

WHAT A CONFERENCE!!!

- Kent Henderson

Some weeks ago, Peter Dimond sat in his office, a worried man. Registrations for the Waitomo ACKMA Conference were few, the long-range weather forecast was bad. Peter, being a deeply religious man, got down on his knee pads, and prayed to the Karst God. And yes!!! His invocations were answered!! 67 delegates registered (a record), and perfect weather!! He had created the biggest and best ever ACKMA Conference!!! Wow!!

Peter picked me up from Hamilton on ANZAC Day evening, a smile crossing his face. He was a happy man, but nervous - would the week go well? A few others had already arrived. Robyn McBeath had already done most adventure tours around Waitomo, and was last seen squeezing down a hole in Ruakuri Cave with a German film crew. She surfaced eventually, with a smile on her face! Ah, those Germans!

Andy Spate and I spent most of Saturday on the *Museum of Caves* computers doing last minute administrivia, while other delegates arrived, caved, and arrived. By late evening, all had gathered at the Black Water Cafe for a John Ash- Peter Chandler et al BBQ bash, and we all marvelled at the wooden statue of John in the foyer - what a great likeness!! The *family gathering* was nigh, and the back slapping rampant!!

After a modicum of sleep, Sunday morning saw us all assemble for the Opening Ceremony in the *Museum of Caves* theatre. Darkness descended, music played, (cave) lights flashed. An abseiler (Kieran McKay) descended from the ceiling, and the John Ash-choreographed *Waitomo Choir* (otherwise known as the Organizing Committee) presented their awe-inspiring act. The Olympics had nothing on this. Well...

We were then bused off to the *Tokikapu Marae* for the official Maori welcome. Actually, I ferried Mick Chalker in Peter Dimond's car, I mean, we couldn't have our President other than chauffeur-driven, could we? Unfortunately, Mick new even less about the Waitomo topography than I, and having been geographically embarrassed twice, we arrived last, for Mick's grand entrance! At the *Marae*, speeches were exchanged in Maori, we all got to sing a song in Maori too (brilliantly, of course), and then to sing *Advance Australia Fair* - well, one or two knew the words, much to the mirth of our Maori hosts. Mick gave a scintillating speech, and blessed himself that he had only a few days to go as ACKMA *el supremo* (Mick loves giving speeches, of course). We then enjoyed a tour of the *Marae*, and a wonderful hungi lunch, with our marvellous hosts.

The afternoon was devoted to adventure caving. All the Waitomo operators had very kindly made their trips available to delegates. Some went Black Water Rafting, others did Haggas Honking Holes, Cave Canoeing, or Waitomo DownUnder. Me? - I went to Lost World with Rauliegh Webb, Barry Richard and

Neil Collinson. It's a 110m abseil down a *tomo* of breathtaking proportions. What impressed us almost as such as the sheer size and grandeur of the cave was the incredible professionalism of Nick Andreef's operation. The clearly superbly-trained guides were fantastic, and the safety features unsurpassable. One had much more chance of injury outside than anywhere in Lost World. Even Rauliegh Webb was deeply impressed! 9.99 out of 10, Nick!

The evening saw the first of successive quality dinners at the Waitomo Hotel, and the *Official Opening* of the Conference. Prof. Paul William's *keynote address* dealt with a wide range of management issues at Waitomo in general, and in the *Glowworm Cave* in particular, which provoked a very lively debate!! Thinks were potentially crook, said Paul - much hadn't been done. Not quite right said others... The issues for the week were certainly cranked up!!

Monday saw a full day field trip over a wide gamut of Waitomo area karsts. The visit to the local Hauturu Limestone Quarry was interesting, if nothing else for watching Joown Eeesh (English trans: John Ash) hide under a bus seat. A popular lad in some circles, our Joown. Actually, as the "necessary evils" of quarries go, the consensus was that this one was "environmentally better" than most. After many waterfalls, karst catchments, forests, airstrips, et al, later, and many issues examined, a haggard band of delegates poured off the bus back at Waitomo for dinner. The evening saw the first two papers. Nick White gave his five minute paper in his usual half hour address, on World Heritage listing and Naracoorte Caves, while Neville Ritchie illuminated us on Maori Rock Art - a fascinating paper. Thereafter, many delegates went to do the wonderful Ruakuri Karst Walk and look at the glowworms. No one got lost (too much), of course. Happily, Peter Chandler knew his way, or at least, that's what he kept telling us. Thank you, Peter!!! Still, we later elected him ACKMA NZ Vice President anyway - probably in punishment!! Nice glowworms, too.

On the Tuesday morning, half the delegates went to tour the Aranui Tourist Cave and see the Ruakuri Karst Walk in daylight, while the other half went to Mason's Valley Glowworm Caves. As the ACKMA Committee was scheduled to meet later that morning, I and others of that ilk, went to Aranui. Since my visit to the cave in 1989, virtually all the "chook wire" has been removed, greatly enhancing the visitor experience. After Mick Chalker delivered another riveting speech to thank our cave guide, the Committee scampered back to the Museum for its exciting meeting. Well... Mick gushed forth with more outstanding oratory - he was almost getting good at it? We did decide to rename our Education Officers as Information Officers, and looked at redefining their roles, amongst other administrivia. In the afternoon it was back to papers, with a

couple of stunners presented. Andy Spate gave us *Best Practice and Cave Engineering*, while Elery Hamilton-Smith and Dianne Vavryc gave us *Best Practice in Cave Tourism*. Both were superb.

