

Adventure Activities as a Management Tool

Sasa Kennedy

TAFE NSW – Western Sydney Institute

Abstract

This paper aims to stimulate discussion of the role of adventure activities in a karst environment. Many karst areas offer guided tours to the public but by offering a range of adventure opportunities you can reach a whole new market, build return business, help develop community interest in karst environments and instil a minimal impact ethic in your visitors.

The paper will look at a range of commercial adventure activities, from kids' soft adventures to spotlighting walks (via caving), which are suited to karst environments and discuss how they can be used to encourage visitors' understanding and support of management decisions. It will consider whether the licensing of commercial operators to provide adventure activities can support management needs in the same way as in-house activities.

The paper will also touch on the ways in which providing opportunities for staff adventure activities and encouraging speleological club involvement can benefit management.

Introduction

Many show cave systems now run an adventure tour, or even a range of adventure tours, in order to increase visitation or lengthen duration of visits. However it is important that cave managers also consider how these tours and other adventure activities can be of direct benefit to the cave systems they are responsible for. They should aim to capitalize on these benefits, whilst minimizing the inevitable impacts.

Not all activities will be suitable for all systems, depending on access, staffing, training and proximity to sources of visitors; however the potential for growth is vast. The range of activities could include off-track tours, adventure caving, children's activities, youth activities, school adventures and surface activities. Staff caving and the activities of speleological societies, whilst not commercial activities, are also a valuable means of assisting cave and karst managers.

Off-track tours allow the less adventurous visitors to experience an undeveloped cave or a cave that has had only primitive development. The cave might be one that is no longer shown due to increased visitor numbers needing larger spaces or previous damage making it a less attractive show cave proposition; or it may be part of the system which is easily accessed on foot, but has not been seen as a commercial proposition and has not ever been developed. This is not how visitors see it; they see it as somewhere special that is open to only the few. For them access to such areas creates a sense of exclusivity and privilege.

For cave managers this type of tour allows visitor access without expensive infrastructure such as lights, walkways and railings. Without lights the likelihood of lampenflora is greatly reduced, though the risk of inadvertent damage to the cave and formations is increased if the cave is totally undeveloped. If the cave has been previously developed the tour can be used to illustrate the impacts of previous practices. This provides a counterpoint to current methods of managing and maintaining show caves. It can create a supportive environment for your innovative, low impact management practices. Hopefully it will get your visitors thinking about how we all need to keep improving the ways in which we interact with the natural environment. Off track tours can also provide a platform for more in depth historical interpretation, building a greater understanding of the significant events in the history of your system.

Adventure caving is now widely available in cave systems throughout Australia. It allows for a range of opportunities from 'soft' adventures to truly challenging experiences such as Jenolan's Naked Lady full day tour. An activity such as caving which involves all the senses is a truly memorable experience. In a risk averse world where most people are increasingly divorced from nature it also provides many people a rare opportunity to genuinely challenge themselves both physically and mentally. For families caving together it

can be a wonderful bonding opportunity. Hardly surprising then that it is so popular.

There are obvious financial benefits to cave managers; adventure caving can both lengthen visitor stay and attract a different market segment. By providing a range of activities with varying levels of difficulty return visitation can also be increased. The less obvious but equally important benefits are that a number of people who have their first caving experiences as paying clients go on to join caving clubs. By imparting a minimal impact ethos at this early stage of their caving careers we can expect that they will continue to be minimal impact cavers. Even those for whom it is a one off experience may take their minimal impact learning into other areas of their lives. The more environmentally aware people there are in the community the more support we have for protecting our catchments. In addition, by increasing membership of speleological societies we are broadening our support base in the community.

Traditionally cave tours have been a family oriented activity and it is important that we continue to provide this great chance for families to build the shared memories that a cave tour provides. We've all heard that wonderful comment "I came here as a kid and wanted my kids to see this fabulous place". But children also have different developmental stages that a standard cave tour does not necessarily cater to. To immerse kids in the cave environment we need to do more. Hands on, flexible activities that cater to their needs can be a wonderful adjunct to the traditional family based tour. These days children are used to interactive, involving and immersive experiences, where they are central to the action. We need to provide them with activities that tick all these boxes but also connect them to the natural world, in particular the karst landscape. They need to believe that the natural world is even more exciting than any virtual one.

