

PROGRESS IN KARST CONSERVATION

- Elery Hamilton-Smith

The Li Guides in Shilin



As our editor says, I have been peregrinating again. This time there is a consistent theme emerging from the various meetings that I attended and field trips that I undertook. On one hand, there has been a great deal of progress in thinking about nature conservation in general, partly because of the focus provided by the Durban Congress in 2003. This has generated considerable re-thinking about protected areas and the role of World Heritage. But there is also an upsurge in thinking about the resource values of karst.

So, let me start with the Durban Congress (which I did not attend). It led to a range of statements on policy, of which the most important are gathered together in a document called the Durban accord. It calls for action on 10 major areas:

- Improving the role of protected areas in biodiversity conservation
- Striving to alleviate poverty through protected area management
- Ensuring representation of all the world's ecosystems and the linkage of protected areas to wider ecosystems
- Improving quality, effectiveness and reporting of protected area management
- Recognising and establishing the rights of indigenous people in relation to protected areas and their management
- Empowering the involvement of younger people
- Achieving greater support
- Improving the governance of protected areas
- Increasing the resources available
- Improving communications about values and benefits

I commenced my wanderings by attending TransKarst in Hanoi. This was the first major speleological conference to be held in Vietnam, and attracted an immense number of delegates. It was a great occasion for meeting interesting people – but the program proved to be incredibly overcrowded with four concurrent sessions running for nearly the whole conference.

Plenary sessions were held in an immense hall with appalling acoustics (at least for someone with hearing aids!). Even viewing the 30 or so posters proved a daunting task.

Those papers which I heard included a great paper by Paul Williams which summarised new developments and trends in karst studies; a wonderful series of papers on the bats of Myanmar by post-grad students from the University of Yangon; a very positive account of improvements in caving practice in the Philippines by Gil Madronero (who has attended ACKMA conferences), Bill Granert and Peter Urich; and an excellent presentation on the contribution of cave survey and other caving field studies to karst science by Pat Kambesis.

Perhaps most significantly, the papers which best illustrated the changing directions in karst management which one would expect to follow from the Durban accord were virtually all from contemporary cutting edge work by Vietnamese karst scientists.

My own presentations were on the role of the IUCN Task Force; classification of karst types as a basis for setting priorities in establishing a more representative series of karst protected areas and the complex speleogenesis of the Phong Nha Karst of Vietnam.

A Bureau of meeting of the International Union of Speleology was held in conjunction with TransKarst and I was glad to be invited to attend. This enabled us to work towards closer co-operation between the UIS and the IUCN Task Force. The development of a Memorandum of Understanding is currently in progress. We were also able to act together in protesting (so far, successfully) against the proposed destruction of an important cave in Bermuda.

Then I moved directly on to Kunming for a special seminar on Karst Protection and World Heritage strategies in China. This was a delightful meeting that was very well structured and included some truly great presentations reviewing the various major karst areas of China. The final outcome was a decision that a serial nomination, encompassing the key karst areas of Southern China, would be prepared and forwarded for the consideration by the World Heritage Committee. This demands a new level of co-operation across provincial boundaries, but it will probably be successful, as opposed to previous single area nominations. It was clear that the conference marked a very considerable leap forward of both karst science and thinking about karst management in China.

Those of us from outside of China found ourselves in the middle of an immense outpouring of hospitality and generosity and all of us returned with a significant increase in the weight of your luggage. We had a great field trip to the Shilin Stone Forest. The picnic lunch was enough for ten times our number!

The Plitvice Lakes



But to me, the greatest highlight was meeting the Li people from the Stone Forest staff who also met us on arrival and hosted us at the hotel in Kunming. They were the best tourist hosts and guides I have ever encountered, anywhere in the world! They were beautiful people, delightful company, and spoke absolutely magnificent English (learned from the BBC). By contrast, we saw a number of bus tours, and they had probably the worst guides I have ever seen – all of them looked and behaved like cattle herders!

But also, the quality of management at Shilin has leapt ahead. After our field trip, the director invited a number of us to dinner and insisted that we tell him what we considered were the best and worst aspects of their management. He is deeply committed to moving still further forward.

Then back to Limestone Coast 2004 at Naracoorte. Kent provided a good description in the last issue of the journal, so I will be very brief. Both TransKarst and our Limestone Coast meeting were part of the International Geological Correlation Program (project 448) and it interested me to compare them. The relatively small size of the Limestone Coast meeting greatly facilitated discussion and exchange of ideas. I believe most delegates would have incorporated new ideas and concepts into their own thinking as a result. My own paper was again on trying to develop a useful classification of karst types.

Soon afterwards, I departed for Slovenia, with a quick stopover in Thailand. Our good friend Ratana met me at the airport and we headed out to Erawan to check progress on the up-grading of the tourist cave Tham Lawa. I had visited this some years previously, and was delighted to see the very real progress that has been made. Even better, we then headed off to Sai Yoke, the type locality of Kitti's bat, *Craseonycteris thonglongyai*. This remarkable bat is the world's smallest mammal, weighing in at about 2 grams. To my delight, the population is no longer in decline as was the case some years ago. Good management and careful monitoring has now led to a real increase in the population without any real threats.

The meeting in Slovenia was a forum on World Heritage Strategies for Europe, more or less along the lines of the Asian-Pacific meeting held in Mulu in 2001. This one was held at Lipice, the stud farm and long-time home of the famous dancing white

horses. We had an excellent representation with most European countries present.

All the papers were excellent; there were some superb visual presentations (particularly Patrick Cabrol and the French speleothems); a day's field trip to Skocjanske Jame and features of the surrounding area; and some very open discussion.

We arrived at more-or-less a consensus about sites that may (should) be nominated for World Heritage. France had already forwarded a nomination for a serial nomination of the most beautiful speleothem caves but it was withdrawn when it proved to have some problems about the proposed management regime. They are now re-working that nomination and it should be forwarded next year. Russia will nominate the Kungur Cave – a great gypsum cave and also a very beautiful ice cave at the same time. Greece is considering a nomination of the Mills of Argostoli and the Czech Republic are looking towards nomination of the Moravian Karst.

Perhaps the most interesting of all is that Croatia is strongly supporting the post-war re-building of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The speleologists are committed to the re-development and re-opening of Vjetrenica Cave, which is a former tourist cave. Their further investigations have proved that not only is this a much larger and more complex cave than previously was known, but that it has a very rich biodiversity. Ivo Lucic, a Croatian journalist, is one of the leaders of this program and has produced a great book, both a scientific text and a coffee-table volume at the one time. They have gained immense support in what they are planning and are committed to make it one of the great show caves of the world.

We also had some discussions about the Alpine karsts – but no conclusion. I have argued that the countries concerned should work together to establish a single trans-boundary park, perhaps in several separate areas, which will capture the finest of the wondrous Alpine karsts. It would be indeed regrettable if we allow political boundaries to fragment the essential unity of the Alps as a natural phenomenon.

After the forum, I was lucky enough to get to Plitvice Lakes, the Croatian World Heritage Area. It is still an absolutely beautiful place and very well managed indeed. Part of the reason for my visit was to update my own knowledge of the site and also to ask if they would be willing and able to assist in enhancing management quality at similar sites in China.

So, eventually, I returned home with an overwhelming feeling that park management, and particularly karst management, is changing for the better quite rapidly. Regrettably, there is much less sense of change and excitement about innovation in Australian park management agencies. At least in part because of budget constraints and also as a result of bureaucratised management and stupidity, a number of Australian areas are falling behind the front line, even though we still have a better overall performance in cave management than most other countries.

