THE CONSERVATION ISSUE OF THE TEXAS CAVES

M. Bourke *

Queensland, as a State, holds few records, but it appears that it may be establishing a new one - that of cave destruction.

Limestone caving areas in Queensland are few and far between. Two areas occur in the far North, one at Mt. Etna, Central Queensland and one in Southern Queensland, between Stanthorpe and Texas. Conservation problems exist for the latter two. The construction of the proposed Pike Creek Dam in 1972 will inundate the Texas Caves and eventually destroy them as the dam silts up, and a large area in Northern N.S.W. and Southern Queensland will be caveless.

The caves are not numerous nor extensive. Ten major caves exist, the largest two of these have 1500 feet passage length each. Total passage length of the ten caves is 4500 feet. Russenden Cave and Crystal Cave are particularly well decorated while Glen Lyon Cave boasts the only permanent underground river in Queensland.

If the caves are of no great extent why are they worth saving? Any reason why caves are of value is applicable in this situation because they represent the only significant caves in such a large area.

The caves have value from an educational viewpoint. Three Officers from the National Parks Section of the Forestry Department and the Irrigation and Water Supply Commission made a three day inspection of the caves. The I.W.S. officer referred to the educational value of the caves in his report. A by-product of the conservation campaign and the associated publicity is that several groups of school children have toured the caves. The area represents the only area of limestone scenery in South Queensland.

The caves present an opportunity for scientific research. Fossil collection has been performed by U.Q.S.S. members for the Queensland Museum. "Russenden Cave" presents the possibility of integrating a vertebrate fossil zone with spore bearing stratified succession.

Detailed cave surveys have been performed and investigation of factors responsible for cave formation can contribute to the study of geomorphology of the area.

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People in the district visit and explore the better known caves and many more people are now visiting the caves following publicity of "Russenden Cave". In the report referred to previously, Russenden Cave is stated to possess potential for commercial tourist development. However, distance from centres of population probably precludes its present development. Hence the caves do possess recreational value. The proposed dam would also offer recreational facilities but the area is already served by a dam and the recreational facilities of the caves exceed any comparable recreational benefits of the dam.

The most potent reason for attempting to save the Texas Caves is because they represent an example of our irreplaceable natural heritage which is unique in a large area.

Conservation activity commenced in July, 1968 after U.Q.S.S. had heard of plans for the dam's construction. Henry Shannon, at the time a hydrologist with the Irrigation and Water Supply Commission, prepared a report to the Commissioner on groundwater as an alternative to Pike Creek Dam. We immediately contacted the Ministers for Conservation and Tourism in New South Wales and Queensland. This was the first they had heard of the caves. A petition was presented to the Queensland Government and one to the N.S.W. Government asking that the decision be delayed until a detailed economic analysis had been performed and that if other alternatives could be found, the area declared a National Park.

We were able to obtain good television, radio and press coverage including an article in the Women's Weekly. Several U.Q.S.S. members spoke at Conservation symposia and we produced Conservation Bulletins No. 4 and 5. The former was distributed to most Australian Speleological Societies and Queensland Bushwalking Clubs, all Queensland and N.S.W. tate parliamentarians and conservation bodies and community leaders.

Bulletin No. 4 is a general outline stressing the application of the conservation concept to the caves, a brief look at the economics of the project and suggesting alternatives to the dam at its present site or the utilization of underground water. Bulletin No. 5 presented a more detailed economic survey. The conclusions of No. 5 were that "the project should not proceed unless a rigorous benefit/cost analysis showed it would be profitable and that if the irrigation project proceeded despite the adverse findings of such an analysis, the scheme would be heavily subsidised by the community in general for the benefit of particular interests at the expense of the nation as a whole". We feel that the project is not economically viable and combines poor economics with vandalism.

Our preoccupation with economics may appear a strange approach to a conservation problem. However, the reasons favouring retaining the caves aren't very powerful. The more abstract concepts of conservation are understood by few people not actively concerned with conservation problems. The reaction to economic arguments has been poor and in the future we will probably place more emphasis on the conservation concepts.

REACTION TO THE CAMPAIGN

Several parliamentarians, mostly of non-government parties, reacted with enthusiasm to the Bulletins. The Australian Conservation Foundation refused to support us in any way. My personal opinion is that the few people we dealt with are more concerned with biological conservation than an issue with social emphasis. We received little support from the Duke of Edinburgh who we had contacted.

After initial good publicity the newspapers commenced quoting the Border Rivers Committee as the authority on the matter. This group consists of local politicians, graziers etc. whose interests are well defined. They are waging a campaign to discredit U.Q.S.S., and to ensure that the dam is built on its present site. Our pleas for an investigation into alternative sites for the dam appear to be ignored. A newspaper situated in the irrigation area presented a vicious, emotional attack on us while the Stanthorpe paper situated close to the caves appeared to support the conservation of the caves.

We received moral support from several speleological societies. However, generally speleologists have not materially supported the campaign.

Public reaction has existed - the 4000 signatures on the Queensland petition testify to this. The campaign has not caught public imagination despite the fact that "Save the Texas Caves" is a familiar catch-cry.

The Government has had inspections made of the caves and is investigating the underground water situation. It is also seeking advice on "the present interest in and use of the caves as a tourist and recreational facility". The alternatives presented have been of water or a few caves and no investigation of alternative dam sites has been initiated. The Minister for Conservation (i.e. conservation of water and hence irrigation projects) will recommend action to the Government.

U.Q.S.S. intends to continue with the campaign, although the outlook for the caves is pessimistic. Further distribution of the two bulletins and more publicity is envisaged. A film of the caves has been commenced.

