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Cave Creek

28 April, 1995

Where: Cave Creek, Paparoa National Park

Summary

On 28 April 1995 17 members of a party of students from the Outdoor Recreation course at Tai Poutini Polytechnic at Greymouth and the Department of Conservation's Punakaiki Field Centre Manager crowded onto the viewing platform high above Cave Creek. The platform collapsed and fell about 30 metres into the resurgence below. As a result 14 young people lost their lives and the other four were injured, some very seriously.



What happened?

- In April 1994, Department of Conservation workers finished constructing a viewing platform which was built out over a cliff at Cave Creek, in the Paparoa National Park.
- The platform was built so that visitors could look down a 40 metre chasm to see the headwaters of Cave Creek come out from an underground cave system.
- On 28 April, 1995, a group of students and tutors from the outdoor recreation course at Tai Poutini Polytechnic in Greymouth visited the site as part of a field trip to study the limestone formations and caves in the area.
- As the party walked into the bush, it split into two groups. The larger group of 18, including the Punakaiki Field Centre officer, reached the viewing platform first.
- At 11:25 am, as the 18 people moved onto the platform, it tipped off its base and fell onto the boulders and rocks of the creek-bed below, taking the victims with it. One student later described how he "rode" the platform down, holding onto the handrail.
- The second group reached the point where the platform had been almost immediately. The polytechnic tutor and two students climbed down to the scene of the accident, while the other conservation officer and a student went for help.
- They had to run back to the start of the track where the group's vehicles had been left, but the keys were not in them. The DOC officer went back to the scene of the accident with warm clothing from the vans.
- The student ran on along the road to the state highway, carrying a note which gave details of the accident location and emphasised the need for rescue helicopters. Finally he reached a house and phoned the Greymouth police. It was now 12:15 pm, almost an hour after the accident.
- Ambulances were sent from Greymouth and Westport while helicopters in Christchurch were alerted.
- Two hours after the accident a Greymouth police constable made it on foot into the area and reported that five of the injured needed to be lifted out as soon as possible.
- Using helicopters and stretchers, four of the injured were eventually lifted out. One was

- from severe spinal injuries.
- By 5:30 pm 14 bodies had been winched up and flown out by helicopter.

How many died?

14 (13 students and one Department of Conservation field officer)

Other events and outcomes

- It was later found that the plans for the platform had been designed and approved by people who did not have engineering or design qualifications.
- The onsite construction of the platform base had been carried out by a working party of DOC staff members. None of the group working on the platform were qualified builders or engineers.
- The platform had been built and then flown in to Cave Creek by helicopter to be put in place, but the plans for the installation of the platform were not taken to the site, and so were not followed.
- The bolts which were supposed to tie the platform to the steps were taken to the site, but no drill, so nails were used instead.
- When the steps to the platform were poured some time later they were not secured properly to the platform. This concrete was supposed to act as a counter-weight for the platform to help hold it in place.
- Steel which was supposed to tie the platform to the counterweight had disappeared, and no other steel was ordered or used.
- A commission of inquiry found that the Department of Conservation had acted illegally and negligently in constructing the platform, and that there had been a series of mistakes that together had led to the collapse of the Cave Creek platform.
- It also pointed out that the Department had not been given enough resources to do its job properly. Because of this, projects were carried out on limited budgets, "making do".
- Compensation of \$2.6 million was paid out to the victims' families.
- The project had not met the requirements of the Building Act, which was being extended to cover government departments at the time the platform was being planned and built. There was no building consent for the platform. Signs stating the maximum number of people to go on the platform at a time had not been put in place.
- There were no prosecutions as a result of the deaths, but DOC's West Coast regional conservator resigned after the commission of inquiry report came out. The Minister of Conservation, Denis Marshall, later resigned in May 1996.
- In the three months following the tragedy, 15 of DOC's 106 viewing platforms throughout New Zealand, were closed for repairs.
- A memorial plaque to the victims of Cave Creek was to be unveiled on 28 April, 1996 on the anniversary of the tragedy, but bad weather stopped the party of 300 mourners from making the walk in to the site. The dedication ceremony was held in Punakaiki instead.
- In 1998, three years after Cave Creek, the track was opened again to the public, with new stairs to replace the old ones which had been removed. The viewing platform was not rebuilt.

Sources

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- Cave Creek : DOC <<http://www.doc.govt.nz/templates/page.aspx?id=42788> >

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