

CAVE MANAGEMENT?

A Victorian Gating Fiasco

- Kent Henderson

Recently, while taking overseas relatives on a trip along the Great Ocean Road, I called in at the Cumberland River Cave, located south of Lorne, on Victoria's West Coast. This sea cave was the subject of a previous article in ACKMA Journal (Henderson, 19**)

The cave itself is accessed along a beach, after passing several rocky rises. Its entrance passage is has a diameter of about 1.5 metres, and is, perhaps, 8 metres long, leading to a medium-sized chamber. Where the entrance passage (which requires stooping only) meets the chamber is a large, active stalactite. It is probably a metre wide and three metres high, and almost reaches the floor. The chamber walls are, in part, covered in flowstone, and the cave is the home of a bent-wing bat colony. In my infrequent visits to the cave over the years, bat numbers have seemed to hover at about twenty plus. Up until recently, the cave was not gated. It is well known by locals, with casual visitation, one suspects, to quite frequent.

And so I led my relatives to it... The first thing I noted was a *Parks Victoria* sign outside the cave, saying that the cave was closed to protect its bats. My initial reaction was okay, far enough – clearly it's been gated. So, I went to check out the expected gate. No gate at the entrance or near it, though. Curious, I thought. Thus I made my way through the entrance tunnel and into the chamber, to behold – the gate!! Oh yes, it is gated alright - a very massive grill has been placed right across the entire centre of the chamber!! No, I am not joking. It's roughly 6 – 8 metres wide, and 3 – 4 metres high, with a padlocked door in the steel grill to the right hand side.

To say the least, I was appalled. Arguably, gating was long overdue, but in the centre of the chamber!?? Why *Parks Victoria* didn't put a gate at the entrance area – say

half way through the entrance passage, I do not know. Clearly, such a gate, to being with, would have been far cheaper to install. So, what is the result of his uniformed management decision (I am trying to be kind)?

1. The bats are not protected, as obviously was the aim. One can now still gain access to the middle of the chamber, and can easily shine lights on the bats, yell and scream, and disturb the colony. There is still more than enough room to hold a good-sized party in the cave, outside the gate. The gate, as positioned, is completely superfluous.
2. The main feature of the cave, the large stalactite noted above, is on the wrong side on the gate. Of course, presumably the gating was done just to "protect" the bats, not the cave itself.
3. The sign outside the cave draws attention to it. Again, an awful decision. The cave entrance is relatively concealed, and can only be seen if one is directly opposite it. It would be easy to walk up the beach and miss it. Given the sign, it is now impossible to miss!! Why on earth the sign was not put inside the cave, say on the wall near the gate, I cannot comprehend.

After my trip, I advised Elery Hamilton-Smith of the situation, about which he had no knowledge. He then contacted the bat expert from the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Lindy Lumsden, who had been consulted, but we understand that her advice was not followed. One wonders who, if anybody, *Parks Victoria* used to do the work on site. Certainly, it would seem, nobody who knew anything about caves or bats.