

Pwll Du Cave Management Group

Minutes of the Extraordinary General Meeting held on Sunday 9th Oct 2022 at Salisbury Hall, Govilon, starting at 11.00am.

Present

Les Williams (LW)	Chair
Sue Mabbett (SM)	Secretary
Peter Smith (PS)	Biological Recorder
Chris Densham (CD)	OUCC
Ali Garman (AG)	Draenen Diggers
Barry Hill (BH)	Hereford CC
Frank Tully (FT)	Wessex CC
Chris Seal (CS)	Chelsea SS
Rich Hill (RH)	Gagendor
Zac Woodford (ZW)	UBSS
Chris Gibbs (CG)	Cwmbran CC
Ian Wallace	Independent Observer
Stuart France (SF)	Cambrian CC (CCC Conservation Officer)
Christine Bryne	Natural Resources Wales (NRW)
Mary Rogers	GOG

1. Apologies

Clive Owen, Treasurer; Dan Thorne (Permit Secretary), Rich Smith (Webmaster / BEC), Steve King (Shepton Mallet CC), Steve Waters (Cwmbran CC) and Josh White (JW) Conservation Officer, and Morgannwg CC.

2. Confirmation of Voting Rights

Firstly checked that we are quorate, the constitution requires: The quorum for a meeting shall be at least six club representatives (including at least two officers) plus the independent chairman.

There are 8 representatives from member clubs (FT, BH, AG, CG, CD, CS, ZW, & RH) present, 2 officers (SM & PS) and an independent chairman (LW) present, therefore the meeting is quorate.

The meeting then confirmed the requirements of the constitution for voting which is: Each club representative and officer shall be entitled to one vote. Individual club representatives may be substituted by their club in order to ensure attendance, however proxy voting for absent officers or absent clubs is not permitted. In summary each person with voting rights had one vote.

3. Review and Vote on Proposed New Entrance Policy

Mary Rogers had a comment from Martin Laverty that there was no mention in the new policy to cover rescue of a caver from Draenen. LW this is not a matter relevant to the policy. In the event of rescue required action will be taken to effect the rescue. In event of planning to close an entrance this would have impact on rescue.

LW asked if there were any further comments, if not we should vote, SF commented that we should review the proposed policy. LW commented the new policy had been reviewed in previous meetings so no requirement to review in detail.

CD had a letter from Lou Maurice member of OUCC, (Lou did cave regularly on exploratory trips in Draenen however due to health issues is longer able to do exploratory trips) which he believed summarised the OUCC stance on the issue. CD read out the letter as copied below:-

Hi Chris,

I still believe that the Morgannwyg cavers were wise beyond their time when they suggested the single entrance policy and it is a pity that it has not been accepted and adopted by the caving community as a whole as it would have provided the UK with a very unique cave system.

I have not changed my view that cave remoteness is worthy of preservation. Although it is extremely unlikely I will personally ever visit remote areas of caves again, the value I gained from it in Ogof Draenen in the past was extraordinary and it is sad that other cavers will not have the opportunity to experience that. This cannot be mitigated against, and UK cavers will have to cave abroad to experience comparable remoteness.

From a cave conservation perspective I am still very much of the opinion that the evidence for human impacts close to entrances compared to far from entrances is strong; both in terms of the impact on the natural subterranean ecological community and on cave sediments and formations. If there is enough of a consensus that this is important, the impacts of the multiple entrances could be mitigated against to some extent by maintaining good taping combined with stricter access policies, ideally reducing permitted trip numbers per year. Assuming the existing entrances are fairly heavily used at the moment, having a proper access policy would be beneficial, and if they are not already gated, then clearly this would be important.

