

Wild Cave Tours, the journey: strange, exciting and rewarding (but sometimes political)

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Abstract

Wild Cave Tours, operating at Mole Creek, Tasmania, was created in 1989 as a cave tour specialist business catering to the tourism and special interest group markets. It maintains part time operation, mainly in the summer season. Over the years, the business has led by example in minimal impact caving and safety standards for dependents in the unforgiving environment of wild Tasmanian caves. However, at the same time, the incapacity of Tasmania's tourism marketing machine to fully embrace boutique and regional tourism products, as well as political conflict in the local community over conservation issues, have caused difficulties. The limited commercial success of the business is primarily due to the difficulties inherent in its regional location and Tasmania's tourism marketing structure and culture. Contemporary management initiatives designed to limit the impact of recreational caving in wild caves could threaten business viability.

Introduction

Mole Creek is one of the more popular of Australia's karsts for cavers and tourists alike. Its fame is due partly to the fact that it hosts a large number of caves that are famous for the abundance of their mineral decorations. For caving club visitors, its caves vary in nature, from vertical to horizontal and from simple river caves to complex maze caves, catering to cavers of all abilities or experience. For Australian cavers, a major attraction and challenge are that many caves at Mole Creek are active river caves (cold and wet). Finally, many of the popular recreational caves are relatively easy to access as day-trips from local campgrounds and other accommodation. Two guided show caves cater to the tourism trade. There are no self-timed (self-guided) show caves.

To a prospective tourism operator Mole Creek may seem like an obvious place for a successful "wild" cave venture, complementing the more

mainstream experiences offered by its well-established show caves. However, while adventure and environmental tourism took off elsewhere in Australia and New Zealand in the last quarter of the 20th century, until the advent of Wild Cave Tours. The only tourists frequenting wild caves of Mole Creek were self-reliant caving clubs and school, scout and church youth groups, along with guests of a former Deloraine youth hostel owner who undertook some casual guiding.

Wild Cave Tours' organised trips into undeveloped caves of the district in many ways reinvented an earlier tradition established in colonial times by Dan Pickett (see Haygarth, elsewhere in these Proceedings), whereby visitors are treated to both scenic and cultural curiosities by a colourful local character. Many rural communities in Tasmania have embraced tourism as part of an economic transition, shifting some of the reliance on primary industries towards the services sector. Wild Cave Tours was one of the first of many micro-businesses to be established in tourism hinterlands, and was modelled on a 20th century owner-operator tourism tradition pioneered by tenting owner-operators on the iconic Overland Track (e.g. Eric Sargent, "Craclair Tours;" John Boden, "Tasmanian Highland Tours"). The story of Wild Cave Tours is intrinsically also a personal tale of the figure responsible for its inception.

The number of caves potentially available for commercial use is limited by the cross-tenure extent of many caves. While several reserves have been created in recognition of caves, it is common that only the entrance is contained within the reserve, and most of the cave extends into private tenure without depth limits. Many more caves are wholly privately owned, as the landscape is intensively used for farming.

A low volume in trade is a substantial reason Wild Cave Tours' service retains a personal touch, however it means the operator requires a

supplementary income and a minimum critical mass to cover costs. Potentially, existing demand for nature-based product could generate more business, as could proximity to the two regional cities of Devonport and Launceston, but there are many reasons it has been difficult to reach out to the market and convert interest to bookings.

Wild Cave Tours' fate has been very much tied to that of fellow tourism operators of Mole Creek, who have been forced to repeatedly reinvent their identity and marketing efforts in response to constant imposed change, including successive state tourism strategies, while competing with other Tasmanian geographical regions for attention. Tasmania's demographics differ from those of mainland states, with the majority of the population living outside the greater metropolitan area of the capital. Although Mole Creek is centrally located to a considerable range of nature-based tourism attractions and activities, the attainment of status as a regional tourism destination in its own right has been evasive. In the state strategic picture, Mole Creek seems like somewhere you drive through on the "touring route" network, or take a day trip to from higher profile northern centres.

