

BRIEF REVIEW OF MT ETNA CONSERVATION CAMPAIGN 1969-1970

by
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This relatively informal paper is purposely brief, firstly as R.K. Headland in his paper to the Seventh Biennial Conference covered the period to December, 1968 and secondly, the history of conservation efforts at Mt Etna and Limestone Ridge is contained in the University of Queensland Speleological Society's publication "Mt Etna Caves". I shall also be covering recent developments not recorded elsewhere.

Early 1969 saw a redirecting of effort after news of the initial refusal of Central Queensland Cement to relinquish part of their leases for the formation of a National Park. A "Workshop on Mt Etna" produced a number of possible guidelines, attitudes and actions. P.H. Caffyn in March made the initial complaint about a breach of the "66 foot limit" at Winding Stairway Cave. This produced a test case to see if the Government and Company were serious about the conditions imposed on mining, and served as the basis for subsequent publicity.

In April the Australian Conservation Foundation replied to a letter outlining the (then) present state of affairs, and noted that a report on alternative supplies of limestone would be of great assistance. The setting up of a non-student body, the Queensland Cave Conservation Council resulted in letters exerting further pressure on Government and Company.

Apparently the Company was still under some pressure, for at an interview in August, U.Q.S.S. learnt of a possible compromise solution in which the Company was to retain a (non-cavernous as far as was known) connection between the remnant east and west leases after the proposed National Park was excised. U.Q.S.S. then made a formal approach along these lines but received no reply.

Summary of major correspondence

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| 15 November 1969 | Inspection of some damage to caves by U.Q.S.S. Secretary and a Livingstone Shire Councillor. Press coverage. |
| 6 December 1969 | Area of Recreation Reserve R272 almost doubled to 204 acres (this addition did not include any cavernous limestone as far as is known). |
| 8 December 1969 | <p>U.Q.S.S. received copy of letter from Mines Minister to Premier.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - protracted negotiations not yet concluded. - pointed out no objections raised when Mining Lease applied for. - technical opinion at time of granting leases was caves of no tourist value. - bat protection not considered at all at that time. - therefore no conditions imposed on leases. - after possible damage to bats pointed out, Mt Morgan and Central Queensland Cement agreed to certain restrictions on mining. Agreement is voluntary but Central Queensland Cement re-asserted that it intends to comply. - <i>undertaking</i> to leave a barrier of not less than 66 feet between workings and the main entrances of the habitat caves and to direct the workings so as to keep clear of any cave structure if such is known. - unfortunately an accidental breakback of rock had occurred in one case reducing the distance to 55' 4" Company is directing operations clear of caves. - no blasting occurred within zone, no damage to cave or bats, work stopped in area. - Company is not prepared to agree to a proposal to surrender part of its leases until alternative supplies of limestone are located of sufficient quantity and quality that can be delivered to the works at no extra cost. - with this end in view, the Department of Mines is carrying out a programme of drilling at no cost to the Company, and when the results of this drilling are known and an evaluation of ore reserves made, the Company will be in a position to decide on the above proposal. |
| 24 December 1969 | <p>A reply to letter of 8th December, sent to Department of Mines pointing out that</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - leases were all granted before U.Q.S.S. first visited Mt Etna in 1962. - Government geologist had reported favourably on caves 18-2-26. - bats should have been considered. |

- U.Q.S.S. geologist disputed accidental nature of breakback, and claimed drill marks were inside the 66 feet limit.
- Department had photographs of damage to a cave.
- 29 January 1970 Department of Forestry advised U.Q.S.S. similarly to reply from Department of Mines regarding Mt Etna but informed U.Q.S.S. that negotiations between Mt Morgan and the Departments was proceeding regarding a National Park on part of R272 (over the road from Mt Etna). Doubt existed if the whole of the cave area was covered by the proposal.
- 20 February 1970 U.Q.S.S. second report on damage in caves to Department of Mines, Premier and Company. Claimed natural degradation rate accelerated by action of quarry.
- 12 March 1970 Department of Mines reply to U.Q.S.S. of 24 December 1969:
 - if promises breached inadvertently there can be no legal redress.
 - the Company's decision must be awaited. Any attempt to rush the investigation at this stage would be detrimental.
- 16 April 1970 U.Q.S.S. sent to Department of Mines and Forestry, a traverse of Johannsen's Cave and sketch of cave locations for Limestone Ridge.
- 23 April 1970 U.Q.S.S. wrote to Department of Mines and Cement Company showing location of most westerly cave on Mt Etna.
- June 1970 Determination of accurate locations of caves on Limestone Ridge commenced by traverse.
- 1 July 1970 Joint signatories U.Q.S.S., Central Queensland Speleological Society, Superintendent Olsen's Caves, Manager Cammoo Caves, Rockhampton Field Naturalists Club wrote to Premier and Ministers for Mines, Labour and Tourism. They stressed concern at slow progress in negotiations and underlined need for recreation caves as opposed to Tourist Caves.
- 2 July 1970 U.Q.S.S. notified of major new cave on Limestone Ridge, Elysium.
- 14 August 1970 U.Q.S.S. map of Limestone Ridge sent to Chief Government Geologist; Department of Mines, Forestry; Central Queensland Cement, Mt Morgan. Shows location of 28 caves accurately.
- 7 August 1970 Forestry revealed that the area offered for surrender by Mt Morgan did not cover the cave system completely.
- 17 August 1970 U.Q.S.S. verbally confirmed that negotiations were taking place only for ML 306 (the most northern lease) on Limestone Ridge.
- 15 September 1970 Forestry Department was informed of further efforts (confidential) towards establishing a National Park in the area. Proposals are to await outcome of present negotiations.
- 22 October 1970 U.Q.S.S. asked Department of Mines for latest information on negotiations, and also of drilling results.
- 11 November 1970 Central Queensland Cement gave notice to Central Queensland Speleological Society of restrictions of entry onto leases where mining operations were being carried out. Also
 - "the nature and effect of the operations are such as to render the immediate area unsafe to unauthorized entrants".
- 22 December 1970 U.Q.S.S. sent a plan of Limestone Ridge showing extent of Elysium to all parties concerned.

Policy problems

Lack of communication and delay in replies from the Company and the Mines Department hamper efforts. In addition the Company has developed an attitude of — "you should not be on leases (i.e. in caves) therefore you cannot see damage" — and complaints are therefore not well received.

Lack of guidelines. It appears that, as the western quarry has now been commenced, the eastern quarry is not to proceed any further west. This, apart from relatively minor bulldozing in the overlying Mt Etna Trig member sediments, leaves the amended Government proposed area for a National Park intact. There is no indication as to how long it will remain so.

The fate of Limestone Ridge, apart from Johannsen's Cave, is completely unpredictable. A survey shows the extent of the presently known cavernous area and there is no doubt that the remainder is just as cavernous. How the undertaking of the company applies to many of the Ridge caves is difficult to gauge — what defines a major cave?

There are those who favour pressing only for total preservation, while previously some favoured preservation of Mt Etna at the expense of Limestone Ridge and now some vice versa. The Australian Conservation Foundation has another policy, and Forestry (National Parks) will accept any cavernous area of the Reserves for preservation.

What the final result will be, I cannot even begin to predict now, but to mis-quote, and as shown by the Winding Stairway Cave incident at Mt Etna, "the price of preservation is eternal vigilance".