



## ***Community Education***

**A National Review of Environmental Education and its Contribution to Sustainability in Australia - Key Findings**

**‘Environmental Education with a sustainability focus in the community aims to enhance social capital, build community capacity for decision-making, develop community leadership capabilities and improve the environment.’**

### ■ The Series

This summary of key findings is derived from Volume 3 of a five part series that reviews Environmental Education and its contribution to sustainability in Australia. The research was undertaken by the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability (ARIES) for the Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage. The series is titled ‘*A National Review of Environmental Education and its Contribution to Sustainability in Australia*’ and covers the following areas:

**Volume 1:** Frameworks for Sustainability

**Volume 2:** School Education

**Volume 3:** Community Education

**Volume 4:** Business and Industry Education

**Volume 5:** Further and Higher Education

### ■ What is Learning for Sustainability?

Learning *for* sustainability (also referred to as ‘education for sustainability’ or ‘education for sustainable development’) provides a new approach for current practice in Environmental Education. This new approach attempts to move beyond education *in* and *about* the environment approaches to focus on equipping learners with the necessary skills to be able to take positive action to address a range of sustainability issues. Learning *for* sustainability motivates, equips and involves both individuals and communities in reflecting on how they currently live and work. This assists them in making informed decisions and creating ways to work towards a more sustainable world. Learning *for* sustainability aims to go beyond individual behaviour change or single actions often associated with education for the environment. It seeks to implement systemic change within the wider community.

## Current Situation

The non-formal education of the community is an important component of lifelong learning, and plays a significant role in creating an informed, empowered and just society. Community Environmental Education can be critical to encouraging sustainability in local areas.

Environmental Education programs targeted at the community vary considerably. Some have a focus on providing environmental information and raising awareness, others involve consultation or the community taking action. Recently Environmental Education programs have become broader and more targeted at community change.

## What is Needed

In practice, community Environmental Education in Australia has evolved over time to result in diverse programs by government and non-government organisations. Traditionally, while citizens have been active in alleviating environmental problems, they did not usually address issues of sustainability at their source. Increasingly, however,

it is being recognised that learning and action for sustainability involve democratic, negotiated and pragmatic engagement, and that community (re)action alone will not achieve the level of change required to achieve sustainability. This provokes the question of what capacity building is required for communities to make the leap from participation in (re)action for the environment to participating in more *systemic change for sustainability*?

The community education sector needs to understand best practice in Environmental Education. This will allow us to evaluate the effectiveness of existing programs and our progress towards long-lasting change for sustainability. This knowledge could also be used in the design and delivery of future Environmental Education programs for the sector.

Increasingly, and as a result of the sustainability agenda, community Environmental Education is concerned with the ability of the community to participate, influence, share and/or control the decision-making process. Building these capacities is a core objective of learning *for* sustainability and what differentiates it from previous community education approaches.

## About this Report

This report is the first national review of its type undertaken in Australia and one of few attempts around the world to capture needs and opportunities in this area. This report consolidates and builds upon the previous studies and provides a review of Environmental Education and its contribution to sustainability in the community sector in Australia. It represents a snapshot of the current context through a review of programs and emerging trends. A number of key themes were identified:

- i) Local Agenda 21 and Local Government;
- ii) Community Action Programs;
- iii) Social Marketing;
- iv) Interpretation;
- v) Environmental Education in Communities of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds; and
- vi) Facilitation and Mentoring.

## What are the Gaps?

Currently in Australia there are a range of methods and tools used to deliver Environmental Education in the community. The motivation and ability of the community to participate in the processes for sustainability is predominantly dependent on the type of approach used.

**Local Agenda 21** initiatives aim at involving the community in decision-making for their local environment and offer great opportunities for extending learning *for* sustainability across the community. However, some local

authorities struggle to implement these initiatives as local government staff have limited training (or workplace support) regarding Local Agenda 21 approaches such as planning for sustainability or participatory learning and change in the community.

To date **community action programs** have focused on a 'hands on' approach and have involved communities in addressing local environmental degradation problems. While these programs are enabling some positive environmental outcomes, most of these programs have not built the capacity of volunteers to manage change (predominately social change) for sustainability. As a result, volunteers may not be able to participate in decision-making concerning sustainability issues at their core, rather they are involved in *pre-determined* projects. Action learning is offered as a suitable methodology to engage community volunteers in learning *for* sustainability approaches to Environmental Education, whilst continuing to generate action through conservation and restoration programs.

