

# **EDUCATION GOES UNDERGROUND AT WAITOMO CAVES**

- Martha Ash

For the past twelve years underground education has been growing at Waitomo. In the 1980's the Education Service at the Waitomo Museum of Caves was doing 30 minute lessons to supplement a visit to the Glowworm Cave - that was the extent of the service. Times have changed! Schools are now regularly choosing (and re-choosing) Waitomo as a site for day trips and science (and other) camps because of the range of activities available at reasonable cost and because there is very little work involved for teachers.

Such a growth would not have occurred without the Waitomo community of tourist operators, farmers, Department of Conservation and other residents in support. The strength of the Education Service at the Waitomo Museum is its community base. While the Service operates from the museum, the focus is on community opportunities outside the museum. Teachers are busy people and many find the task of organising a school camp overwhelming given the teaching load. The Education Service seeks to take the work out of the organisation by providing resources, programming, booking and educating.

The starting point for any school visit must be the educational objectives. When a teacher contacts the museum about a pending visit the first question is "What would you like to achieve?" Usually the topic is earth science and the objectives are based on the new Science Curriculum. Pre-trip information is sent to support the area of study and units are provided which offer suggestions for post- and pre-trip activities. Many teachers make a pre-trip visit to Waitomo to investigate the sites of the activities, the walks and the accommodation.

Last year a introductory weekend was held in Waitomo to provide teachers with an overview of what was available. Its popularity dictates that a second weekend be held early next year.

All activities outside the museum classroom are provided by local operators (Black Water Rafting, Waitomo Adventures, Waitomo DownUnder, Juno's Horsetrekking, SPLAT and the Waitomo Caves), however, the Education Service programmes and books the trips. Accommodation is booked for the groups at either a caving hut (there are two), a marae (four are available), the campground or at a camping site on a farm.

A typical programme for a group of 30 Form 2 students may be as follows:

**Monday morning.** Travel to Waitomo. Powhiri (welcome) onto marae by local Maori. The marae offers a superb cultural experience and is the most popular accommodation for schools.

**Monday afternoon.** "Discover Waitomo". A Fact Finding Mission. This game was developed to give

children an orientation to Waitomo while providing a fun activity. It is a simple orienteering game using a walk around the Village.

**Tuesday morning.** Glowworm Cave. Museum Visit: Talk, AV and Displays

**Tuesday afternoon.** Aranui Cave. Ruakuri Walk. By visiting the Glowworm Cave first the students gain a frame of reference for the museum talk. The most often used topic is earth science and the talk provides an insight as to why there are caves in Waitomo. We talk about Waitomo's two landscapes (one above and one beneath) and discuss features. The models used in the lesson are related to the experiences the students will be having during the week.

The afternoon trip to the Aranui Cave and Ruakuri Natural Tunnel Walk reinforces the museum talk. Groups have the option of having a guide for the walk.

**Wednesday.** Stubbs Farm. An all day activity with Black Water Rafting guides which includes a caving trip (varying degrees of difficulty depending on age), abseiling and The Quest (an adventure game which encourages cooperation and team building). The Stubbs Farm has 600 hectares of bush with wonderful walking tracks which schools may use if they have time. Some schools opt to camp a night on the farm.

**Thursday.** Trip to the Coast. Most schools choose this option because it reinforces the earth science objectives and it provides a relaxing time for everyone. A guide is available to accompany the group if the school wishes. Groups stop at Mangapohue Natural Bridge, Marokopa Falls and PiriPiri Caves before fossil hunting at Kiritehere.

**Friday.** Pack up and leave possibly visiting the Shearing Shed, Ohaki Maori Village or the Kiwi House. Before the school leaves I spend time with the teacher evaluating the visit and making notes about what to change for future visits. Payment for everything is usually made at the same time.

Last year approximately 5,500 students used the Education Service at the museum. It is interesting to note that three years ago the majority of students came on a day visit. This year the majority are staying overnight. Through November 3-6 schools a week are staying in Waitomo - most for at least three nights.

Perhaps the fastest growing school market is the upper secondary school area. Karst landscapes make an excellent topic for the curriculum prescription of "Natural Processes". Similarly, a tourism study in Waitomo is a manageable way of handling "Cultural Processes" as prescribed by the geography curriculum. A model for the study of

Waitomo tourism by 7th Form geography students was published in the NZ Geographer last year. The author is a teacher who has used our service for the past 5 years with his 7th Form class.

Visits to Waitomo are growing in popularity in all school sectors. The challenge is to make each group feel they are the most important, and that there is nothing we would not do to make their visit enjoyable and worthwhile. Without the continued support and enthusiasm of all the adventure operators, the Maori whanau, the Waitomo museum and the tourist caves such a service would not be possible. (The tourist caves have actually put their price to schools down in order to encourage schools to come at off-peak times. In a time of 'bottom line' mentality this has shown wonderful support for the New Zealand school children.)