Wild Cave Tours was essentially an extension of a caver-conservationist's lifestyle, growing out of

a yearning to seed a deeper understanding of the world beneath our feet, a world whose interconnectedness with the surface and our activities upon it was poorly understood. I began my caving life at Mole Creek, after my return to Tasmania to live in 1976. I rubbed shoulders underground with members of the Southern Caving Society and the Northern Caverneers, trudged through the thick wet forests of the Great Western Tiers with Bob Woolhouse tracing the location of the limestone contact and investigating associated features, assisted Kevin Kiernan during his 1983 reconnaissance survey of the Mole Creek karst and attended *Speleomania* (1985 Australian Speleological Federation Conference). I had also witnessed, as a eucalypt seed collection contractor for the Forestry Commission, the transition in forestry to larger coupes in the clearfelling of native forests in the early 1980s. I could understand the threat of such activities, compared to prior selective and smaller scale forestry techniques, on karst processes and land stability. Wild Cave Tours was begun the same year that I joined other local conservationists to work towards a proposal for Great Western Tiers National Park, formally launched the following year, 1990. Consecutively, the growing number of caver-conservationists in the local area formed the Mole Creek Caving Club in 1991.



Figure 1: This was probably Wild Cave Tours' first trip under license to Croesus Cave in 1989. This was a field trip for environmentalists visiting northern Tasmania. Volunteers including the author cleaned the feature behind the group, "the snow bank," of previously placed handprints.

Wild Cave Tours' genesis in 1989 was triggered by a high-profile effort to develop a third show cave at Mole Creek, despite the arguable fulfilment of foreseeable demand in northern Tasmania. The context of the proposal was that the beauty and extent of Mole Creek's caves were becoming more widely known, and having only two of them developed for public view was another under-utilised natural resource; a bit of a waste. It had been recognised that opening the utopian cave, Kubla Khan, would be far too expensive to develop, so a proposal for a tramway in Croesus Cave was underway, driven by politically well-connected persons. I saw licensed commercial caving trips in Croesus as a more appropriate way to make the cave available to the public, and one that could keep the cave in a wild state, as the icon for cavers that it was. With the support of the then Senior Ranger, Chester Shaw, a Tasmanian television film crew was taken into the cave to promote the concept while my licence application was underway. In Tasmania, even tourism is political. I was frustrated that karst systems and their caves lacked acknowledgement in the resource exploitation-conservation debate. I felt I had a

chance to communicate this imperative to people, if I could first demonstrate to politicians and community leaders that even undeveloped caves could have direct exploitative-economic value. If I could get this point across, I might be able to develop profiles and support for indirect economic benefits like rural water resources, the health issue of sinkhole dumping and intrinsic values like cave fauna and landscape aesthetics. Like other Tasmanian conservationists starting up micro-businesses in tourism, I believed in a great future for tourism, and tourism's ability to help justify the protection of native forests from big business forestry while retaining timber resources for local communities' use.

In the early years, clients may have been motivated mainly by a sense of adventure and the promise of scenery most people don't get to see, but in the process, they were almost all touched by insight beyond mere facts and figures, for example "A different perspective on life" (from the Visitors Book). In more recent years, a sophisticated clientele has been openly seeking special, genuine nature experiences guided by experts, passionate in their field. Throughout its life, the business may have been

successful in catering to corporate group markets, but its limited success in the Tasmanian youth/school group market is regrettable. A brochure supported by the department of Sport and Recreation and Meander Valley Council, specifying the advantages of using specialist guiding (*Youth Outreach Program*), had little effect. Wild Cave Tours' best discount rates are outcompeted by the lure of free of charge services offered by youth workers employed in government service organisations; whereas clients of a micro-business must pay enough to provide the day's "wage." The lack of regulation of the not-for-profit sector, as to which caves are visited and standards of the conduct of dependents, has always been problematic. This sector likely represents the largest cave user group of Mole Creek's undeveloped caves.

Although Wild Cave Tours was started up rather early in the market's maturity of demand for such product, building up the business over some years when little money was left after expenses was made possible by sole parent income support. However, Wild Cave Tours struggled just to cover operating costs in the first few years of operation, with many of the operating days being familiarisation trips ("famils") for others in the tourism industry to get to know the product, and free-of-charge trips for people on the *Visiting Journalists Program*, run by *Tourism Tasmania*. From the bookings diary, the summer period of 1993/94 saw 1 to 3 trips a week, usually for 1 to 5 people. I fully threw myself into tourism operator mode, taking out the inaugural Tasmanian Tourism Award for Environmental Tourism, participated in regional tourism marketing, development and awards and kept doing rounds talking to accommodation operators, Visitor Centres and networking with other emerging nature tourism operators. Wild Cave Tours' business increased up to the 1996/97 year, which carried 139 clients over 57 working days. Business then levelled off at that volume. It had become a very satisfying part time, largely seasonal job. There was a lot of working down-time, preparing for trips and cleaning up after them and carrying out roles in local and regional tourism committees, but each trip was so well received it injected energy.

