



WANDERING HERE AND THERE

- Elery Hamilton-Smith

Most ACKMA members know that I have always been a traveller and have totally enjoyed it. But everything has a down side – in my case travelling has a two-bit downside – the first is aeroplanes and airports, and the second is the inevitable badgering from our good editor to write something for the journal!

My last such article was in December 2000, describing my visit to Slovenia for the NATO meeting on Sustainable Mineral Extraction in Karst areas. So, roll on 2001.

My first trip was to the Asia-Pacific Forum on Karst Eco-Systems and World Heritage. Fortunately, Mia wrote this up in September 2001 and I need only add a very little. Hans Friedrich and I had planned the forum during the previous year, with an immense burst of work in the last two months, and put a lot of anxiety and hard work into it. Looking back now, we are delighted at its success. The forum proposed a number of major international initiatives, and several of these are now well under way and the others have gathered the necessary support to now move on.

As so often happens, one of the exciting outcomes was almost completely unforeseen. Peter Ackroyd and I, with great assistance from many colleagues, had produced, as a working paper for the forum, a draft Atlas of Karst Conservation in the Asian-Pacific region. This was so well received that it has now grown to be Vol 1 of a world atlas that will be published by a leading international professional journal. We already have tentative arrangements

for co-operating editors for three of the projected six further volumes. More news later.

The report of the Forum is right now with the printers and should be available very shortly. Another unforeseen outcome is that it is now being seen as a prototype for a similar forum in Europe.



The Guardian of Tham Sai Yot

The Waterfall at Bohinj - Outlet of the High Lakes on the Triglav karst



September saw a visit to Bangkok, this time to work on the detailed planning of a capacity-building program in karst management for the Royal Forest Department of Thailand which was one of the follow-up projects from the Mulu Forum. Again, there will be more news of this as it finally reaches the stage of implementation. Most of our time was spent in a meeting-room, but we did get in a great day trip.

Our first stop was at the Tham Sai Yot monastery, where a somewhat formidable guardian pointed the way to the show cave. Then on to Chaoem Rattanakosin National Park. Here the cave system is formed along the interface between granite and limestone, which results in some very interesting geomorphology. Tham Than Lot Noi was a delightful meandering river cave with minimal but very heavy infrastructure – the annual flooding would obliterate anything else. We did not have time to walk up to Than Than Lot Yai – a giant archway at the head of the valley - a truly fine mural in the visitor centre gave us a fine view of it.

In October I went to the American Cave and Karst Management Symposium, and this time I have to thank Kriste Lindberg for saving me a lot of writing with her report in the most recent journal. I only have two things to add. The first is my personal assessment of Kartchner Caverns. As many will know, this cave has been the subject of an immense publicity campaign and what can now be seen as greatly exaggerated claims. My passenger magazine on American Airlines had a nice little paper on customer service in the tourism industry where one guru argued that, “Customer Satisfaction is experience minus expectations”. The people at Kartchner should have read it – after their great build-up, that formula would almost certainly give a low or even negative core.

But the great disappointment was that much of the hype had promised the most researched and thoroughly monitored show cave in the history of

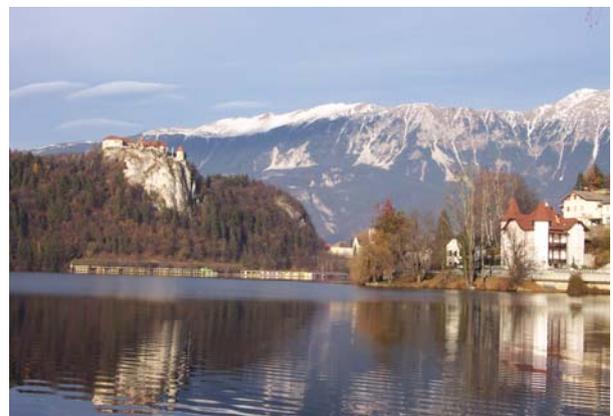
cave tourism. They have poured what must be thousands of tons of concrete into the cave to develop the most massive pathway system imaginable – an approach already considered outmoded in many countries. But when I asked what detailed information they could give me on the impacts of that development on the cave environment, the answer was that they had not measured it! They certainly do watch over visitors and their impacts in great detail – a great example of counting fleas while the buffaloes stampede!

The next stop was the wondrous Yucatan Karst of Mexico. I will not deal further with this here, as I will shortly have the formal report on my visit ready and will hand that over to Kent for another issue of the journal.

Finally came another visit to Slovenia. The main purpose of the visit was to attend a symposium on monitoring of karst sites, the report of which will shortly be published and I will then summarise it for this journal. But we visited the Vilenica Cave – probably Europe’s oldest commercially operated show cave, having operated since the beginning of the 17th century. It is now managed by the local speleological society. Their re-development of the infrastructure is quite excellent, the cave tour is spectacular and the guiding delightful, while the presentation of the site with a small historical museum and a karst walk to review surface features is a model for any operation. And much of that was a volunteer effort! When they can achieve so much, shortage of funds is not much of an excuse for not doing things properly!

I then met with Gordana Beltram who chairs the RAMSAR committee on subterranean wetlands – something we will hear more of in Australia over the next couple of years. We had decided to abandon any idea of an office-based meeting and planned a trip to Plitvice – but the weather in that direction was poor so we went to the Alpine karst instead. A photograph or two will tell the story better than words. We returned by way of the Soca River Valley – a river flowing away from the karst that always has bright green water – probably some sort of refractive phenomena similar to Mt Gambier’s Blue Lake.

So, that tells a bit of the year’s activity, with the details to follow in coming journals.



The Alpine Karst, looking across the lake from Bled