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20/05/03

Community Consultation re: Heritage Action Plan for Buchan Caves.

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Caves were first reported at Buchan in 1840 when Stewart Ryrie was sent by the New South Wales (then Colonial) Government to survey the route from the Monaro down to Gippsland. This was only several years after the first settlement of East Gippsland. He came through, and walked straight into what is now Wyatt's (or the Potholes) Reserve and spent a day looking at one of the caves there. So Ryrie's trip was the first recorded awareness of the caves at Buchan. It goes back a long way before Frank Moon and the reserves.

One of the things I am involved in and which is very relevant to tonight's discussion is that I chair the Task Force on Caves and Karst of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). This means that I have constant contact with cave managers in virtually every country in the world and I have visited caves in probably 40 countries. So I thought what I should do in this presentation is to answer the question of "What is special about Buchan?" or more particularly, "What are some of the most important things about Buchan when you compare it with other cave areas?"

You will probably know for instance that there are caves right through the Great Dividing Range – Yarrangobilly, Wombeyan, Jenolan, Wellington, Stockyard Creek, Ashwood, Mt. Etna near Rockhampton and even right up into northern Queensland. Some of these caves are very well known, very beautiful and very interesting. Some of them have a remarkable geological history. However, a lot of people don't think too seriously about caves; their sheer beauty impresses them. Now if you just take that one criterion of their beauty, Buchan doesn't really figure all that well. The Font of the Gods area in the Royal is magnificent; it's comparable to almost anything in the country, but you know there is then that long walk out through the Royal where you don't see much more beauty; and when you compare it with Jenolan which is loaded with beauty, Buchan fades a bit on that score. We cannot say it stands out for its beauty, its got little bits of beauty but it's not overwhelming in the way that some places are. A friend of mine, who I think probably saw more caves in his lifetime than I have, used to say that the Temple of Baal at Jenolan was the most overwhelming experience he'd ever had in a cave because it is such a beautiful room.

People commonly say caves are terribly important in terms of geological history. But some of them are not, and don't tell us all that much. Here we could probably learn much more about the geological history of the South-eastern Australia from the Murrindal River valley than from the caves. Geology of the Murrindal River is fascinating and it is a clue to many aspects of the development of the Snowy River catchment. But it would be hard to show that to the public and get them excited about it. You need to be a good geologist to really understand and appreciate it. Whereas at Naracoorte people can see all the fossils of the last half million years actually been dug up in front of them. Buchan just cannot rival that wondrous portrayal of one aspect of the history of the earth.

But let me talk about what happened when Frank Moon managed to find his way into Fairy Cave. This is when we can find a very interesting story. Actually, I am not going

to talk very much about Frank, but there is no question that Frank was the man who put Buchan on the map as a tourist site. He was such a salesman and such an enthusiast, that he convinced the people of Victoria that this was the most wondrous discovery. You only need to look at the newspapers at the time to see what a sensation it was and that was very much due to Frank's talent for selling people about his enthusiasm. So he played a very important part and must never be forgotten.

But, Fred Wilson rarely gets very much credit. Fredrick Wilson was a very shy man. He did some wonderful things in his life for other people got the credit. He was a very reticent and retiring man, but also a very ethical one. But, after many years of experience at Jenolan, he was appointed to manage the Buchan Caves and to set them for public viewing.

Fred was an exceptional man. His daughter told me once that she remembered when she was growing up that she was told "never to kill a snake, a spider, a fly - they have as much right on earth as we do." Just imagine someone saying that in the 19th century. It was so many years out of step with the rest of the world. But he had a deep and abiding love for nature and he loved helping other people to appreciate it.

So he came to Buchan. I don't think he was all that welcome. People thought Frank Moon was going to manage this cave that he discovered. And I think Fred felt he was a bit of an outsider and wasn't exactly made welcome at first. But he was such a gentleman that people soon warmed to him.

You all know Royal and Fairy Caves. Fred saw to it that those caves were very well protected. He erected wire netting scenes right through them. Managers of a number of caves around the world at the same time were also doing that, but generally in a very shoddy way. They just hung a bit of wire netting along the pathways, often hanging loosely so that people could lean over and touch or even break off the stalactites. A number of caves opened in the 19th century all around the world suffered very badly with a lot of damage being done to them.

But Jenolan and Buchan were different because of Fredrick's craftsmanship. At Jenolan, his brother Jeremiah who was the manager claimed the credit, but Fred did the work. If you look at the "Font of the Gods" today, you can see that the wire netting is still in very good condition because of the way in which Frederick installed it, showing wonderful tradesmanship. He preserved caves that otherwise would have had a lot of damage to them and we owe a great deal to him. We are lucky that the quality of the work he did can be seen to this day.

Royal Cave is the best example of his work that is readily seen by the public. And no matter what is done to modernise that cave, Fred Wilson's work should always remain because it is such an outstanding monument of the contribution he made. He did another nice thing at the "Font of the Gods". Guides and visitors often look at and admire the beautiful stalagmites known as the "Twelve Apostles. I have the first photos that Howard Bulmer took after the cave was discovered, and there were only three apostles and it was somewhat plain and uninteresting. As Fred put the path through the cave he regularly had to remove some beautiful decoration. So he chose the best of it and set them in place in the "Font of the Gods" so we now have 12

apostles. That alone makes an immense difference in the presentation in that bit of the cave.

