

Andy Baker, nominated in 2021 for sustained excellence in water and climate science, especially the use of chemical tracers including applications to speleothem palaeoclimatology

Andy Baker¹

¹University of New South Wales

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Abstract

My earth science focused PhD research included the analysis of annual fluorescent laminae in cave stalagmites, under the supervision of karst hydrologist Peter Smart (Bristol, UK). At the time, the source of this fluorescence was uncertain, opening new research opportunities characterizing what is now understood to be soil-derived, water-soluble fluorescent dissolved and colloidal organic matter that is transported to the cave by vadose zone percolation waters. Aquatic organic matter fluorescence research benefitted at this time from significant laboratory analytical advances that were commercially driven, including Sony's Blu-ray technology and the use of fluorescent labelling in the biomedical sciences. Faster analyses at increasingly higher energy excitation energies opened opportunities for novel fingerprinting of organic matter in hydrological science, including landfill leachates and sewage contamination. Today, hand-held fluorescence sensors can instantaneously determine microbial water quality. And back in the field of speleothem (cave deposit) science, annual geochemical laminae are now recognized to be widely preserved in regions where there is a seasonality in recharge, providing a precise chronology for the stalagmite paleoenvironmental archive. Currently, we are utilizing this precise chronology to generate high-resolution fire history records, where the fire proxy is water-soluble ash-derived elements transported from soil to cave by vadose zone percolation waters.



REFERENCES

a.baker@unsw.edu.au
@baker_and

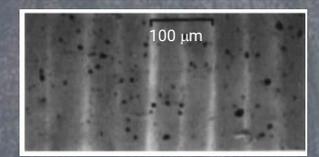
ANDY BAKER Water and climate science: the use of chemical tracers including applications to speleothem palaeoclimatology



Fluorescent annual laminae in speleothems – how do they form?



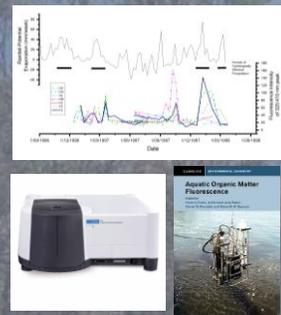
Speleothems are cave deposits such as these stalagmites.



Baker et al (1993) showed that fluorescent laminae in stalagmites were annual. But what were they? When are they deposited?

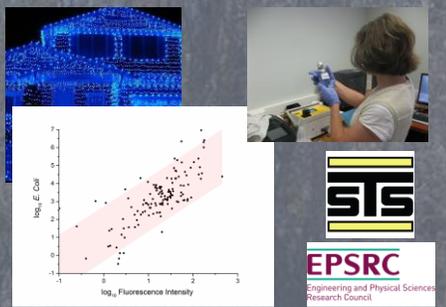
Dissolved & colloidal organic matter optical characterization

Analysis of cave percolation waters showed that seasonal fluxes of fluorescent dissolved organic matter (fDOM) from the soil above the cave (Tan et al 2006). In this decade, analytical advances made rapid fDOM characterisation practical. Used by multiple disciplines at the same time, marine, fresh, potable and waste water fDOM knowledge was shared at a Chapman Conference (Coble et al 2014)



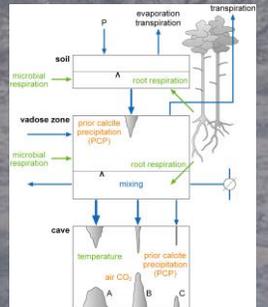
Handheld and in-situ water quality measurements using fluorescence

Recent improvements in LED technology permits the ultra-violet excitation of fDOM in portable devices. Applications include real-time microbial enumerations in surface and groundwater (Cumberland et al 2012; Baker et al 2015).



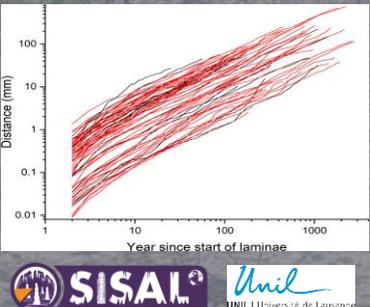
Understanding karst vadose zone hydrology

Annually lamina formation in speleothems requires a seasonal hydroclimate and a suitable karst hydrology e.g. not too much, not too little, vadose zone water storage. Karst hydrology is non-linear and heterogenous. How does that affect lamina formation in speleothems? A process-based understanding karst vadose zone hydrology is necessary (Hartmann & Baker 2017) Shown here are the controls on growth rate.



A precise geochronology for past climate reconstructions

Where the hydrology and climate are suitable for annual drip water geochemical fluxes onto stalagmites, it transpires that the annual stalagmite vertical growth rate is very constant. Stalagmite growth in these samples is metronomic, the perfect geochronometer (Baker et al 2021).



Soluble, ash-derived elements: a new stalagmite paleofire proxy

By synchrotron X-ray fluorescence mapping of stalagmites, we can build a precise chronology. Unusual concentrations of elements are from the flux of water-soluble, ash-derived elements after fires (McDonough et al., 2022).

