Baloon Cave visit and assessment, Carnarvon Gorge, Queensland

Fieldwork Report, 7 February 2019

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Cover photo, from left to right: Fred Conway, Darren McCleod, Will Lawton, Milton Lawton and Dale Harding near Baloon Cave, Carnarvon Gorge discussing the fire damage and next steps. All photos by Paul S.C. Taçon unless otherwise indicated and with permission.

Figure 1: Fred Conway at Baloon Cave with remains of viewing platform behind.

Background

On 2 January 2019 Dale Harding (Bidjara, Garingbal and Ghungalu peoples), who is a member of Griffith University's *Place, Evolution and Rock Art Heritage Unit* (PERAHU) Indigenous Advisory Group, contacted PERAHU Director Professor Paul S.C. Taçon by email to inform him about fire damage to Baloon Cave, Carnarvon Gorge National Park, that occurred in December 2018. After a phone conversation later that evening and a series of emails, as well as conversations between Dale Harding and community members concerned about Baloon Cave, Professor Taçon was invited to visit the site by Dale Harding, Milton Lawton and other community members.

After flying to Roma on 9 January, Taçon and Harding drove to Carnarvon Gorge where they were met by Fred Conway (senior Bidjara elder and Carnarvon Gorge National Park Ranger for

over 30 years; see Figure 1), Milton Lawton (Bidjara), Darren McLeod (Garingbal) and Will Lawton (Bidjara; Milton's youngest son). All members of the group are passionate about their heritage, especially the rock art sites but Fred (now 75 years of age), in particular, has been active much of his life in looking after his people's rock art. As the Queensland Government states on its website for Carnarvon Gorge "Fred is an Indigenous Elder and tireless advocate for protecting Indigenous cultural sites, particularly the rock art sites in Carnarvon National Park in central west Queensland" (https://parks.des.qld.gov.au/parks/carnarvon-gorge/ranger.html). In 2014, he was given a 'Queensland Great Award' for his service.

After introductions and a welcome to Country the group proceeded to Baloon Cave (Figure 2). Public access to the site was closed but permission had been obtained from Queensland Parks and Wildlife (QPWS) staff, some of whom we later met with on site, including Brett Roberts. This report focuses on the results of the visit including recommendations discussed in the field.

Figure 2: Fred Conway and Dale Harding approaching Baloon Cave.

ARC Laureate Project: Australian rock art history, conservation and Indigenous well-being

This fieldwork was also part of an Australia-wide research program focusing on rock art. The project 'Australian rock art history, conservation and Indigenous well-being' is part of Professor Paul Tacon's Laureate award from the Australian Research Council (FL160100123). The overall aim of the Laureate research project is to ensure that rock art landscapes are better conserved, appreciated and understood for the benefit of local communities and future generations. We are currently exploring questions such as:

- How can we contribute to better conservation and management of rock art landscapes for the benefit of future generations?
- In areas with vast landscapes of rock art - how can we help communities make decisions on where to focus their time, energy, and resources for rock art conservation and management?
- Why are rock art complexes important for Indigenous people, and especially for Indigenous well-being today?

For further information on this larger program please visit:
https://www.griffith.edu.au/humanities-languages/place-evolution-rock-art-heritage-unit/

Why rock art is powerful and relevant today

The Laureate project is aligned with *The Rock Art Network*, an international alliance of individuals and organisations, of which Professor Taçon is a member. In 2015, they published a seminal volume on how we can better protect the valuable and vulnerable heritage of rock art (Agnew et al. 2015) and in 2018 produced the following about why rock art is important:

Rock art – ancient paintings and engravings on rock surfaces – is a visual record of global human history. It is a shared heritage that links us to powerful ancestral worlds and magnificent landscapes of the past. It tells the story of the birthplaces of art, the dawn of artistic endeavors. It creates connections to significant places and depicts encounters with the surrounding living world. Through its existence nature and culture are connected in the landscape. It resonates

with our individual and collective identity while stimulating a vital sense of belonging to a greater past. Rock art illustrates the passage of time over tens of thousands of years of environmental and cultural change. It incarnates the essence of human ingenuity and facilitates contacts today between cultures and aspects of spirituality. Rock art is artistically compelling and full of meaning. This fragile and irreplaceable visual heritage has worldwide significance, contemporary relevance and for many indigenous peoples is still part of their living culture. If we neglect, destroy, or disrespect rock art we devalue our future.

