

Recent Family Expeditions to the Caves of Krabi, Thailand by Imogen Furlong and Bev Shade

The first season: 2016

In January of 2016, we fielded an expedition to Krabi, Thailand, with two goals: to search for caves in & around the massif of Khao Kayam and to pool parenting resources to allow for some much needed adult caving time to a group of caver families and friends. Having children wasn't a requirement for the trip, but tolerating children was. Another way of putting it was that we intended to expose our children to the wonders of international caving. The trip was organized primarily by Imogen Furlong from the GSG, building on information provided by Thailand Cave Survey. We lodged at the Banana Bungalow, a hostel within walking distance of the Khao Kayam massif in which there were no recorded cave entrances.

While Imogen worked on local leads and permission, the rest of the team chased down some known leads donated by the Thailand Cave Survey (Martin Ellis) and started prospecting the southern side of the Khao Kayam massif by kayak. We hoped to find resurgences or entrances that could take us toward the centre of the massif, theoretically fed by the giant sinkholes on its crest. These large sinkholes are visible in imaging as well as from your plane as you land at Krabi airport. On the south side of the massif, tall limestone cliffs tower over the Khlong Nai Sa, a wide murky river framed by verdant mangrove swamps and deep tidal mud banks. There is no solid footing. In places, tidal channels through the dense mangroves offered access to the base of the cliffs, but the solutional features we found seemed to owe their existence more to sea and tidal action than to the giant river caves we were looking for.

However, even from a distance, the craggy spires and irregular surface of Khao Kayam looked promising, so we moved on to the west and north sides, where we could approach (mostly!) by land. Khao Kayam is approximately 5km long, 3 km wide and 560m high. Prospection on the west and north sides took place simultaneously, depending mostly on which kids wanted to go caving and which kids wanted to go to the beach, as the west side was relatively kid-friendly, and the north side was decidedly not.

On the North Side of Khao Kayam: Bushbashing the lower slopes of the massif above palm oil plantations, yielded a number of leads, mostly breakdown-choked cave entrances. Travel was slow through the dense vegetation, and the locally available machetes left much to be desired. GPS signals were weak in the dense foliage and irregular terrain, further complicating exploration. Several exciting entrances merged into one named Gecko Eggs Cave, a maze of breakdown filled chambers, which were rammed full of pristine white formations. Every day, the cave would yield more passage in unlikely spots, and as the days passed, the cave got deeper and more complicated. We hoped to pass through the breakdown into the solid bedrock seen in some of the caves near the base of the massif, but were turned back in many places by impenetrable breakdown. Ultimately, the cave was surveyed to **397** meters long and 55m meters deep. There were a few leads left, but unstable, so it seems better to find new caves in this area. Several other promising entrances were located in this area, but we ran out of time to survey them.

Further north along the west side of the massif, we were shown a large spring pool reported to have significant dry passage at times of low water levels, and an entrance dismissed as "you don't want to see that one, it's too small!" The cave is named Tham Lek Lek, which means very small cave. We were

unable spot any dry passage at the spring either by climbing to higher galleries or by snorkeling in the murky spring pool. Tham Lek Lek, on the other hand, turned out to be quite a jewel. A small entrance at the base of a tall limestone cliff led to a pleasant chamber dominated by mountains of mud. The air in this room was still and humid, but at least we were truly in the dark zone at last! A bit of grovelling under a flowstone boss at the “end” of the cave led to several lovely galleries – flat gravel floors, tall arched ceilings, well decorated. Our stroll through this new passage ended at a small sump. This sump was small but clear, and teemed with troglobitic isopods. We had a great time teaching the kids about cave fauna and mapping caves, and the joy of getting to name passages when you’re on the survey team.

Back at camp, Bev and Imogen kept thinking and discussing the sump – here we finally had a proper cave, certainly there was more passage on the other side. Could we drain the sump? The cave was almost flat, but we might be able to put water in a depression 20 meters downstream. Bev scoured local hardware stores for some sort of hand pump and tubing, to no avail. Bailing by hand seemed tedious, but we did have access to child labour! Finally, we scavenged some buckets from the hostel and convinced our offspring that bailing a sump would be exciting and fun! Progress was slow and some children required encouragement, but after what seemed like an eternity but was probably more like an hour or two, we lowered the water level by about 30 cm, and suddenly were greeted by a rush of cool air! After that, the cave always felt fresh instead of stagnant as it had. The pace of bailing picked up and soon we had a short ear dip that opened into a borehole! A full day of survey ended with 400 meters surveyed, a great looking main lead, and several big infeeders in the ceiling and a bit of a high at base camp. Over the coming days, we kept pushing the main route, which was a classic meandering river passage, and the few side passages we could climb into. We had to slog through some low crawlways where you got muddy up to your eyeballs, but were always rewarded by more nice passage.

