

NARACOORTE AND TANTANOOLA CAVES: CHANGING of the GUARD

Deborah Craven-Carden

After eight and a half years as Manager, Naracoorte and Tantanoola Deborah Craven-Carden handed over the keys to Acting Manager Nick McIntyre on Saturday 26 August '17.

Deborah arrived at Naracoorte in January 2009 to backfill the position while previous manager Steve Bourne trialled a new role based out of the Mt Gambier for the then Department of Environment and Heritage. After the trial period finished Steve was offered the role of Deputy Regional Manager and Deborah was offered a five-year contract as Caves Manager. Contract periods were extended until Deborah decided the time had come to get involved in other things on her 'Bucket List'.

At the handover ceremony Deborah noted the very special aspects of each Cave Park - Tantanoola Cave with its ultra-exquisite cave decorations and the listing of Naracoorte as South Australia's only World Heritage Area - the southern sister of 1994 serial-listed Australian Fossil Mammal Sites - Riversleigh and Naracoorte (AFMS).

She outlined some of the many projects that had been done during her time, starting with a review of the Naracoorte Caves education package in 2009, followed by a visitor strategy, a brand strategy and interpretative concept and then an interpretation plan. These were the basis for the two-years of Master Planning that laid the framework for capital asset upgrades. The key aspect that emerged from the planning was that science is the 'brand' for Naracoorte.

The discovery of the fossil deposits in 1969 led to years of palaeontological research through Flinders University. In 2011 a Federal Government 'Caring for our Country' grant enabled three years of sustained research and in 2017 a four year Australian Research Council granted to University of Adelaide brings 'Science Alive' back to the AFMS Naracoorte.

In 2013 Naracoorte was targeted by the Federal Govt World Heritage Division to receive 'Caring for our Country' funding whereby the first Executive Officer was appointed with a key task of servicing the WHA's first community governance group. The first appointee set-up the strong framework from which the second EO bases his role.

Deborah noted the superb efforts of the Friends of Caves volunteer group and thanked them for their dedication to the Park's gardens and grounds. Tantanoola Cave has a regular volunteer whose efforts are transforming the site.

In 2015 special Federal tourism development funding was granted and a series of infrastructure upgrade works began. In a couple of months the 'Roof-top' Loop Walk will be completed. The target audience is wheelchair users and others who cannot, for various reasons, get into caves. On a recent visit Andy Spate and Deborah agreed this walk will be great for old cavers. Yes it will, as along with other visitors old cavers will be able to stand on the observation platforms along the 'Roof-top' and peer down through cave roof holes into caves below, reminiscing about the good old days when....

Paths in the Stick-Tomato (Wet) Cave and Cathedral Cave area have been redirected, old cave fences replaced, feature fences will have name blades identifying for visitors the cave they are looking at. The Wonambi Visitor Centre and the Bat

Observation Centre have each had a face-lift in the smart new black and white colour scheme. By the end of September new wayfinding signs will be installed about the main Visitor Precinct and interpretation panels along the Roof-top walk. The Wonambi Visitor Centre foyer will be upgraded by Christmas and the Victoria Fossil Cave Precinct upgrade will be finished by March/April '18.

The relighting of all the show caves with LED lights and the installation of more stainless steel handrails in Stick-Tomato, Alexandra, Victoria and Tantanoola Cave were important upgrades.

These interesting projects ran in tandem to the usual operational aspects - staff management, Work Health and Safety, business operations and financial controls, cave maintenance, cave monitoring etc. and so on.

Naracoorte and Tantanoola are two of the eight Iconic Tourism Sites under the umbrella of the Adelaide based Economic and Sustainable Development Division. At Naracoorte there are three commercial enterprises - the guided and self-guided cave tours and the 'Learn by Activity' education program, the Caves Café and the Wirreanda bunkhouse accommodation and campground. Tantanoola has the one show cave.

Both Parks have loop walks - Tantanoola's goes around the 'Up and Down Cliffs' from where visitors can get 360 degree views. Naracoorte's new 'Roof-top' Walk adds to the suite comprising the World Heritage Walk in the main Visitor Precinct that links to the five kilometre World Heritage Hike. The hike goes past Victoria Fossil Cave to Stoney Point, a really attractive part of the Park.

Having South Australia's only breeding site for the endangered *Miniopterus Southern Bentwinged* bats at Naracoorte Caves and being able to view them in their breeding chambers via remotely operated infra-red cameras is a very special aspect of the site.

Deborah says the Caves Manager job has been a culmination of a great 30 year career in conservation and protection that started on New Zealand's South Island West Coast. The NZ experience - administration and finance, endangered species, heritage, helping set up and implement the Te Wahipounamu South-West World Heritage Area and the management of Papparoa National Park (caves) was able to be wrapped into one package for managing Naracoorte and Tantanoola. They may be comparatively small but they are complex and ever interesting.

A review of the Master Plan will be done shortly to reassess the original concepts and update costings. From this a Business Case will be completed, the intent being that it will pave the path for the next phase of the World Heritage Area's upgrades.

Acting Manager Nick McIntyre's usual job is Public Lands Manager, based in Mt Gambier in charge of National Parks and Reserves in the South East of SA. He will remain as Acting Manager until a new long-term manager is appointed. Deborah advises that when the role is advertised it will be broadcast via the ACKMA email.