The Network abides by eight important principles which set a foundation for rock art conservation (Agnew et al. 2015:4):

Principle 1 – Work actively to promote rock art as a valuable heritage for everyone, and allocate sufficient resources specifically to its future care.

Principle 2 – Manage to protect all values

Principle 3– Preserve and manage rock art as an inherent part of the landscape

Principle 4– Safeguard cultural rights and practices

Principle 5 – Involve and empower Indigenous owners and local communities in decisions about rock art management and conservation

Principle 6 – Use recognised ethics, protocols and standards for documentation, conservation and interpretation as the basis for management practice

Principle 7 – Give priority to preventive and protective conservation

Principle 8 – Make effective communication and collaboration a central part of management

These foundation principles lead to the four 'pillars' which make for strong rock art policy and conservation when it is applied in practice (Agnew et al. 2015:4-5):

Pillar I. Public and political awareness
There is a need to raise awareness about rock art, the range and severity of threats to it and the need for effective responses to these threats. Public and political awareness of rock art is vital for successful planning and budgeting for conservation and management.

Pillar II. Effective management systems
Systems are required to manage rock art sites and groups of rock art sites in their landscapes. This includes identifying the significance of sites, their management needs and

the development of strategies for their long-term conservation. A key to the development of such systems is the active involvement of all key stakeholders especially traditional owners, site custodians, and local communities and the allocation of the capable human resources required to look after rock art sites.

Pillar III. Physical and cultural conservation practice
Careful guidance is needed for the work of physically protecting and, if necessary, undertaking conservation work on rock art sites. The same applies to the cultural practices that secure the physical and spiritual integrity of rock art sites. Physical conservation and cultural conservation need to be considered, planned and undertaken in dialogue with each other. In each case, it is important that people with suitable expertise are available, that expert knowledge is respected and that informed decisions are made regarding the physical and cultural benefits and impacts of actions.

Pillar IV. Community involvement and benefits
An important way of conserving and celebrating rock art is through appropriate and well-managed economic, social and cultural development initiatives by and for indigenous, local and regional communities. Genuine community involvement can result in greater awareness of rock art, increased economic opportunities and higher quality display and interpretation for visitors.

*The Rock Art Network, established by the Getty Conservation Institute and the Bradshaw Foundation, comprises individuals and institutions committed to the promotion, protection, and conservation of rock art globally.

Baloon Cave viewing platform history

Initially access to Baloon Cave was via a stone and soil walking track, with low handrails separating visitors from the art panels. However, some vandalism occurred with lines and letters scratched over and into stencils. To facilitate better access and to better protect the rock art a large viewing platform and walkway was installed at Baloon Cave in 2014 (Figure 3 and see https://www.wagner.com.au/main/our-projects/baloon-cave-viewing-platform for photos immediately after installation). REPLAS Enduroplank recycled plastic products (see http://www.replas.com.au/tag/balloon-cave/) were used with composite fibre structural components. On the REPLAS website the Enduroplank is promoted as a low maintenance endurable material suitable for Baloon Cave (http://www.replas.com.au/carnarvon-national-park-upgraded-replas-enduroplank-viewing-platform/):

The perfect fit-for-purpose as a low maintenance, long lasting product lies Replas Enduroplank™, an upgrade for the pathway near this cave. This recycled plastic decking solution gives better access to the National Park's guests.

Not only is this recycled product low maintenance and long lasting, it is durable enough to handle to walkers, hikers, and even 4WD vehicles to head right into the heart of this country!