From a scientific perspective it is possible that there might be some feature worthy of scientific study which increased access via a closer entrance would make easier, although I suspect that there will always be scientists like me (in the past) and Lee Knight who are perfectly capable of getting to and working in the remote areas, along with young fit volunteers. And more importantly, it is the case that cave science can be undertaken close to entrances in many, many different places. There is more of a shortage of cave scientists (and funding) to do the work rather than a shortage of accessible caves to investigate. The thing that is largely missing from a scientific perspective is remote areas that are rarely or never visited. We do not know what future scientists might be able to do in areas of caves that are unimpacted or little impacted by cavers. Preservation of remote areas far from entrances such as those large remote areas of Ogof Draenen that were rarely visited is one way of achieving this. There might be other ways to do this - for example areas of new discoveries could be visited once and mapped and then closed off and designated as conservation areas for future science. Or areas could be deliberately left completely unexplored or passages left un-entered (we once taped off an entire passage from both ends in Prisoners of war in the hope that future cavers would have the opportunity to see what unentered passages look like, I have no idea whether it has since been entered).

Considering bats, by far the biggest threat to them is likely to be the use of explosives during the hibernation season (and on some bats that use caves outside the hibernating season). However, there may also be disturbance by increased caver numbers due to increased caving activity and increased accessibility from multiple entrances (especially near to the main hibernation areas). This might be mitigated against in an access policy that ensures that all cavers visiting the cave know more about bats and how to cave without impacting them, perhaps also with laminated signs just inside entrances. I won't discuss explosives policy much, but that is something that also needs to be addressed more widely in UK caving to ensure that bats and people don't become exposed to bang fumes, and to consider whether it is OK for people to blast wherever they want (e.g. in midwinter chambers and the last sandwich).

So, what of the future of the multiple entrances to Ogof Draenen? Taking a pragmatic view - unless there is a step change in caver opinion, there is no point in closing them against peoples will as more will be opened. Over many years, decades, cavers have not been able to reach a consensus agreement on maintaining Ogof Draenen as a single entrance system, and although a (sometimes thin) majority in support of it was maintained in the PDCMG, those that disagree always continue digging new entrances anyway. Given this and where we are, for all aspects of conservation it would probably be better to have gated, regulated access rather than uncontrolled digging and uncontrolled use of entrances and explosives. I have no doubt that in the same way entrances were opened and used with little regard

for the conservation issues, as more entrances are used and more still are opened, ultimately all areas of the cave will be heavily and irreversibly impacted by cavers. The will to really consider cave conservation ahead of sport is just not there. This is a shame as I have always viewed Ogof Draenen as our Lechigula - a very remarkable cave that holds millions of years of geomorphological and geological history, some of the most diverse and unusual formations in the UK, and ecological communities (both terrestrial and aquatic, both macro and micro) that provide unique (and poorly studied) contributions biodiversity. It is, without doubt, a cave worthy of adopting a different approach to access and conservation where the focus is not entirely on sport caving. But this is not the choice that cavers have made and now, if these entrances are kept open cavers will have to decide again how much they want to conserve, how much they want to restrict access, and how much they want to turn it into a sport caving playground like OFD. With respect to future digging of new entrances, personally I think it will be a pity if there are even more new entrances, especially enabling easier access into the far end of the cave with the subsequent impacts on the Dolimores, war of the worlds, the Wessex, and life on mars series. But I don't suppose that consensus could be reached on this either.

I am not sure what my advice is - except that I think there needs to be discussion with the people who have dug the entrances to see what they want and how much they would be prepared to compromise. Maybe consider if they would accept a single entrance policy if it was a different entrance from the original one and the other ones were closed and locked but available for rescue. Maybe consider each entrance on a case by case basis. Maybe see if they would accept some kind of compromise with two or three entrances, but with agreement to have no new digging activity to try to enter the southern areas of the caves. If we could keep places like war of the worlds and Dollimores at least 2.5 hours caving from an entrance that would be better. But maybe it is already too late for that.

I am not sure any of this helps you much. I am still too tired by it all to get involved. Maybe one day I will start giving more talks on cave conservation and cave science or writing articles on it again.

Good luck, and thanks for keeping on with this.

Lou

CS agreed with many points that Lou had raised. The point of the new policy is to discuss any entrance to determine whether it should be adopted. By accepting multiple entrances may occur we encourage cavers to inform us of new entrances.

