

Barrow Island

Trip Report to Barrow Island By Stefan Eberhard

This was a WA Museum organised trip to explore and sample the biology of underwater passages in Ledge Cave. Carl and Stefan went along as volunteer cave divers/collectors. Rauleigh's visit was a separate cave management plan & track marking exercise undertaken on recommendation of WA Museum to WAPET (WA Petroleum). The date of RW's visit coincided with the WA Museum trip.

Access to Barrow Island and the caves is only possible through special arrangement with WAPET.

Ledge Cave reaches the water table, which is saline and tidal at this point close to the coast. A 10 metre long free dive leads into an air chamber about 30m long - this had been discovered some years previously. Last year whilst on a museum field trip SE found an underwater continuation requiring scuba gear.

Carl and Stefan explored about 50m of new underwater passage. The passage was

exceptionally well decorated with pure white speleothems – somewhat reminiscent of the stunning underwater caves featured in photographs from Yucatan in Mexico, and the Bahamas. Maximum depth reached was 8m. The underwater sections are generally restricted in size and the siltation is extreme. The passage continues but is very tight. Photographs, survey and fauna collecting were undertaken.

In the air chamber Bill collected a blind scorpion. This is a very significant find, being the first troglobitic scorpion recorded in Australia and one of only a dozen or so species known throughout the world.

Segments of the operation were captured by a film crew who were on site producing the first of an ABC documentary series entitled "Island Life". Watch out for this one when it finally hits the TV screen in 18 months or so.

Stefan Eberhard

The Kimberley

A FISH STORY - CAVE DIVING IN THE KIMBERLEY By Stefan Eberhard

DATE: August 1998
PERSONS: Joe Cavlovic, Donna Cavlovic, David Woods, Robyn McBeath, Stefan Eberhard.

There are a lot of cave maps which show a sump at the limit of explored passage. Most often this represents the end of the cave, but not always - it sometimes signifies the beginning of the rest of the cave!

After the 1998 WASG expedition to the West Kimberley and the Osmond Range I ended up in Kununnurra. Robyn McBeath joined me here and we spent about 3 weeks exploring the local region. Whilst in Kununnurra we enjoyed the company and hospitality of David Woods, Donna & Joe Cavlovic. Joe is Donna's uncle - a new Australian immigrant from Yugoslavia, he

came here well before northern Australia became a popular tourist destination. Uncle Joe was quite a character, an expert bushman and fisherman with a great knowledge of the local region. The harsh and unforgiving, yet stunningly spectacular East Kimberley had been his backyard playground for decades - he knew the names of all the big crocs, and where they lived. He was a real life Dundee of sorts, with a repertoire of survival tricks and stories which he continually entertained us with. My own romantic notion of the great Aussie bushman was challenged upon meeting Joe, for here was a man who likely knew as much about the Australian bush as a black fellow, and yet he spoke with a strong Slavic accent!

One of Joe's stories I recall was about his bulldogging of the wild Kimberley cattle. These

beasts can be aggressive and will chase humans. Joe would first run to taunt and tire them then position himself to take the final charge making sure he was standing behind a small mallee-like tree with numerous stems. The horns of the charging beast would become entangled in the stems whereupon Joe would grab them. I accepted this tale with scepticism at first, although at fifty something years of age, Joe was still lithe and fit. Later, I had good reason to doubt my scepticism.

The unnamed cave KNI-19 is located in the Ningbing Range, East Kimberley. The cave acts as an occasional flood overflow - about a hundred metres of low passage leads to a sump pool with bat guano in it. The cave is an important roost site for bats at certain times, although on this occasion the bats were absent. The cave supports a population of banded cat snakes, which dwell in nooks and crannies in the ceiling. When the bats are present the snakes hang from the ceiling and catch the bats in mid-flight. KNI-19 is also important for invertebrate fauna - the cave contains a number of troglobitic species, both terrestrial and aquatic. Whilst there we collected a new species of *Tainisopus*, an ancient and extraordinary aquatic crustacean - this being the first record of the group from the East Kimberley.

The *Tainisopus* was collected with the aid of a dive mask and underwater torch which I had brought along for the purpose of checking out the sump. The water in the sump was clear, at least initially, so long as care was taken to avoid stirring up the silt. I could see airspace about 4 metres away so dived through with a guideline. David then dived through and we found ourselves in a circular chamber with another sump. This next sump extended beyond the limits of breath-hold diving but looked promising so we resolved to return with scuba gear.

We all returned to KNI-19 a few days later with a set of small twin tanks. Everyone came through the first duck, except Joe who had never done much caving before. Robyn, Donna and David waited in the air chamber whilst I explored the next sump. The water was crystal clear with a green tinge. The passage twisted and curved smoothly - the phreatic sculpting was spectacular. I came to an opening which was shaped like an triangle. Like peering through a small window, this opening overlooked a large spherical room - a pressure dome with coloured horizontal banding showing the layers of

limestone. The water must really swirl through this place at times during the wet season I imagined, but now it was still and quiet as I drifted weightless into this extraordinary room. I was beginning to really enjoy myself, and fancifully considered that I might be dreaming until I was alerted by the fact there appeared to be no way on. I circled the dome searching fruitlessly, then sank onto a dismal pile of rocks in the middle of the floor. The rocks seemed to be effectively blocking the bottom of a plughole, but to my surprise beneath an innocuous looking lip of rock lay the way on.

The continuation was restricted and abruptly brought my focus back to the business of carefully positioning the line. My tanks were scraping the roof and my belly was scraping the floor as the silt stirred-up began to obliterate the visibility. My instinctive urge was to terminate the dive here but although the conditions weren't pleasant they weren't especially hazardous, so long as I was careful and kept my composure. I stopped for a while to consider the situation - the passage continued quite low but still passable. I had plenty of air and guideline, one torch was dead but two others were still working - the only blockage to further exploration was in my head. A short distance further on the passage broke air surface after a dive of 130 metres length. I shed my gear and climbed out of the water. About 30 metres on there was another sump. I left the exploration of this for next time, which will be easier with two people to handle the gear. After an absence of about an hour I returned to the others still waiting patiently, then we exited the cave.

When I was younger I explored plenty of cold, silty and horrible sumps in Tasmanian caves, but for years I have dreamed of exploring for the first time, a beautiful passage full of warm and clear water. That dream had finally been realised in KNI-19. The discovery was both a physical as well as a personal one. The personal discovery was learning more about my response to a potentially stressful situation underwater, but managing it positively. It also reaffirmed my belief that the dangers of cave diving lie not so much in the underwater cave environment itself, but mostly in the mind and hands of the diver. With adequate training and equipment, experience and discipline, cave diving becomes a routine like taking a stroll in the park. Back in town that evening Robyn off-handedly commented to me how it would be nice to have fish for tea. Joe overheard this and said, "You want fish? OK I'll see what I can do." He then

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took off in his ute but was back within half an hour. We figured he might know a mate with some fillets in his deep freeze, but our jaws dropped when we looked in the tray of the ute and saw a 20 pound barramundi still wet and writhing. We could hardly believe that he had hooked this monstrous delicacy just minutes

before at the town river crossing, yet Joe's casual, honest demeanour did not imply that a clever trick had been played, nor could it have been since there were no fish farms in town. That fish tasted very sweet indeed, and with a bottle of wine to wash it down we believed every word of Joe's story telling that evening.