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A THEME PARK GROWS BENEATH THE GROUND

By Matt Chew

A few weeks ago, the Kartchner Caverns State Parks in Arizona reached the \$1 million mark in reservation sales. Tourists love the new attraction. Tours are sold out through the spring. The media frenzy that came with the parks' November opening is barely subsiding.

So those of us who look after state parks should be delighted, right? Unfortunately, it's not that simple.

It is true that visitors to the new park are treated to a grand experience. But in developing the park for this purpose, we fundamentally altered both the cave itself and the experience it provides. What we did at Kartchner Caverns is what too often happens to the truly natural wonders in our landscape.

A park built traditionally around a natural wonder transforms the phenomenon of interest into a museum of itself. At its best and worst, the Kartchner Caverns extravaganza summarizes the current art and practice of "show-cave" development. It immerses visitors in an undeniably grand theme. But it neither aspires to nor achieves beyond what has gone before. We took something unimaginable and reduced it to what we could imagine, the predictable product of an unremarkable mindset.

We present the "cavern as edifice," a secular cathedral, replete with mostly self-commissioned monuments to those who commanded and contributed to its completion. But there is also "cavern as artifact," a mystical, adored, and untouchable self-containing reliquary; the garishly lighted "cavern as art," and the unexplainable "cavern as performance venue" (Yes, there is a stage and seating inside.).

You also get the "cavern as classroom" with inescapable, insatiably informative tour guides; and finally, "cavern as elevator," complete with the appropriate musical score. What happened to the "cavern as cavern"?

I am a bit anxious underground, and not much of a caver. But being responsible for developing the park's Bat Management Plan, I had the opportunity to wander through parts of Kartchner Caverns when the only way in was a steel ladder down a 40-foot vertical shaft. I first saw the cave in the ephemeral illumination of headlamps and flashlights. I skidded on muddy, uneven rocks and landed on my rear end more than once. I crawled where headroom permitted nothing else. And sitting in a darkness to which eyes can never adjust, I heard a thousand bats chattering at each other - or maybe at me. Such pre-development encounters taught me that the world of the cave is both fascinating and uncomfortable.

But discomfort is a lousy selling point. So, playing Henry Higgins to a geological Liza Doolittle, we civilized the cave. We revised nature's rough draft with concrete and stainless steel. We flipped on the lights to illuminate, but mainly to dramatize. We piled on music for good measure.

As Arizona State Parks mediates the encounter, the "real" cave disappears behind the impression of it that we must - or think we must - convey.

It's not often that someone discovers a "new" park-worthy resource and has the chance to raise the old development standard. At Kartchner Caverns, what the visitor sees was a compromise between achieving the lowest development cost and the greatest spectacle. There was, at least, lip service (and the price of a couple of refrigerator doors, to maintain high humidity and seal out desert heat) paid to maintaining the environment that produced the amazing formations on display, so that we can call it a "live" cave.

To be fair, construction would have been quicker and cheaper if preservation had received zero priority. But how many acres of cave floor were obliterated so we could deliver the message of preservation? What will be the impact from thousands of visits?

Even in the implausible event that we develop management expertise to match our rhetoric, no park visitor will ever notice further growth in a cave formation. We could have achieved much the same visual effect by lacquering the whole place. What untrained eye can tell the difference between the real thing and the artificial formations on display inside the visitor center?

Kartchner Caverns tourists get to see only what we decided to show them. If we succeed as interpreters, what they see is what the cave becomes in the mind of a visitor. But under the imperative to march an uninterrupted column of paying customers down the tunnel, we never permit a direct experience of the actual phenomena present.

Those who exit a Kartchner Caverns tour thinking they comprehend the nature of a cave are mistaken. What they got was a gaudy package calculated to maximize revenue by creating a demand and then accommodating it. No contemplation or reflection required (or allowed).

Perhaps, as the party line goes, once it was discovered, the cave had to be developed in order to be saved. Or maybe national publicity, multimillion-dollar project authority, "rural economic development," and opportunities for hobnobbing with VIP visitors confirmed themselves as the only acceptable standards of success. Maybe there is a deeper darkness after all.