

MANAGING AND INTERPRETING TROPICAL CAVES – FEELING HOW DIFFERENT CAVES ARE

- Penny Davidson*

Introduction

In 2001 I presented a paper at the ACKMA conference held at Wombeyan talking about my PhD project which looks at Jenolan Caves as a tourist site. My paper today presents some of the results from this project which are pertinent to karst tourism in general and possibly relevant to any form of tourism.

I wish to highlight two points:

- that how people experience caves – both visitors and staff / others – emphasises the multi-sensual nature of the cave experience; and
- the multi-sensual experience identifies some of the markers of difference for cave tourism, ie what makes this particular site a 'place' different from others and imbued with particular meanings

These points are not necessarily new or earth-shattering and, given that this interpretation has been derived from people who have visited or lived at a caves site, will most likely be information that you are very familiar with, either consciously or sub-consciously. However, I think what I am about to say is an interpretation that is not often talked about, we know it but its not really part of the cave management discourse.

The work is based on qualitative research methods; that is, it used relatively open-ended questions, and techniques such as interviews, which allowed the collection of detailed and contextual information. I began with a set of loose questions about the activities people undertake at Jenolan and the meanings and values they found important. The aim of my questions was to retain a flexibility that enabled people to talk about their experience in a way that made sense to them.

Seeing

I examined the text from interviews with staff and visitors using a physical sensory framework. I asked how did we physically engage and relate to place: how did we see, feel, hear, and smell the karst site? The bulk of this paper, therefore, outlines the ways that caves are seen, felt, smelt and heard based on the interviews with visitors and staff.

Well, caves are spectacles: just consider these quotes – and there were many, many more.

*The scenery is stunning and the caves top it off. I was amazed by them as we approached such incredible natural beauty
It's beautiful, the natural environment, the river was gorgeous and the cave was very pretty
It was great, beautiful. The caves are spectacular.*

A huge number of visitors travel through karst scenery with camera in hand wanting to record the visual delights. As a spectacle caves certainly meet or surpass most people's expectations. In many

accounts told by visitors and staff caves are seen and their words emphasise beauty and spectacle.

The sense of 'visual' is used in the management agency's promotional material. This material refers to 'beautiful formations', 'large and well decorated', 'stunning views', a visual impact that will leave you breathless, 'exquisitely beautiful helictites', and so on. You are promised an experience where your visual senses will be deluged with unique and astoundingly beautiful sights. You are invited to 'inspect', 'superb *show* caves', 'see', and 'explore'. The quotes from the visitors and the promotional material give the impression that the optical sense is filled to the brim with visions and spectacles that leave a lasting impression on the short-term visitor and long-term resident alike.

In several ways vision is different from the other senses. In the western or 'developed' world vision is a dominant sense: it provides more information than the other senses combined with up to 75% of our received information arriving through our eyes (Knudson *et al.* 1999). Our language reflects this visual dominance: we say 'seeing is believing', or consider the significance of an 'eyewitness' account as opposed to 'hearsay'. A tourist in one tourism research project (Suvantola's (2002: 182)) makes this point: 'If I told this, they wouldn't believe me at home, but I have a picture to show, so they have to (Denise, 22)'. We tend to believe what we see over what we hear, feel or smell (Porteous 1996). Where smell and sound require a closer level of proximity (usually), and touch requires contact, vision occurs from a distance. Vision is possible from great distances; indeed, some distance between object and eye is required for the object to be seen.

Most importantly seeing in a cave should perhaps be understood as a limited seeing because even with all the lights turned on in a cave there are places that one doesn't see but rather feels, hears, smells, or imagines. The remaining darkness and what you don't see is as central to the experience as what you do see.

Feeling

So we see caves – they are a visual experience. Smell, touch and sound are also part of the cave experience as independent sensations and in concert with each other. Touch, or haptic sensing, is an intimate and often taken for granted interaction. Sometimes referred to as the most primitive of senses touch is also the most sensuous of all the senses; it cannot be switched off, 'we are always in touch with our environment' (Porteous 1996: 38). The language that people used to describe their reactions to caves shows that the interaction, and therefore meaning, is more than a visual experience. People do more than 'see' the cave. A simple example of the haptic nature of a cave experience is the constant temperature and atmosphere that it provides; the whole body is immersed in, and touches, the constant temperature and humidity of the caves.

*They're nice and cool
It is lovely, nice and cool, spectacular.*

In addition, at least in adventure tours, visitors are allowed, required and enticed into touching the cave. The physicality, body interacting with place, is particularly evident in the challenges that some visitor's voiced as they squeezed through small gaps in the rocks during an adventure tour.