It also is promoted as fire retardant but fire testing undertaken in December 2017 appears to have limited mixed results (see Abraham 2018, available on the REPLAS website).

Figure 3: Baloon Cave with viewing platform in July 2018 before the fire (photo: Selina Goodreid and lifeoutsidework.com.au).

Recycled plastic had been used for a rock art viewing platform at Nganalang, Keep River National Park, Northern Territory. It too was said to be fire retardant but in 2008:

> once the plastic material ignited, the severe heat generated caused the painted rock surface to shatter and disintegrate, falling to the floor of the shelter. The follow up conservation action in consultation with Traditional Owners was confined essentially to a clean up, placing the shattered material near the entrance of the shelter and to initiate baseline monitoring to assess the need for any future intervention (Lambert and Welsh 2011:47).

In December 2018 the Baloon Cave viewing platform and walkway was burnt to the ground. At both Nganalang, Keep River and Baloon Cave, Carnarvon it appears a hot fire melted and then ignited part of the infrastructure, resulting in an extremely hot explosive fire with heat so intense that massive exfoliation of nearby rock surfaces resulted, destroying or severely damaging rock art in the process, as well as coating areas with soot.

Results of inspection

During the visit we inspected the walkway infrastructure leading up to Baloon Cave, including the remains of both recycled plastic and wooden walking tracks and bridges (Figure 4). One of our first observations was that the recycled plastic infrastructure was badly burnt and melted but much of the wooden infrastructure, although blackened, was largely intact (Figure 5).

Figure 4: The plastic guardrail on the right that once was in the fire's path burnt and melted.

Figure 5: Wooden bridges, although scorched, survived largely intact, unlike plastic infrastructure.

The fire was particularly devastating where the viewing platform and walkways leading up to it once stood. This infrastructure was completely destroyed, severely damaging the rock shelter in the process. The heat must have been very intense as much of the rock shelter surface exfoliated and collapsed. Black soot covers remaining parts of the shelter wall and ceiling (see Figures 6-11).

Figure 6: View of Baloon Cave after the fire facing into the shelter.

Figure 7: Dale Harding (left) and Will Lawson (right) inspecting Baloon Cave.

Figure 8: View of the shelter from the right before the fire (photo: Marisa Giorgi).

Figure 9: View of the shelter from the right after the fire.

Figure 10: Baloon Cave where the viewing platform once stood with collapsed wall on floor.

Figure 11: View looking out from the back of the shelter.

Rock art at the site was heavily impacted. Damage to the main panel consists of exfoliation to the left, right and above right; cracking at the upper right; and a coating of soot over most of the stencilled hands and all of the hafted axe stencils (see Figures 12-14). As one approaches

the panel, at first it appears it is completely blackened but closer inspection and photography with the light at the right angle reveals the stencils underneath.

Figure 12: The main panel (centre) before the fire (photo: Marisa Giorgi).

Figure 13: After the fire. At first the main panel (centre) appears totally blackened.

Figure 14: Damage to the main stencilled panel consisting of exfoliation, cracking and soot.

Damage to the rare hafted stone axe stencils is pronounced as not only have they been blackened but also where two of them are located the rock has both cracked and exfoliated. The cracked portion at the left looks as if it could easily collapse (see Figures 15 -16). It may be possible to remove the soot and to consolidate the panel but this needs further investigation and assessment (see recommendation 5 below). Should it be decided to attempt this it should be undertaken cautiously, so as to not create new damage. More generally, physical intervention at rock art sites should always be a last resort, carefully considered and undertaken only by knowledgeable/experienced professionals.

Figure 15: Baloon Cave main stencil panel before the December 2018 fire (photo: Dale Harding).

