

**The social construction of Jenolan
Caves: multiple meanings of a cave
tourist site**

Thesis submitted by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationships and resultant meanings that people have for the place of Jenolan Caves, the most visited cave tourist site in Australia. The aim of the research project was to:

further our understanding of the social dimensions of caves tourism in order to comment on issues and practices related to sustainability.

The question was approached from a constructionist perspective, which assumes that the world of human perception is not real in an absolute sense but is made up and shaped by cultural and linguistic constructs; it is a constructing of knowledge about reality not constructing reality itself.

The findings are based on interviews with staff, visitors and other people who regularly associate with the place of Jenolan Caves. The highlight, and perhaps the most exciting finding, was the rich depth of meaning that Jenolan is given by a broad range of people. Staff and visitors articulated a sense of passion, care and physical engagement.

The obvious emotion of place reflects the embodied nature of place experience, other facets of which include the active and sensual ways we interact, and make sense of places we visit. Although sight dominates the experience the sound, touch and smell in a cave are also essential ingredients of the experience.

It was clear that emotion is a response we have to place; emotion is also central in the construction of Jenolan as a tourism place. In particular passion and enthusiasm oscillates between visitors and staff, creating a connection between the two and becoming a central facet of Jenolan.

Emotions relating to place are also negative and there was a clear tension for many people in close association with Jenolan between protecting place and selling or using place. Two dominant discourses that people draw on to make sense of Jenolan are stewardship and commodification, these are ways of making sense of Jenolan that have different primary goals but in practice are woven together. The tension exists as a very real, expressed frustration, disillusionment, and at times anger for those that work at Jenolan. It is time this tension is acknowledged, if for no other reason than it will inevitably have an impact on the interdependent relationships that exist between staff,

visitors and others. That is, a satisfactory visitor experience is vulnerable to negative changes in staff relationship to place.

Within the managing organisation, and across a portion of the relevant disciplines, the embodied nature of place experience and interdependence between peoples and place is not fully recognised. It is not fully articulated within the Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust, and in likelihood is not articulated in other protected area agencies. The implications of these findings for the ongoing sustainability of protected area tourist sites, such as Jenolan Caves, is that discourses and approaches are required that open the management system to the sensual, emotional, and interdependent nature of place.

A systematic monitoring approach of Visitor Impact Management has been adopted by Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust. On reflection the aim of such an approach is to enable the organisation to identify when strategies need to be altered, that is to learn. The findings indicate that much about the visitor experience is emotional and relates to discourses or ways of seeing that aren't fully articulated in the organisation. The findings also indicate strong links between place interpretations of visitors, staff, the organisation and others. It is possible that frameworks such as Visitor Impact Management, which examine a component of place meaning in a systematic way, will facilitate solutions to many visitor related issues, but when the issues relate to tacit processes in the organisation or arise from unfamiliar discourses will not be recognised and/or dealt with. Visitor Impact Management located in the broader context of organisational learning may provide a process that opens the organisation to the full depth of place meaning, and provide tools for engaging with a broader variety of meaning-making discourses.

Qualitative methodology was adopted to answer these explorative questions. Specifically ethnographic methods of data collection were used: interviews, observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 79 staff and locals, and 140 visitors. These were recorded through note taking, returned to respondents for inspection (not to visitors), and then coded for items that provided insight into the relationship and meaning that Jenolan had inspired.

Principle conclusions

The findings suggest that:

1. The experience of relating to Jenolan is multi-sensual, emotional and cognitive. The full depth of the experience of place at Jenolan, including touch, sound and smell, should not be underestimated, partly because it is the fully sensual nature of the experience that provides an emotional response. Emotion is a significant part of Jenolan place meaning as it is the passion held by staff that facilitates the interdependent relationship between people(s) and place.
2. All persons were active in the process of meaning construction, for themselves and for others. Undoubtedly staffs were key players in the visitor experience, but so too were visitors in the staff experience. This web of interdependence suggests that an analysis of any one component can offer a limited understanding, indicating the need for ongoing wholistic awareness of place and relationship.
3. The third dimension that is explored in the thesis is tension and frustration expressed by those who work and interact closely with Jenolan. Staff at all levels within the organisation, and in the formal documents, used both stewardship and commodification discourses to make sense of Jenolan. The stewardship discourse portrayed place as requiring care and protection, whereas the commodification discourse represented place as a resource available to be transferred into product and financial exchange. At times the task of trying to both care for and sell place required incompatible strategies and resulted in considerable frustration and tension. It is these discourses that are used in the language of management and the formal documents pertaining to Jenolan. The discourses of stewardship and commodification are dominant in their use; consequently points of view will be listened to, acknowledged and considered most valid if expressed in the discourse of commodification and stewardship.

Statement of the Contribution of Others

I wish to acknowledge the contribution of others in the design, development, support and critical thinking associated with this work.

The research has been funded by the Australian Postgraduate Award (Industry) in conjunction with Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust. Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust has also provided considerable in-kind support including accommodation on-site and staff time.