During this time, exploration of Gecko Eggs Cave was ongoing, and we were excited to see the survey plots get closer and closer together! Eventually, the two caves were only separated by about 15m, but breakdown prevented a connection. However, the stream passage of Tham Lek Lek continued upstream (increasingly smaller and less pleasant) until one team finally emerged from a small sinkhole on the north side of Khao Kayam. The tired cavers were happy to hike home through the palm oil plantations instead of back through the less pleasant bits of cave. The cave now stands at 1.33 km long, with good potential for connection to upper level entrances via numerous avens.

On the west side of Khao Kayam: Several local residents showed us caves. Some of the caves had been show caves in the past, as evidenced by collapsing wooden board walks across the mangrove swamp to improve access. These were mostly airy fossil caves, the edges and corners of much bigger caves, long since eroded into thin air. They hint at majestic galleries and luscious borehole. Good places for kids’ hide and seek while they wait for the sketcher, or hold the tape. We mapped two of the four (Tham Hong and Muddy Stick) adding 200m to the survey.

2016 Participants: Nicola Burgess (UK), Rob Bryniarski (UK), Ross Davidson (UK), Liz Das Neves (UK), Larissa Dickson (AUS), Naomi Fox (UK), Imogen & Rowan Furlong (UK), Tim Moulds (AUS), Bill Nix (UK), Dane Randell (AUS), Bev Shade (USA), Fraser, Kate, Lyrah, & Torin Stephens (UK), Ollie Wilson (USA), Matt & Sebastian Wire (UK), Rebecca Wire (NZ).

Return in 2018

In the intervening two years, word had obviously spread of the family friendly expedition to paradise. We saw an increase in membership and gained some additional financial support from the Ghar Parau, which was used to purchase some equipment. 15 families of various sizes made up the 52 strong group of cavers and support crew from UK, Europe, USA and Australia. The expedition was split across two accommodation sites, Banana Bungalows and Melina Villas. This led to some communications and data harvesting issues, which were navigated partially successfully via Social Media.

Objective one was to get into the enticing doline at the top of Khao Kayam. This was helped by a cooler wetter January 2018, where bushbashing in the jungle was a less dehydrating experience than in 2016. Nevertheless it took Rob Bryniarski aided by Alan Jackson, Torben Redder, Ian Lawton and Matt Wire, several trips out on the hillside route finding and laying polyprop handlines up rock faces until the doline was reached. With less than 20mins spent exploring the bottom, the prospecting is incomplete in this area and a return is recommended. Signs indicate that this doline fills to around a depth of 5m, creating a lagoon in wet season, so best prospects are above this height from the bottom of depression.

Several other high level (circa 400m) vertical entrances were investigated, but did not penetrate the hillside more than 30m, being infilled. The upper areas, are still largely unprospected, and areas of very prickly impenetrable vegetation make some slopes inaccessible. Lower on the northern slopes above Lek Lek some other shorter caves were found. Short sections of horizontal passage in large dimensions (5m wide x 10m high) located at around 100m above sea level are pieces of a jigsaw which hint at the ancient systems that once existed. All these closed down after a few metres with the longest at 60m.

Bev Shade and Matt Wire returned to an unexplored entrance near Geko Eggs and this turned into a very pleasant cave, named Happy Crawfish. This cave was surveyed, and had similar dimensions and scope to that of nearby Geko Eggs. Happy Crawfish was 392m long and 43m deep. This cave again stops short of connecting to Tham Lek Lek. The bottom of the cave ends in a sump which Peter Glanville attempted to free dive. During the attempt he came face to face with a large curious crawfish, which had a nibble, decided it didn't want any more of the Dr G and left him to scramble to safety.

At the same elevation but further east, still on the northern slopes Imogen, Liz Lawton, Liz De Neves and Will Stewart found a promising entrance blocked by a boulder. Levering this out of the way revealed good sized passage descending steeply to a tight squeeze. Once through passage dimensions improved and a Bat Colony of 30 or more bats roosted up in an aven. The cave finished in a too tight rift, a surveyed length of 86m and depth of 26m, showed the cave again 30m shy of a Tham Lek Lek connection.

The Southern and Western areas yielded the most in terms of surveyed length. The remaining two west end caves discovered in 2016, Tham Moo and Tham Kang Kow added 800m to the survey. Rob Bryniarski and Alan Jackson, accompanied on separate occasions by Brett Wiltshire and Rob Suczak explored the mangroves along the southern edge of the Khao Kayam Massive. This muddy mission discovered several short caves, a couple of which were resurgences. The most promising of these stands

at 138m named 'window of opportunity' with a going lead requiring the removal of an obstacle, to continue exploration.