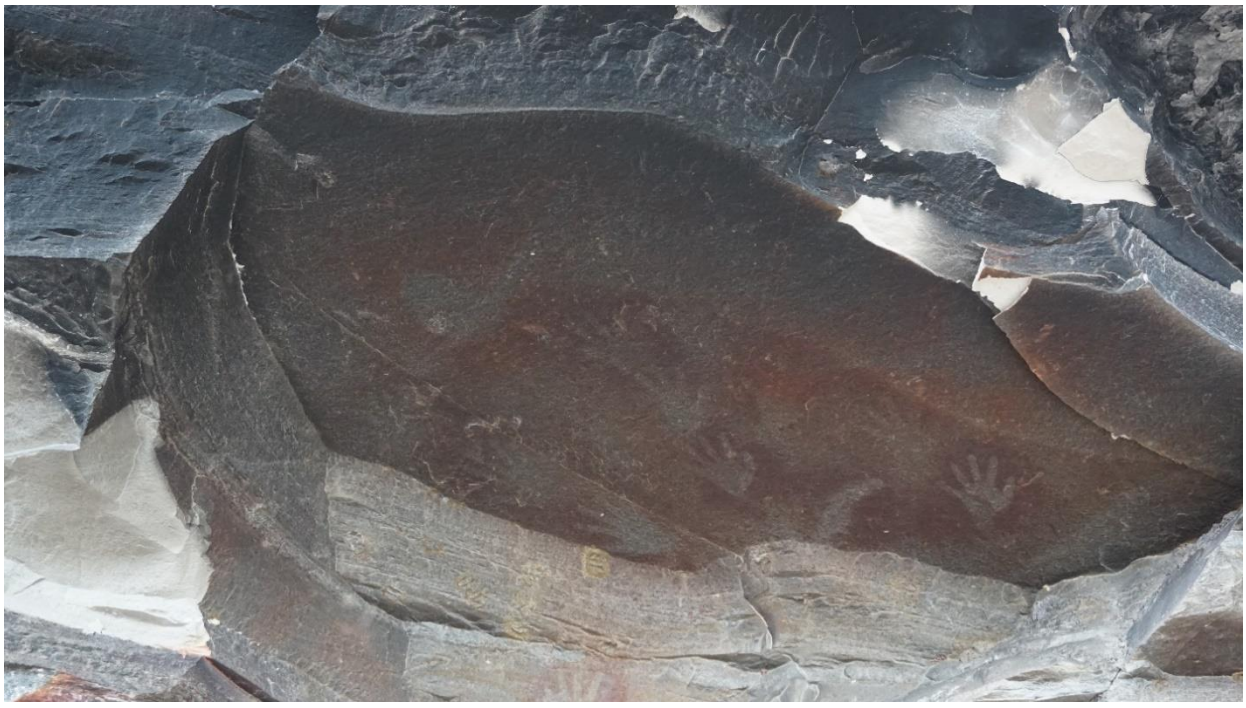

Figure 16: Baloon Cave main stencil panel after the December 2018 fire.

The lower right side panel has suffered from exfoliation but not as much soot damage.

Figure 17: The lower right panel before the fire (photo: Marisa Giorgi).

Figure 18: The lower right panel after the fire.

The lower left side has suffered some soot damage and exfoliation high up.

Figure 19: The left side of the shelter before the fire (Photo: Marisa Giorgi).

Figure 20: The left side after the fire. Some hand stencils are covered in soot.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations came out of discussions that took place immediately after visiting Baloon Cave. They include:

1. Fred Conway was very angry about what happened but wants healing now. He would like the site to be used as an example/case study of what can happen at sites with improper infrastructure. For this he would like the site left pretty much as is, after the remains of the platform are removed, so people can see the damage European mismanagement of sites/heritage that has occurred. He said Baloon Cave could be used for educating people about how important these places are and what can happen to them.

2. Milton Lawton said everyone has been spiritually wounded by the fire event. The past couple weeks he has had disturbing dreams and after he saw what the fire did to Baloon Cave he and his family became physically sick/ill for 6 days. He also said it is now time for healing and that everybody should work together for positive outcomes.

3. The clean-up of the site and removal of the remains of the walkway and viewing panel should only be undertaken with appropriate Aboriginal community members present.

