

A HISTORY OF ADVENTURE CAVING IN WAITOMO

- Peter Chandler

Our common use of the term 'Adventure Caving' is I think, the commercial operation of tours through undeveloped or minimally developed caves, where visitors wear special clothing and personal equipment, and have guide(s) that get them through safely, as well as albeit brief interpretation instead of the traditional showcave, passive or scenic caving tour structure.

In researching such a topic it is useful to backtrack, to the definition of Adventure as either

- an unusual and exciting experience.
- a daring enterprise.
- a hazardous activity
- to incur risk

Although the visiting of local caves for recreational purposes did not start until the 1950's and any tourism related tours till the 1980s, there has been a long history of venturing into the Waitomo limestone. Waitomo of course, translates Wai-water, Tomo-Hole geographically the submergence of the Glowworm cave, over the years this expanded to include the whole cave, the village and the district.

Pre European use of caves was by all accounts was restricted by the limits of daylight, and tapu (use surrounded by strict custom), mainly for burial and habitation. There are accounts of overhanging bluffs being used for shelter. The earliest recorded cave visits was for the purpose of collecting Moa bones. This was made in 1849 by Arthur S Thomson, the cave Te Anaoteatua located with the help of a local Maori guides from the nearby village. It is more often called Masons Dry Cave, part of the Mangawhitakau system. Other early naturalists in the area included Ferdinand van Hochstetter, the infamous Andreas Reischeck did not venture this far inland. The exploration of the Glowworm Grotto on the 27th of December 1887, was certainly a milestone in the regions history and the quickly established tourism remained for the first few decades 'adventurous'

Aside from a long history of cavers at the Hamilton Tomo Group Hut (also an associate YHA for many years since its establishing around 1960) taking backpackers caving, the Waitomo Museum archives detail the first local adventure caving operation as that of John Ash (caver-geologist turned schoolteacher) and Trevor Brunton (caver - cave guide) whose first 'shake down season ' was over the summer of 1980-81, in the Zweiholen & Downstream sections of Gardeners Gut. John and Martha Ash continued this recipe over the following years as Waitomo Outdoor Activities and Diversions around both teaching and family commitments, until teaming up with myself.

Origins of the Black Water Rafting enterprise, for which I can piece together a certain amount, can be traced back many years. From the initial development of Ruakuri cave for tourism in 1904 by

James Holden, the first documented exploration of any upstream sections of the cave was not until 1946, when a group ventured to the hidden Waterfall and Beyond. This trip - possibly not the first, was immortalized by a series of photographs now housed in the museum collection and a story published in a local newspaper. Carbide Lamp-soot dates of 52 and 11-12-52 in the Tumutumu stream entrance series indicates exploration past the 'ducks' and certainly to daylight.

From an Auckland Star newspaper clipping it is recorded that in September 1953 fifteen speleologists, canoeists and a reporter ventured upstream from the hidden waterfall it while the cave was partly flooded it reported. Not surprisingly, it was stated that they planned to return when the waters were less treacherous, set for wading and swimming, and no mention of inner tubes.

Ruakuri Cave was not fully mapped and mostly explored until the efforts of the Tokoroa Caving Group in the mid 1960s, discoveries included other upstream entrances and a high level passage that was excavated to daylight because of its close proximity. Several oil drums were organized to stabilize the clay and provide access - they remain intact to this day .

Log books from the Hamilton Tomo Group Hut indicate a number of float through trips being done through Ruakuri Cave, It was now also possible to do long versions through the rather small entrance on Joe Harries farm (now Chris Kay) or a shorter run through the 'Drum' entrance. Well before the days of wetsuit availability or electric lights, there are documented examples of some hypothermia cases at the end of these trips. as a recreational caver, my first introduction to the Ruakuri Float Through was in 1982 with Bruce Mutton now resident in Nelson and still caving, details are sketchy, I remember catching up to others in the group, one of whom had cut their knee open after floating over the (4- 5 foot) waterfall .

The float through was a perfect trip to introduce novice cavers to, perhaps more experiential than speleological. In 1984 While employed on a Project Employment Program at the Waitomo Museum, cunningly organized by Peter Dimond through the Labour Department to get university student cavers to be paid to work there, several float throughs were done, sharing wetsuits and equipment by running two trips back to back or only wearing half a wetsuit. These were only possible after hours of negotiation with the then Cave Manager, Dave Williams, it was not widely known who owned the land on the other side of the Waitomo Upper Valley Road (Ruakuri Road)

Back on the scene after some overseas travel, 1986 saw me guiding with the THC, as warden at the HTG Caving Hut, and doing some more casual guiding for John Ash. When Dave Williams heard rumours of more than just a few float throughs being done and some money being charged, things quickly evolved into a donation for wetsuit hire (\$10) and the name was decided upon. Later there were some thoughts that such an enterprise could be operated under the THC umbrella (perhaps it could of been several years earlier)

The Holden family, owning the ninety acres of land passed down from grandparent James Holden, had around 1986 /1987 obtained advice that they were major owners of Ruakuri cave. This eventually led to the THC closing the regular Ruakuri Cave Tours in February 1988. Negotiations have continued but the ownership never challenged -another story. It can be assumed that the common law ownership to the centre of the earth now stands, at least when valuable minerals are absent. This test case certainly opened the way for some other landowners to consider tourism activities in their caves, which in all cases had been explored and mapped by recreational cavers of the previous generation.

