

A Final Word from the Chairman

They say a week is a long time in politics, and while things don't move quite so quickly in the world of caving politics, I will have been BCRA Chairman for six years at the end of this month and that is certainly long enough. This will be my last Chairman's letter – I am positively, absolutely standing down at the end of 2006!

I'm leaving because I have largely achieved what I wanted to when I took over, because I need to spend more time on my growing business and because I want to spend more time with my young children. I will continue to be involved in BCRA activities through the Explosives User Group, and I also retain the role of BCA Insurance Manager since this is no longer a BCRA responsibility and I have not yet found anyone else to give it to. I hope to spend less time in meetings and more time actually underground, helping to promote BCRA through practical activities. We're not going to find the volunteers we need to help make the body a success by sitting in meetings full of the same old faces, and for that reason I do not intend to stay on BCRA Council once my term as Chairman has come to a close.

Since I took over as BCRA Chairman, much has changed in the world of caving politics. With the creation of BCA, and the changes in BCRA, we are finally starting to see a proper integration of the two bodies into one. There is still much to do, but I believe that the people at the centre of BCRA and BCA now have a reasonably clear idea of where the organisations should be going. The next job will be to carry the membership with them, and persuade new members to join to support British caving as a whole.

By an overwhelming majority, the BCRA AGM in September voted to make membership of BCA a pre-requisite for membership of BCRA. In my view, this was the key decision in the process of integrating BCA and BCRA. The proposal will make it necessary for any person wishing to be a member of BCRA to also be a member of BCA. Council are united in agreement that this is a vital step in the process of unifying the two organisations and in ultimately ending up with only one national body. Further changes will be required to tidy up the membership structure of both organisations and sort out exactly what the benefits of each class of membership are, but the fundamental decision has been taken and we can finally move on from the limbo created by the inordinate and inconclusive SGM held in February.

Although the change has already been decided, let me rehearse the two significant arguments against the proposal for the benefit of those who were not at the AGM, or have otherwise not been following the discussion. Number one is a simple reluctance to change when it's not clear precisely what the benefits of the change will be. Number two is the fear that BCRA's science interests will be subsumed and eventually forgotten as BCA focuses on less speleological priorities.

Taking each of these in order, I have sympathy with number one because I will be the first to admit that BCA and BCRA have recently not been good at communicating what they are doing and where they see themselves going, and I must personally shoulder a large part of the blame for

this. Our communications have not been good, which in my case has been due to an excess of other commitments, but this very fact is also a point in favour of the change. The maxim 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' clearly does not apply here - BCA and BCRA have not performed well in recent years, and action is required to improve things. I am convinced that this change will introduce efficiencies in our administration which will make it possible to communicate with members more efficiently and effectively, as well as freeing resources to spend time developing new benefits for members.

Point number two is, I think, the more important one and if I believed that BCRA's interests in cave science, in its broadest sense, were under threat from this proposal, I would be the last person to agree to it. In fact, I believe that cave science is more under threat if we do not take this step: in recent years BCRA has failed to promote cave science because it has spent too much of its time on non-science issues like insurance. When these are the responsibility of another body, BCRA Council will be able to focus its full attention on developing and funding cave science in the UK and elsewhere, and we will really start to see some progress. By integrating BCRA fully into BCA, we remove the distractions, but retain the financial control which will keep cave science at the top of the agenda for the national governing body.

Nevertheless, there will always be the potential for tension between the different interests in the cave science community and no constitution can, of itself, protect any set of interests in perpetuity. Constant vigilance will be required to ensure that the correct balance between the needs of each part of the caving community are met.

I'd like to end with a final plea. This is not the usual one about looking for volunteers to get involved - I think that goes without saying. More important to me is to get the wider caving community to understand the culture of the organisations which represent them and provide their caving related services. In the modern day age of customer service it's easy to think of BCA and BCRA as service organisations to which customers pay a fee and then get services as of right, but the reality is not like that. BCA and BCRA are staffed by volunteers, all of whom have other things to do with their lives. Most have livings to earn in addition to their work for BCA and BCRA. Next time you wonder why you haven't had your copy of Speleology, or your insurance card has not turned up, instead of bitching about it, pick up the phone and ask where the problem is, and whether you can do something to help sort it out. You don't need to be a member of Council to play a part in either organisation.

