

What is wrong at Wellington Caves?

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AFTER 30 years attending Wellington Caves' Advisory Group, acting as ASF's stakeholder representative, I no longer felt the Council was acting in the interests of the environment. I have resigned. ASF should not, in my view, be associated with the oncoming mess.

In the 1980s when I first visited Wellington Caves the state of maintenance was, in my view, the second worst in Australia. Paint seemed to be a major marketing tool, with stones across the karst structures behind the kiosk painted red, green and blue—gnome-like colours.

Cathedral Cave's stairs were slopped with white, dribbling road paint, presumably to highlight dangerous edges but looking amazingly tawdry. Cave walls were graffitied with huge, white road-paint arrows indicating the way out for the amazingly geologically challenged.

A right-hand alcove provided handy storage for rubble and industrial detritus. An entrance-way alcove boasted a bogus display of Ben Hall's campfire, with a nearby rusting revolver acting as focus for guide stories undeterred by matters of historical accuracy.

Electricity cables ran along rusting handrails and the finest 1950s lighting system provided an almost continuous illumination, fostering strange photosynthesizing growths. A rotting Bible rested upon a stalagmite imaginatively called 'the Altar'.

Old maps drawn by government geologist, Oliver Trickett, from the late 1890s showed the location of a cave that once had existed in the caravan park. This cave could possibly make a new tourist attraction. Local mythology speaks of a photograph showing a lake inside the cave and someone paddling a corrugated iron canoe on the lake. Everyone who speaks of this myth claims to have a friend who has seen this photograph.

However, it has never been seen by me.

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Anticline Cave entrance when first exposed

It was also said that the 200 cases of whisky stolen from the golf club could possibly be hidden inside. The longest lasting urban myths are those that can't be disproved.

Wellington Council was reticent about exhuming the cave because of an electricity pole positioned right where the cave was likely to be. The caravan park lessees were uninspired by the prospect of dirt piles in their park and losing a camp site. The caravan park might be full a couple of times a year, so not a major drain on profits.

Rather than disconnect the power lines, extract the power pole and exhume underground cables, Ernie Holland, then Jenolan Caves Head Guide and on Advisory, suggested cave divers could enter a small watery squeeze in the bottom of nearby Limekiln Cave from where it might then be possible to surface inside the buried cave in the caravan park to make an assessment of its possibilities.

Squeezing into McCavity for the first time is a matter of descending into the lower void without scuba gear, reaching up through the squeeze for each tank and putting dive gear on underwater. I handled a new-fangled digital underwater video camera, intending to record the base of the electricity pole.

The cavern beneath the Birth Canal Squeeze revealed itself to me through the eyepiece of the video as a large underwater realm with spectacular formations. It was

all completely new. In later years McCavity would become a magnet for cave divers from across Australia and the world. I was to develop a warm affection for Wellington Caves. Nearly every trip revealed a small discovery, although never one quite as significant as McCavity. After some ASF cajoling I was to accept a position on the Advisory Group.

Later, the council provided an excavator and a driver to expose Anticline's entrance. Sadly, in the past the cave entrance was thought to be a handy place to dump rubbish. Getting to the lake required climbing over decaying debris. In the cavern below was a lake, but no canoe, and as to the whisky I can assure you—honest to goodness, I wouldn't lie to you,—there was nothing there.

I ran many SUSS trips to Wellington and also hosted a scout team under the watchful eye of their supervisors but with me as acting trip leader. The scouts were under strict orders to do exactly what the trip leader said. I issued instructions to my young charges to remove the kayak from the top of a nearby white Ford (my Ford). "Don't worry about the owner. He'll never know." We took the vessel down into Anticline where we floated it on the underground lake. Although this was a bright yellow kayak draped with wet, bedraggled scouts we finally had that damned photo of a boat on the underground lake.

The Advisory Group meetings were intended to gradually bring reform to cave presentation and infrastructure. It was a slow business with the council always reluctant to invest ratepayers' dollars. Nevertheless, there were many improvements our Group brought to the caves.

The previous caves manager did a great job wiring and lighting Gaden Cave. He was later instrumental in the mine development. We gradually improved Cathedral's limiting light usage, moving some rubbish out, securing funding for lighting and re-wiring. On the downside, here we are 30 years later and after agitating for cave light-

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ing reform it still isn't complete. Even so, much has been done and the recent work has been done well.