Revision and development of the Wild Cave Tours product was led by participants' responses. For example, I found everyone keen to help in

my "cave maintenance" (cleaning handprints on calcite and picking up rubbish). So it was that active conservation, quickly became part of each trip.

People appreciated novel things about the trips; dressing in caving overalls, the loan of photography equipment and expert assistance with their photography, and the true caving tales as told by the local caver/s guiding them. They relaxed into an otherwise potentially hostile environment when the small numbers allowed them to not feel rushed by younger or more experienced participants. The many journalists made the country home baking quite famous! The product was promoted as a packed itinerary, offering two caves in a half day and up to four in a full day tour. Wet Cave was the focus for many years; this grandly proportioned and decorated stream cave, with a spectacular glow-worm display where I played flute, always made a huge impact on people, was quite adventurous enough for most, and nearby Honeycomb Cave could be used for some physical fun and to warm up after the long cold experience in Wet. Croesus was only used occasionally, for photographers and naturalists prepared to endure the extreme cold and long drive to see it. Those motivated by adventure were better satisfied elsewhere. Baldocks Cave offered historic acetylene lighting relics, a variety of crystal calcite forms, cave fauna and great natural bush setting. A lower level could be used for adventure. Cyclops Cave, a short stream cave near Baldocks, was used as a contrast. Two additional caves came into use for a few trips a year. From 1995, those willing to take the time were conducted into Westmorland Cave, a 20 minute walk each way on Council land upstream of Wet Cave, off the old tourist walking track to Westmorland Falls. It had a wonderful glow-worm display, a fun entrance passage and a lovely "wilderness" rainforest setting. From 1995, My Cave was used occasionally for competent clients, its climbing entry a risk for the unprepared. Finally, Sassafras Cave came into use during 2000. It had an excellent glow-worm display, and was an easy scenery appreciation type experience. Although its small reserve was enclosed entirely by private land, the farmer kindly allowed access.

As operator of Wild Cave Tours, my lifestyle was barrelled along beyond cave tourism, but this has been a transition era, as interest in the Great

Outdoors has rapidly expanded; my involvement in broader roles has been a necessary part of being a specialist operator who has pioneered standards sympathetic to both environmental and client wellbeing. I have been driven to spend uncounted hours of voluntary involvement in the development of national outdoor activity standards, education outdoor activity guidelines, cave rescue exercises and actual rescues, conservation working bees, national caving issues and to agitation for positive change in cave

visitor management in Tasmania from within industry, club and environmental organisations. Official response to the latter persistent agitation has been long coming, but is presently coming to fruition with moves to impose obligatory standards of conduct to improve safety, and number restrictions to reduce environmental impact (see Figure 2), on all wild cave users, including the not-for-profit sector. These changes will also impose restrictions on Wild Cave Tours' licensed operations.



Figure 2: Accumulated caver impact on earth slopes in Honeycomb Cave. Left: 1998; right: 2011. Ferns and mosses have reduced in coverage, while some erosion is evident on the climb.

A micro-business such as this has brought some interesting people contacts! Numerous free-of-charge trips have been donated for environmental education, especially field trips for *Forest Festival* participants, special interest groups and conferences. Trips for better-informed audiences such as these groups are more rewarding, as clients interact more with the presenter, allowing in-depth interpretation and discussion of conservation issues. Student groups are especially challenging, but equally rewarding, in the process of bringing them actively into the spirit of teamwork and care with their impact on the natural environment. Extended programs have allowed students more interaction, learning cave surveying techniques, rescue and navigation

skills. Journalists on sponsored, all expenses paid tours of Tasmania really excelled themselves, producing thousands of dollars' worth of inspired publicity from personal experience. However, amusing exceptions included a journalist whose experience was terrifying, as she wrote (of being in the cave): "I feel as if I opened my mouth it would fill with black material. I keep my mouth shut." A major coup and highlight for Wild Cave Tours was meeting Sorrel Wilby for the filming of a *Getaway* segment, a person who makes everyone she touches feel special and who knows how to have fun. Collingwood first-graders on leave after the season were sceptical of our ability to challenge such fit blokes as themselves, yet were left

virtually quaking at the knees after Honeycomb Cave. Some international millionaires were blissed-out when their raw, wet and dirty adventure was rewarded by silver service dinner and theatre in the bush. However, the weirdest and most wonderful thing of all was to witness

the blessings and rituals performed by a Tibetan monk in Wet Cave. His self-appointed mission was to bring about healing for the community's contemporary political turmoil and divisiveness and for Tasmania's forests (Figure 3).