And so to Wednesday, with the lack of sleep and late night arm bending leaving some the wearier. Elery led a cave guiding workshop first up, which I missed due to necessitous adminstrivia work, but I understand it went well. Then more papers, including gems by Stefan Eberhard on the Conservation of Cave Fauna in Australia, and Ian Millar on Cave Fauna Conservation at Golden Bay. Lots of stunning slides and complicated maps here, folks! The afternoon saw a reversal of the previous morning - Aranui and Mason's Glowworm Caves.

Derek Mason is an affable fellow. The tractor ride to his caves was fun in itself! First we visited Mason's Dry Cave - well it was by NZ standards. On the way up the wonderful karst ravine leading to it we passed Derek's "karst toilet", constructed over a sink hole. Frankly, it didn't attract any favourable comments, but Nick White still managed find a convenient use for it! Later we visited Mason's Glowworm (or Wet) Cave - very stunning, inside and out. The infrastructure in the cave left something to be desired, and the boat used to view the glowworms was somewhat rickety, but hopefully time will see the many problems solved. Be that as it may, thank you Derek for so kindly hosting our tour, plus the afternoon tea afterwards on the croquet lawns!!

Wednesday evening saw delegates visit the famed Glowworm Cave itself. All were impressed, particularly with the punt ride under the "glowworm sky". Since my 1989 visit, the cave had been re-lit in 12v. While the lighting was much improved, I was not totally impressed. The floor/track lighting, in many areas, shines straight into visitors' eyes. This can (should, must) be fixed Robert Tahi!! On the plus side, I thought the off-floor lighting was generally well positioned and effective. After the Glowworm Cave visit, delegates sojourned to the Waitomo Tavern (a now established nightly ritual) to get a handle on karst hydrology. The Australian delegates, in particular, rapidly became experts in the Waitomo hydrological system, readily distinguishing between the many sections of it, such as Export Gold, DB, etc!

Thursday followed, the Conference flying by! An action-packed morning of papers awaited us, with Les Kermode, possibly NZ's nicest karst fossil, bespeaking on NZ lava caves, Radon Ruth Lyons beguiling us with - what else? - radon in caves, and Chris de Freitas eugolizing on monitoring in the Glowworm Cave, amongst others. Many delegates waltzed off on a field trip to Stubbs Farm in the afternoon to look at land use, karst conservation and management issues, and its education programs. Me? I snuck off with Barry Richard, Neil Taylor and Neil Collinson, and a few pommie tourists, to do Blackwater Rafting 2! I had down BWR 1 in 1989, and I was very keen to take the BWR2 trip. Amazing stuff - a wonderful abseil in, a scintillating flying fox trip over the underground

Ruakuri streamway, plus tubing under the glowworms. The two waterfalls we breached to exit the cave were, well, exciting!! Let me say how professionally the trip is run, too. Safety is paramount. All infrastructure (which is totally removable) is excellent, and the guides superbly trained. Many thanks John Ash, Peter Chandler and Van Watson! Back at the Museum in the evening, Chris Pugsley et al led a discussion on Glowworm Cave monitoring, etc, which exposed a large range of issues.

Friday, the last official day of the Conference! Phew! More papers were first up. Yours truly delivered a paper by Heather Jefferies on cave gating, and the results of a survey I'd undertaken on the same subject. Martha Ash spoke on cave/karst education at Waitomo. Overall, I think 17 papers were delivered across the Conference, and all were of an extremely high standard. Wonderful stuff!

The ACKMA General meeting followed. An amicable event as always. Greg Martin took over as new ACKMA President - our first NZ *fuehrer* (at last!). Peter Chandler became NZ Vice President, Brian Clark (in his absence!) Conference Convenor, and Robyn McBeth & Dave Smith the Australian and New Zealand Information Officers, respectively. Congrats. to them all! The same faces were re-elected to the other positions. Elery Hamilton-Smith and Dave Williams were elected as Life Members of ACKMA, by acclamation - thoroughly merited. Both were in attendance, and responded graciously. Nick White, Rauleigh Webb, Brian Clark and some other nameless reprobate were elected Fellows of ACKMA. After a ballot, an official ACKMA logo was selected. A New Zealand entry (what a surprise!) was the runaway winner (see the front cover hereof!)

The afternoon saw our final field trip, visiting the Managahue Natural Bridge, the wonderful 35m Marakopa Falls, the Marakopa beach with its amazing black iron sands, and the Piri Piri Cave. The latter was interesting, but heavily degraded under foot. A few pints of interest were consumed on the way home in the Te Anga tavern, prior to returning to Waitomo for the Conference Dinner.

And what a dinner! The highlight was the appearance the infamous *Captain Speedo* to make the Conference Awards. Many notables got a gong, such as the honeymooners (Mick and Lynette McRobb) who had married only a week before (sincere sympathies to both), Chester Shaw, who received a surprise 50th birthday cake, and Nick White, who momentarily became a cave invertebrate!!! The *Wildman* (Kevan Wilde) received his certificate as a Life Member of ACKMA Inc, a rather nice *illuminated address*.

What a marvellous Conference - "the best yet", they cried!!! A massive thank you goes to Peter ("a girl's best friend") Dimond, our Convenor, Greg Martin, and their organising committee for a flawless job, which will be very long remembered!

The Saturday saw many delegates travel to Rotorua for a day of thermal springs, mud pools, luge rides, etc; while some simply went caving back at Waitomo! Many delegates, of course, departed, but twenty

stayed on to partake of the *Post Conference Study Tour*, which is yet another story to be found in these pages...