

Chris White of Cement Australia about to present titles of the quarries to Leigh Harris, Capricornia Regional Manager, QPWS. Photo: Nicholas White.



MT ETNA QUARRIES TRANSFERRED TO QUEENSLAND PARKS SERVICE AND THE CENTENARY OF NATIONAL PARKS IN QUEENSLAND

– Nicholas White

Rehabilitation of the Eastern Quarry, Mt. Etna.
Photo: Nicholas White.



Hundreds of people attended the Parks Centenary celebrations and the formal handover of the Mt Etna quarries by *Cement Australia* to the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) on 27 September 2008. This marked the end of the longest conservation campaign in Australia.

The Parks Service chose the Cammoo Cave setting to conduct the formal side of proceedings together with a full program of walks, cave visits, fossil digging and activities such as learning about the important bats based on the Mt Etna Caves National Park.

The Australian Speleological Federation (ASF) was well represented at the ceremony by a number of Executive members, as well as many of the people both past and current members of ASF, who conducted the campaign from the 1970s to the 1990s.

CQSS, UQSS and ASF members fought the cement companies for over forty years over the mining of the caveriferous limestone on the sides of Mt Etna, which resulted in the destruction of and damage to the caves. There were blockades and legal challenges to no avail. The legal arguments to prevent mining were never heard because of the question of standing, despite an appeal to the High Court, but the judgement produced important changes to the law on standing which has allowed cases to be heard in the public interest and to provide better protection for the environment in Australia.

When *Cement Australia* sought advice from the community on what should happen to the quarries only ASF expressed an interest in the Eastern Quarry.

ASF then conducted detailed and time-consuming negotiations for three years with *Cement Australia* for the Eastern quarry to be donated, via its Gift Fund, to ASF to manage the residual caves and karst.

John Clarke of QPWS explaining the importance of bats on the Park. Photo: Nicholas White.



It was only with political changes in Brisbane which resulted in a policy to double the Park Estate by 2020 that QPWS expressed an interest in the Eastern Quarry. Subsequent negotiations resulted in *Cement Australia* donating the site directly to QPWS rather than to ASF.



Chris White, Cement Australia, presenting a cheque to Peter Berrill for the ASF Gift Fund. Photo: Nicholas White.

The ASF President, Stan Flavel, spoke of the involvement of ASF in the campaign and Craig Hardy spoke on behalf of people involved in trying to prevent mining and protect the caves with their associated bat populations. Peter Berrill, on behalf of ASF, received a generous donation to the Gift Fund from Chris White of *Cement Australia*. These funds will facilitate the publishing of a book on the history of cave and karst conservation battles in Australia. This was followed by the new Capricornia Regional Manager of QPWS, Leigh Harris, accepting the gift of title to the quarries on behalf of the State Government.

As well as welcoming the handover, Peter Berrill was emphatic in stressing that although the ASF was not happy with the QPWS performance at present, it looked towards a renewed commitment to better karst management, including involvement of ASF. He finished off with the statement: "*Mt. Etna has become 'Hallowed*

Ground', this is our mountain, look after it, because we will be forever vigilant."

Ann Augustyn and her staff from Capricorn Caverns assisted with many of the activities through the day. ACKMA Fellow Dianne Vavryn was very involved in tours and presenting bat information to visitors.



Children at the Fossil Dig. Photo: Tania Smith.

Scott Hucknull from the Queensland Museum conducted one of his fossil dig days where children searched for fossil bones. The children sieved cave breccia to find bones which are then identified by the scientists and explained to the children. It is one of the most effective hands on science exercises I have seen.



Dianne Vavryn at a display erected for the Handover Ceremony. Photo: Tania Smith.

Scott Hucknull was instrumental during the 1990s in retrieving cave breccias intersected during quarrying and storing these at the quarry. The study of these breccias has enabled a reconstruction of past climates at Mt Etna. He has also recently been conducting a fossil dig at Capricorn Caverns.

The studies have shown different climatic phases at Mt Etna during the last million years. There was a rain forest fauna with possums at about 800,000 years BP followed by much drier conditions about 250,000 years BP with many of the larger megafauna groups represented.

For a more comprehensive history of the prolonged Mt Etna conservation battles see *An overview of the Mt Etna Campaign* by Peter Berrill and Dianne Vavryn – ACKMA Journal No 72, pp 15-18, September 2008.