The teams exploring the Khao Nong Chang Tai area, found a string of caves with phreatic development. Tham Nong Chang Tai was extended by a further 500 metres from 2016 with ongoing wet passages near the entrance, now stands at 821m long. Other caves in this area were Phreatic Ghost Cave 390m, Rough Pearl 160m and Ridley Racer 65m to name the longest. This area was well visited by the children in the team, due to the accessible nature of the entrances and the passage size. Several digging trips by kids excavated ways into more passage, thus proving their value to the expedition.

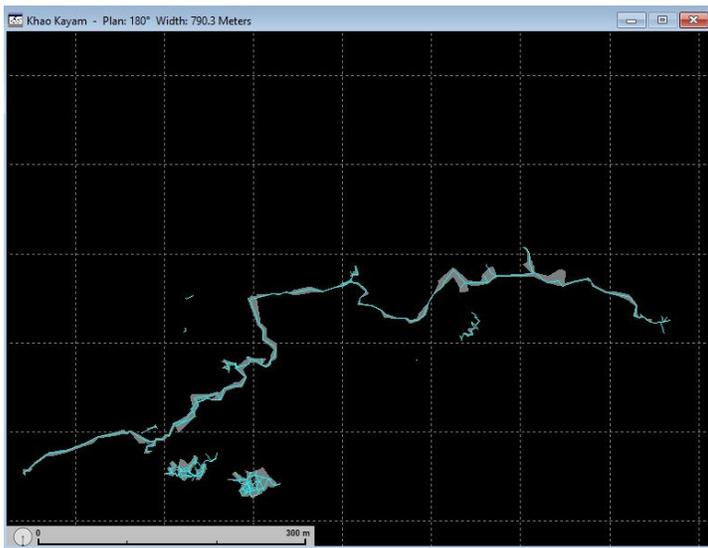
We plan to return in January 2020 to continue work in this region.

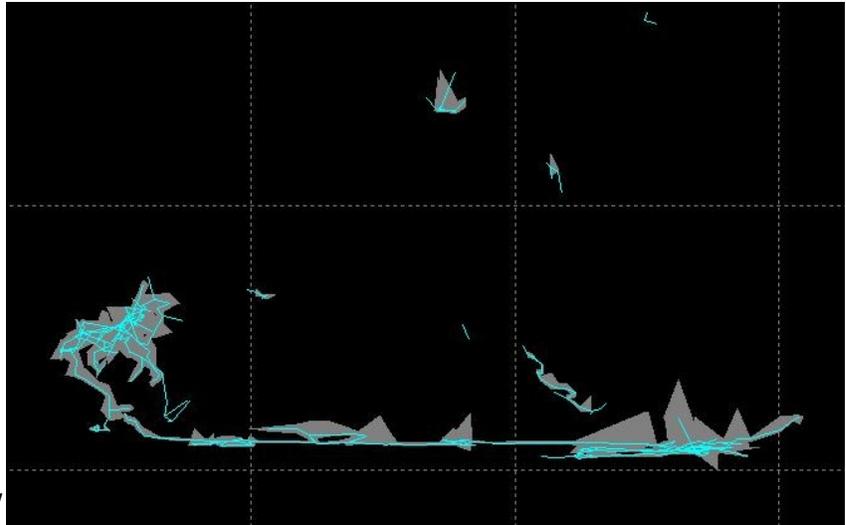
2018 Participants: Rob Bryniarski (UK), , Liz Das Neves (UK), Jennifer, Ken & Will Demarest (USA), Larissa Dickson (AUS), Imogen & Rowan Furlong (UK), Peter and Angela Glanville (UK), Connor Haughey (USA), Ian, Liz, Emily and Toby Lawton(UK), Alan and Anna Jackson(AUS), Louise Koorsgaard (DK), Tim, Claire, & Barbera Moulds (AUS), Bill Nix (UK), Paco Murray(AUS), Kathleen O'Connor (USA), Dane Randell (AUS),Torben, Marie and Karin Redder(DK), Bev Shade (USA), Fraser, Kate, Lyrah, & Torin Stephens (UK), Rob Susak(AUS) Kirsty, Will, Rueben and Erin (UK), Robert and Ryan Suczak (AUS), Ollie Wilson (USA), Matt, Aurelia & Sebastian Wire (UK), Brett Wiltshire(AUS), Vadimir Yurkens(RUS), Matt and Ben Yurkens (CHINA), Barbara Zakrzewska(AUS),, Bert, Johanna and Harry De Wale (AUS)

Notes:

1.All Data sent to Thailand Cave Survey managed via Martin Ellis and hosted on the Shepton Mallett CC website <https://www.thailandcaves.shepton.org.uk/>

2. Lek Lek system Plan and Profile





Tham Nong Chang Tai: Now
821m long