Remember also that BCRA and BCA are there to support you and your activities. If you've got a bright idea which needs some support, or a problem about which 'something should be done' then BCRA and BCA probably will support it, if you are prepared to help them do it. These are your organisations, doing things for you, but they can't do it without your help.

*Nick Williams
BCRA Chairman*

In Brief

Toby Stewart

In May 2004 we were sad to report that, just as we were going to press, we heard of the sudden death of Toby Stewart, BCRA's South Wales correspondent and reviewer for Speleology. Toby was a prominent figure in South Wales caving, and an article about his caving career, written by his closest friends, appeared in Descent 179. ■

Descent 179, pp22-23, Aug/Sept 2004.
Speleology 4, p5, May 2004.

New Chairman

This January Nick Williams will step down as BCRA Chairman. He is succeeded by Steve Whitlock, who many will know from Wales where his is a member of Byrnmawr CC and the Combined Services Caving Association. New to the BCRA Council, Steve brings an interest in cave radio, exploration, surveying and explosives to the post of chairman. Welcome to Steve! ■



Battery-free Torch

Traditional peril-sensitive lights go out just when you need them most. This one strapped to your helmet will get brighter as you thrash around to escape danger – or even just start shaking with fear. The new NightStar LED torch requires no batteries or any changeable parts, and claims to be rugged, waterproof and 'practically indestructible'. It's probably not for normal caving, and certainly not for surveying, but for £30 it might be useful for long-term emergency dumps where batteries could corrode. ■

nightstaruk.com

Viruses in Bats

Recently bats have appeared in the news linked to some of the world's most notorious viruses. New Scientist reported that researchers in Gabon have found fragments of the Ebola virus in three species of fruit bats. This is the first time that Ebola has been identified in bats.

In three areas of China researchers have found bats which carry a virus similar to SARS. Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome is a disease which came to the public attention in 2002, when an outbreak resulted in over 700 deaths and billions of dollars of economic damage, not to mention the cancellation of several caving expeditions to Asia. As reported in the journal Science, the new virus is 92% similar to SARS. Luckily the virus carried by bats poses no danger to cavers – it cannot infect humans – however, it could provide an important clue to the origin of SARS. ■

Caving on the Web

SpeleoBase

The free cave database software Speleo-Base has recently been updated. SpeleoBase is a Windows program which offers central management of all your cave-related data such as names, locations, rigging guides, gps waypoints, surveys and photos. Now in version 2.7, the latest edition has expanded export and filtering functionality. It is available from users.skynet.be/avalon/avalonuk/software/speleobase.htm

Caves in Thailand

Shepton Mallet CC have compiled information about caves throughout Thailand on takobi.co.uk which features surveys, maps, a cave registry, and a bibliography. The website also includes reports from several years of expeditions.

Speleogenesis

The study of how caves form has gone online at speleogenesis.info with the new virtual journal of Speleogenesis and Evolution of Karst Aquifers. The

journal features articles on the origin and development of solution caves and related aspects of hydrogeology and evolution of karst. In addition to these scientific offerings, there are reports on exploration in the Caucasus which will be of interest all cavers.

Intl. Journal of Speleology

The International Journal of Speleology, the official journal of the UIS which is published by the Speleological Society of Italy, is now online at www.ijs.speleo.it The website lists the contents

of more than thirty volumes of the Journal published since 1964. It also offers photos and searchable abstracts. Scientific articles from volumes 10-32 are available for free download in pdf format.

National Caving Organisations

The UIS has a new web page uis-speleo.org/natspel.html which lists all national caving organisations and multi-country organisations. The page includes contact details and should be useful for cavers travelling abroad or those wishing to research karst in other areas. ■