4. Everyone agreed we should try to make 3D models and possibly some sort of small 3D replicas from existing high resolution photographs if enough from different angles taken before the fire can be collected from a range of individuals.

5. Paul Taçon should consult rock art conservation experts as to whether the soot coating over the main panel of stencils can be removed and the panel consolidated without doing further damage. If the community agrees the first action might be an off-art test of soot removal. Fred asked if chemicals would be used but hopefully all that would be needed is water, perhaps applied with cotton buds and/or a special cloth.

6. Uncle Milton would like to see a new relationship between the community and Parks, like the way it was some time ago. He said the viewing platform was installed without proper community consultation.

7. A full site history and conservation/remediation assessment should take place.

8. Input from a broader range of Bidjara and Garingbal community members needs to take place, especially from women.

9. Ideally, an agreed media strategy should be developed so everyone is talking from the same page. This could include a media statement and designated spokespeople. Among other things, a post could be placed on the Bradshaw Foundation web site (http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/), an organisation that disseminates information about world rock art, at the appropriate time to alert the world to the dangers of using recycled plastic products at rock art sites.

10. Everyone in the group would like collaborative academic publications about what occurred to tell the world and to help prevent such material (i.e. recycled plastic, etc.) being used at any other site in Australia. This report could be used as a resource for such publications.

11. An initial online search suggests recycled plastic products have been installed at many park and heritage locations but not at other rock art sites. An audit of Australian rock art sites with walkways and viewing platforms should be undertaken to see what materials they are made from and if recycled plastic for any aspect.

12. The nature of existing infrastructure at other Carnarvon Gorge rock art sites, and more generally throughout Queensland, should be reviewed.

13. All future conservation and management decisions about Baloon Cave and other Carnarvon Gorge rock art sites should have Aboriginal community involvement and approval. It should also follow the principals set out by Agnew et al. 2015 (see above).

14. National Parks organisations across Australia should be alerted so that recycled plastic is not used when old viewing platforms and walkways are upgraded and new infrastructure for public access is installed.

Figure 21: Fred Conway (second from left), Milton Lawton (far right) and others look toward building new positive relationships so rock art sites are better managed for future generations.

Conclusions

Of course, the main conclusion is that recycled plastic products should never be used again at rock art sites, especially for walkways and viewing platforms. However, wooden infrastructure is also problematic and there have been many instances in Australia and overseas where wooden platforms and/or walkways caught fire and then caused damage to rock art panels. As Lambert and Welsh (2011:48) conclude: "Clearly, new boardwalks should no longer be constructed using combustible material, and old wooden boardwalks need to eventually be replaced with a non-combustible material or design". Metal walkways and viewing platforms, although more expensive, might be the way forward for some sites. One of the best examples was installed at the Jibbon rock art site on the edge of Royal National Park, New South Wales (Williams et al. in press [2019]; see Figure 22 and 23).

Figure 22: Metal stairs and walkway, Jibbon rock art site, New South Wales.

Figure 23: Jibbon viewing platform.

At Baloon Cave, the main central panel, once immediately above the viewing platform, suffered the most damage, especially to two of the three hafted stone axe stencils (Figure 24), with a covering of soot, exfoliation and cracking. There is a risk that the rock above the major new crack could sheer off and fall to the ground, taking portions of the stencils with it. It also poses a

health and safety risk to visitors, staff and contractors rehabilitating the site, as well as conservators addressing both this issue and the soot over the panel in the future.

