

KARSTCARE

– CAVERS LOOKING AFTER CAVES AND KARST

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PHOTO: GARRY K SMITH

*Jessica Wools-Cobb in the Pleasure Dome.
Photo Competition First Prize for a Print in the Passages category.*

INTRODUCTION

KarstCARE is a group made up of active cavers in northern Tasmania who are interested in contributing to the management of caves in the Mole Creek Karst National Park. Each KarstCARE participant is a member of Wildcare, which is the largest incorporated environmental group in Tasmania.

Wildcare has existed since 1998 and is a community partner organization with our “Parks Department”. Wildcare has several different sections: Adopt-a-track, Heritage Care, Fishcare and Community Action in Reserves. (C.A.R.). C.A.R. groups concentrate their efforts on specific national parks or reserves. Wildcare members work alongside staff of DPIWE

and the Parks and Wildlife Service, but the organisation sits outside the Parks Department.

Membership of Wildcare is \$25 per year and these funds stay within the organization to help fund projects. Most projects are joint Parks & Wildlife Service/Wildcare projects, with proposals for funding going to the Wildcare board with Parks backing and support. Members receive a regular *Wildtimes* newsletter bringing news of past achievements, conferences, meetings and planned projects, and also receive discounts from supporting businesses and a substantial discount on the annual National Parks Pass.

Wildcare has its own insurance, regrettably an important necessity in current times. The insurance premium is paid by Wildcare to cover members who are undertaking any Wildcare-approved work. All working bees must be authorized by the organization, with strict guidelines as to the type of work, how it may be supervised, what equipment may be used, etc. A "CAREs" group in consultation with a Parks Ranger usually initiates a project. Wildcare must be notified before any work is undertaken, with a list of participants and full details of the project or Parks staff may call a specific working bee.

KarstCARE is a CARE group focussed on the Mole Creek Karst National Park. We work directly under the Parks Office at Mole Creek. Our structure is somewhat casual, with a President, who I prefer to call a coordinator, and various volunteers from both within caving clubs and cavers not aligned with a club. We have so far contributed about 500 hours of "hands-on" work in the past 4 years.

The President's role is liaison with Parks staff to discuss projects and coordinate volunteers and equipment. He also arranges all administration with Wildcare, such as working bee call-ups and activity notification. He also ensures proper registration of each volunteer for each activity to ensure insurance cover.

One of the most difficult tasks for the President is the raising of funding for projects. This can be from within the Wildcare organization itself, from various Government-based environmental bodies or even from corporate bodies. Although most of our work is labour-based, funds are required for such things as cleaning equipment, ropes for access and even track-markers. Parks sometimes assist with such equipment but often volunteers provide their own.

ACHIEVEMENTS SO FAR

Kubla Khan

The access track has been cleared to ensure a definite route, limiting damage to the surrounding bush land. Within the cave, about 130 kg of mud was removed from "de-trog" rock, an area used to prepare for a visit to the Pleasure Dome area. All cavers remove their outer trog-suit, boots, socks and anything else dirty before stepping across to an enormous flowstone area which is arguably the most spectacular in this cave. By cleaning the access and the area itself, and placement of matting, further mud transfer has been virtually eliminated. Much of the standard route through the cave has been cleaned; however some sections are more difficult than others. This is an ongoing project with conference participants who wish to visit this cave able to make a contribution.

The Sally's Folly work-site is 3 hours travel from the surface - probably one of the more remote sites for a working bee. At this site our group cleaned down a flowstone climb revealing micro-groes under the mud, installed a new boot-washing station limiting further mud tracking and cleaned a slippery



PHOTO: DAVE WOOLS-COBB

Changing the water at a boot washing station in Kubla Khan Cave.

climb, which is part of the route.

Boot-washing stations are positioned throughout Kubla Khan Cave. If used properly, they are an effective method of limiting further mud tracking on to previously cleaned areas. These stations need periodic maintenance to remove accumulated mud and to top up the water (sometimes from several hundred metres away).

Tailender Cave

We carried out a line survey over 2 days, instituted track marking and placed some advisory signs and stringlines on "no-go" areas. We also achieved extensive cleaning.

Assistance with water-tracing

Our group was able to assist with local knowledge in an NHT project involving the hydrology of the Mole Creek area, including the placement of charcoal collection bags to determine stream flows in a particular valley.

Mersey Hill

This is an area of land purchased by Parks to incorporate into the Karst National Park. Unfortunately this block has been infested by a weed - Spanish Heath. As the land is just above the Mersey River, it was considered that there was a risk that this weed would spread to adjacent areas and downstream.

Two environmental groups had already worked on this site before KarstCARE held a working bee to poison more plants. Painting poison on plants seems an unusual activity for cavers but it was our highest-ever attended working bee! We finished off that day with a site visit to Mersey Hill Cave to examine future cave management issues.

Croesus Cave

It is probably the 'second most' spectacular cave in the Mole Creek area, with a spectacular flowstone feature named "Golden Stairs". In past times the land management group, the Government Forestry Department had installed an inflated dinghy to bypass this area.

This led to extensive marking of the landing point, so the boat was removed. This resulted in all cavers having to walk over the Golden Stairs (which is self-cleaning) but at the top was a muddy pool with the route continuing across more flowstone. We built a rock walkway from surrounding rocks to prevent picking up mud and tracking it further. We also

cleaned the area and further upstream for another 100 m.

Marakoopa Tourist Cave

We spent a day removing all “non-cave” material possible from the tourist sections. Apart from minor public litter, many old electrical installations were still lying around, plus other old construction materials. In total, four large garbage bags were filled with rubbish.

The most interesting find was a very old “Milo-type” tin with candles and a few old-style light globes. Countless broken light globes were also removed.

CaveMania Post-Conference Project

Our methods have to be innovative at times - for instance, for the preparation for the CaveMania project in Kubla Khan, water has been stored in swimming pools over the past winter season (as there are no reliable water sources in the area through summer).

KarstCARE has conducted a number of working bees in Kubla Khan to set up this project to store water, install fixed rigging, track-mark and delineate areas to be cleaned. KarstCARE’s aim is to have a totally clean route right through Kubla Khan Cave wherever possible. This route totals about 3000 m in length. The Kubla Khan project for January 2005 involves cleaning between 140 and 160 metres of the route. All conference participants who have competent vertical skills will be able to join a trip into or through Kubla Khan provided they are prepared to work for two hours or so. Knowing how popular the cave is with visitors we hope to achieve a great deal.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Later in 2005 we are planning a “delicate” cleaning job in Croesus Cave to undo damage done some 30 years or so ago before the cave was gated. Plans are also underway for extensive trackmarking in some of the non-tourist sections of Marakoopa Cave. Our task in the future will involve assisting Parks staff in the more difficult areas. Our guiding principle is to undo previous damage done by cave visitors and assist in managing caves to minimize future damage. Much of our work is tough – it sometimes involves standing in water at 2°C while scrubbing flowstone with a brush! Many of our sites are difficult of access, but then who better to work in a cave than those who “naturally” feel comfortable in such an environment?

WHAT CAN KARST MANAGERS DO?

It is important to involve speleologists/cavers in cave and karst management especially as they are often the people who have found the caves, surveyed and documented them. I feel we should not judge either past practices of cavers or cave managers using today’s values. By using the expertise of cavers, managers can undo some past damage and institute management principles (such as track marking, bootwashing stations) to limit future damage to caves. By developing relationships with cavers in a particular caving area, managers can tap into local knowledge and expertise. Cavers usually welcome the opportunity to have an input into management decisions. We all care about caves, so with managers and cavers forming a partnership we can work together for the good of caves and karst. ■