

David Summers, International Show Caves Association (ISCA) President (right), with Hein Gerstner, Manager of Cango Caves – ACKMA Conference 2009. Hein is also a director of ISCA.



## **THE NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN SHOW CAVES**

– David Summers\*

### **INTRODUCTION**

We need to rally all of the people involved in the world of show caves to the cause of achieving sustainable development in show caves. Our goals for the development and operation of show caves must be defined in terms of sustainability in all countries – developed or developing, market orientated or centrally planned.

The world first really heard the message of sustainable development from the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development created in 1983, a full twenty-five years ago. Not last year – but a quarter of a century ago. To put this time period into relative comprehensible terms, it is one eightieth since the time that the Romans extended their empire into England. It is a hundredth of the time since construction of the Great Wall of China was commenced, not finished.

The World Commission on Environment and Development presented their report to the United Nations Assembly in 1987. Somehow, it has taken the world time to react to this farsighted report. Maybe, it was a shock of harsh reality for the wealthier northern states. Maybe it came as a surprise to the poorer southern states. Whatever it was, the world has only now started to mobilize to the call of sustainable development.

Sustainable development means that the environment meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development means meeting the basic needs of all. The 'environment' is where we all live and 'development' is what we all do in attempt to improve our lives within that abode.

After 25 years of virtual standstill and deterioration, our brave new world starts to move forward. It is time for change. It is time for global cooperation to move forward. It is particularly important in light of the present global financial downturn for the nations of the world to collaborate to achieve sustainable development.

The world of show caves has its own United Nations Organization of show caves – it is called the International Show Caves Association. ISCA can provide the necessary link between the scientists and the public. Public interest in the scientific world is growing. The media is accelerating this.

### **THE NEED FOR SUSTAINABILITY**

The challenge for us in the world of show caves is to ensure that our caves are sustainable: Our number one enemy is environmental degradation. We must fulfill our responsibilities towards global sustainable development.

We need to grow closer to each other. We need to collaborate and share our experiences. We need to share our successes and, even more importantly, we need to share our failures. Do we want to have another Lascaux tragedy on our hands? The answer is a resounding - no. We need to collaborate more.

There is a global need for sustainable development of show caves. There is a need for international collaboration to achieve sustainable development of show caves. We need worldwide solidarity to achieve this critical goal.

Let's start at the very beginning of the term sustainable development. In many ways our subterranean worlds are sensory monitors of what is occurring above ground. Even our entry into these natural systems can be intervention. In any show cave, environmental matters must rank as the highest consideration. The often touted need for economical profit pales against environmental considerations. If the environment of the cave is not good, then its economic future will not be good. Conversely, of course, if the economics of the show cave are not good, then the environmental quality will suffer.

Where do we start? Clearly the item that must always be at the top of the list is the protection of the cave. This must always be in the highest echelon of the priorities of a show cave. It will be futile to implement any new methods of operating or developing a cave if the foremost obligation of protecting the cave is not achieved.

Vandals, with senseless malicious intent, can cause immeasurable damage to any cave - damage that can take thousands of years to overcome, if ever. In considering time spans in the life of a cave, it must always be borne in mind that the time since caves were first developed for showing to the public can be equated to the blink of the eye compared to the time taken to create a cave.

Protection of a show cave must fundamentally prevent entry into the cave by unauthorized people. It is pointless to rely on methods of discovering the identity of the intruder in order to punish them. We must protect the cave against the vandalization that can occur through unauthorized entry. Cameras simply will not protect the cave. Proper gating of a show cave can consequently be considered the first step in pursuing the sustainable development of a show cave.

Another critical component of developing and operating a show cave is the protection of the formations from the prying fingers of the visitors. All too frequently we hear of renowned formations that are irretrievably lost through this type of vandalism. Consequently, protection of the cave can be considered a fundamental in sustainable development.

#### **THE NATURAL RESOURCE OF A SHOW CAVE**

After the cave is protected, the next question that must be answered is - what is the purpose of the show cave? The fundamental purpose of a show

cave has to be education, be it academic education or enlightenment of the public.

Show caves are where the public needs to be directed in order to enable them to see the incredible underground spectacle that exists in our underworld. The general public does not belong in wild and unimproved caves.

Caves are inherently dangerous places if the lay visitor is not properly trained and equipped. In accepting the general visitor into their caves, the show cave operator must be aware that the average visitor is becoming more educated and will also have a greater awareness and appreciation for the environment.

