

CONFERENCE MUSINGS

EDITOR'S NOTE: Subsequent to the 18th ACKMA Conference, I asked selected attendees to 'write a few words' on their impressions of the event, which are recorded below. With the exception of John Watson, they are all 'first timers'...

Dr. John Watson wrote: 'It was great to attend another ACKMA Conference after a break of some fourteen years! At that time attendances were around 40-60 people so the Margaret River assembly of over 100 participants was a bit of a quantum leap for me. However, it was great that the camaraderie of the smaller conferences was still there. It was a bit harder to meet everyone, especially if you turned up a day late like me and missed the Sunday reception. However, with a few exceptions I did manage to chat to most attendees at some stage. I was a little surprised that there were not more attendees from South East Asia, however, I am sure that this was due to external factors such as world recessions and the like and was just a temporary blip.

I thought the papers included some really valuable new information but as is so often the case there is usually not enough time for questions and further discussion. That is why the land use workshop (Ross Anderson) and the field trips were so valuable, quite apart from a welcome break from the main hall. The workshop was particularly useful for me – I just hope we manage to capture the salient points from the discussions and summary. I think a very telling point in the conference was when Julia James pointed out that although climate change is an important issue for karst, urbanisation and other changing land use is here now and critically important at the local scale in particular.

It is also some time since I have taken an objective look at the cave and karst management in the Leeuwin -Naturaliste Ridge and overall I was most impressed by what is now happening. This is not only due to the efforts of the agencies involved but also to the individual staff. For example, on the Saturday morning I called in at both Calgardup and Caveworks (which I had missed on the field trips). I was made most welcome by the staff at both sites.

'As for the conference organisation, it was magnificent and my thanks go to Anne Wood and all her organizing committee. The conference handbook (Kent Henderson) and the Field Trip Guide (Rauleigh Webb & Ken Grimes) were excellent. The food was varied and great and the variety of venues for business, eating and socialising was also great. It was also wonderful to catch up with so many of you who I have not seen for many years and to witness your on-going dedication to caves and karst, sometimes in very different and challenging personal circumstances.

'A real bonus for me was to meet up with a friendly and very talented musician in Geoff Kell. I have now

set my sights on Mulu and a return to Tasmania in 2011. You'd better be there too Geoff!'

Lisa King wrote: 'Oh, the joys of an ACKMA conference! Where do I begin? Camaraderie, commitment to cave conservation values and a generous forum to express and circulate opinions and discuss ideas were some of my impressions of my first ACKMA conference. As a PhD student interested in World Heritage, National Parks and visitor management, I was quite humbled by the caliber of attendees and the quality of presentations. ACKMA has developed a 'conference culture' of expecting everyone to attend presentations – and everyone did! I found the talks to be insightful and quite enlightening to a caving neophyte such as myself. Other impressions include lots of food, more food and lots of good laughs. During evening hours, who knew so many cavers had additional talents in the realm of bush poetry, singing, dancing, jokes and music! Mandolins, guitars and campfires...that was a memorable evening as was conference closing night. I think several ACKMA members could have been professional comedians...

The value of the conference to me professionally and personally was immeasurable. I now have new opportunities to write papers with top people in the cave management field, and have made numerous friends and professional contacts. The conference has spurred me on to learn more about caves, caving and to do my best to make sure these unique environments are properly protected...I plan on attending as many future ACKMA conferences as I can. My new mantra is now *Mulu, Mulu, Mulu*. Looking forward to seeing everyone there!'



Massages in aid of the ACKMA Life Member's fund!
Left – Kirsty Dixon works on Pete Chandler.
Right – Lisa King does Libby Chandler.

Patrick Nykiel wrote: 'Well, what can I say about the 18th ACKMA conference in Margaret River? I found this raucous event a great centre of learning and a reinforcement of my potential career choice. Many powerful papers were presented, with highlights being Dr Julia James with her bell

ratings and management schemes; Dr John Watson, the musician from Albany; Ross Anderson with the awesome photos of the Woodvale swimming pool subsidence; Brian Clark (need any more be said?), and of course Dr Dave Merritt with his glow worms. I must say there were many other excellent papers but these were the ones that stuck in my mind as being particularly interesting.

The facilities were excellent, with more food than has ever seen consumed before by 100 people. Good food at that, entrees were more than enough to sustain me; however mains and dessert were always too good to refuse.



Attendees listen to a talk at 'Explorus'

One cannot forget the silly persons at the conference and cries of 'Thank you delegates' from Kent! The benefits of higher education and picking up spare 'brain cells' were also made clear to me. Brian Clark and Steve Bourne should be remembered evermore as the clowns of ACKMA. Clarkie will be long remembered for his 'foot in mouth syndrome' exposition at the Conference Dinner – at which some hilarious quotes were recorded from Dr Julia, Dr Claire, and Derek. More examples of brain cells frying and higher education.

If Mr Bourne, with whom the phrase 'oh dear' is usually associated, dropped any more grey matter he would not have enough to distribute. He is an amazing person that people should learn from, his hilarity exceeds all imagination. Other highlights include the Conference Dinner generally, and afternoon caving expeditions as well as various blunders and things you would never find in a *normal* conference!

In short, this was the best conference I have ever been to. I have gained more from these debates and controversies than any other. ACKMA and members thereof, you have captured me, see you all in Mulu! NOTE: I am not responsible for any sarcasm, puns or humour in this report. Blame Brian, Steve, Kent, Rob, not to mention Andy, and any others responsible for my new education.'

Peter Grills wrote: 'As it was my first ACKMA conference, what to expect was all unknown. I did

not know until April that I had the holidays to go and I must thank Anne Wood for my late rego and the help and return phone calls to me, putting all in place.