At Jenolan we run a range of children's activities in addition to a wide range of more traditional cave tours. The four current kids' activities are "Stones & Bones", "Animal Discovery", "Junior Guides" and "Junior Explorers". They range in length from 1.5 hours to 3 hours. While it might be hard to maintain a child's interest for 3 hours on a show cave tour it is relatively easy in an activity

based program, where you can vary the time of the activity components and depth of info provided according to the interests of the group. This is done by having a range of activities and games, some active, some creative and some more intellectual, but all fun.

During "Stones & Bones" the children follow the treasure map left by a scientist of old in an activity that focuses on geology and paleontology. The tour goes on and off track, so kids have the added excitement of using helmets and headlamps. Looking for, finding and examining treasure is far more memorable than just listening to someone talk about fossils, animal bones and rock.

The "Animal Discovery" activity looks at current and extinct fauna through a series of games and action that takes place above and below ground, linking the caves to their surroundings. A take home puzzle book is included to remind children of their visit. Again the use of props and interactivity helps the messages about cave critters and how dependant they are on their environment to stick in the child's mind.

"Junior Guides" and "Junior Explorers" are longer activities where the children become the guides and explorers. Both programs are themed, aiming to leave the children with a definite message. In "Junior Guides" the children look at all the aspects of karst that a guide is involved with; show caverns, wild caves, daylight caves and the areas above ground are all visited. Children learn how all these areas are interconnected by water. This allows them to consider how when they interact with water they also affect many places and the creatures and plants that live in them. The children aren't concerned with the learning experience, but due to the carefully structured program the message does get through. What makes it so memorable for the kids is that they get to be the guide and in charge of what is happening and they get up close and personal to some really cool places. Watching their dismay at the possibility that they may get dirty turn to delight as they crawl through muddy passages is a reminder of just how divorced many kids are from the natural world in the 21st century.

In "Junior Explorers" they love drawing their own maps, naming the features and following their maps to safety. For once in their highly

organized lives they are in control of their own destiny. They also love playing the explorers matching game to discover some of the magnificent places that are not seen on show cave tours. Along the way they develop some observational and navigational skills. But for us the advantage is that they develop a sense of possibility – “Maybe I can discover the next cave...” Hopefully we are planting a seed that will one day turn into a fully fledged caver. At the very least these kids now understand that there are still uncharted parts of the planet to explore.

A children’s activity program has many advantages for cave managers; financially it can attract a new visitor group, parents who like to feel they are giving their children stimulating, educational opportunities, and by providing a range of activities you can also build return visitation. More importantly it provides a new vehicle for conveying messages about the karst environment and how we can help to protect it. Most important though, it will help you to build an emotional connection between kids and karst.

The youth market is a difficult one to crack. For many teens a day out with the family can seem a bit daggy, even if they secretly enjoy the experience. To meet the needs of this group we need to provide experiences aimed squarely at them. Activities that are ‘cool’, can be seen as ‘extreme’ and as theirs exclusively will hold appeal. Caving provides youth with a perfect opportunity to take risks, feel tough, challenge themselves, be physically active and interact with their peers. If you have an option of using a cave away from the tourist precinct that is not used by other groups you can also play on the satisfying sense of exclusivity.

Teens can of course be a demanding client group, so why should you work at attracting them at this stage, rather than just waiting for them to grow up? Well for a start this is a largely untapped market. Also, just as with children’s activities, the parents usually need to supply transport, which means they will require cave tours and meal breaks to fill their time while they wait. Like children’s activities though the real benefits are long term; you are inspiring a new generation to care about karst and caves and building a support base in the community. Hopefully even building up a future pool of speleologists.

Developing school adventures will bring the same long term benefits for children’s and youth based activities. It will also increase mid-week visitation, return visitation and may inspire family visits. From the school’s perspective there are many aspects that cave adventures can cater to, including team building and leadership programs and syllabus based adventures. In addition a range of other activities can be provided on site and we can provide risk management documents, which are very attractive to most teachers, saving them the need to develop these for themselves.

Surface activities that may be offered to schools or the general public include spotlighting, orienteering, bushwalking and abseiling. Having a range of activities makes your site more attractive as an all-in-one destination.

