF, namely 'Access to karst' and 'Regulations' (Table 1). We suggest that these two threats (= old story) may also be taken as opportunities to effect change, namely:

- 1 Engage with land managers; and
- 2 Influence policy (= new story), and recommend they be integrated into ASF's Strategic Plan.

Separately from the Strategic Plan, concerns in the speleological community about the growing trend in regulatory threats to access catalysed organisation of the forum and panel discussion on cave access, conservation and management, which was hosted at the 31st ASF Conference held in Devonport, Tasmania in early January 2019. The conference was attended by more than 120 speleologists from around Australia, and the forum generated open and constructive discussions about key issues and challenges across most Australian states and territories (except Queensland and Northern Territory).

Different perspectives and regional approaches to cave conservation and access management were described and discussed. Perspectives were primarily from those of speleologists although numerous ASF members at the forum including the speakers (named in preceding article) have worked as, or closely with, scientists and land managers.

Figure 2. Examples of the trend in access and interpretation policy is reflected in sign "culture" which has shifted from being informative and inviting curiosity while taking due care, towards a litigious and fearful focus on the hazards and dangers that discourages curiosity and appreciation. Left (top and bottom): Junee Cave, Tasmania signs installed 1990s; Right (top) Junee Cave walking track installed > 2015; (bottom) Tommy Grahams Cave, Nullarbor, installed ca. 2018.



STRENGTHS	THREATS
Leadership	Access to Karst
Knowledge	Regulations
Advocacy	
Codes and Guidelines	
Dedication and Purpose	
WEAKNESSES	OPPORTUNITIES
Aging Demographic	Use Technology
Fragmented Activities	<i>Engage with Managers</i>
Engaging with Members	<i>Influence Policy</i>
Reduced Exploration	

Table 1. SWOT analysis reproduced from ASF's Strategic Plan 2019 – 2024 (Appendix VI, pp. 23–24). Recommended additional opportunities in italics.

Indigenous perspectives were under-represented at the forum but are noted here as important to bring on board as we move forward.

What did the forum achieve and where to from here?

Table 2 summarises the key points recorded during the forum open discussion, structured using Dr David Drake's Narrative Coaching framework and BEAM tool for individual and organisational change. Narrative coaching is a mindful, holistic and experiential approach that helps people shift their stories about themselves, others, and life itself to create new possibilities and new results <https://www.narrativecoaching.com/what-is-narrative-coaching.html>

The BEAM tool is useful for clarifying the current situation (=old story), and the shifts in mindset, behaviour and the environment that are needed if there is to be a new aspiration (= new story).

OLD STORY: problems with access, knowledge gaps, breakdown or lack of relationships, mistrust, limited collaboration, lack of recognition for what speleologists are contributing.

NEW STORY: collaboration, continued access, corporate memory maintained, knowledge, data and resources shared, speleological expertise recognised, utilised and appreciated, mutual respect.

What would it be like if in all of our speleological endeavours (on the ground, in the caves, in our interactions with other cavers and with the land managers) we were intentionally operating from this new story?

The overarching aspiration that came out of the forum may be stated as:

Balancing access and conservation through collaborative relationships

How could we use a common overarching aspiration such as 'Balancing access and conservation through collaborative relationships' as our individual and collective mantra to step up in whatever arena we are in and proactively be sharing, trusting, collaborating and respectful? The forum showcased some great examples of collaborative and trusting working relationships.

If we want this to be our new story and we really want to shift from the current situation and mindset, what are each of us going to commit to doing? Has this become an active movement for sustainable change and not just something we discussed or criticised in a forum and wrote up as an article?

MINDSET

What is the current situation?

- Speleologists provide maps and knowledge to land managers
- Maps and knowledge may be used to justify restricting access to caves
- Access restrictions may be disproportionate or misguided
- Access policies may be applied inconsistently
- Permit systems may be onerous
- State of cave environments is poorly documented or monitored
- ASF expertise is under-recognised
- Alternative in-cave protective measures such as route marking are under-utilised
- Land managers move on and knowledge is lost
- Trust and relationships between managers and speleologists is inconsistent, often difficult

ASPIRATION

What is the aspiration?

- Balancing access and conservation through collaborative relationships
- Cave values are protected
- Access for speleologists is facilitated
- ASF expertise is recognised and sought by land managers and policy makers
- Improved leadership and mentoring within ASF
- Alternative protective measures utilised
- State of cave environments documented and monitored
- Access regulations are proportionate and relevant
- Access policies are applied consistently
- Collaborative relationships between managers and speleologists
- Trust

continued overleaf

BEHAVIOUR

What matters?

- Speleologists proactively initiate ‘soft infrastructure’ protective measures in caves
- Speleologists report on state of cave environments and monitoring priorities
- ASF clubs nourish relations with local land management authorities
- Speleologists consulted at start of access policy and planning processes
- Issues addressed through local standing management advisory committees
- Supportive leadership and mentoring within ASF clubs
- Speleology, in all its aspects, fostered by ASF clubs

ENVIRONMENT

What works?

- Relationships and trust between speleologists and land managers
- Consistent national policy on cave conservation and management
- Cave access permit systems less onerous
- Land management policy and processes are transparent and accountable
- Methods for monitoring and assessing state of cave environments; measureable outcomes
- ASF leadership, mentoring, peer guidance, ethics, minimal impact, best practices
- ASF recognised first and foremost as a speleological organisation versus recreational caving
- ASF, together with ACKMA, recognised as leading national bodies of expertise in caves and karst.