

THE CASE FOR COLONG

OR

COLONG IN THE LIMELIGHT

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A summary of, and some observations on, the major conservation issue in New South Wales in 1967-68.

INTRODUCTION

Colong is a classic example of the conflict between conservation and exploitation. Associated Portland Cement Manufacturers (Aust.) Ltd. plans to quarry limestone in the Colong Caves Reserve, initially at Church Creek, but conservationists see the area's proper future as part of the Kanangra-Boyd National Park.

The case for conservation in this area is not based solely on the caves - Colong would be worth retaining in its natural state even without them - but they do form an important, integral part of the region as well as having their own intrinsic value.

LOCATION

The Colong Caves Reserve is located in the Southern Blue Mountains, 62 miles west-south-west of Sydney (170 miles by road). It is 20 miles south-south-east of Jenolan and 15 miles north-north-east of Wombeyan Caves. It is well within the Proclaimed Catchment of Warragamba Dam, an area which is considered to be the finest potential national (wilderness) park in N.S.W.

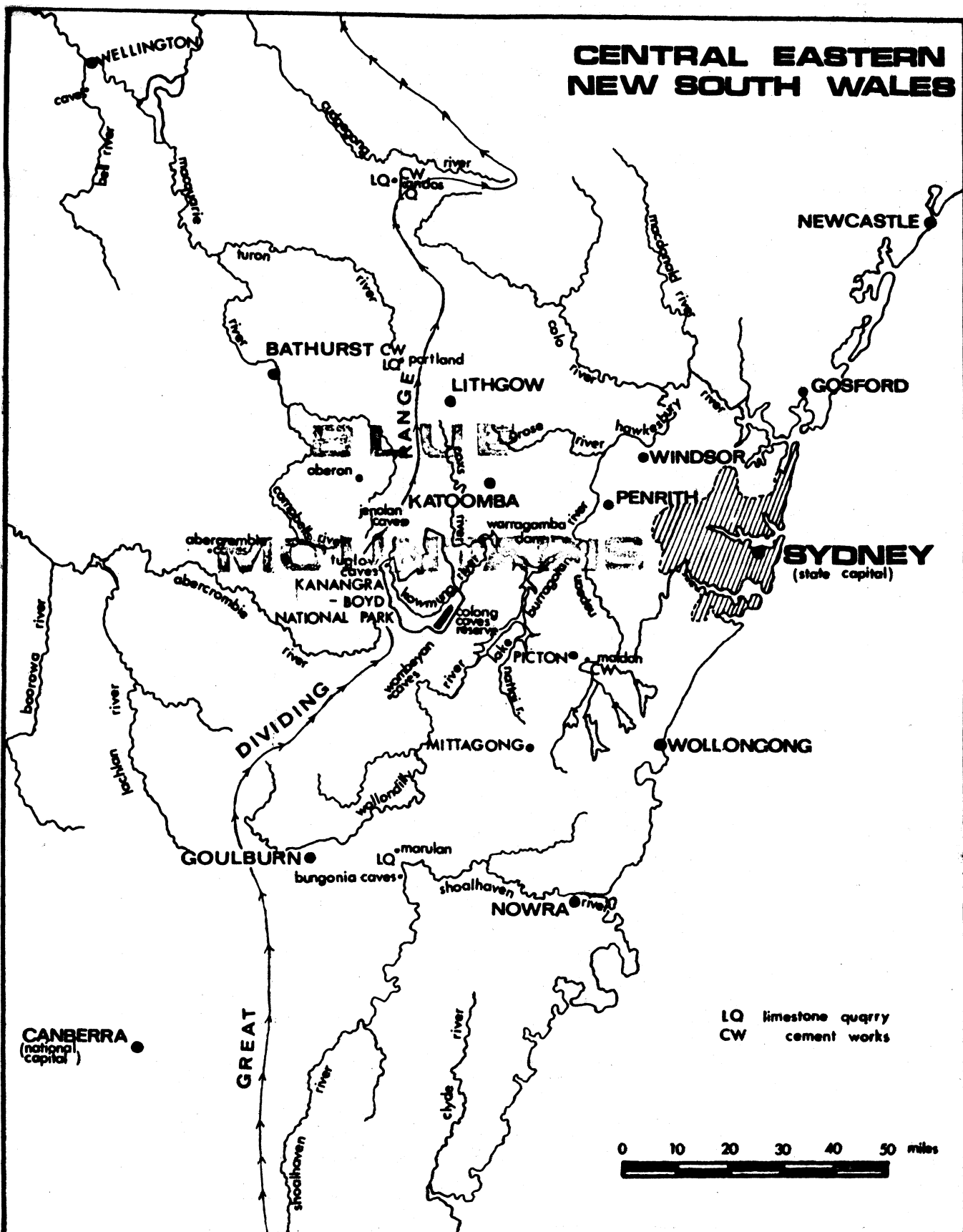
LIMESTONE OUTCROPS

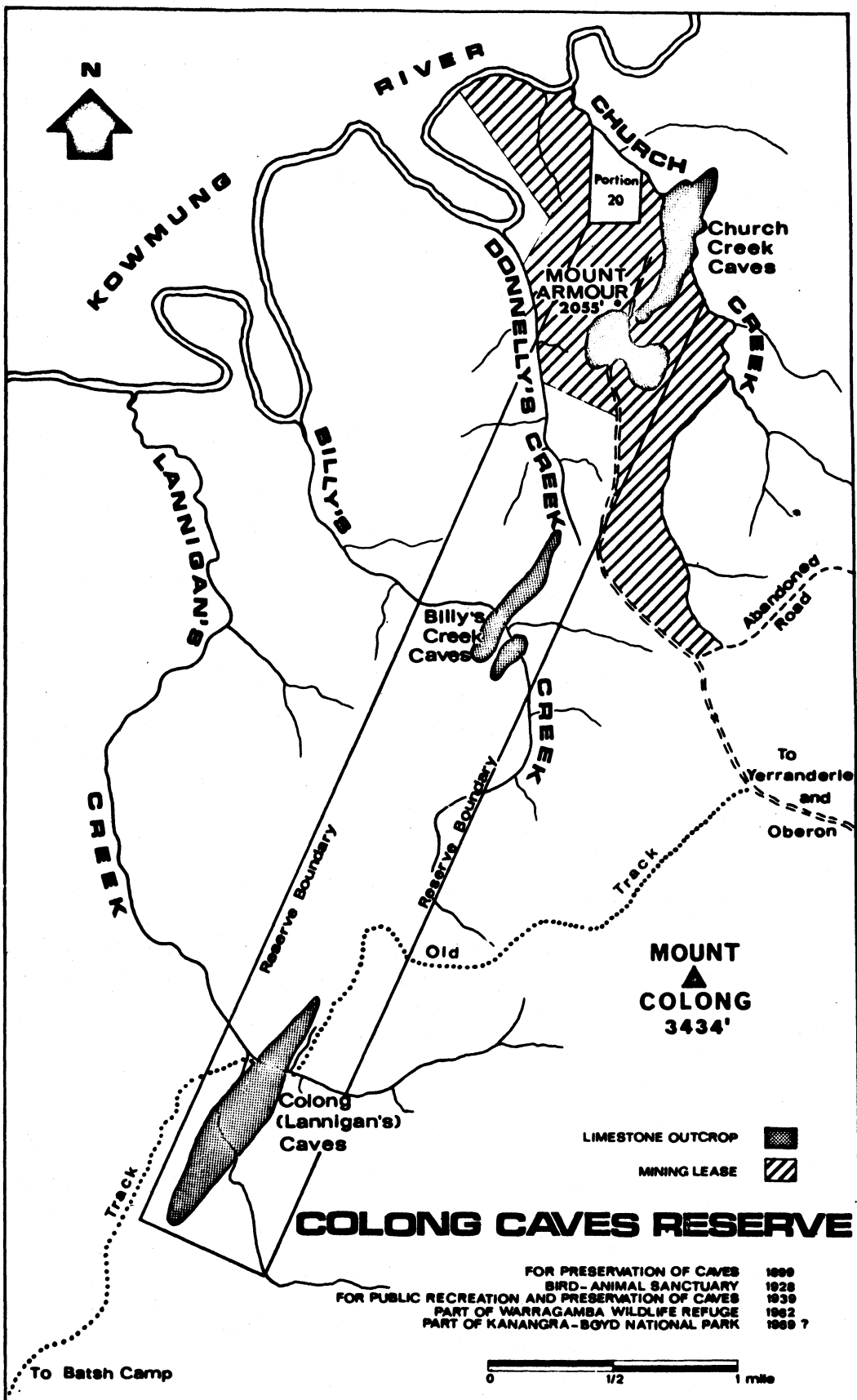
Massive, high grade limestone occurs in the Reserve at three localities.