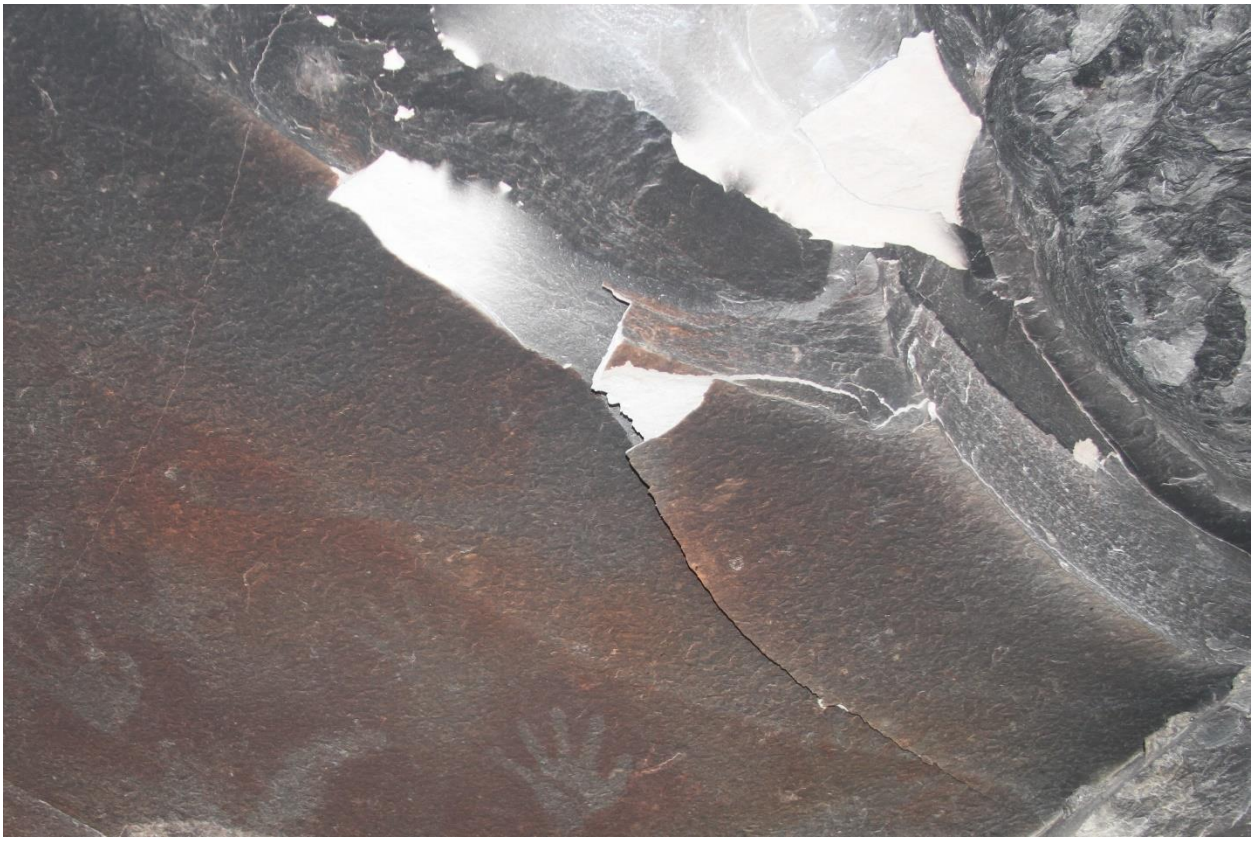

Figure 24: Close-up of area of damage to the hafted stone axe stencils.

Rock art conservators should be employed by QPWS to undertake a detailed conservation assessment and to decide what remedial action could be implemented. Previous interpretative material installed at the site was excellent (e.g. Figures 25 and 26) but if the site is reopened to the public, and considering what happened, then very different new interpretive material will need to be developed in consultation with representatives of the Aboriginal community.

For any of the above to happen smoothly a stronger positive relationship between QPWS and the larger Bidjara-Garingbal Aboriginal community needs to be fostered.

Figure 25: Previous signage about the hafted stone axe stencils (photo: Marisa Giorgi).

Figure 26: Previous signage about the hand stencils (photo Marisa Giorgi).

Other photographs from the visit

The following are some photographs of Baloon Cave from various perspectives taken as a baseline for future conservation and management and as a record of fire damage.

Figure 27: View into the shelter with the main art panel in the centre.

