

# International recognition and management of caves and karst

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## Introduction

Many members of ACKMA were involved in the preparation of the IUCN Guidelines for Cave and Karst Protection (Watson et al 1997) and part of the time at the 1995 ACKMA Conference was devoted a very important meeting to discuss the content of those Guidelines.

The Guidelines document has since been utilised worldwide as setting a standard that might be observed in cave and karst conservation. It was formally adopted and integrated into the official policy of the US National Parks Service, has been extensively used in Australia and New Zealand and to varying degrees in virtually all other countries. It is now undergoing a review and redevelopment in the light of experience since its publication and of growing awareness of the problem that it did not deal adequately with such topics as biodiversity management, management of archeological and palaeontological sites and tourism management. It is thus timely to provide some overview of current issues across the world. Commencing with the international and then looking at some of the national implications.

## International Recognition

During the period 1968 to 1971 the Man and Biosphere program was developed within UNESCO and this led to the establishment of Biosphere Reserves in many part of the world. The role of these has gradually evolved and today the Biosphere Reserve is used widely as the basis for negotiating sustainable programs of land management. In many cases, the core of the Biosphere Reserve will be a protected area often a national park and sometimes a World Heritage area. In these situations the Biosphere Reserve provides an invaluable form and process for buffer zone management.

At about the same time, considerable discussion came to be focused on wetlands and at a meeting at the city of Ramsar (Iran) established the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Initially, this gave particular

attention to the protection of birds particularly those who were migratory. Again Australia played a significant role because of our remarkable migratory birds who follow an enormous figure of eight migratory route between Siberia and Southern Australia. However, the Convention is now very widely focused on wetlands as a whole and is one of the important forums for examining the effects of climate change. Also, as a result of a paper prepared by Andy Spate and Elery Hamilton-Smith for the 1996 Ramsar Conference in Brisbane, a new category of subterranean wetlands was recognised. The first site registered internationally under this provision was Skocjanske Jama in Slovenia but a number of others have since been added.

Meanwhile, and since the remarkable international effort to conserve great Nubian monuments in the Nile valley, discussions have been taking place for a considerable time on the recognition of sites of Outstanding Universal Value. This culminated in 1972 with the establishment of the World Heritage Convention probably well known to all ACKMA members. There are now some fifty cave and karst sites recognised as World Heritage and others are currently in the process of assessment and consideration.

The 1982 Charter for Nature gave particular emphasis to biodiversity and, as valuable as this is, it tended to detract attention from sites that did not demonstrate great value for the 3 F's (Fur, Feathers and Flowers). It has taken some time to adequately redevelop recognition of geological features (Dingwall 2005) or of marine sites.

Most recently continuing international concern about giving much more attention to geodiversity has resulted in the development of Geoparks with well-established networks now in China, Europe and now rapidly developing in Australia.

## Processes of International Recognition

Concern has often been expressed about the need for clear criteria and processes for

recognition at the international level. While initial recognition of World Heritage sites more or less accepted all nominations, the World Heritage committee has taken the lead in demanding a particularly thorough process of assessment and inscription (UNESCO 2005).

Continuing with World Heritage as the primary example of rigorous selection, any nominated site must meet one or more of ten criteria in order to establish Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) and the extent to which it meets any of the criteria is decided by rigorous comparative analysis with similar sites. It must also meet various conditions of integrity including authenticity, appropriate boundary definition, the intact character of the site and evidence of appropriate and adequate management capacity to ensure sustainable management.

### **Good News and Bad News**

The major good news is that at both international and national levels there has been a remarkable growth in the number of recognised and adequately protected karst sites. Although the quality of management varies widely from country to country, there has been a significant improvement. A number of countries have used rapid assessment and decision-making processes and have also undergone immense changes in thinking about nature conservation.

This process means that some of the long standing conservation oriented nations have now fallen behind the front line of thinking and action. The current serial nomination in progress on the South China karst demonstrates the remarkable creativity and thoughtfulness in assessment and nomination; a very high quality indeed of commitment to good management and proper protection to karst values; and leading edge in site

presentation to the public (at the same time, I should note that China and the United States have something in common – they manage to offer the best and the worst of everything). I could cite many other examples but there is not time.

Probably the major bit of bad news is that there are some countries that still suffer the problem of the right hand never being aware of what the left hand is doing. Thus at one presentation in Vietnam recently, I heard the Provincial Government proclaiming how highly they valued a World Heritage area was and how well they would look after it for all time. At the same time they pointed to their dramatic success and rapid progress in building a new coastal highway that is causing unbelievable sedimentation and other environment damage.

The National Geographic Society's annual monitoring and rating of World Heritage sites (National Geographic Traveller 2006) highlights further bad news. They pointed to the great increase in tourism numbers to a point for which management was totally unprepared and totally unable to cope. The point was made that conservation objectives of World Heritage were being neglected in order to pursue an amusement park ideology for mass tourism.

### **Turning Back to the National Level**

I trust it is clear that we can no longer be complacent about our own standards in neither resource management nor visitor management. We should seek out, as some members are already doing, opportunities to learn from others.