The largest outcrop is at the junction of Lannigans Creek and Caves Creek, at the southern end of the Reserve. It contains the main Colong Cave System, with over 4,000 feet of passage. The outcrop is a mile long but it is trisected by the steep-sided gullies of Lannigan's and Caves Creeks. Its maximum

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width is about 2,000 feet and it reaches a height of 650 feet above the creek. Although, strangely enough, the mass of this deposit has not been assessed in any available official report, the exposed portion would be in excess of 100 million tons. Analysis by the Department of Mines in 1958 showed it to be the purest limestone in the area, with 99.1% calcium carbonate and only 0.1% gangue.

There are two small outcrops at Billys Creek, totalling about 6 million tons. Analysis: 98.1% CaCO_3 , 0.7% gangue. Investigation has revealed only a few small caves.

In the Church Creek - Mount Armour locality, where the present controversy is centred, two outcrops can be superficially distinguished. The larger, more northerly one is cut by Church Creek, on the southern side of which the Cathedral Rocks rise sharply to about 200 feet. The limestone continues to outcrop almost to the top of Mt. Armour, a thousand feet above, and is exposed again just south of the summit. A sample yielded 96.4% CaCO_3 and 2.2% gangue. The latest estimate of reserves in this locality (excluding the small outcrop on the northern side of the creek) was given by the Minister for Mines on 2nd October, 1968 as 30 million tons.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Reserve, covering 1400 acres, was first dedicated in 1899 for preservation of caves. This was a direct result of a report by Department of Mines surveyor, Oliver Trickett, who was responsible for most of the caves reserves in N.S.W. He included in this Reserve, not only the well known Lannigans (Colong) Caves limestone but also the then little known outcrops at Billys Creek and Church Creek.

In 1928 the same area was made a Bird and Animal Sanctuary and after applications for mining leases were refused in 1939 as "inimical to public interest", it was re-dedicated "for Public Recreation and Preservation of Caves". It was also included in the Warragamba Wildlife Refuge, proclaimed in 1962.

Few areas of Australia probably enjoy as much apparent protection or have had their value to conservation as often recognised as the Reserve at Colong. However, none of these dedications exempts the Reserve from the provisions of the 1906 Mining Act, under which it is treated as Crown Land.

As far back as 1928 it was suggested that this area should be a national park. Definite plans were put forward in 1932 and again in 1962. In 1966 the present Government announced that it would establish a national park covering about 102,000 acres in the Kanangra Walls - Kowmung River - Colong

area. For an undisclosed reason (which can only have been that the mining leases were not finalised) it was not included among the twelve national parks established under the National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1967. Despite more recent statements indicating the Government's approval, it is still not a national park.