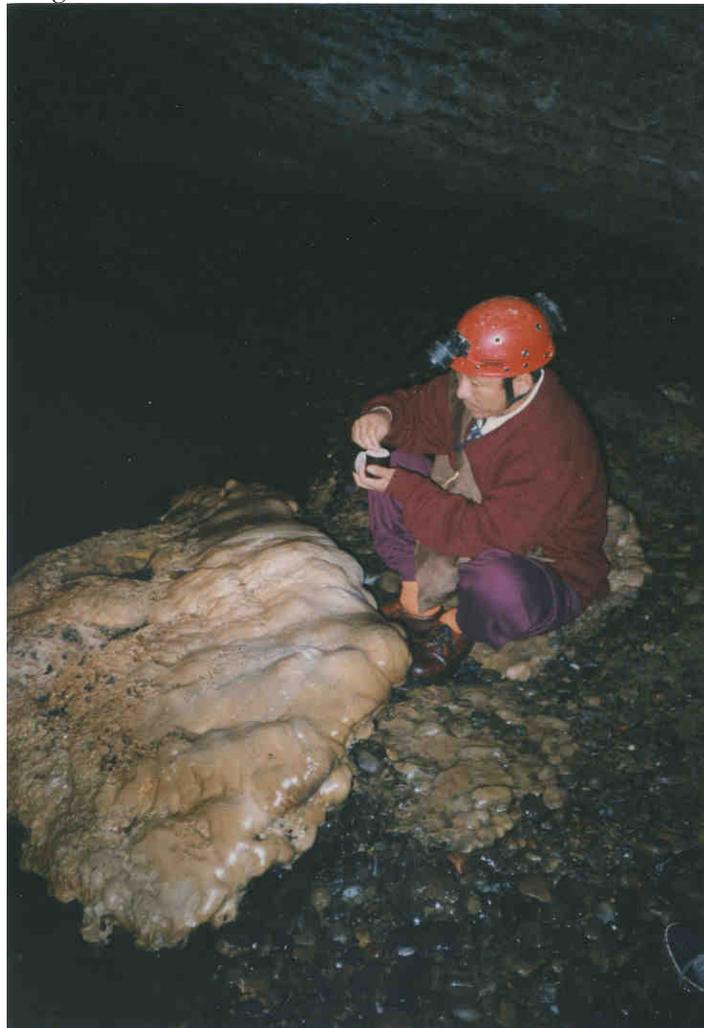


Figure 3: Lama Samten in Wet Cave, 1998.

In 2000, local landowners began to be politically active, following a period of rising tension in the local farming and forestry sector, which saw the listing of the Mole Creek karst landscape on the Register of the National Estate. The negotiation of Tasmania's *Regional Forests Agreement* (RFA) and the rescinding of the generations-long grazing lease over the state reserve at Wet and Honeycomb Caves, when its status was upgraded to National Park, were seen as further insults. The owners of Wet Cave brought a century and a half's public access to a close as a protest (only the entrance is contained in the public reserve)

and logged the highly visible hillside adjacent to the reserve, in contravention of the RFA. Access was bulldozed on the farm to an upstream entrance of the cave, which was advertised for lease as a "world class cave system" for tourism, but no lessees came forward. Later that year, access to Westmorland Cave was also closed, marked by an ugly confrontation of a Wild Cave Tours client group by local farmers. An old gentlemen's agreement had provided for the walking track to pass through 200 m of private land onto Council's block, to avoid development of the longer Public Works Road alignment,