The broad conceptual framework for the research was originally drawn up by my supervisors, Peter Valentine and David Gillieson (James Cook University) and Ernst Holland (Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust). The detail of the project aims and method was developed in collaboration with Peter Valentine and David Gillieson.

Associated outcomes of the thesis were two reports jointly undertaken by staff at Jenolan Caves, and members of the Social and Environmental Monitoring Committee. These reports are referred to in the thesis and appropriately referenced.

My involvement with this project would not have been possible without the support from Charles Sturt University in the form of leave, and ongoing encouragement.

Some of the illustrative material originated from my own photographs, however others have been kindly provided by Jenny Whitby (Newcastle and Hunter Valley Speleological Society), Kent Henderson (ACKMA) and the Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust website.

I would also like to acknowledge the editorial assistance of Greg Kelly, and Marty Greig in the critique of logic and style.

Declaration on Ethics

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Human* (1999), the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (1997), the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics: Standard Practices and Guidelines* (2001), and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (2001). The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee (approval number H1110).

Penny Davidson

(Date)

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Whilst many life journeys are intensely personal experiences they are often only made possible by the many people who provide support, encouragement, evaluation and even distraction. I would therefore like to acknowledge and offer sincere thanks to the many people who made my journey possible. I want to specifically acknowledge the direction, encouragement and support of Peter Valentine and Dave Gillieson – my supervisors. Many thanks to Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust for the opportunity to undertake this work, and the provision of the tangible resources that made the project possible. And also thanks to the staff, visitors, management, and many people associated with Jenolan Caves for their time, support and willingness to share their experiences. I would love to provide a name to you all, but I dare not for fear that I would leave someone out. A special thankyou to Ramona, Liz, Chiem and Mehtap for not only supporting me in my journey but also sharing theirs with me. And I should also acknowledge the warmth and refuge that the Dalrymple Squash community provided me – keeping me sane as well as fit.

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In loving memory of my brother Colin who passed away in the middle of this journey.

Table of Contents

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF JENOLAN CAVES: MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF A CAVE TOURIST SITE	I
STATEMENT OF ACCESS	II
ABSTRACT	III
Principle conclusions	v
STATEMENT OF THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS	VI
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	VIII
TABLE OF CONTENTS	IX
LIST OF TABLES	XIV
LIST OF FIGURES	XIV
STATEMENT OF SOURCES	XVI
Declaration	xvi
PREFACE	XVII
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Purpose	1
Background	3
Structure of thesis	9
Chapter 2	9
Chapter 3	10
Chapter 4	11
Chapter 5	11
Chapter 6	12
Chapter 7	12
Chapter 8	13
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	16
The Karst landscape: natural resource, leisure site and home	16
History	17

Institutionalisation of environmental stewardship - Recognition of the need for a balance	18
Different approaches – management frameworks	19
Call for greater integration of social issues	24
Related research	25
Human interaction in karst landscape	25
Tourism	27
Human geography	29
The science of caves and karsts	32
Visitor Impact Management (VIM)	33
Organisational learning – principles and purpose	36
Benefits of placing VIM in an organisational learning framework	39
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY: MOVING FROM QUESTION TO ANSWER	41
What information do I need?	41
How to get that information	46
Selecting who to interview – setting the boundaries	50
Staff	52
Cavers, researchers, locals	55
Tourists	56
Interview questions	59
Recording statements	60
Sorting and making sense of data	61
Why you would take this research seriously: Validity	64
Member check	66
Self-reflection	66
Conclusion	69
CHAPTER 4: JENOLAN AS A LEISURE SITE - AN OVERVIEW OF THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS	71
Introduction	71
Social experience	74
Pleasure / personal development	75
Relaxation and well being	79
Hospitality, service and access	82
Novelty and difference	90
Difference	90

Learning	92
Challenge	96
Conclusion	100
CHAPTER 5: SENSING PLACE	101
Place	101
Sensing Jenolan	103
Dominance of visual and rational	108
Seeing	110
Haptic/ touching	114
Imagined touch	121
Smelling Jenolan	124
Auditory Jenolan	126
Absence of sound	128
Interactive audio experience	130
Further Analysis	130
Jenolan is a multi-sensory and emotional experience	131
Jenolan sensing is an active and interactive process	133
Jenolan is constructed as the ‘other’	141
Conclusion	145
CHAPTER 6: EMOTION AND INTERDEPENDENCE	147
Emotion in place construction	147
Meaningfulness and Belonging	148
Community	148
Meaningfulness	151
Emotion in the organisation	153
Visitor-guide relationship and interdependence	161
Conclusion	168
CHAPTER 7: TENSION BETWEEN STEWARDSHIP AND COMMODIFICATION	170
Introduction	170
Poststructuralism and discourse	171
Environmental stewardship	175
Absence of stewardship	180
Institution	181
Historical Stewardship	184

