

Cango Caves - A Progress Report

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Cango Caves, South Africa.

Abstract

Africa is the cradle of humankind – from Australopithecus to the oldest modern humans to be discovered. Although virtually ever rock shelter overhang or shallow cave contains either pre-historical or historical remain (or both), proper cave systems are not that frequently found. Except Cango. This ancient pre-Cambrian limestone host one of the larger systems in Southern Africa and definitely boast the best developed show cave in the sub-Sahara. This paper is an attempt to firstly introduce this limestone cave and secondly describe the attempts made by the management to keep abreast with cave best practice models and appropriate applications as well as dealing with local politicians who often battle to understand the ethics and sensitivity of such unique non-renewable resources and heritage. This paper is our attempt to conserve, educate and taking up responsibility of managing an ‘inherited’ heritage for the next legacy (should we be so lucky that they realize the responsibility).

Introduction

Africa is the cradle of humankind. If it was not for the protective matrix of the Malmani (Transvaal) dolomites and the canopies of caves, the Australopithecus (Southern ape) fossils would have remained the missing link.

Sub-Saharan Africa is rather poor when it comes to carbonate rocks conducive for the formation of cave systems. It is nevertheless riddled with thousands of shallow caves or rock overhangs. The emphasis is however focused more on the contents of caves (archaeology and palaeontology) rather than the cave itself. The exception is Cango, a true limestone cave system and the biggest show cave operation in Africa.

“Cango” meaning “place of water between hills”, is an ancient Khoi/san word. Cango Caves is situated in the Southern Cape Intermontane basin, called the Little Karoo. “Karoo” means dry, which it is, with an annual rainfall of 340mm p.a. The refill of underground water from the ring of surrounding mountain (the Swartberg, Kamanassie, Outeniqua and Red Mountain)

retains the region as a “green” desert. The Swartberg Mountain, the range to the north, was recently declared an international Heritage site.

The depositional history of the Kango formation limestones date back to Pre-Cambrian times (100 million years go) when stromatolite deposits along a shallow shoreline formed the lowest member of the Cape Supergroup stratigraphy, known as the Kango member.

The presence of a well developed fault line that runs parallel to the Swartberg Mountain range caused the orogenetic pressure from the drifting Falkland plate to squeeze the limestone lense from the lower strata to the surface in a north/south tilted orientation. Numerous hot springs accompany the fault line and it is one of the reasons the effects of the 1969 great quake were felt in Oudtshoorn.

The limestone member lay submerged in the water table 15 million years ago, due to a period of exceptionally high rainfall. This resulted in a phreatic, low energy system of 7.2km of which the first 1.2km is designated tourist cave. Cango II was discovered in 1972 and remains pristine. It has been visited by the late Mr. Roy Skinner, the first non-South African and by Kent Henderson of ACKMA in 2008.

Wild Caves in the limestone belt tallies to 26 of which 2 are infrequently used by Adventure operators in the schools and teambuilding market. Significant is the adventure route option at Cango. It is probably one of a kind in the world and does quench the need for the adventure seeker, although it is pretty commercial.

A Dutch ensign, Isaac Schrijver entered the secret realm of the Little Karoo through a canyon like feature, the Attaqua’s Kloof in 1689. His colonial presence halted the Later Stone Age in this region. A hundred years later, the Cango Caves were discovered by a certain Van Zyl, farmer and road builder. He was accompanied by a team of slaves. This colonial “discovery” could never be substantiated by archival evidence. Political

“disputes” often erupts over the naming of the Caves and some of its larger chambers. The archaeological evidence however, provides sufficient proof that Stone Age People occupied the twilight zone of the Cango as far as 80,000 years ago. The discovery is undisputedly their claim.

Cango is not the deepest or longest cave in Africa, but it is one of the oldest tourist attractions in South Africa. The sheer size of the caverns and its massive speleothems (as well as the lack of competing caves around), was sufficient to be described as one of the wonders of Africa by Hedley Chilvers at the turn of the previous century. Some of the first protective legislation was passed, by the British government specifically for the conservation purposes of Cango. The first ever official and government remunerated guide was appointed at the Cango Caves.

Managing a show cave in Africa poses many challenges. Having local politicians as decision makers for cave policies often affecting operational procedures, together with the fact that the Municipality is becoming increasingly more dependant on cave income, ensures a threatening environment for the Cave. This affects staff appointments, conservation, ethics and often much needed funding for critical projects, e.g. LED lights. Solutions are never simple, often implying intense negotiations, arguments and threats of intervention by the Provincial Government. The latter is the

appointed keeper of the Cango Caves. Sadly they also lack the capacity or drive to make a drastic change.

The Cave currently is receiving 230,000 visitors annually and the market is healthily split on a 50/50 basis between foreign (mainly German, Dutch and U.K.) and domestic.

Negative impacts are definitely the absence of an accepted Management plan and the (still) dormant scientific advisory body. Council still has not been in a position to approve the existing management plan and views the science committee as a threat and unnecessary expenditure.

Not all is doom and gloom.

We are currently running several worthwhile projects that we try and align with international best practice models, e.g. the LED light replacement programme, the construction of a new walkway to prevent dust pollution, the Radon protection programme and the environmental monitoring project.

Our current aim is to “ringfence” the cave as a recognised conservation Trust, run by an assembly of knowledgeable directors, to ensure the longevity and well-being of the caves as a non-renewable geo-asset and as the unique selling point of the Little Karoo. The future of Cango is doubtful under the prevailing situation.