which was used as an integral part of the farm on either side of it. Although the well-known Westmorland Falls were also inaccessible, the government was unwilling to develop the legal access. Farmers cleared part of the Westmorland walking track for vehicular access, from the farmland to the entrance of the cave, where an old log dam diverting water to the farms was replaced by a small concrete dam and new flume system, to maximise capture of the water from the cave's inflow. Council backed out of any involvement in these issues by gifting their land to the state government for conservation. Four years passed before an access easement over the private land portion of the old walking track was funded and purchased by the government, restoring access. Unfortunately, Westmorland Cave was physically blocked by a catastrophic debris flow during the January 2011 floods (see paper elsewhere in these Proceedings). Meanwhile, the farm used to access Sassafras Cave was purchased by a forestry *Managed Investment Scheme* (MIS) company. Access to this cave was closed in 2002 after only two years' use by Wild Cave Tours. MIS companies were paying prices for land above their market value as food-production farms. Croesus was finally withdrawn from the license in 2003, since it was a restricted access cave that the Parks and Wildlife Service and many club cavers thought should only be available to caving club members. By 2002, the Wild Cave Tours product had changed to mainly half day trips seeing just one cave. Honeycomb has become the main cave, with equal accent on adventure, learning physical caving skills, and environmental interpretation.

Marketing was as problematic as access for Wild Cave Tours. In 1994, the business joined Tourism Tasmania's wholesaling program, *Tasmania's Temptations*. Having such businesses on the books embraced the emerging official "wilderness" branding of Tasmania, and gave micro-businesses presence in a brochure nearly all visitors found. However, like many other owner-operated businesses found, for Wild Cave Tours it was very costly to participate, both in up-front costs each year and in commissions. The communication chain was too long from client to operator, through retail agent and wholesaler, and the nature of boutique product was often poorly represented to clients, causing mismatches and refund requests. Although a collective of up to 14 owner-operators called

Tasmania's Natural Experiences (TNE) lobbied very actively, the small extra volume for Wild Cave Tours from wholesaling caused more working days in the season for very poor returns and so I left the program in 2002. TNE continued co-operative marketing efforts; furthermore, its members got on the internet. Things were changing; we could afford to market ourselves. Another co-operative, the *Tasmanian Licensed Guiding Operators Association* (TLGOA), was formed to liaise with government regulatory, management and licensing bodies, organising annual meetings with them and representing members' common interests in between times. TLGOA's members were able to survive the Public Liability Insurance crisis of the 1990s, by virtue of the Association's collective buying power.

Still, Tasmania's boutique operators thinned out in the late 1990s, weakened by the "recession we had to have" or having fallen victim to the uncertain returns of regionalism. For example, Mole Creek's operators struggled through council amalgamations and the resulting loss of identity through the merger, two changes in district phone numbers playing havoc with marketing and the rise and fall of inter-municipal marketing co-operatives and Tourism Tasmania's "touring routes." Mole Creek's 4WD tour operator closed up shop. Mole Creek and Wild Cave Tours had little support from a Deloraine Visitor Centre funded out of the RFA, partly because Deloraine openly felt in competition with Mole Creek during and since the RFA funding bid. For Wild Cave Tours, a further reason was the large number of volunteer staff, making it impossible to properly familiarise the Centre with the product. In its struggle to survive, the visitor centre became largely an accommodation booking service, and its "Activities" book was forgotten. Local accommodation establishments and show cave guides have always been very important in referring clients to Wild Cave Tours. However, brochure display at the show cave ticket office was not allowed, and offers to produce co-operative marketing brochures with Parks and Wildlife were unsuccessful. Wild Cave Tours' production of its own brochures ceased in 2004, as they had always prompted more enquiries for the show caves than for my own business.

By 2004 I had acknowledged the business' reliance on cost-neutral promotion like tourism association websites for members and my own web domain and site. I dropped all advertising. I had become convinced of my inability to differentiate the Wild Cave Tours product from the show cave product in the tourism information distribution network, hence tourism marketplace. The practical daily limitations in carrying capacity of a specialist boutique caving operator in regional Tasmania necessitated more working days than I could secure. I faced the need for a day job, and went back to university to re-skill formally, in environmental science. I have been there full time since the summer of 2004/05, have loved every minute of it, and am still energised by taking tours on weekends and occasionally during the week in summer, especially those tours conducted for a small but devoted clientele of student groups.

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Conclusion

Wild Cave Tours' success can only be measured on its own terms, not in commercial terms. While it has never made enough profit to support its owner-operator without supplementary income, it survives and continues. It upholds a stewardship ethic towards the popular recreational caves of Mole Creek, high standards in caving leadership and the conduct of dependent groups, and the client experience continues to be enriched by genuine insights into the world of speleology and by environmental education. Even if current moves towards curtailment of all recreational caving activities in the interests of cave protection and the safety of dependents renders Wild Cave Tours incapable of continuing, it may have already achieved enough for one lifetime.

Photography is by the author.