Another attraction at Wellington Caves is an old phosphate mine, dug in 1910 by excavating the ancient filled canyons and caves in pursuit of phosphate deposits. In 1910 mine workers dug deep into buried canyons, lining the floors with rails, producing several levels of buttressed floors. Many fossils of macrofauna hailing from the last 200,000 years were unearthed. Most fossils were shipped to eminent experts overseas as part of our subservience to the Australian cultural cringe.

In the local town museum, among the loosely curated bric-à-brac, is a picture of workers on a verandah of a mine building shoving diprotodon hip bones into hessian sacks. Unable to profit, the mine closed, remaining an abandoned relic for years, a fascinating example of early 20th century mining techniques and artifacts.

Discussions and urgings by the Advisory Group were able to prompt government to provide a grant to restore the mine before it collapsed. Work could be started and elderly men experienced in traditional pillar and stall carpentry employed to replace the roof supports.

John Aquilina, then Minister for Land and Water Conservation, addressed a crowd of people outside the phosphate mine's entrance, presenting a cheque for \$500,000. In his speech, he said it was a grant but later I was told it was an interest-free loan and then later again, when reviewing the cave's budget, we seemed to be paying interest. One might ask whom that interest was paid to. This liability on the caves' budget was cited as a reason why the caves should be privatised. Nevertheless, the 'loan' was eventually paid off from caves income.

Armstrong Osborne's and Mike Augee's contribution to the curation of the museum and the design of the phosphate mine presentation is something they should be proud of. Turbulent geology in the deposits of the mine tells a history of floods carrying silt, laden with dead carcasses, cementing thousands of fossils hanging exposed in this matrix.

The fossil story is presented alongside the geology and the heritage of a mine constructed with picks and shovels.

It's all on display now and without the Advisory Group this valuable heritage item would not have survived. The local museum was re-curated, largely by Armstrong, to reflect Wellington's megafauna history with some artistic renditions of ghost bats and giant goannas (*Megalania*). From the Australian Museum we obtained life-sized facsimiles of megafauna, including a giant



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Scout exploration 'canoe' in Anticline Cave

snake, megalania and a skull casting of a diprotodon taking prominent position in the museum entrance.

While councils came and went with the changing dynamics of voters, the Advisory Group remained largely unchanged over the years. Towards the end a few more pro-development members joined, but were largely co-operative. Changing governance philosophies brought changes in attitudes to self-governing groups. Councillors openly reported to our meeting that we were thought to be exerting too much influence.

At times weird proposals were raised in Advisory meetings, one such being to fill in the entrance of Anticline because it was unsightly. Councillors tried to placate our protests, reassuring us that a concrete pipe with a hatch would guarantee access for divers. They argued that the cost to landscape the entrance was far too great and something had to be done. I shot my mouth off, arguing that I could get a hundred cavers on site to do the restoration work. Besides, a hatch would ensure the CO₂ build-up would prevent anyone ever visiting the cave again.

Whether to fill in the cave or have a go at restoration went to the vote. It seemed to me that we should be a cave protection group rather than a cave destruction group. To my disappointment, the vote was not overwhelmingly protectionist and Anticline was only just saved from burial—saved by the vote of that lovely woman who knows nothing about caves from the Department of Lands. As former Liberal Prime Minister John Gorton knew, one vote is all it takes.

I didn't get a hundred cavers to come; there were maybe twenty or so. But people

from the area—the Friends of Wellington, National Parks employees, Jenolan guides, people from the local arboretum and of course the usual suspects from SUSS—they came.

The cave's general manager, Chris George, was on a knife-edge about occupational health and safety that day. We had some men and women in their 80s who at first were reticent about their physical ability but who were soon caught up in the project. They couldn't resist being in the hole, passing stones along the rock chains.

Rocks were manually passed to the top and placed in gabions to support the entrance. In so doing we exposed an historic stairway leading to the lake. In the end we had the entrance stabilised and cleaned of rubbish. Ultimately a viewing area was built, thanks to Chris George, but the final steps down to the lake may never be built. While this was a win for the environment it may have been seen as having an undesirable influence on management.

Advisory was treated with increasing disdain. Budgets were no longer presented.

Improvements would be made to the park without notification and costs for unapproved projects would appear on the liability column of our undisclosed budget. You could once find this out by consulting the caves budget which was available on the internet, but lately this has not appeared.