FORMER MINING PROPOSALS

Attempts had been made to obtain mining leases in the Reserve in 1939 but these were refused. (Apparently the Department of Mines was more aware of the need for conservation in those days than it is today). However, in 1955 and 1958, despite opposition from conservationists, other applicants were more successful and three leases were issued. However, the interests controlling these leases were unable to exploit them and they were subsequently taken over by A.P.C.M. In January, 1968 the Government granted a new lease to Commonwealth Portland Cement, a subsidiary of A.P.C.M. Almost immediately about 5,000 acres was excised from the proposed national park - apparently so that the Government could claim (as indeed they did) that the mining leases were not in the proposed park.

Local conservationists reacted to these two actions as never before and the Government, and particularly the Minister for Mines, was swamped with letters of protest. Objections came, not only from conservation societies, bushwalkers and speleologists, but also from professional organisations such as the Institute of Architects, the Labour Opposition and the Government's own party.

Conservationists sought an opportunity to have the dispute heard before a Mining Warden (a Mines Department official with no power to enforce his decision on the Minister) but as no objection had been lodged within fourteen days of the application this poor substitute for a democratic process was denied them. (Note that the only places where notice of the application was given were, 1. A calico sign pinned to a post somewhere on the side of Mount Armour and 2. The notice board at the office of the Mining Warden's clerk at The Oaks, 50 miles from Sydney). Even after the statutory period has elapsed, the Minister may authorise the Warden to hold an enquiry - this he steadfastly refused to do.

THE PRESENT PROPOSAL

A.P.C.M.'s subsidiary, Metropolitan Portland Cement operates a cement manufacturing plant at Maldon, near Picton, at present supplied with limestone by rail from its quarries 60 miles away at Marulan, near Bungonia. It is A.P.C.M.'s intention to supplement this with limestone from Colong. The rugged nature

of the area precludes the use of road or rail transport so the company plans to construct a 39 mile pipeline (at a stated estimated cost of \$13 million). The limestone would be transported through this as a slurry. The only source of water near Church Creek is the Kowmung River, one of the few unpolluted streams in the State and the major watercourse of the proposed national park. Despite official denials, it is believed that it would be necessary to build a dam on the Kowmung, if not initially, then within eleven years - by which time the rate of output is planned to be approaching 1 million tons annually.

THE COLONG COMMITTEE

On 21st May, 1968 the Minister for Mines wrote a letter to a Sydney daily newspaper setting out the Government's reasons for granting the lease. As a result of this letter, and a general desire for a better co-ordinated campaign, a meeting of representatives of 50 conservation and allied societies was held at Sydney University on 29th May. It unanimously passed a resolution strongly condemning the Government's action in granting the lease, and also set up The Colong Committee. It consists of representatives of the National Parks Association, The National Trust, the Wild Life Preservation Society, the Institute of Architects, the Federation of Bushwalking Clubs, the Nature Conservation Council, A.S.F. and others.

In its first six months the Committee has:-

1. Obtained the services of a Public Relations Consultant to help publicise the campaign and inform the public of the issues involved.
2. Obtained the services of two solicitors to investigate and advise on legal matters.
3. Commissioned a Consulting Engineer to investigate aspects of erosion, siltation and pollution of the Warragamba Catchment which might result from the proposed mining and associated works. His report is extremely critical of the weak conditions in the lease concerning erosion and the failure of the Department of Mines to consult the State Soil Conservation Service in this respect.
4. Commissioned a Geologist to investigate alternative deposits of limestone in the region which could be mined without seriously affecting the national park and are not known to contain large caves. His report contradicts the Minister for Mines' claim that these consist of only 600,000 tons, stating that in fact these deposits (in the Murruin and Little Wombeyan Creeks area) total in excess of 50 million tons. The Minister has, as a result,

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amended his estimate to about 25 million tons but still denies that these deposits are economically exploitable.

The Committee is at present in the process of expanding its membership and increasing its activities.