Spotlighting is a very popular family activity, allowing visitors a chance to encounter nocturnal wildlife. As people tend to have an emotional response to animals this provides karst managers with a great opportunity to strengthen visitor attachment to the site and also to broaden their understanding of karst ecosystems. Financially, spotlighting is a good incentive for families to stay overnight.

Orienteering and abseiling activities are of interest to schools who are using the site as an outdoor education camp or for Duke of Ed training. Orienteering may also be of interest to those visiting as part of either the science or geography curriculum. It can also be a fun family activity. If you incorporate karst surface features as markers you will increase participants’ knowledge of, and potentially interest in, karst geoheritage. Again there is a financial incentive in increasing mid-week visitation.

Bushwalking is an activity that is relatively cheap and easy to provide which is of interest to groups ranging from families and schools to inbound visitors. Being easily affordable it is likely to induce longer visits if properly promoted. Managers can use self guided walk brochures, signage or guided tours to highlight many aspects of their karst area, from history, flora, fauna or geology, thus providing a more holistic appreciation of the karst geoheritage.

To summarise, surface activities can lengthen visitor stay, attract a broader market and allow for packaging of product; most importantly

they provide an opportunity for managers to increase visitor understanding of and connection to karst landscapes and ecosystems.

Staff caving trips can also be of enormous benefit to karst managers. To begin, if a range of activities are offered, suitable to a range of skills and interests, it is a great way to build team spirit and keep morale high. Everyone can be involved, get to know each others strengths and share knowledge. Caving skills can be developed and maintained. Staff familiarization with the system will increase and, along with this, a sense of ownership will consolidate.

The benefits to management cover a broad spectrum. An increased sense of ownership and strong team spirit means staff are more likely to stick around, saving money in recruitment and maintaining a skilled workforce. Show cave tours are improved by deeper knowledge of the system and improved ability to answer questions. Guides are also likely to put a more personal stamp on their tours when they have a wider experience of the system.

Obviously the more caving experience an adventure guide has the better they will be able to deal with anything that may crop up on an adventure tour. Staff who may have been hesitant to take on this type of tour may discover their inner adventure guide, allowing greater flexibility in rostering. Staff fitness levels will also improve with regular caving trips.

With the increased level of karst understanding that inevitably comes with time spent underground (without the distractions provided by visitors) your staff may even begin to make some interesting discoveries, such as the diprotodontid recently found at Jenolan on a staff caving trip. This discovery has led to a renewed interest in paleontology amongst the staff, which has in turn fed through to our visitors.

The benefits to the caving community of having access to cave systems are many and varied, chief amongst them perhaps being the opportunity to visit and experience such amazing places, possibly discover new ones, develop skills and build understanding. The sense of belonging to a group and sense of connection to place should also be considered.

Karst managers should see speleos as partners in cave management, rather than as a threat to their resources. Needs of each group should be discussed and clearly understood by both parties.

Caving clubs can provide a major support base for karst managers, lobbying for government support and encouraging interest in caves among the general public. They are also a valuable knowledge source, often having an understanding of areas of cave history that can be easily overlooked when the focus is understandably on show cave history. Many cavers have valuable skills in geology and earth sciences, biology, chemistry, surveying, paleontology or rescue. These skills can be utilized by cave managers. Desirable projects and studies that are beyond the budget boundaries can be undertaken by caving clubs. Cavers will often happily take on management instigated projects, but managers should be prepared to consider their ideas also.

In order for this to happen though, the clubs need to be able to attract and train new members, which means that “recreational” caving trips must also be permitted, to allow for cave familiarization and leader training.

Trained cavers are also a potential source of experienced employees. Where there is overlap between the two groups the information and experience sharing creates a more vibrant workforce and can aid communication between management and cavers.

Where there are rights there are also responsibilities. In all adventure activities the preservation of the karst environment should be the prime consideration. Respect and encouragement should also be given to those who participate in adventure activities. Various interest groups will all benefit by working together rather than seeing each other as adversaries.

Remember, the more people who feel a genuine sense of connection to a site, the more people who will contribute to its preservation and even come out fighting in defense of that site should it ever be under threat in any way. These supporters are thus an invaluable asset for cave managers. Along with the aforementioned advantages this should ensure the place of adventure activities as a valuable tool in the karst management kit.