### **ADVENTURE CAVE TOURISM IN WAITOMO - THE NOW!**

For a lot of people just getting out of bed in the morning or finding the glasses which you've taken off the night before can be a real "adventure". When we apply the term to caving it probably usually denotes interacting with a so-called 'wild' cave, or a minimally developed one, on pretty much nature's terms. But we must acknowledge that there will exist a wide range of frames of reference.

The 'tourism' tag usually denotes that you are herded in a group and that you pay for the privilege. If we take a close look at adventure tourism as it applies to commercial caving we might be able to perceive that there is little difference between what the clients experience and that which recreational cavers would, when negotiating the same resource. In a sense, therefore, commercial adventure caving is essentially recreational caving where money changes hands between the guides and the guided.

As outlined in the previous edition of the ACKMA Journal, adventure caving in 'wild' caves of the Waitomo area has grown and left its mark on caves and caving. Caves are now worth money. Those which have commercial tours operating through them have elevated the land values and accordingly the rates which the owner must pay. Every cave is worth developing a tour in and one could be excused for thinking that it's the good ol' days in Kentucky.

From a recreational perspective this could mean that the resource owner now charges a headage or that they bar access completely reserving the system for commercial guided groups operating under a lease/license - concession arrangement. Indeed, if you start doing your sums of say 10,000 clients at \$50 pp and a 10% commission you've established quite a tidy little income. With farming in some areas of the rural sector showing such a dismal return, who is going to be so bold or arrogant to state that this is resource prostitution?

Some enlightened cave owners try to tread the line between parties by allowing bone fide card-carrying

speleological society members free access while charging others. One wonders whether or not this generates a divergence in mentality. Would the payers be more careful or would they adopt the attitude of "stuff it, I've paid my dues and I'll go where I like and do what I wish." What about the safety implications if you have charged money? Under the new Health and Safety in Employment Act or Consumer Guarantees Act, could it not be construed that you have an obligation as the resource owner to identify and manage hazards? We know that the intention of the law is not to impede or stifle recreational pursuits or to penalise landowners but when the cash register rings?

Obviously the law does place very real obligations on the commercial operator. A list of legislation relevant to safety, the environment and customer service includes the following acts:

Land Transport Act 1993. Accident Rehabilitation and Compensation Insurance Act 1992. Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992. Health Act 1956. Food Hygiene Regulations 1974. Building Act 1993. Occupiers Liability Act 1962. Conservation Act 1987. Historic Places Act 1993. Resource Management Act 1991. National Parks Act 1980. Reserves Act 1971. Marine Reserves Act 1971. Fair Trading Act 1996. Consumer Guarantees Act 1993. Commerce Act 1986.

Under Health and Safety the rules are simple. The employer shall take all practicable steps to maintain a safe working environment for all those people legally on site. Employees shall take all practicable steps to ensure their own safety and that they do not cause harm to anyone else. "Practicable steps" means demonstrate a management (guiding) commitment and train staff identify and manage hazards prepare contingency plans manage accidents and incidents (and keep records) which do occur.

This has a dramatic effect on professional standards, training, personal skill levels and accountability. Is it no wonder then that some commercial cave operators boast (and not lightly) that their guides have far higher standards of operation than recreational caving counterparts.(A bonus for all involved is the evolution of a competent pool of practitioners in the event of any search and rescue callout.)

Codes of practice are creeping in - white water rafting, sea kayaking, horse trekking, caving. These are national codes generated (in the most optimum case) by authorities, operators and recreational practitioners. They lay down guidelines for training, standards, qualifications, risk management, safety levels, equipment and resource management. Is this so bad? It does not mean that you are unable to 'walk the wire' or stand on the edge yourself, it just means that you have to think very carefully before you allow or encourage others to.

When your livelihood depends upon the interaction of client with a natural resource it should mean that you recognize and practice the concept of sustainable use. You are forced to acknowledge that

environmental guidelines are not only sensible but that they are imperatives if the commercial guiding operation is to survive for the long term.

This means understanding the nature and parameters of the resource. It also means adopting a philosophy as to what is acceptable both in terms of wear and tear and as far as development or hardening of sections of the cave in order to overcome access, risk or impact issues. So on the one hand the adventure tour operator might find themselves suddenly immersed in cave ecology (the partnership between the Glowworm Cave and university academics in the Cave Research Group is a good example; Black Water Rafting undertook a study of native fish and eels to see whether or not clients or structures affected their movement through the cave), vulnerability mapping, photomonitoring or any other disciplines or tools aimed at providing knowledge on which management decisions can be made.

Once again this can set high standards of resource management which few recreational caving groups have the ability (or sometimes the inclination) to match. However, it does provide a wonderful opportunity for a partnership between clubs and "corporates" and for establishing monitoring systems which provide valuable data on cave use and cave 'health'.

One often hears the comments that caves "have no carrying capacity"; that they are fragile, non-renewable resources and that the best way to conserve/preserve them in a natural state is to "lose" them directly after discovery. The cave experience, however, is here to stay and whether money changes hands or not there are exciting challenges out there to care take our underground resources.