A show cave is an incredibly valuable natural resource. Providing we protect it and preserve it, we can achieve sustainability. Nowhere are the words - the environment is both physical and social - more applicable than in a show cave. The show cave owner/operator has a clear responsibility to ensure that their guides are well trained and have ongoing education. The responsibility of the guides is to ensure that they are providing a good educational tour. They are not the star of the visit - the cave is.

A show cave is the absolute best medium to let the public see and understand the wonders of the underground. Without this opportunity to physically witness the interior of a cave, it is predictable that the public will not be as concerned about the need to preserve and conserve caves. We must all work to ensure that the old notion that a cave is simply a hole in the ground, with its best use being a dumping ground, is no longer prevalent.



David Summers with Lisa King - ACKMA Conference 2009. Lisa is a PhD student who was funded to the Conference through the ACKMA Life Members Fund.

#### **SUSTAINABILITY OF SHOW CAVES**

The ongoing need to promote and educate the public is a global need. This very same credo is the same in every continent of the world. International collaboration is fundamental to the achievement of these objectives. We cannot expect to achieve this in isolation as individuals. In assessing these objectives, it is important to bear in mind that not every cave needs to be a show cave. Show caves are an incredibly small percentage of the total number of caves in the world.

We, as owners and operators of show caves, have a responsibility to ensure that show caves are operated with the absolute highest environmental standards. The matter of need becomes fundamental. In assessing "need", the economic impact that a show cave can have on a locale must always be remembered. Not only are the more obvious economic advantages arising from direct benefits to be considered, but also the less obvious benefits arising from a show cave must also be taken into account.

The notion that a show cave must be economically successful, in order to support the environmentally sound practices, is alive and well. Find a cave that is not performing well economically, and it will follow that there are insufficient funds available to support the environmental needs.

While I believe that the owners and operators of show caves are generally working hand in hand with the environment, there clearly is a need to be cognizant that this can always be improved. We must be vigilant and remain on the cutting edge of environmental matters. To do this the clear benefits of international collaboration must be enhanced and utilized more.

We have the ability to ensure that our show caves are sustainable. The future need not be threatened as long as we are vigilant and ensure that we are not promoting interlocking crises that can happen with indiscriminate economies and ecology. Sustainable means that we must avoid using up natural resources. We must be in harmony with the productive potential of the ecosystem.

In the end, sustainable development is not a fixed state of harmony, but rather a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are made consistent with the future as well as present needs. There is an overwhelming need to make informed choices. The need to adopt sound sustainable development practices is upon us. The transition to sustainable development can be achieved.

Part of our environmental management practices must be focused on after the fact repairs of damage and restoration of natural habitats. We must accept that change will happen. We must produce more with less.

### **GLOBAL COLLABORATION**

There is a clear challenge facing the world of show caves. We must protect, conserve and preserve our incredible displays of the earth's natural systems. Show caves are not simply curiosities, but very important vehicles to aid and promote public awareness.

The last component that we must meet is the need to remain viable. After a period of stagnation, we are finally waking up. We have made an important start. We must now enter into serious collaboration on a global basis.

We have established the International Commission on Sustainable Development in Show Caves. Now this body must start its deliberations. These deliberations will extend around the globe and cover every continent. We need countries in every continent to support the essential objectives of sustainable development. We are charged with a very fragile and delicate world, a world that requires a co-joining of economy and science. This is what the International Show Caves Association is all about.

In addition to establishing the International Commission on Sustainable Development in Show Caves, ISCA is currently preparing Management Guidelines for Show Caves. These guidelines will be practical and even if a given show cave does not comply with them they will provide guidelines that show caves can work towards.

We do not have a resource that we can rebuild, if it is damaged, within periods of time that are less than thousands of years into the future. We are all aware that once something in a show cave is lost, it is effectively lost forever. The future need not be threatened if we collaborate, collaborate and collaborate.

\* paper represented at the 18th ACKMA Conference, Margaret River, Western Australia.



### **FIVE INTERNATIONALS!**

The recent ACKMA Conference was blessed with the attendance of five International attendees (we don't count Kiwis as such!). These were (left to right): David Summers, ISCA President; Jeffrey Simum, Senior Guide in charge of Visitor Access Infrastructure, Mulu Caves, Sarawak; Brian Clark, ACKMA Past President and Life Member, Manager of Mulu Caves; Hein Gerstner, Manager of Congo Caves, South Africa; and Bian Rumei, Senior Guide in charge of Human Resources, Mulu Caves, Sarawak.

For David and Jeffrey, this was their first ACKMA Conference attendance. All made a substantial contribution to the Conference, and we are looking forward very much to the company of (at least!) Brian, Jeffrey and Bian at next year's ACKMA Annual General Meeting 'Week', which will be held at Mulu.