Now it is such a beautiful place partly because of the profusion of those stalagmites that Fred put in so cleverly that they look totally natural. So he not only protected the cave but did his best to really make it look good and present it at its best. It is a great pity he didn't get more credit; everyone recognised and respected Frank Moon but if they met Fred he didn't make much of impression, he was such a shy man.

This is one special thing about that Buchan Caves. They are a great monument to Fred Wilson and we should make more of that because it is an tribute to their proper protection and management that was assured here right from the beginning. He set a pattern that is really lasting.

As you look around Australia, the idea of having a beautiful garden in a cave park was fairly normal through history. Maiden, who was the director of the Sydney Botanical Gardens planted the gardens at Jenolan. William Reddan of Naracoorte was a trained horticulturalist when he was appointed manager of the caves and he planted a beautiful garden. Some people wrote in the visitors book saying "the gardens here are even better than the caves". They became an attraction in themselves.

Mt. Gambier still has a particularly beautiful cave garden. Yanchep in Western Australia provides another example. But the most intact of them all is Buchan. Buchan is still pretty intact because it depends on the trees and it is going to be possible to further redevelopment that so it can hopefully last forever.

So, another thing that was started off by Fred Wilson was the ornamental planting. For instance, he did some initial planting around the entrance of the Royal Cave. Although he was not a horticulturalist or even a gardener, he believed personally that caves reserves should have nice gardens.

So although Wilson initiated the idea of a garden as an attractive part of the Buchan experience, which really did not come to full flower until Linaker, a government landscape designer, came to Buchan to do a first plan and initiate the mix of trees we have here in this valley. As Linaker's plan was gradually implemented, Frank Moon did quite a bit of planting, but when Albert Sandford came, just before the war broke out, he had a long background as a foreman at the Melbourne Botanical Gardens. So he planted whenever he had time and put the final touches to the reserve. Those plantings have run down in recent years, and their redevelopment is vital to their preservation as another of the very special features of Buchan.

For many years Buchan Caves Caravan Park won awards for the finest caravan park in Australia. That was largely because of the trees. It has been by-passed because more recent caravan parks were backed with much more capital investment and so developed better facilities. But even now, when you talk to visitors, they say "it's fantastic, the trees are so beautiful". It's a very central part of the visitor experience here.

A final special feature of Buchan came in 1938. A.E Lind, who was the local member of Parliament, was also Minister for Lands and he decided Victoria should have more

National Parks. Up to then there was no system of National Parks, although there were individual parks such as Wilson's Promontory and Mt. Buffalo run by committees of management. Lind decided to make more Parks that could be called National and that became a much more recognised name. Buchan was one place that he decided should be a national park and a real showpiece of the new systematic approach.

He believed that at a national park there should be facilities for visitors to swim, play sport, picnic (which meant fireplaces) and children should be provided for with playgrounds. Much of the development was based upon the designs used by the U.S National Parks, and so his thinking included a formal archway at the entrance. So in 1938 there was a wonderful burst of new development at Buchan: the swimming pool, tennis courts, the entrance archway, the kitchen, the laundry, the toilet block, the car wash were all constructed at that time. On the 3rd of December 1938, they had the formal opening of the new National Park, and it was a big event.

As we all know the war came the following year and Lind's momentum in parks was lost. Buchan at this stage was closed for the duration of the war. It wasn't until many years after the war that we really started to think enthusiastically and positively about National Parks again. Buchan is the best example in this state of what Lind saw as the right kind of development for a National Park. Few people would agree today – but this development gives Buchan another very important bit of its character as well as making it a historically important site..

So when we look at visitor experience here at Buchan we are looking at Cultural Heritage. We are looking at the cultural icons with Fred's protection and presentation of the caves, the presentation of them, the tree planting, the 1938 work, and these the things that give the visitor experience here. When visitors arrive, they drive through the archway and to many people that's an exciting entry into the park. Then they start to see the colour of the trees, particularly in the Autumn, but even in the rest of the year. They find themselves in a very condensed area, a sense of being closed in and more quite. It is a homely place, with a very friendly scale of development. There are no two lane roads or any other big-scale development here, it is all low key that people enjoy, it is a restful place. So that when you look at Buchan in a comparative scale to other Australian areas or cave landmarks of the world, Buchan stands out for it's presentation, and for the above ground beauty.

Interesting, the world's first tourist cave (Vilenica in Slovenia) has just gone through complete redevelopment and, lo and behold, it is very low key. Beautiful plantings, some nice sculpture, a very informal Visitor Centre and some nice walking paths. Other Slovenian show caves are the biggest and most popular in the world, with millions of visitors a year and truly grand development. Vilenica has deliberately gone the opposite way, they have gone low key; and I think that says something very important. The Slovenians with their sense of both tourism management and cave management chose to keep Vilenica as a low key place.

I think that is also one of the keys of the visitor experience at Buchan. It is a small and a friendly place. It feels good when you come into it, and w a lot of other people have told me the same thing. This is why the thing we have been engaged to do is potentially very important and we must do it well for the sake of the future of Buchan

because it is the Cultural Heritage that is the most distinctive and special feature of Buchan.