

17th INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS of SPELEOLOGY

SPELEO 2017: CAVES in an ANCIENT LAND

Cathie Plowman

Four years ago, the Australian Speleological Federation's bid to host the 17th International Congress of Speleology (ICS) was approved in the historic Czech city of Brno. The venue for the Australian congress was to be Sydney and specifically Panthers Leagues Club at Penrith. As the International Union of Speleology has pre-determined months for its congresses, it would be held in July ; mid-winter.

The ASF asked Denis Marsh from Orange Speleological Society to convene the congress and preparations for Speleo 2017 began in earnest in May 2014. David Butler and I came on board then, David as treasurer and myself as field excursions coordinator. Initially a team of five, the organising committee grew to include a core of 11 people, plus another 4-5 who were regularly 'on the fringes'.

From the beginning the congress was the usual story: too much work for a small team, over-worked people constantly taking on extra jobs and, always, the worries about not having the funds to meet our expenses. The latter causing much consternation about a registration fee that would cover costs, but which wasn't prohibitive. But somehow it all came together and the 17th ICS, held 23–29 July 2017, was a wonderful success.



Major congress sponsor, thanks to the ever-generous support from David Head and Weidmüller.

Photo: Janice March

How do you define a successful congress? There were close to 500 registrants, all presentations were well-attended, most field-excursions were booked to capacity, the feedback from participants was very positive and the financial books are balancing nicely. But more than any of that, when you see people you know haven't met before, and you know they work in similar areas, coming together to talk and share meals and ideas, then the congress is working.

There were many 'fronts' to the congress organisation and, as readers will understand, it's impossible to mention them all. But here's a few pieces of the massive jigsaw that was the 17th ICS:

Behind the scenes

Walking to an evening abseil practice at the Cataract Gorge in Launceston in early 2015, Janice March (from Northern Caverneers) mused over what she might do to support the congress. I mentioned that we needed a lot more funds and within weeks Janice had immersed herself in seeking sponsorships and subsequently wrote hundreds of letters and emails trying to gain support from the business world. Sponsorships came in many varied ways, from monetary support, advertisements in congress publications and donated products which were auctioned or used for competition prizes.

Justin Wilkinson (from Sydney Speleological Society) led the team that put Speleo Olympics together where teams competed for the best time through a series of 'cave-like' challenges: not breaking 'straws' or treading on 'oolites', and pushing a squeeze and that was filled with hundreds of used PET bottles. Lots of fun and team-work.

The plenary lecture theatre at the Brno congress was a sea of colour with the flags of the countries that make up the IUS. We didn't have access to flags or funds to buy them so congress committee member and primary school teacher Ann-Marie Meredith (from Western Australian Speleological Group) engaged her year 2 students to draw and colour the flags from the 56-member countries of the IUS, as part of a learning plan.

Like it or not, money does matter. ACKMA stalwart and treasurer Tony Culberg provided professional assistance to congress treasurer David Butler on the complexities of GST, BAS and much more.

Congress presentations

Having missed the Welcome to Country, given by Aunty Edna Watson, and the official opening, I made sure that I got myself away from the registration desk to hear the keynote addresses. I'm so glad I did. After all the hard-yards to pull the congress together, these were three excellent presentations and I left feeling up-lifted about where the coming week was heading.



Associate Professor John Webb delivers his keynote address.

Photo: Janice March

Professor John Webb, La Trobe University, Victoria. John spoke to the congress theme of Caves in an Ancient Land and how the long and diverse geological and climatic history of Australia has impacted karst development in this country. This presentation was a wonderful introduction to Australia's karst and the scientific program of the congress.

Dr Elizabeth Reed, University of Adelaide and the South Australian Museum. Liz spoke on the contribution of cave sites to the understanding of Quaternary Australian megafauna records. Liz was particularly enthusiastic about the benefits of working closely with cavers to achieve research in this area. Greg Middleton described Liz's talk as 'one of the best at any cave meeting or conference I've attended in recent years'.

