

CAVE INSPECTIONS FOR THE HANDICAPPED AT YARRANGOBILLY CAVES, KOSCIUSKO NATIONAL PARK, NEW SOUTH WALES

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INTRODUCTION

At the last Conference held in Mount Gambier in 1979, we discussed a planning process aimed at developing a Karst Area Management Plan for each karst area within reserves managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSW). The first such karst area to receive this treatment was the Yarrangobilly Caves area in Kosciusko National Park. The plan eventuated as a rather cumbersome one, the format of which will be refined for subsequent efforts.

Among the appendixes to the Plan was the discussion paper which I would now like to present to this Conference. I regret that I cannot attend to deliver the paper personally, but trust that its content will promote discussion of this most interesting facet of cave management.

CAVE INSPECTIONS FOR THE HANDICAPPED

1. Which is the solution, and which is the problem?

In the past, those involved in presenting cave tours or other forms of guided activity have tended to concentrate on presentation of material. But such an emphasis tends to inhibit the development of material or techniques which will appeal to each visitor, in a manner understandable by each visitor. Recently the trend has been to place more emphasis on involvement, which is regarded as more conducive to understanding, and more capable of modification to suit each visitor's needs.

The key to this approach is to be aware of who and what the visitors are. There has been a tendency to assume that the audience is fairly homogeneous - the amorphous mass of the "general public" - with no significant differences in age, language, education, cultural background, interests, capacities, aspirations and expectations.

Looking critically at such an approach, one must ask which visitors are not being considered? These tend to include the elderly, the young, foreign visitors, ethnic minorities, the highly educated and under-educated, and physically or mentally handicapped persons. There is a clear need to try and redress this lack of consideration. This section discusses the ways in which we can cater for the handicapped. This is not to suggest that the other visitor groups are not equally important, but rather there seems to have been a basic assumption that the handicapped could not be readily provided for in the area of cave inspections. This assumption is strongly challenged.

Historically, the provision of facilities for the handicapped has been tinged with charity for the "less fortunate" or portrayed as being outside the normal routine. The U S National Park Service at one stage grouped all atypical visitors as "special populations" and, in well-intentioned manner, set about providing "special" opportunities or facilities. The thinking today has changed - it has been pointed out that the only thing special about these visitors is

that they have never had a fair share of resources Names and labels divert attention from things we don't want to come to grips with. Special populations are not special. Handicapped people need the same things as the rest of society - they need love, exercise, fresh air, open space, aesthetic and cultural opportunities, employment, fulfilment. What they need with these is access.

It has been said that for many years National Park managers have stood at the gate and welcomed people. As long as many people came, managers didn't worry about those who did not come. Today we have to recognise that those who did not come probably couldn't - these are the economically, socially or physically disadvantaged. The provision of access can reverse this process.

There is a need for both physical access - for managers to become aware of architectural barriers and how to remove or replace them - and programmatic access - for managers to design programmes that are accessible to all aspiring users. An important factor to recognise is that structures and programmes made accessible to the handicapped or disadvantaged are accessible to everyone We do not need to single out any group for special treatment which draws attention to their handicaps. They do not want special facilities because these lead to segregation, and frankly, most do not need special facilities.

The challenge at Yarrangobilly is to overcome the assumption that access to programmes (ie cave inspections) cannot be provided to the handicapped. It is relatively easy to provide physical access to the static interpretive facilities of the Visitor Centre by provision of ramps, parking spaces, toilets of suitable design, and so on. The challenges really lie in provision of opportunities for the handicapped to experience at first hand the cave environment.

The main obstacles to planning access for the handicapped are the fears and limited imagination of the able-bodied. This means that we need to plan with the handicapped and not for them. Accordingly, the ideas outlined below are a concept only, which needs to be discussed at length with the user groups before any implementation. We need to let the handicapped determine what constitutes a barrier to access, and what is required to remove barriers, rather than working from handbooks and standards.

2. The Needs of the Handicapped

In concept, then, our aim at Yarrangobilly is to provide the same access to facilities for everyone. Few modifications in design are necessary to provide physical access, since most handicapped people do not need, and in fact resent, pampering. For access to interpretive programmes some modifications may be necessary, since although the goals and benefits of the programmes are the same for non-handicapped persons, the ways of achieving them are different.