Figure 28: The left side of shelter.

Figure 29: The right side of the shelter and rock art panel.

Figure 30: Results of exfoliation.

Figure 31: Remains of viewing platform structural components.

Figure 32: Remains of viewing platform structural components.

Figure 33: The site being assessed with Brett Roberts of QPWS (left).

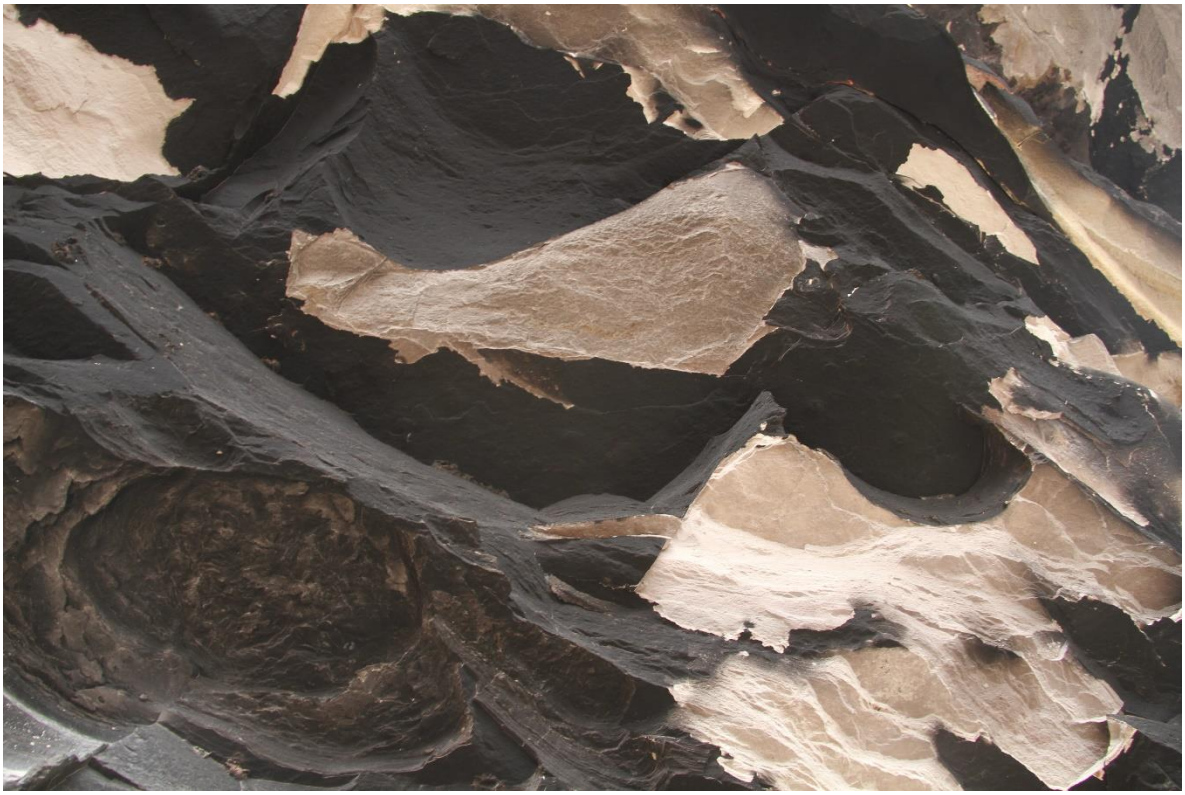

Figure 34: Exfoliation of the ceiling.

Figure 35: Scratched graffiti and vandalism over stencils made prior to the fire.

Figure 36: Scratch marks over hand stencils prior to December 2013 (photo: Dale Harding).

Figure 37: Baloon Cave before the viewing platform was installed (photo: Simon Ling); Dale Harding documenting the extent of the fire damage in January 2019; walkway and viewing platform in September 2015, before the fire (Photo: Dale Harding).

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Further information

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