

Karst: people, places and history

A way of life

Karst environments are highly valued by many communities and cultural groups due to their unique features, ecosystems and biota. Their spiritual, cultural, aesthetic, recreational, educational and scientific values provide people with a sense of inspiration and connectedness, which, together with their agricultural and industry use, make them invaluable to current and future generations.

Karst environments are cultural centres

In many parts of the world, societies, both past and present, give importance to karst environments. The ancient Mayans for example, used caves as temples, seeking help from the god Chac on issues relating to water quality and supply. Hindus, Buddhists and Christians have continued this tradition using caves as places for worship and healing.

This spiritual and religious association is particularly strong in Indigenous cultures. In New South Wales (NSW), karst environments are the topic of Aboriginal creation stories and sites for ceremony and industry. Evidence of this is provided by the rock paintings, carvings, quarries, middens and stone artefacts that have been found in many of the State's caves, and which often date to 20,000 years before present.

Karst environments also feature in Australian folklore with bushrangers and early cave explorers telling stories of blind fish and bottomless pits.



Recreational use of karst. ©S.Babka



Christmas Carols in Jenolan Caves. ©R.Commins

Today, karst environments continue to be used for special events and activities. Weddings and religious ceremonies are regularly conducted in caves, and in Australia (or indeed, any other part of the western world) it is rare for a cave to not have a 'cathedral chamber'.



Tourists in Orient Cave, Jenolan. ©J.Lim

A recreational asset

Many of the world's most scenic landscapes owe their appeal to karst. Mountains, cliffs, hills, valleys and other landforms contain karst features which contribute greatly to their aesthetic and recreational appeal, and provide the drawcard for visitors from all parts of the globe.

Karst environments are used around the world for their cultural, spiritual, aesthetic, recreational, educational and scientific values.

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Tourists at Jenolan. ©J.Lim

The use of caves for show or adventure caving is of particular interest, attracting more than 20 million people each year. This does not include the more intrepid and adventurous people who choose to explore wild (or undeveloped) caves where human activity is often limited.



Music in Jenolan Caves. ©P.Woodward

Karst environments are equally important as educational tools. In only a few environments are the ecological chains of cause and effect so evident, or the environmental determinants and influencing factors on human society so clear. The stable environment of many of the caves provides the ability to preserve in great detail much of the material evidence left by past cultural events and activities.

The prehistoric legacy found in many karst environments, particularly caves, is well known and has contributed to our knowledge of past activities and events. This legacy needs conserving to ensure that cultural activities are preserved or allowed to continue, while at the same time providing a recreational resource for individuals, groups and the community generally.



Caving. ©Gary K.Smith



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