Years ago a proposal to build a Japanese garden was put to the Advisory Group. The deal was, as I remember, that the Japanese would pay for its construction and ongoing maintenance. To us this seemed agreeable and the project went ahead, resulting in fountains, meditational stream environ-



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Keir satnds on an exposed rock in the Anticline Lake during the drought

ments and wooden things that fill with water, tip up and go 'clonk'. At some stage the cost of two gardeners' salaries and maintenance costs were added to the cave budget—about \$75,000 p.a.

An arbitrary \$30,000 charge for electricity was added to the budget, although there is no relation between the charge and actual consumption. I don't think there is an electricity meter, but we were buying enough electricity to light a small town.

Equally high charges for water and sewerage might be argued as perhaps justified because the solution to removing local effluent was by pumping it 15 km back to Wellington was an expensive one. At least it eliminated the settling pond round the back of the caves.

Ultimately Wellington Caves are controlled by the council and they can charge what they like for whatever they want. Nevertheless, arbitrary charges disconnect the incentive to reduce costs through improvement.

LED lighting and solar panels could significantly reduce electricity consumption but the electricity charges are a flat rate and so there is no incentive to reduce consumption.

In 2014 councillors attended a meeting, presenting a budget consisting of a single line of total costs incurred by the caves. They stated the caves to be a major cost that could only be made profitable if they were privatised. Jenolan was showing the way!

To my mind, council had been using the caves as a milch cow but perhaps had forgotten about the milk.

Many of the budget charges were imaginary sources of income to the council. Any saving or financial improvement made to the park was somehow prevented from

reducing the caves' deficit column.

Ignoring disapproval and alternative suggestions from Advisory, the Caves were rezoned to make development more attractive. The Japanese garden's costs were transferred from the caves budget to that of Wellington's Parks and Gardens, making the budget more attractive to potential lessees of the caravan park. The only interested tenderer pulled out.

The council then commissioned a business plan. The plan was not made available to Advisory.

Later I learned one of the newer Advisory members had drafted the plan but they were advised (ordered?) not to mention this to the rest of the panel or make its contents available. Later that person resigned from the Advisory Group.

A document was presented to our committee that suggested new terms of reference: that our group would only respond when our expertise was asked for. Not really, to my mind, a forum of input for stakeholders.

One of the last meetings I attended, a group of consultants gave a presentation—a new vision for Wellington Caves. Much of the material contained in a glossy brochure used terms, phrases and guidelines which had been lifted from documents previously put together by members of Advisory. As Paul Keating said, "...the only reward for public service is the public good" and so that material was given for the benefit of the caves.

The problem for me was that after the motherhood content the development plan was steeped in flaws, poor design and environmental ignorance.

Colourful architectural plans show dozens of new cabins constructed across a

flood plain, nestled within artificial gardens cradled by an artificial wetland constructed over natural water features that we cavers call dolines.

A camp site is positioned on a karst landscape providing a supporting incline to lay out a tent and sleeping bag. To the south, fibreglass megafauna are poised to act as a tourist attraction viewed from an aerial cable car sweeping over the park from somewhere to somewhere else on the top of the phosphate mine.

Just as the National Party provided millions of dollars for an ill-conceived dam on the Belubula River they also secured \$750,000 for this development

The trouble with feasibility studies is that there are many money leaks into ancillary pockets before a physical act of construction begins. This is why in Australia today we can't manage to build very much. I glimpsed a development plan budget that costed tasks such as choosing the cabin design at tens of thousands of dollars and another not-so-difficult task at high prices—perhaps a job that could be done in a couple of afternoons by one of the council secretaries.

With the \$750,000 whittled away, it might be possible to build one cabin. The rest will have to be funded with a private-public partnership. Phase 1 of the three-phase plan was to build the cabin blocks. The other phases may never be achieved. This frenzy of entrepreneurial vision could explain why many of the shops in Wellington High Street are boarded up.

It was always difficult getting anything done on Advisory but this was a new low. I felt ASF should no longer be associated with the Advisory Group.

After resigning I received a two-line letter from Council accepting my resignation. Campbell Gregory, a past Advisory member and local farmer, took the trouble to write some kind words in a handwritten letter reviewing our achievements, thanking me for my time and regretful for the situation.

There were always strained staff relations, in part because guide staff earn very little, working precious weekends and overtime, sometimes without pay. The caves' general manager resigned, along with some of the guide staff. Wellington Council's Director of Strategic and Planning Services recently departed.

At present there is little management or site maintenance. The last time I was there our megalania replica had been broken in two and the paint was fading badly. A second caves manager was appointed but doesn't seem to be available if you try to ring.