

Cave Management in Australasia VI



**Proceedings of the
Sixth Australasian Conference
on Cave Tourism and Management**

**Waitomo Caves
New Zealand
September, 1985**



R. E. Jolley

CAVE MANAGEMENT IN AUSTRALASIA

Proceedings of the sixth Australasian Conference on Cave Tourism and Management.

Waitomo Caves, New Zealand
September 1985

Edited by D R Williams and K A Wilde

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CAVE MANAGEMENT IN AUSTRALASIA

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Copies of these proceedings are available from D R Williams, Caves Manager, Waitomo Caves, New Zealand.

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SOLICITING PUBLIC COMMENT DURING THE PREPARATION
OF THE DRAFT MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE NARACOORTE
CAVES CONSERVATION PARK

Lindsay Jolley

South Australia National
Parks and Wildlife
Service

I am going to outline a technique used in South Australia to increase public input when preparing management plans for parks. The first park it was used on in South Australia was Naracoorte Caves Conservation Park.

First I will describe the legislative requirements for the preparation of park management plans in South Australia. Under the National Parks and Wildlife Act, the Director of the National Parks and Wildlife Service is required to produce management plans for the reserves dedicated under the Act. One month must be allowed for public comment on the draft management plan. Normally two months are allowed. These comments are considered by the Reserves Advisory Committee which recommends to the Minister the form the final management plan should take. It is the Minister who decides on the final management plan; hence the final decision should reflect the overall community needs.

How then has the public been involved in South Australia in this process so far?

Until about 1981 there was only a small number of management plans under preparation. The decision then to give plan preparation a priority led to a dramatic rise in management plan preparation; for instance, in the South East Region, draft management plans have been released for public comment for nine parks. Draft plans for a further ten parks are ready for release and draft plans are in preparation for another four parks. This makes a total of 23 parks of the 36 dedicated areas in the South East Region. We have been very busy.

Generally management plans are prepared by planning officers (permanent and contract) or consultants. Until about 1981 they would contact "known" public in order to obtain information to help in the preparation of the draft plan. The Service did not place advertisements soliciting public input.

The Service then progressed to putting advertisements in newspapers requesting public comment. In the South East this usually led to a small number of submissions only, as had happened elsewhere in the State. Later, letters to some groups and further media requests for public comment solicited only a few further written submissions. Our advertisements were not giving the anticipated return.

The reality is that many people find it hard, or are reluctant, to comment unless they see a hard copy of a plan.

How did this affect the public response to our management plans?

In spite of our attempts to overtly seek public input there was still quite a number of people who sincerely believed that they had been left out of the planning.

When you get controversy with a plan it not only tends to lower the Service's public credibility it also leads to a use of a lot of Service officer resources. Admittedly there can be a positive side to controversy; it can help to increase public interest and knowledge. Don't forget the losses.

Action by the Department of Lands in soliciting public input into the management plan it was preparing for Ewens Ponds, a well-used sinkhole, confirmed for me that significant input could be obtained during the preparation of the draft plan. Not only did the Department put written requests for help to interested persons and organisations, it followed up non-replies to ensure that replies were eventually forthcoming.

I decided to take this obtaining of public input a step further. A range of interested persons would be put together to ensure interaction with each other as well as input to us.

The first park I had the opportunity to implement this for was the Naracoorte Caves Conservation Park. By this stage a preliminary draft management plan had been prepared by a consultancy team. The plan was being finalised for public release and comment. As was the case for most plans, the consultancy team had contacted "known" persons who had an interest in or had knowledge of the park. The media had been used also to locate such people.

Nevertheless there were matters in the draft management plan about which I was uncertain. I wanted a sounding board before the draft plan was released.

What did I do?

Invitations to attend a Sunday afternoon workshop were sent out to about sixty persons and organisations. Each invitation was accompanied by a twelve page outline of matters for possible discussion in the draft management plan. Once you have prepared

your preliminary draft management plan you are in a much better position to prepare the discussion outline.

The invitation list included interests in non-tourist caving, school groups, fire protection, park neighbour issues, tourism, local government and conservation.

In order to ensure that we were genuinely seeking public input I obtained the services of four local independent people to act as chairpersons. Each workshop group had a chairperson and a Service officer who acted as a recorder. The Service officer was only to supply information and was not to take part in the debate. He/she recorded the groups comments, be they consensus or differences. As you can imagine a role with these limitations can be very frustrating at times. Nevertheless it was the public's workshop, not a means for us to expound our ideas.

I determined the membership for each workgroup in order to ensure a range of ideas in each and to avoid the domination by any particular interest group. In order to ensure that as many of the issues were discussed, each group was given specific aspects of the park to discuss; for instance one topic was cave classification. Consequently, not everyone got into the group he/she would have preferred. Only about two people asked if they could change groups.

Thirty people attended the workshop and we obtained a lot of information. A lot of it was not new; but then we were given hints as to how to present certain issues differently than we would have normally done. It is not just what you say, it is how you say it.

The workshop has ensured a draft management plan that is even closer to the final management plan. It has also ensured less public disquiet when the draft plan is released and has already led to greater public confidence in the integrity of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

The cross-flow of information between participants has meant that potential adversaries have got to understand the others' point of view. This will mean less conflict when the draft plan is released.

Participant reaction to the workshop on the day was very positive and tributes were made to the Service for organising it. I was not out to get consensus only; I wanted ideas and feelings, no matter how apparently way out they were.

All participants received copies of the summaries of each workshop group to ensure that they knew that their ideas had been acknowledged. I believe that failure to do this could detract from a lot of the benefits initially gained from the workshop.

I have subsequently carried out two more workshops. For one I invited 91 people and 55 attended and for the most recent, I invited 65 people and 50 attended. As for the workshop at the Naracoorte Caves Conservation Park both of these provided new insight as well as assisting the public credibility of the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Another workshop is planned for a fourth park later this year.

My experience in park management has convinced me that it is necessary to solicit public input into planning and not rely on it to come to you in response to advertisements.

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