The plughole was just wonderful, I did enjoy going up - easier to climb than drop. I felt exhilarated at getting through the S-bend, though it was shorter than I thought - it tested my confidence level, and it felt great to get through

The promotional material invites visitors to sense the physicality of Jenolan, to feel and engage actively with the structures that constitute the cave environment. Visitors are beckoned to participate in 'climbing, muddy, slippery' slopes, to go through squeezes, to 'slide to the cave floor', to walk through the mountain, 'follow the footsteps of the discoverers', 'climb and crawl', 'enter another world', 'squeeze through tiny passageways of 'wild' caves', 'mix with the local currawongs', 'encounter wombats, wallabies ...'.

In these ways visitors are invited to be bodily present, physically active and 'in touch' with the cave, not just a set of eyes looking at what the cave has to behold.

Touching is a reciprocal sensation; to touch means also to be touched (Rodaway 1994). Unlike sight, sounds or smell where one can see the other without being seen/heard/smelt touch involves both 'parties' in an active sense. To touch the limestone rock is to be touched by the limestone rock, or to put it another way, the touching of skin and limestone has an impact on both skin and limestone.

The skin senses the cool, smoothness of the rock, and the rock absorbs some of the acids and oils of the skin producing its own set of reactions. Herein rests many of the issues of 'impact' that require much of management's attention.

If we acknowledge the significance of touch in our experience of the physical world then it is a formidable request to invite people into an unfamiliar environment with the intention that they derive pleasure and develop some awareness or knowledge of that environment but at the same time severely limit their opportunity to touch. Touch is the dominant sense of the young child, exploring a hitherto unknown world (Rodaway 1994).

It remains a significant sense in the way that we understand the world. The request 'not to touch' requires the visitor (be they staff or tourist) to use their cognitive understanding of the consequences of their touch, to control the desire to touch.

That visitors continue to reach out to touch the limestone is proof of the strength of the desire to use this sense.

This is particularly understandable because the cave environment, even in well-lit show caves, is only ever partially lit and might be described as semi-darkness. In show caves there is much in the space that exists but cannot be seen. And in a darkened environment it is perhaps 'natural' to draw to a greater extent on senses other than sight: senses such as smell, hearing and touch.

Smelling

We also smell the cave although we often tend to ignore, forget or discount any information that is gathered from our nose. Smell is often overpowered by sight and sound. Having said this, I am sure that you can think of examples where the opposite is true: where smell permeated your experience of place and dominated the experience – perhaps walking down the street there was a pervading smell of sewerage or petrol fumes that discouraged you from staying any longer.

Olfactory experiences are most often noted when the smell is unpleasant; the term 'odour' is frequently used in a negative sense, and in these situations the sense of smell can then take precedence over information received through other senses (Tuan 1977; Rodaway 1994).

Smelling is also an intimate interaction. One needs to be in close proximity to the source of the smell, or the very least in actual proximity with particles from the source of the smell (occasionally travelling reasonable distances when carried by wind). And smell can evoke emotionally-charged memories of events and scenes in a way that sight is unable to (Tuan 1990: 10). People who have had long-term relationships with the cave environment are more likely to make mention of the smell of caves – the 'dank wet smell' that arises from the bacterial activity in the cave environment. One staff member said:

It is still an exciting place, I love the smell of the place, the dank wet smell, and beautiful eucalyptus smell outside, it is a wonderful perfume.

In the case of show caves (Jenolan) the smells and odours seem to be most notably marked by an absence; an absence of smells that might be associated with other places.



Penny Davidson in the clutches of Andy Spate!
- Conference 2003



One smell is most commonly referred to as 'fresh air', or the absence of the urban and industrial odours: the promotional material beckons: come to the place of 'fresh, cool mountain air', and visitors comment:

One of the benefits is that we have got out and about, got fresh air. The day had been nice, good. It was relaxing, fresh air, quiet, no McDonald's, we can breathe well here.

Hearing

We see, touch, and smell caves, we also hear them.

The sounds of Jenolan are anticipated in the promotional literature: 'hear about Miss Chisolm ...' 'hear the delicate tinkling of the bellbirds', enjoy the 'quiet beauty', 'the still of night', tranquillity, and 'listen to the chorus of birds'.

Whilst we have a limited hearing range compared to other animals, and therefore able to receive limited information through this sense, our hearing is another emotion-rich sense that can arouse, annoy or sooth us (Porteous 1996: 35). Take for example the power of music – it not only reaches the emotions of a person, but also helps to paint a picture in the imagination.

Sound and hearing is a notable sense of the tourist cave, mostly through the stories and information told by guides to visitors in the calm of the cave environment. Visitors said:

The coach driver's tales and insights were fascinating and entertaining. It was great to learn more about the Blue Mountains.