I arrived into the Margaret River area a week before the start of the conference and worked my way down the coast searching out tourist caves. Yes all were offered during the conference but some days different caves were available, giving me the chance to see different caves.

'From Sunday I was made to feel welcome by ACKMA and the people attending. The indigenous aboriginal welcome to country was very informative and a great start to the week. Monday to Friday the procedure of morning papers and afternoon trips, was a great idea.

The papers delivered covered the local area and international level. Daily the food started at breakfast flowed into morning tea, then lunch and then dinner just in case hunger was on anyone's mind. The food was great and plenty of it thanks to all involved in feeding the multitude.

I must thank Jay Anderson for organizing late evening caving trips. Also to the guides Tracey and Rob who gave up their time to take us out of a night. Overall the conference to me was a great opportunity for me to meet people in the industry that I dream about. It offered me caving and education about of caves in the Margaret River area. I would like to thank all involved for a great time and hope we can meet again.'

Rhonda Oshaneck wrote: 'The 2009 ACKMA conference was my first, and hopefully won't be my last. The combination of managers, scientists and cavers made for interesting content and conversation. Being a recreational caver and a scientist by training (although in health research), I was interested in finding out more about caves and the issues surrounding public access to these fragile spaces.

I was disheartened to learn how the caves and karst in Western Australia have been sorely mismanaged and misunderstood (particularly by land developers), but pleased to see that measures are being taken to 'give caves a voice' through the new foundation supported by the National Trust.

I was also somewhat shocked to learn that there is no single decision-making organisation that oversees Karst in Western Australia. To try to bridge some of the management gaps, a few other interesting and potentially valuable initiatives presented in the conference are the draft caves and karst policy that could ultimately lead to legislative changes in how caves are managed in Western Australia, and the International Show Caves Association, which is working to bring show cave managers together around the world.

The afternoon workshop was a great opportunity to tease out some of the issues associated with managing caves, and it became clear that better

education of both the public and the government officials that form policies is sorely needed to help conserve caves. The other aspect of the conference that was interesting was the science; particularly the glow worms and their light cycles, the stygofauna and troglofauna found nowhere else in the world, the megafauna fossils found in Mammoth cave, the impact of 'climate change', and the impacts of land development on cave and karst systems. Overall, I came away from the conference with the impression that caves will have a louder voice, and we will not lose these special places.'



Dr John Watson (left) and Geoff Kell
– the ACKMA 'orchestra' in action!

Sasa Kennedy wrote: 'I confess I hadn't really thought about attending an ACKMA conference – after all I'm not a cave or karst manager – but when Dan Cove mentioned the Interpretation Workshop to be held prior to the conference I thought that might be something I could make a useful contribution to. Besides, it sounded like a perfect opportunity to visit an area of show caves renowned for their beauty (and maybe even fit in some caving). I carefully studied the program of field trips and began daydreaming about a week in the west. How could I resist?'

'When I called Anne Wood to make some tentative enquiries her enthusiasm and warmth clinched it and I was on my way. What an excellent decision! The helpfulness of Anne and the organising committee throughout the week was outstanding. Special thanks to Jay for organising guides, permits, gear and transport for the night caving trips. They were fabulous; a perfect opportunity to get a real feel for the Margaret River karst, catch up with old friends and get to know new ones. Congratulations also to whoever organised the catering – some serious caving will be required to get rid of those extra kilos!

'A surprise to me and I think a great strength of the conference was the mix of management, scientists, speleos, guides and others who attended. I gained a lot from the diverse papers: insights into the range of issues confronting karst managers; a better understanding of the variety of karst types and their management, both in Australia and elsewhere;

a broader view of the many ways in which caves can be presented to visitors and some very useful scientific knowledge. I loved hearing the tales of caving in earlier times and different places. It was really nice to see the passion with which everyone spoke of their caves and their projects and the interest shown in the projects and ideas of others.'

For me the conference provided a valuable opportunity to network and to discuss ideas with other guides and cave lovers; some new info that I can incorporate into my tours and activities (both above and below ground); ideas for new activities to develop and a renewed enthusiasm for my privileged job of inspiring cave visitors to care about karst. Thanks again to all concerned. Looking forward to seeing you underground!

Julia Coggins wrote: 'Having attended the odd seminar or workshop and being pretty green at caving, I must admit that amidst the excitement of attending my first conference there was a certain amount of trepidation at being around all these wonderfully knowledgeable people that live and breathe caves. Well that was dispelled within the first half hour of the opening festivities – you'd be hard pushed to find a warmer, friendlier and more humorous lot than these guys.'

'I was lucky enough to start my week with the pre-conference *Caves Guides Interpretation Workshop* facilitated by Dan Cove and presented by Sasa Kennedy, David Hay and Geoff Kell. The workshop was excellent, offering some great ideas for engaging visitors and making their cave experience memorable.'

'Our cave guides can run up to six consecutive 45 minute tours a day each so having a 'theme' that promotes an important message and periodically changing the theme and message will be a great way of keeping up the energy and enthusiasm levels that is expected on a guided tour. I think using science based games is a great idea to introduce the young (and the young at heart) to karst and cave environments I'm sure this will be something we can build on and have fun with.'

'I was hoping to take back a few ideas that we could use to help give our public cave a bit of a face lift. To my delight I have a whole gamut of relevant and useful information that encompasses everything cave and karst including state of the art products, recommendations on structural requirements, the importance of identifying objectives prior to commencing any cave works, new ideas in management and presentation of show caves to visitors.'

'The amount of research and the level of dedication displayed by the presenters were both inspirational and comforting in light of the ever increasing pressures on our karst systems. I have come away much richer for the experience and look forward to 2011 – awesome, superb spring to mind and, dare I suggest, ten bells for organisation, content and presentation.'