Support from Jim Holden in getting an alternative tourist venture established in their section of Ruakuri Cave followed this ownership belief, but with any split resource permission for use of the downstream part of the Cave and egress into the Ruakuri Caves and Bush Scenic Reserve was required for the fledgling Black Water Rafting enterprise.

Permission was granted in September 1987, it is interesting to consider whether this would of been possible after the dry Ruakuri tour had been closed in February 1988. Anyway, 20 Tee shirts, fliers, a painted sign for the front of the museum and more wetsuits, inner tubes, lights and food was organized. Early trips often required some soliciting of business by personal approaches to likely adventurers. Trip numbers began to snowball, John organized student-guide Angus Stubbs on a subsidized work scheme.

Of note was cave transport, equipment store and battery chargers all rolled into one Austin 1800 utility, a cage with roof on the back to keep the customers wetsuits and equipment in. With front wheel drive it was totally unsuited to the steep, then - gravel track out of the Ruakuri Carpark. Over that summer John Ash and I joined forces, expansion and the innovation required have continued as with any business operation.

Talking to him several years ago, Waitomo Adventures managing director Nick Andreef said his first caving trip at Waitomo was after reading the 1988 article about Black Water Rafting in the New Zealand Herald, it was a return trip to the Lost World via the Mangapohue streamway.

Nicks entrepreneurial nature meant that 'Caving Unlimited' was soon established with partner Greg Ransen, initially being operated from Auckland and

some early abseil trip guiding being contracted out to John Maine of the Auckland Climbing School, before local cavers Van Watson and Kieran McKay were employed. An industrial steel ladder originally destined for the Spider Hole exit was instead used as a walkway to the 90 metre abseil takeoff ledge before being replaced. A galvanized steel ladder did not replace the electron ladder in Spider Hole till mid 1996.

Nick became the second adventure operator to have bookings based at the Museum of Caves, which had expanded its operation to take advantage of the increased patronage and turnover where adventure tours included a visit to the museum as part of the overall experience.

Black Water Rafting established BWR2 - A sequel Trip was established in Ruakuri cave in 1991 to compliment BWR 1 and give staff already with the necessary SRT skills some much needed variety and challenge.

David Nordell, in association with his boss Nick Andreef set up the 'Haggas Honking Holes' an abseiling and caving trip in Ringlefall cave on James Haggas Property. This was another example of adventure caving being promoted by a catchy phrase, and more recently in the 'Pink Gumboot Tour' operated by Nick Andreef's Waitomo Adventures in Kamutu Cave on Carol Johnston's property.

1992 also saw Joe Davis and Richard Carnachan form 'Waitomo Down Under' a cave tubing trip like Black Water Rafting but in Footwhistle Cave/Te Anaroa, near Roselands Restaurant, on Fullerton Road. Some modification to the cave to enable easier access was done and their trip uses some of the key elements tried by BWR, and adds a marae visit and protocol. This cave had previously been used by John Ash and BWR for school groups.

Recent years have seen Farm/Cave Tours operated by Clare Carey in the Marokopa Natural Tunnel Scenic Reserve and by Derek Mason with his Natural Glowworm caves. A boutique caving trip to the spectacular St Benedicts Caverns on the Haggas property is operated by Waitomo Adventures. Meanwhile Adventure caving tours by BlackWater Rafting Have continued in Gardeners Gut as well as to lesser degrees Huhunui, Reserve and Mangapohue. The Recreational Cave Registration System operating at the museum indicates a moderate degree of skills training groups also using the easily accessible caves on Department of Conservation Scenic Reserves.

The most recent adventure tour established is that of Cave Canoeing, operated by BWR Guide Simon Hall in the upper end of the Mangawhitakau cave on Masons Farm. Packaged around generous views of *Arachnacampa luminosa* it is definitely a new way to view a Waitomo cave - since 1953 anyway!

The adventure tourism 'boom' in Waitomo has brought a whole new group of young people to work around the village. The extra customers has had a

flow on effect on Backpackers hostels and other accomodation, horse riding. The number of children at the local school has been boosted, they are now planning for a 3rd classroom. It is difficult to estimate the combined patronage of all the

adventure trips in Waitomo, it is probably in the region of 40 to 50 thousand per annum. Small compared to the total numbers through the Glowworm cave , but certainly a considerable part of the Free, Independent Traveller's market.