Ken Smith, Cave Divers Association of Australia and Cave Exploration Group of South Australia. Ken gave a highly-visual presentation on the beauty and challenges of cave diving in several sites in Australia and New Zealand. I was in awe of the beauty and enthralled by the skill shown in Ken's presentation.



*Flags of International Union of Speleology member countries, thanks to the efforts of Year 2 students, Collier Primary School and their teacher Ann-Marie Meredith from WASG.
Photo: Janice March*

There were five concurrent streams of presentations over four days. Coordinating these to streams, allocating rooms, and juggling the time-table and session chairs was the work of Jill Rowling and Susan White. Hiccups to contend with included people not having arrived in time for when their presentation was due and rescheduling. These issues were generally well-resolved.

The presentations showed the breadth of speleological efforts and research that people are engaged in around the world, often with very limited resources. The papers were organised as follows:

- Archaeology and Palaeontology in Caves
- Australian Caves and Karst
- Biospeleology, Evolution, Ecology and Problems
- Cave Management and Education
- Cave Climate and Palaeoclimate Records
- Cave Mineralogy
- Exploration and Cave Techniques
- Extra-terrestrial Caves
- Geomicrobiology of Cave and Karst Environments
- History of Speleology and Karst Research
- Karst and Caves in Carbonate Rocks, Salt and Gypsum
- Karst and Cave Survey, Mapping and Data Processing



*Inside the exhibition marquee.
Photo: Janice March*

- Karst, Pseudokarst and Caves in Other Rocks
- Lava and Volcanic Caves
- Medicine, Philosophy, Social Aspects
- Modelling in Karst and Cave Environments
- Speleological Research and Activities in Artificial Caves
- Speleogenesis
- Speleothem Research
- Sustainable Development of karst
- Other Topics

Like many in the organising team, 'things to do' limited when I could get to presentations, but some stand-out ones that I attended included:

- Val Hildreth-Werker and Jim Werker (USA): Cave Conservation and Restoration workshops with cave guides in Brazil.

- Leda Zogbi (Brazil): Lights in the Darkness, a cave photographic project in Brazil.
- Barbel Vogel (Germany): Cave Animal of the Year, as Barbel is my inspiration to get a similar program off the ground in Australia.
- Steve Peerman (USA): Caver Quest, showing new options for the use of digital technology in cave interpretation.
- Douglas Soroka (USA): Recovery of cave fauna after cleaning heavily-impacted show cave.
- Armstrong Osborne (Australia): the geo-heritage of Cliefden Caves.

The crowd-funded scholarships

It was a pleasure to get to know the recipients of the crowd-funded scholarships and attend their presentations. Several ACKMA members contributed to the crowd-funding effort.

Roxanne Tsang (Papua New Guinea): Roxanne presented on a research project in Nakanai karst area in East New Britain Province, PNG where she has been interviewing local people on their perspectives of the caves and karst.

Isma Dwi Kurniawan (Indonesia): Isma presented on the impacts of human activities in show caves in Pacitan, East Java Province, Indonesia.

Exhibition Marquee

The 1800 square-metre marquee might have looked and felt like an over-sized lifeless space but for the planning efforts of Janice March and Justin Wilkinson. When set-up, it included a 100-seat lecture room that was used for presentations, the cartography salon with more than 20 high-standard cave maps displayed, the arts salon area with cave-inspired textile arts, the photographic salon where the photographic entries were viewed on a screen. There was the poster area with over 50 posters relating to many varied aspects of cave research. There were book stalls and cave-related merchandise, lounge areas for resting and catching-up with people. The Sixteen Legs Tasmanian Cave Spider exhibition was accompanied by staff from Bookend Trust.

A 'book launch' evening saw four cave books launched and an 'open night' coinciding with the adjacent Penrith Night Markets saw local people come and viewing the displays and activities. Hopefully they learnt a little about speleology. And it was certainly warmer inside than out!



