

## CONSERVATION PRESSURES AT BUCHAN

by

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The question of conservation has been with us for a very long time now. In fact speleologists have been aware for a long time of the necessity to retain caves as they were originally found. Conservation and pollution problems have hit the popular media in a big way and it is extremely hard to give a balanced talk when dealing with such emotional problems. Indeed the more one talks the more there seems to be a backlash against conservation issues.

In Victoria with regard to Buchan and the surrounding limestone area very little effective conservation activity has taken place despite a good deal of talk. The V.S.A. in particular is just beginning to have an awareness of the problems facing it. These problems have not as yet resulted in much total destruction of caves. I will at this stage try to outline some of the problems and indicate where steps are being taken or should be taken to remedy the situation.

The basic problems are no different from any others that are being experienced around Australia and in other parts of the world. The major predators of caves at Buchan are human. The area around Buchan is quite fertile grazing land. The farmer, in pursuing his activities, has played havoc with the landscape. Clearing and cultivation have resulted in a lot of soil movement which has undoubtedly closed and silted up many entrances. This has been helped by the hilly terrain. The other problems farmers have had to contend with are stock losses down caves and burrowing by rabbits in the vicinity of cave entrances. From talking to local farmers it is apparent that quite a few holes have been closed up. In some cases this has been achieved by the use of explosives. Closing up of entrances is particularly easy as many of the entrances are small and none of them would present the same problems as are experienced at Naracoorte. There have been no recent examples of any of the major cave systems being blocked up by such means but there have been instances where farmers have threatened such action.

The other use farmers have put caves to has been for the disposal of rubbish. Household rubbish, old fencing wire and animal carcasses litter the entrances of many caves. No concerted action or cleaning up of such caves has been initiated although littering within caves is kept to a minimum by its removal by members of V.S.A.

The next question is one of cavers. Buchan is some distance from Melbourne but access to the area is extremely easy and more and more people are visiting the area all the time, both as tourists and to do some caving. Accessible caves are spread over quite a radius and protective legislation covers only a few caves in the Buchan Reserve. There are three other areas set aside as reserves: the 18 acre reserve in the Potholes area at Murrindal, the Pyramids area but excluding Dalley's Sinkhole, and the complex of Murrindal and Lillipilli caves.

Control of these areas is very loose except for the Buchan Reserve and falls under the Lands Department.

Caving is pursued by quite a number of groups and individuals within the Buchan area. The major concern is over non-affiliated groups over which V.S.A. has no ethical or moral control. The V.S.A. has provision for affiliation of groups. This has resulted in the University groups of Melbourne, Monash and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology being members as well as some of the Walking Clubs and one scout group. With regard to these groups we have very close co-operation and they respect our mutual concern for leaving caves as they are found. We are able to help them in a number of aspects such as training of beginners, provision of equipment and giving them the use of our facilities and access to records when we see fit. V.S.A. has adopted a list of caves which are to be used for instructional purposes. These caves have been chosen to provide representative types, sizes and technical problems for the beginner. To some extent these caves have already been extensively vandalized. This sort of procedure has eased the problems of damage to decoration and kept rank beginners and prospective members out of our more dangerous or technically difficult caves.

Despite steps such as these of loose affiliation with V.S.A. we have been singularly unsuccessful with a lot of small groups who appear at Buchan on an irregular basis and often cause us a great deal of concern in the way they go about their caving. Examples of groups entering our deeper potholes with inadequate or unsound equipment are relatively common. Some of them are quite capable of using V.S.A.'s name to gain access to caves. It is very difficult for V.S.A. to retain a responsible image in the locals' eyes when it is so easy to associate acts of vandalism or trespass with us.

I hope I have covered this question of trying to cope with unaffiliated cavers (for want of a better term) but I fear that V.S.A. is meeting with no more success than some other societies.

At times "gem" hunters have proved a nuisance, in one instance at East Buchan a group was found by the owner of the property carrying a sugar bag full of formation. This type of desecration has certainly gone on and will continue to occur. V.S.A. has begun to overcome some of the problems of the more dangerous or valuable caves by means of

cave gates. As yet only Scrubby Creek has been done but Honeycomb and Dalley's Sinkhole are also on the list. This measure is regrettable and also questionable as to its efficacy, as gates have been broken in other places.

I might at this point pass on to caving in Buchan Caves Reserve. All caving has been banned in the Reserve as a result of irresponsible behaviour not directly attributable to V.S.A. or its members. V.S.A. approached the Lands Department who control the Reserve personally with a very carefully stated case for our continued access to the area. The response was extremely negative to say the least and, I might quote at this stage from their reply: "... the caves in this Reserve have been surveyed and mapped by qualified persons over the years and repetitive work of this nature is not likely to be of value to the Committee". They provide only one let-out and that is that they do not wish to hinder "genuine scientific research in the caves". This avenue has not yet been pursued but will be in the near future.

This sort of attitude seems to permeate the Public Services and in this case they are purely interested in tourism. At present while it is regrettable that we cannot enter the caves it is giving them a necessary rest from undue pressure of irresponsible groups and thus provides some positive measure of protection.

The next question to discuss is mining and quarrying. With regard to mining leases there are quite a few scattered over the limestone areas. These are nearly all in the name of Rio de Janeiro Mines or G. Milton. These, I feel, do not present a threat to any of our caves. There is no active mining going on although there have been pockets of galena-silver which have been worked with limited success. The likelihood of a significant mineral find in the area is limited. When it comes to extractive industries the threat of destruction of caves becomes very much more real. I do not propose to go into detail at the moment mainly because I have not really researched the question. At present there is only one quarry working and that is Rocky Camp. This has been in operation for some years. They have broken into about two small caverns but the hill on which the quarry is situated is otherwise barren of accessible caves. There is another licence applied for by L. & K. McRaes to which V.S.A. has made a formal objection. The area covered by this application covers two extremely significant caves, Cloggs Cave and Mabel Cave. As yet apart from discussions with the applicants we have not been successful in our objection to including the areas containing these caves in the lease.

The most recent significant development in terms of extractive industries is the action of Gippsland Minerals in buying up the old Sutton property and part of Mr Hodges' property presumably with the intent of quarrying activities. They have not as yet made formal application for a licence and nor has V.S.A. enquired about their intent. There are quite a few caves threatened in the area. These include Scrubby Creek, S.S.S. Cave, Stormwater, The Canyons and related caves. Something will have to be done in the near future with regard to saving some or all of this area as it contains particularly, one of the major cave systems.

To round off the picture at Buchan, V.S.A. is being faced with problems which are familiar to most of you. Success in achieving conservation needs a much more active programme by the club such as more vigorous objection to extractive industries' licences and perhaps bring the whole area under the control of a body such as the National Parks Authority. V.S.A. should be at the spearhead of this activity. The only thing of a real constructive nature is the start which has been made by the club on a booklet describing the area in detail and stating the case for conservation of the caves in it. To some extent this has prompted me to write this paper to provide a background of the problems which will have to be faced if there are to be any caves left for future generations.

## DISCUSSION

Q *Pardon my ignorance but when someone buys a farm do they have to get a lease in order to mine?*

A In Victoria, for an extractive industries' licence, there is a licence and a lease. Lease refers to Crown Land, licence to private land. The owner of private land has no quarrying rights. If someone wants to peg private land he can come to an arrangement whereby he pays compensation for damage to the land.