CHURCH CREEK CAVES

Oliver Trickett, on his visit to Colong in 1899 was told that a cave at Church Creek was "not particularly interesting" so he did not visit it. A writer in the Sydney Morning Herald in May, 1910 mentioned caves at Church Creek: "The hill (Cathedral Rocks) is a limestone one, and no doubt honey-combed by caves. It has since been ascertained that you can walk right through the old subterranean river for a distance of two miles". Recent investigations have so far failed to reveal any caverns of such proportions.

The area was visited by speleos. in 1965 but results were not very encouraging. About seven sinkholes, the deepest reaching forty feet, were located. Difficulty of access discouraged further investigation until recently when a road built by the mining company was found to be trafficable.

In two trips, in July and September this year, thirteen separate caves were located. Their lengths range from about 15 to perhaps 1200 feet and the maximum depth reached is 90 feet.

CC4, the largest cave, is the most interesting. It is well decorated throughout much of its length, particularly in the larger chambers. There is a flowing stream in the main passage which is 25 feet below the dry bed of Church Creek. The presence of the stream augers well for cave life but so far little investigation into this aspect has been carried out.

A number of caves in the area are inhabited by bats of the Eastern Horseshoe and Bent-winged species. The extremely rare Brush-tailed Rock Wallaby (Petrogale penicillata) inhabits small caves in the limestone. It is proclaimed "rare fauna" in N.S.W. and is in danger of extinction. The wallabies formerly inhabited the limestone at Lannigans Creek but have apparently been frightened away by the large number of visitors. Their obvious preference for limestone indicates that Church Creek may be their last stronghold in the Blue Mountains where the only other known colony is in a captive state at Jenolan Caves.

NEW ENLARGED MINING LEASE

On 2nd October, 1968 the Minister for Mines issued a statement regarding "Colong Limestone", as a result of new negotiations with the cement company. The outcome is, that under the guise of "consolidation", the company is to get a new lease of 580 acres (covering nearly all the limestone at Church Creek) in place of four former leases totalling only 120 acres. The guarantee deposit on the new lease has been increased from \$2,000 to \$100,000, apparently in an attempt to satisfy conservationists; and the area surrounding the lease has been returned to the national park. The lease conditions are, however, still considered to be unsatisfactory particularly as they would be, for the most part, unenforceable.

One condition, in four parts, purports to protect caves: "14. (a) The leasee shall comply with any directions in connection with its blasting operations that may be issued from time to time by the Minister for Mines for the purpose of minimising damage to any limestone caves within or adjacent to the area demised," (b) and (c) relate to the erection of barricades to prevent public access to caves during blasting. "(d) The leasee shall comply with any directions which may from time to time be issued by the Minister for Mines to prevent or minimise spoil or other material from blocking off entrances or openings to caves within the area demised provided that the Minister for Mines shall not be obliged to issue any such directions if he is of the opinion that the blocking of any particular entrance or opening to a cave is necessary for the proper conduct of quarrying operations within the area demised." (My emphasis). All of which means that the conditions do not ensure preservation of caves - this depends entirely on the whim of the Minister for Mines at any particular time.

THE FUTURE

The Government's case is based purely on economic grounds and it is apparent that it believes these should override any aesthetic considerations and any moral obligations it may have to maintain public reserves established by its more far-sighted predecessors.

It is the Government's intention to make Colong limestone available to A.P.C.M. to supply the Maldon plant which, on a capitalisation per ton output basis is the least economic cement manufacturing plant in N.S.W. This plant has been subsidised by previous Governments to the extent of over \$4 million which was written off from a \$9.2 million Rural Bank loan after the company incurred losses exceeding \$3 million. More recently the Premier threatened that Government building

contracts might not be let to companies using imported Tasmanian cement. This in fact amounts to indirect assistance to A.P.C.M. which thus has its competition reduced. Colong limestone for Maldon is another indirect form of Government subsidy to A.P.C.M.