At risk of over-simplification, we can separate the handicapped into the following groups:

- * visually impaired and blind
- * deaf
- * deaf-blind
- * mentally retarded
- * ambulatory disabled.

It must be noted that these groups are themselves heterogeneous but basic guidelines as to how programmes could be made accessible are presented below:

2.1 Visually Impaired and Blind

Facilities accessible to the blind should be integrated with those normally available to the public. Any blind person visiting Yarrangobilly would necessarily be accompanied by a sighted person, so it is largely unnecessary to provide any special guiding equipment. Guide ropes and kickrails are likely to be superfluous - these people make their own way through the rest of the world without them. As long as areas are safe for everyone the blind need nothing special. Only small percentages of blind people can read Braille, so this should not be provided. Information can best be presented by way of sound, but large print can enable those with less visual impairment to read signs and displays.

2.2 Deaf

Depending upon the degree of auditory disability, deafness poses considerable problems in the communication sphere. The main problem for the deaf is that very few hearing people have the knowledge necessary to communicate with them. The deaf cannot learn to hear but hearing people can learn the language of deaf people. Rather than having to modify our programmes we need those presenting the programmes to develop their communication skills. Accordingly, no specific proposals are put forward to make Yarrangobilly more accessible to the deaf.

2.3 Deaf-Blind

Deaf-blind visitors will certainly be accompanied by someone who is not handicapped so no special accommodations are proposed.

2.4 Mentally Retarded

To present a meaningful experience to people with mental retardation it is necessary to design a programme geared to their particular level of comprehension and allowing their total personal involvement. It is unlikely, given the geographic isolation of Yarrangobilly, that design and implementation of such a programme would be warranted.

2.5 Ambulatory Disabled

People with ambulatory limitations, especially those in wheelchairs, only need facilities that are accessible and navigable with their apparatus.

3. Providing Access at Yarrangobilly

The emphasis in presentation of cave inspections has always been on visual display, with "Do Not Touch" a golden rule, and with the voice of the guide or a tape recording discouraging visitors from listening to the cave. To make a cave inspection facility accessible to all clearly requires a rethink - a re-orientation towards an appreciation of the cave environment using all one's senses.

The emphasis in any such inspection must be on ensuring visitor safety and providing a varied a sensory experience It should be portrayed as a "Sensory Tour" not a "Tour for the Blind", for the experience provided will be just as meaningful to the non-handicapped.

Yarrangobilly has a cave which may be suitable for this purpose: the Glory Hole self-guiding cave. This cave is not only visually impressive but has the added features of being very active,

and being subject to unusual draughts and breezes. The sound of constantly dripping water, the sudden encounter of a cold gust of wind in the cave passage, and the change of air as one leaves the cave provide excellent scope for interpretation of the cave environment. To plunge the visitor into darkness by blindfold allows the interpreter to delve into the concept of permanent total darkness and the morphological adaptations of cave fauna to that environment. And who could understand the need for cave-dwellers to develop their other senses than visitors who have no sight?

Vital to the success of this approach of using all one's senses is the incorporation of things to touch. This should include not only different types of speleothems with samples selected from the plethora of broken items in this cave and others at Yarrangobilly, but also moss and plants from the Glory Arch and pieces of fossiliferous limestone. The sense of taste would be exploited in the cave by tasting drips of water intercepted before they reach the floor, while smell is of prime importance at the entrance and exit.

For the non-handicapped visitor, such a tour would provide a whole new dimension to a cave inspection - a new understanding of a unique environment through the extension of one's basic senses.

Certainly the sensory experience gained would be worthwhile, but what of safety? The cave is readily accessible by walking track (with railings). It is a "through" cave and has a well-defined path with railings and relatively few steps. There is certainly a fairly steep flight of steps cut into calcite above the Ice Age section and a final flight of steel steps to the exit, but these should not be a major concern if sighted persons accompany visitors.