I enjoyed being told how they were formed, all unbelievable, I am amazed

It is very good: a combination of natural scenic attributes with lighting. Lovely. I liked the explanation given by the guide, and liked the interpretation of the formations, that adds poetry and colour

But we have limited control over what we hear – again, we cannot 'close our earlids' (as Porteous puts it) – and our hearing experience is perhaps therefore more vulnerable to intrusive or undesired sounds. As a consequence the visitor's auditory

experience was often remarked on as a negative experience. Hearing the stories, understanding the information offered by the guides is an important part of the experience. Any interference in this auditory channel was frustrating and disappointing:

It was hard to hear the announcements in the main arch

I didn't like other people who spoke other languages over the guides

I disappointed with the size of the tour, the waiting. We were at the end and trapped around the corners so we missed what the guide said - but he was good

I didn't like the screaming kids

It is also the absence of particular sounds that were noted, along with the almost indefinable smells of the country air. The other senses, sight-touch-smell, provide information that contrasts the karst areas to the urban, industrial and modern. Sound also provides this contrast and places the caves as different to the 'normal' noises of life. In a cave environment, usually surrounded by bush and countryside the noises of urbanity are left behind.

I enjoyed the tranquillity

It's picturesque and tranquil being in the countryside

It is peaceful and quiet – the carpark was full but we could still find a quiet place for lunch

Sound is important to the experience. It is the absence of unwanted sounds, and clarity of the sounds such as the stories told by the guides, that make the experience meaningful.

Multi-sensing

Caves are sensed in many ways. People experience them through sight but also touch, smell and sound. One staff member tells us:

I have intense emotions in the cave, turning the corner & seeing a new place, so sensual, it assaults every sense, I want to sit & soak it all up.

When visitors described their experience and their response to caves they did so with reference to many senses. The cave environment is spectacular and evokes tremendous applause regarding its beauty and visual interest, but it is also an aesthetic experience employing other senses and producing other responses.

The fully sensual nature of the experience ensures that it is an emotional as well as rational experience. Freeman Tilden (1977), a founding father of interpretation, strongly argued that emotion and a sensuous contact with the landscape are precisely the experiences that guides should be facilitating for their visitors, drawing on their 'priceless' ingredient of passion. In Tilden's words:

We should not attempt to describe that which is only – or better – to be apprehended by feeling. (Tilden 1977: 86)

The excerpts from visitors and community reveal that the experience is valued for its cognitive and affective experiences: the history and geological explanations provide cognitive satisfaction but the colour, touch, and sound ensure that the experience is truly memorable because of its emotional impact.

Difference

The multi-sensing of the cave environment draws attention to some of the ways in which the karst tourist site is made into a 'place', that is, the ways in which it develops a set of unique meanings.

The perception of difference is a key characteristic of the tourist experience where place and behaviour are distinguished from the place of origin (McCannell 2001; Suvantola 2002).

The tourist makes sense of their experience in relationship to its opposite, the non-tourist experience. The multiple ways that people sense the cave environment tells us that the tourist cave's difference is its antithesis to the urban, industrial and modern; a difference that appeals to visitors and residents alike.

For example, with Jenolan, whilst it is relatively close, a two or three hour trip, to Australia's largest metropolitan area the journey to the caves and the landscape on arrival give a sense of isolation from the developed world and provides instead a feeling of being encompassed by the natural terrain. A journey to Jenolan is an experience of fresh air, vistas not dominated by human constructions, or sounds and smells that are in contrast to urban living.

Visitors' descriptions of the case study site, Jenolan Caves, also present its ambience or character as located by a sense of the historical and a *lack* of features that represent modernity and development. When asked whether or not they had any suggestions many visitors replied 'keep as it is', 'do not change'.

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*It is good the way it is – I wouldn't change anything
No suggestions, just to stay as is
Keep it rustic and the historical atmosphere (but
maintain it better)
It has an old style, removed from the city, and
should be kept that way*

The request to 'keep as is' focuses on the 'naturalness' of the site and the European history or heritage. In a world of changeability and uncertainty the constancy or stability at Jenolan Caves is seen as a positive experience, a contrast and relief to the 'other' world that visitors have escaped from.

People do not want to make the three-hour trip to find themselves at a site that could just as easily be found within the city. The 'old world charm' and absence of 'touristy' or 'commercial' features distinguish Jenolan from other places. Quite possibly then, at Jenolan, the loss of heritage and naturalness would be tantamount to a loss of 'place'; a loss of the markers that distinguish it from other places.

Conclusion

In my own view I think what this data does is articulate some of the tensions that tourism faces—be it tropical karst, temperate karst or other form of tourism. We have a tendency to focus on the visual and yet we are multi-sensual beings, and often it is the non-visual information that prods and stimulates the whole of our being, and contributes so much to a meaningful experience and an emotionally rewarding experience.

Some of this emotion is tied up with the perceived differences – the place markers. In a Westernised country I would guess that any karst tourist site is marked by its naturalness, and absence of urbanity and industry.

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