We are seeking pressure on the Government from the public and groups. How can the A.S.F. member societies and individuals assist the campaign? We feel that letters to the Ministers for Conservation and newspapers in both states involved would help. Note that the project is jointly sponsored by the Queensland, N.S.W. and Federal Governments and hence the campaign is relevant to the New South Welsh speleos. A petition to the N.S.W. government has been prepared and signatures are required for this petition. Although the effect of the petition on parliament is probably of no significance, it is a good talking point, and newspapers take to it readily. Being a University Society money is a problem and two conservation campaigns have used most of our 1968 funds.

Out of the campaign has come a realization of the lack of government concern for conservation of natural phenomena which are not particularly spectacular and the absence of conservation concepts on the part of much of the public.

Applied to caves, if these individual conservation problems re-occur for different areas, finally the few remaining areas will be forced to bear a pressure of people that they will be unable to withstand. The solution lies in public education and the responsibility rests upon people with an awareness in these matters - the speleologists of today.

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SOME IMPROMTU THOUGHTS ON THE TEXAS CAVES

H. Shannon *

With regard to the Texas Caves, Mr. Bourke has left out the very important economic arguments against irrigation projects. You will find that if you have got an economist in a corner and talk to him about irrigation that he will be pretty scathing about any Australian irrigation project, the first reason being that these things cannot cover the actual cost of construction of the dams and headworks, and therefore are costing more than they are worth, and next, that they are generally growing unprofitable crops to boot.

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We are in the position of having to win a cave conservation battle in a State where people do not understand what a cave is, and to try at least to correct the impression that we are standing in the way of the nation's prosperity. The economic case against the project is so strong that this project should be rejected regardless of whether there are caves or a beautiful valley there or not. It has got no real merit of its own.

Now, even assuming there was any use for irrigation to provide water for the valley, which is doubtful, water can be provided on my figures for 1/135 of the cost of the dam, which is $400,000 as opposed to $40,000,000. We are able to offer this one to them as an alternative. It so happens that there has been comparatively little development of underground water for irrigation in this valley. There are two reasons for this - one is that people in this area have less initiative than is usual in the country, another is that most blocks being grazing holdings it is simply not worth their time to irrigate. But very few people in Australia are able to resist the temptation of getting a large wad of government money spent in their area, and they will push for the project, regardless of whether it is a sound investment or otherwise, and this dam is a very, very bad project. It is even uneconomic by comparison with many Australian irrigation projects, and that is really saying something. However, assuming that they did really have an economic use for irrigation and even if the water from underground was not sufficient for their requirements(and it is) the underground water can provide 60 thousand acre feet of annual assured supply. The dam would provide 45 thousand acre feet plus another 25 thousand from the other streams in the area which could be operated in conjunction with the dam, bringing it up to 60 thousand.

However, they are proposing to build another dam on the Mole River which would provide twice as much storage capacity as the Pike Creek dam. So they are planning to produce this one, which would be more expensive granted, but it would be possible to build this dam and provide even more water than they require. So you would have this situation where the underground water, plus the Mole River dam would provide more water than they originally thought available in the area, and for less money. Also Pike Creek is not without other dam sites on the creek. There is another one about five miles upstream of the caves and several more above that. They would not provide the regulated supply of 45 thousand acre feet but they would provide a fairly substantial portion of this.

So in effect we are rejecting this dam site and also putting a limit on the Dumaresq dam site which is considered impracticable at the moment. This would result in sacrificing

something like 10% of the ultimate water supply capacity of the Border Rivers catchment. This could not be called an unreasonable sacrifice for preserving any feature of natural beauty let alone a place which is, for southern Queensland, and in effect most of northern New South Wales as well, actually unique.

Imagine that Church Creek was the only cave system you had, and its destruction was imminent. Just let that sink in a bit. The Texas Caves are the only caves that we can get to reasonably easily on an ordinary weekend that are in a reasonable state of preservation. The only ones. It is a superlatively beautiful area in its own right and would probably be worth preserving even if there weren't caves there. Yet the government of Queensland and New South Wales look like destroying them for a project which is economically unjustified.

Now the record which is established here is not so much the worst bit of vandalism perpetrated by any government, but the most pointless. Never has there been less justification for vandalising a beautiful valley.

Not being economists ourselves we have assembled the economic criticisms we got from published works of economic specialists. We were assisted in the work by an Agricultural Economist who is thoroughly familiar with the economics of irrigation.

The following quotation summarises the situation pretty well once you can penetrate the jargon. "We will at times assert that certain policies are mistaken, that is that they incorrectly represent what we believe the correct social preferences are. In such cases the political process will be regarded by us as having failed though it remains possibly amenable to correction. The subsidy to irrigation, for example, will be regarded in this light because it ultimately can be justified only on the basis of a preference to particular interests which we cannot believe others would generally concede once the fallacies and obfuscations surrounding the policy were stripped away".

This is applicable to Australian irrigation projects. On the 1963 Queensland report on this particular thing, it is proposed that the maximum charge for the water would be $3.00 per acre foot. The actual cost of the water is $12.00 per acre foot - thus the subsidy would be $9.00 per acre foot. Cost increases since 1961 may by now have brought the cost of the water to $14.00 per acre foot. You have about 200 farmers down this valley; these farmers would be receiving a pension of something like $1,500 each per year. These people are not

even prepared to pay for the water but they are prepared to drive us out of our one decent caving area. They will not even think of shifting the dam site. They sat there not using the underground water which has been there all the time.

It is rather difficult for us to keep our heads screwed on in these circumstances - we have succeeded in doing it, as all the volatile materials have been steamed off and only a crude oil residue is left. We do hope that we can get a little bit more than just sympathy. Particularly some suggestions. We are rather busy and think that the Colong people might have some suggestions as to how we can get other people involved in the campaign. We think we have done reasonably well considering the immense mental block we have to get over.

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