It is obvious that the existing electronic interpretive devices in this cave are completely inappropriate for such a tour. The tapes guide visitors' eyes around the chambers ("Look up at the roof, etc...") and refer too much to shape, colour and physical resemblance's. This could be rectified by a new script, but the speakers are also a very noisy intrusion into the cave environment and serve to distract visitors from the sounds of the cave. Well designed, static, back-lit signs make no such intrusion, can be read to blind or blindfolded visitors and can be placed and worded to facilitate interpretation to all visitors.

This inspection facility should be available at all times to both sighted and non-sighted persons. It should always be supervised by a guide who should be on duty in the Glory Hole Cave anyway. If a group wishes to undertake the inspection the supervisors of that group should also be available to assist the guide and ensure safety.

The recommended pricing for the Sensory Tour inspections is \$1 for adults and 50 cents for children.

For the ambulatory disabled there are further constraints. The caves open for inspection generally have stairs and steep gradients, which would make wheelchair access impossible. This is certainly so with the Jersey Cave, most of the Glory Hole and much of the North Glory Cave. This is less of a problem with Jillabenan Cave, but here the path through the cave is too narrow for a wheelchair to negotiate and the platforms are small. There are also problems in some of these caves with a seated person being unable to easily observe some of the features being shown.

At this point, it seems that the wheelchair-based visitor is just "written off" as being too difficult to include in cave inspections, however a meaningful experience can still be provided for these people with a little modification of programmes and a small amount of physical

modification. The tour proposed could just as easily cater for a whole party of wheelchair-based persons as for one individual. The tour would be guided by a ranger and would utilise the Glory Caves.

The tour as envisaged would be guided along the Glory Arch Walk, which has reasonable gradient and surfacing, and a good safety rail. It is traversed by small log cross-drains rather than steps and would require very little upgrading or modification. At the Glory Arch Cavern, cave formation can easily be explained and the group taken through the arch into the Ice Age section of Glory Role Cave. This is as far as wheelchairs can go in this cave. The group would then be taken up the ramp to North Glory Cave. This may require a small amount of modification to ensure a non-slip surface, and some parts of the concrete path may need widening or may be provided with a low rim to prevent wheels slipping off.

Once in the cave they would be taken into the large Queens Chamber and then down a ramp which would replace the steps, into smugglers Passage, the winding stream passage which provides an excellent illustration of cave stream development. The very steep steps from here prevent further progress, so the group would return to Queens Chamber and move on to the Kings chamber, with a ramp constructed to replace the present small flight of steps.

This inspection would allow visitors to see a considerable variety of speleothems, cave structures and features. If the group then returns to the Visitor Centre and is acquainted with the displays, the result would be a very worthwhile educational experience.

No problem is envisaged in incorporating non-handicapped visitors into the same tour with handicapped persons. After all we are attempting to break down barriers and overcome segregation. Given that visitors in wheelchairs will have experienced more of a cave than they have ever seen before, it is unlikely that they would resent termination of their inspection at Kings Chamber while non-handicapped persons continued on to the end of the cave. Naturally, track lights would have to be left on and somebody should remain with them until the rest of the party returns.

The cost of this inspection would be the same as for a standard inspection of North Glory Cave, ie \$2 for adults and \$1 for children.

4. Conclusions

We are very lucky that at Yarrangobilly we have the ability to provide access for handicapped persons to cave inspections, without the need for major reconstruction or reorganisation. It is likely that Yarrangobilly will be the only show cave in Australia offering such a facility, although it is believed that wheelchair access will be facilitated in reconstruction of Tantanoola Cave in South Australia (P Morris, pers. comm).

We have the opportunity to design our facilities for all people. With the extra attention paid to designing our facilities for the use of all the senses, those facilities can be made more stimulating and satisfying to all visitors and will result in more effective interpretation, which is seen as the key role of the Yarrangobilly show cave area. In addition, by breaking down some of the barriers which presently inhibit handicapped people from using our facilities we will have helped to reduce the handicaps that those people bear. By integrating facilities for all users we can engender familiarity to break down stereotypes, to allow the non-handicapped to deal with the handicapped as real persons.