*Roxanne Tsang, from Papua New Guinea at Jenolan Caves.
Photo: Janice March*



*Post-congress excursion at Tuglow Caves, NSW,
led by Andrew Baker.
Photo: Janice March*

Field Excursions

Coordinating the field excursions was my main congress job. Initially, 27 pre-and post-congress field excursions were offered. Locations and caving pursuits offered were widespread and varied; from Chillagoe to Margaret River, New Zealand to the Nullarbor. Show caves, cave diving, vertical trips and arts-in-caves were amongst the wide range of experiences offered. The excursions were reviewed mid-January 2017, those with inadequate bookings were removed from the program leaving 17 excursions. I cannot express enough thanks to the people who put the effort into organising the excursions. Whether they proceeded or not, it took a lot of time and effort just getting an excursion to the point where it could be advertised.

The mid-congress excursion day included options for the Australian Museum, a Blue Mountains bush walk, a Blue Mountains dry canyon trip and a day at Jenolan Caves. Coordinating the Jenolan Caves excursion was my biggest single challenge of the ICS, and during the process I worked with three different cave managers. I wanted a memorable day with a variety of cave experiences, and no 'people jams'. Our eventual

day was four buses, 188 people and a complex schedule including science talks and tours, show cave tours, cello concerts, a photography 'open cave' and dining room lunch. And it all worked. I was so grateful, especially that everyone had boarded the departure buses by 6.45 a.m. The cello concerts in the Cathedral Cave were given by from Blue Mountains musician Georg Mertens. You can listen to one of these concerts via YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urugWCMDBMW>

Social Program

Evening activities included a reception hosted by the team from Lyon, France who are hosting the 18th ICS.

Bookend Trust showed the completed film Sixteen Legs which combines art, science, humour and more to present the Tasmanian cave spider.

An Australiana Night featured a supper of sausage rolls and bread and vegemite (the supper at the French night was far more interesting) and raised money for the Karst Conservation Fund via the ubiquitous auction.

David Butler won the 'over 55s' prusik competition, coming second-place overall, just 13 seconds behind the overall winner (Greg Thomas from WASG). David won a rope-cleaning machine for his exhausting efforts.

International Union of Speleology

Two general assembly meetings of the International Union of Speleology were held in conjunction with the congress. Delegates elected a new president, George Veni from the USA to take the reins from retiring Kyung Sik Woo. A second woman was elected to the Bureau (i.e. the executive), this is Barbel Vogel from Germany, and Tim Moulds was also elected to the Bureau. Well done Tim and best wishes with your efforts.

In Summary

- Seven days, including associated International Union of Speleology meetings.
- 23 July to 29 July 2017.
- Held at Panthers Leagues Club, Penrith, Western Sydney.
- 461 Registrants, plus approximately 20 day-registrants
- Registrants from 46 countries.
- Five concurrent streams of papers over four days.
- Over 50 posters.
- 20 maps in cartography salon.
- Photographic salon featuring 350 photos from 24 photographers (including some seriously impressive photos and places).
- 27 pre-and post-congress excursions offered.
- 17 pre-and post-congress excursions run.
- 198 people attended pre-and post-congress excursions.
- 4 mid-week excursions attended by 249 registrants.
- 4 partners' program day trips attended by 20 people.
- Congress dinner attended by 345 people.



*Cleaning caving equipment to guard against White Nose Syndrome.
Photo: Janice March*

Feedback from some of the registrants

It was a fantastic congress - in the top 2 or 3 that I have attended anywhere in the world, very well done and great thanks. Andy Eavis, UK

I had wonderful time in Australia and I don't forget you and your Society. All cavers are one family. Yong Gun Choi, Korea

Know that the congress you organized was thoroughly enjoyed by everyone I spoke with. I repeatedly heard about how friendly and attentive the organizers were. In fact, I heard and saw that repeated about the Australian people in general. It was a privilege to work with you and attend your ICS. George Veni, USA

We would like to thank you and the whole organizing team for all the work you did to make this congress successful and for us unforgettable. Ernest and Taraneh, Austria.

We (in Indonesia) certainly need a lot of networks amongst speleologists from around the world. We have much to do and to establish linkages is one of the urgent things. I hope this link (with Australia) goes on and on. Hilary Reinhart, Indonesia.



*The team for the Brazil Cave Photographic Project with Philippe Crochet (France) proudly displaying the project book.
Photo: Janice March*