Euro-centric History	185
Indigenous history	188
Commodification	190
Use of commodification at Jenolan	192
Conflicting agendas	195
Personal tension	196
Conclusion	203
CHAPTER 8: MANAGEMENT AS A LEARNING PROCESS	205
Organisational learning	206
CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION	214
Jenolan as leisure site – multiple perspectives	218
Recognising the embodied nature of place meaning	218
Interdependence between place, staff and visitors	219
Multiple discourses and ongoing negotiation	220
Implications to the sustainability of Jenolan Caves as a tourist site	223
Conclusion	224
GLOSSARY	227
BIBLIOGRAPHY	228
APPENDICES	252
APPENDIX 1	253
Characteristics of interviewees	253
APPENDIX 2	255
Questions asked of staff	255
APPENDIX 3	256
Interviewee roles associated with Jenolan	256
APPENDIX 4	257
Questions asked of visitors	257
APPENDIX 5	258
Questions asked of associates of Jenolan Caves	258

APPENDIX 6

259

Standard Off-peak cave tour program at Jenolan Caves

259

List of Tables

Table 1: Overview of research objectives and method	49
Table 2: Potential interviewees for understanding the social construction of Jenolan Caves	52
Table 3: Comparison of interviewee place of origin to Cave tour population place of origin	57
Table 4: Comparison of interviewee cave tours with overall cave tour participation	58
Table 5: Example of data organisation and filing	63
Table 6: Stewardship excerpts from Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust Corporate Plan brochure	182
Table 7: Indigenous history excerpts from Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust Corporate Plan brochure	189

List of Figures

Figure 1: Location of Jenolan Caves	4
Figure 2: Plan and section of the Jenolan tourist Caves	7
Figure 3: Visitor Impact Management Process, adapted from Graefe and Vaske 1987	35

List of Plates

Plate 1: Jenolan Caves staff	54
Plate 2: Visitors and guide at Jenolan Caves	54
Plate 3: Pleasure of caving	77
Plate 4: Hospitality and sharing times at Jenolan	77
Plate 5: Flowstone at Jenolan	99
Plate 6: The Jenolan Caves precinct	106
Plate 7: View of Jenolan Caves House, track from Carlotta Arch	106
Plate 8: Crystal formation – stalagmites, stalagmites and ‘cave mysteries’	113
Plate 9: Colour enhanced cave crystal	1113

Plate 10: Cave crystal protected from visitor's touch with wire mesh	119
Plate 11: The haptic experience of adventure caving	119
Plate 12: The tranquillity of the Blue Lake and The Grand Arch	129
Plate 13: Accommodation nestled in the bush environment	129
Plate 14: Queue for tickets extending into the Jenolan precinct	163
Plate 15: Cavers resting after an experience of discovery and team effort	163
Plate 16: Staff communicating, sharing and learning during a workshop (Peter Valentine, Grant Commins, Graham Cummings)	222
Plate 17: Staff and members of the SEM committee (Grant Commins, Domino Houlbrook-Cave, Dave Smith, Andy Spate, Grant Hose)	222

Statement of sources

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

Signature

Date

Preface

This preface is written mostly for the visitors, staff, and management of Jenolan Caves. When you read this interpretation of your experiences I fully expect that either the environment has altered or your own experiences have altered and so the particular view expressed here may no longer resonate with you. After all, three years have passed since I did the interviews (2001). However, I hope that I have captured some essence of your experiences, and that some of the key themes and interpretations explored here have some relevance and possibly provide a new window for looking at those experiences.

If this is not the case, I have either erred (terribly) or it is time to again re-examine the relationships that people have with an environment and landscape such as Jenolan Caves.

A member of the Australasian Caves and Karst Management Association, David Williams (1982) presents the human relationship with caves as interactive, that we impact on the caves, and they impact on us. He says:

So in a tourist cave man (sic) is an integral component of the environment influencing and being influenced by the other components.

The structure of the thesis is not a single flow or theme. In adopting a qualitative and ethnographic approach I left myself open to the multitude of messages that could emerge from the data. And many 'messages' or insights did emerge, not all of which, you will be relieved to know, I attempt to cover here. But rather than selecting one theme I have chosen several. Why? Because they all constitute invaluable insights regarding the relationship between people and place, and have some implications for the task of 'management'. The themes I have chosen are connected by underlying theory and initial question. The thesis follows the route taken during the research; the arguments emerge from the data not as clear, singular findings but as particular viewpoints or interpretations. In reading it through you will be following the path, and struggle, of my own ponderings and interpretations. I present the document in this way because I believe that the process of research, the transparency of research (which surely must be the basis of 'validity or reliability' or is that believability) is more apparent if you are given the whole story. That is, the research is not treated as if the researcher was able to look at the world behind a glass wall – unseen and unfeeling, or that the emergence of results

was as clear a process as counting up the number of eggs that might have been hatched from a laboratory hen. The process of sorting and thinking about the results was exactly that: a process. It was not a linear path; it was convoluted, rugged and dark in parts. The thesis outlines this path – omitting the convolutions and darkness – mapping the development and synthesis of ideas, so that you, the reader, can see where I have come from and how I have got there, but also so that it may, in the end, be more believable to you.