

Team finds rare cave-dwellers

By Alicia Bridges

LARGELY unknown and new species of cave-life have been collected from caves on the Nullarbor to increase the knowledge of unclassified species and identify methods of long-term preservation.

As part of the State Government's Saving Our Species Nullarbor Karst Project, a team comprising staff from the Department of Environment and Conservation and Rangelands Natural Resource Management project joined Western Australia Speleological (caving) Group members and WA Museum staff on a research trip to the Nullarbor.

The vast landscape is home to thousands of underground caves which provide a habitat to rare cave-adapted organisms which are mostly blind, slow-moving and without pigment.

Led by WASG president Paul Hosie, the team spent four days mapping the caves and collecting fauna samples to be later examined, identified and possibly classified by the WA Museum.

Results of the museum study are expected to be made available by June 2007.

DEC biodiversity NRM coordinator for the southern rangelands Renee Berry said major marked caves such as Weebubbie Cave, Madura Cave, Cocklebidy Cave (the world's longest with only one entrance), Webb's Cave and Mullamullang Cave were visited with the specific aim of developing preservation strategies and methods of protection from unguided human contact.

Biological specimens were also collected from unmarked caves.

"The aim of the field survey was to

increase knowledge on the flora and fauna living in the caves, as well as identify the potential threats to the system," Miss Berry said.

"The field survey and additional desktop survey will form the basis of development of interim management guidelines to be completed later in the year.

"These guidelines will assist DEC, landowners, cavers, traditional owners and the public to effectively manage the caves and preserve the fragile ecosystems contained within them."

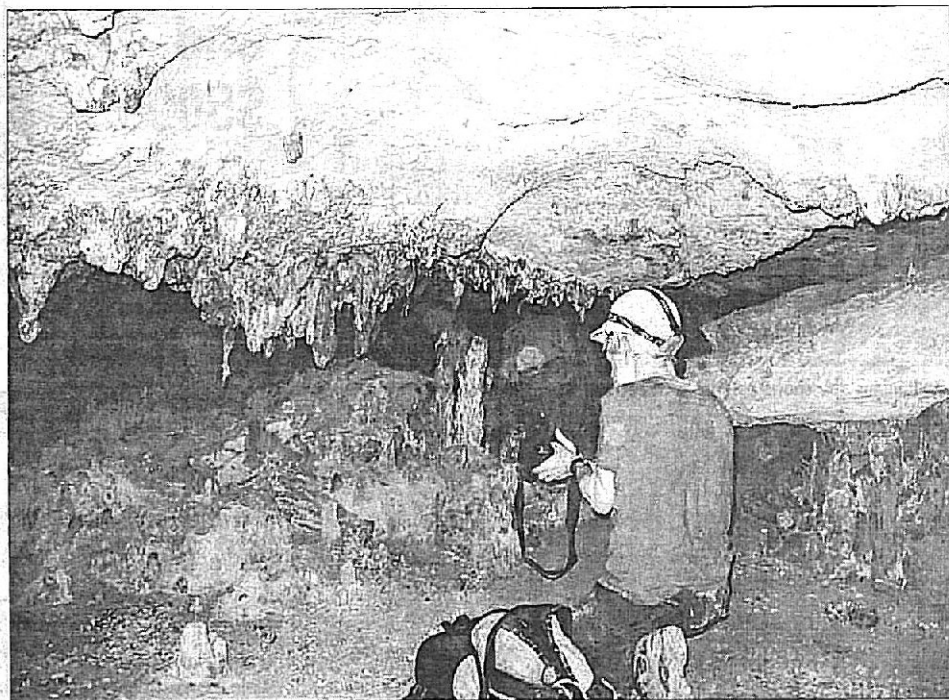
"The trouble is people go to these caves and there is no information and they can get themselves in trouble."

Western Australia Speleological Group president Paul Hosie.

Mr Hosie, a professional cave diver, said the Nullarbor caves varied and were immense in size compared to well-known formations such as those surrounding Yallingup in the South West of WA. He and a team of divers from his organisation embarked on the trip with an ultimate goal of assisting preservation of the sites.

"(We are identifying) how to preserve these caves so that people going into them; that is managed somehow," Mr Hosie said.

"The aim of our group is to teach people how to go about caving with what's called a 'minimal impact caving code'. The trouble is people go



New discoveries: The research team investigates Webb's Cave, one of the thousands on the Nullarbor.

to these caves and there is no information and they can get themselves in trouble."

He said it was also easy to damage the caves and their delicate ecosystems unknowingly.

Simply disturbing a group of bats can upset the whole ecosystem, causing them to leave, perhaps die and remove a food source for bacteria that feeds on their droppings. WASG also helped the

WA Museum's Julianne Waldock to collect samples of fauna including spiders, cockroaches, shrimp and centipedes.

Mr Hosie said new species and one new genus had already been identified from those samples, the most impressive of which he said was the Tartarus Spider, which is only found in the Nullarbor caves.

The spider is the size of a palm with long legs, is blind and is also

slow-moving.

"They're not as horrifying as you think," Mr Hosie said.

"It lives in this amazing funnel web made of the most fine silk."

Mr Hosie said the slow pace of life inside the caves meant many of the fauna could live up to 40 years.

Results of the museum study will form the basis around which management guidelines can be formulated.