SF commented that Ogof Draenen has relatively few caver visits, from the caver monitors he has in place there is an average of one visit a week with ~ 200 cavers a year visiting Draenen. SF also found from the monitoring there are very few (3-4 recorded) through trips, most cavers are going to a specific area to explore. Ogof Draenen is not like Ogof Ffynnon Ddu (OFD) where through trips are a common event with the through trips being the purpose of the trip. OFD is caver friendly compared to Draenen.

CS commented he perceived conservation different from wilderness, in terms of conserving the cave there is often more damage on the way out due to tiredness. Wilderness / remoteness within Ogof Draenen is one of its strengths and would be a factor considered for any new entrance use.

PS commented that incentive to dig new entrances to Draenen would likely be reduced once additional entrances are adopted. Multiple accepted entrances at OFD, seem to have resulted in little pressure for more. The additional entrances at Ogof Draenen have secured access for bats. The access route(s) of bats present from time of first breakthrough into the cave are unknown and hence vulnerable to becoming blocked.

LW thanked everyone for their comments and believed this time had provided a review of the policy. No further comments were raised so the meeting voted on the new entrance policy

Those for adopting the new entrance policy – 10 votes

Those against adopting the new entrance policy – 0 votes

Those abstaining on the vote on the new entrance policy – 0 votes.

LW thanked everyone for attending and strong acceptance of this policy. SM reported that those, with voting rights, unable to make the meeting had also expressed positive acceptance of the new policy.

The entrance policy approved is copied below:-

Pwll Du Cave Management Group Entrance Policy

Ogof Draenen is one of the largest cave systems in the UK and may warrant more entrances to facilitate further exploration, discovery or research. At the same time there is a need to consider many other factors before adopting any entrance as a recommended route. This policy states PDCMG's approach to adopting any new or additional entrance as one that the PDCMG helps manage or recommends for use.

Each entrance will be considered on a case-by-case basis by the PDCMG Committee and a recommendation will be put forward to the PDCMG member clubs for a vote (e.g. at a general meeting, or EGM). The PDCMG Committee's recommendation will be based on consideration of the following factors,

- location in relationship to surface features and entrance accessibility.
- location inside the cave in relationship to other entrances.
- conservation needs in respect of the area inside the cave that the entrance facilitates access to.
- the benefits of the entrance to promote further exploration, surveying, discovery and other research activities
- other potential benefits or detriments of the entrance (e.g. loss of wilderness)
- the views of the landowner(s) if known on which the entrance is located.

The Committee may announce an interim policy on a new entrance until a vote has taken place. The membership vote shall take place on or before the next scheduled PDCMG meeting. The PDCMG Committee will publish its recommendation to member clubs ahead of that vote along with the entrance proponents' response and reasoning for proposing the entrance. Voting is based on 1 vote per PDCMG member club.

Should an entrance be recommended and/or accepted for adoption, the PDCMG will approach the landowner(s) where necessary and if applicable any regulatory body for permissions.

Should PDCMG membership vote not to adopt an entrance, then PDCMG will request that its membership and the wider caving community do not use that entrance. It does not automatically follow that an unadopted entrance will be closed by PDCMG; there could be good reasons why an entrance must remain open, in which case PDCMG will look at what alternative measures can be taken to discourage its use (e.g. remove / not support fixed aids on that route). Ultimately any decision to close an entrance lies with the landowner(s) and/or a regulatory body. PDCMG will if requested advise landowner(s) and if applicable regulatory bodies on the best options for unadopted entrances.

The decision on whether any adopted entrance needs a gate / barrier will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Should a gate be required then access will be granted to all bona fide cavers as per current access conditions.

As this in an EGM where the only matter on the agenda was review and vote on the new entrance policy, no further business is discussed as part of this meeting.

Meeting closed 11.30am.

Post meeting notes:

As the new policy had been approved, the discussion of other known entrances (Drws Cefn and the Nunnery) will occur at the next general meeting. For this next meeting submissions will be prepared to cover all points detailed in the new policy that are factors in determining whether an entrance is adopted or not. SM was asked to contact the landowner to inform that this new policy has been approved and any potential issues he may have with an entrance location.

Verified as an accurate record 06/12/22

[Signature]