The present Government has tried to infer that the Church Creek deposits (which the cement industry has done without for so long) are now essential for the survival of the industry and mining in the Colong Caves Reserve, formerly officially described as "inimical to public interest" is now declared "in the best interests of the State".

If mining is allowed to take place at Church Creek, it will not stop at the present lease. Once the area is worked out (in perhaps 20-30 years) the company would have a very strong argument (capital outlay on pipeline and plant together with a much larger workforce than is presently employed) for extending its operations to the rest of the limestone in the Reserve. Indeed, if caves are destroyed in this reserve - and it is inevitable that they will be if mining proceeds - a very dangerous precedent will have been set which could endanger almost every other cave system in N.S.W., since most are "protected" by the same type of reserve.

Increasing public awareness of the situation and the issues involved, reflected in growing support for the Colong Committee, will eventually result, it is hoped, in some form of public enquiry which could consider the case independently of political pressures. In the meantime the dispute has unfortunately, but of necessity, become a political one. Perhaps only if it sees some threat to its own future arising from this issue will the Government take action to terminate the vandalism of the Colong leases.

SOME OBSERVATIONS

Perhaps the first mistakes were made in 1955 and 1958 when conservationists were unable to prevent leases being granted in the Colong Reserve. More recently, there would have been opportunities to have the latest two lease applications contested before a Mining Warden if we had known about them in time. As a result of the realisation of the ludicrous method of notification of applications, some thought is being given to how the Mining Act could be amended to ensure that there would be adequate notification - perhaps by notice in the Government Gazette.

As a long term measure it would appear to be desirable to get as many caves reserves as possible incorporated into national parks. Even then protection would not be ensured but the process of granting mining leases would be made more

difficult. In the meantime, the adoption by State Governments of a general policy of protection of caves in caves reserves would be a step in the right direction, though an extremely unlikely one at the present time.

Colong is not the first instance of its type (cf. Mt. Etna in Queensland) and it is by no means the last. Our society is obviously going to require cement as a basic building material for some time and unless those most interested in caves and their conservation can find some way of directing mining into areas of minimal aesthetic and speleological value, it may not be many decades before we are left with only tourist areas from which Governments derive actual financial benefit.

DISCUSSION

Does the Colong committee intend to stop at Colong or do they intend to go beyond this case and try to force the Government to introduce better safeguards against this kind of thing?

Greg Middleton: It's amazing how many people have asked us this question. Apparently they have concluded that this business is going to finish soon - we envisage that this fight for Colong itself could go on for at least another four, perhaps ten, years, and this is the expected life of the present committee.

Regarding other things, this is a pretty big fight as it is, and, as I say, we have spent about \$2500 as it is on this particular issue and I don't know how much we will spend in the next ten years. We certainly haven't got the capacity for expanding our interests to include other particular things. Regarding these amendments which we would like to have brought in, the National Parks Authority, the National Trust and other such bodies also want these and they will be working for them irrespective of any action taken by the Colong Committee. The Colong Committee itself is having to restrict its activities to this particular case, it's big enough in itself. For example the other thing we don't like in the area is the Yerandery silver mining which is likely to start up again in the next few years but although it has been suggested that we take this up too we are going to completely ignore it. That's another fight again.

Fred Sanders, C.E.G.S.A.: One interesting point which was brought up was the restriction on importing cement from Tasmania. I think that would be rather a sticky one under the Constitution, wouldn't it?

Greg Middleton: This has been questioned, but the Attorney-General had denied that the Federal Constitution does restrict this strictly as it was stated by the New South Wales Premier. He indicated that there was a possibility that contracts would not be issued to companies which were using Tasmanian cement, so that it's not a direct embargo which the Federal Constitution disallows. It's a very indirect sort of thing in which preference just wouldn't be given to such companies - only for Government contracts of course. However there was a column in the Sydney Morning Herald which made a very biting attack on this on the grounds of infringing Section 92 of the Constitution. We feel in fact that New South Wales would be better off if it could import this cheaper cement from Tasmania.