Studies have shown that whilst traditional **social marketing** approaches have enhanced knowledge and awareness of environmental issues, they have had little impact on the attainment of long term environmental outcomes. However, recently a small number of social marketing campaigns have been integrating aspects of reflective learning approaches, which may help overcome its limitations.

**Interpretation** is used to increase understanding of the natural environment and cultural heritage. Focused on the experience of the

### ■ Types of Community Environmental Education

The various types of Community Environmental Education and their alignment with the principles of learning *for* sustainability are mapped out below. This scale highlights the increasing level of community learning and ability to think and act towards sustainability:

- 1. Information Sharing and Awareness Raising** - from 'expert' to learner.
- 2. Material Incentives in Participation** - engages the community in an activity for a potential cost-saving or reward.
- 3. Consultation** - issues presented to and discussed with community but there is no obligation for authorities to accept community views.
- 4. Community Action** - participants are actively involved in a project. Although these projects are typically pre-determined and only provide end-of-pipe solutions.
- 5. Community Capacity Building** - participants develop skills and capacity to effectively engage in community decision making.
- 6. Learning for Sustainability** - focuses on 'critical reflection', futures thinking and action learning. Participants gain skills to enact and embed change in practice.

### ■ Mittagong Forum

The Mittagong Forum, a group of 25 Australian environmental NGOs, was funded in its first 5 years from a one-off, un-tied grant from the Poola Foundation, a philanthropic organisation. The grant enabled its members to focus intensively on leadership development and capacity building within the Australian Environment Movement. One result has been a reorientation of focus to establishing learning cultures within the environment movement by prioritising education and capacity building as a key to successful environmental campaign outcomes.

Mittagong Forum (2004)  
See: <http://environment.org.au/about/>

### ■ The Watershed Volunteer Education Program

The *Watershed* program educates volunteers to become environmental educators. Watershed staff mentor and engage volunteers in action learning and action research, building volunteer capacities in designing education programs. The programs engage and empower the communities to make informed decisions regarding change for sustainability. The approach is uniquely different from other volunteer programs as it encourages volunteers to explore and share their own learning experiences, contributing to sustainability. This freedom for volunteers has resulted in highly innovative, informed and energised education programs, and has enabled the *Watershed* to have a far greater reach than their permanent officers alone could achieve.

Marrickville Council (2004) *The Watershed Volunteer Education Program*. Available at: <http://www.marrickville.nsw.gov.au>

### ■ Facilitation Using Deliberative Democracy

Elton Consulting acted as independent facilitators on the Bronte Catchment Project, which was innovative in its processes of deliberative democracy and community participation to improve water quality at Bronte Beach, Sydney. The project resulted in a demonstrated shift in perspectives across community groups and precincts, from minority and special interest views, to a position of collective and general interests.

'A process of deliberative democracy assumes that citizens who are given comprehensive, detailed information can produce high quality recommendations that can be implemented and achieved.'

Elton Consulting (2001, p.1) *Enhanced Stormwater Management Through Local Community Participation, Draft: The Bronte Catchment Project*. Available at: <http://www.elton.com.au/publications.htm>

learner as a tool for understanding, a handful of interpretation programs are beginning to integrate critical thinking and reflection processes. Although at this stage limited in scope, the emerging shift towards more learner-centred approaches and engaging communities in designing and implementing interpretation is encouraging. By reorienting interpretation techniques so that they involve the learner in a process of reflection and critical thinking, the interpretation process opens up learners to new understandings aligned with the principles of learning *for* sustainability.

The majority of Environmental Education programs available for communities of **culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds** are still confined to information and awareness raising. Some are beginning to build community capacity and provide opportunities for community members to participate in decision-making and change for sustainability. This has been possible by adopting more action-oriented methodologies which are associated with learning *for* sustainability. For example, action research which engages the community through an action oriented, context specific, learning process.

**Facilitation and mentoring** are emerging as appropriate tools for learning and change for sustainability. Mentoring aids in overcoming the barriers associated with translating learning into action for change.

Although these tools have only recently been adopted and used in the field of community Environmental Education, the results thus far have shown they are important and valuable in achieving change for sustainability.

As many community Environmental Education are heavily reliant on external sources of funds, **funding bodies** in this sector have an important role in shaping the structures and processes used. One significant challenge for community Environmental Education in Australia is for governments, in partnership with community groups and local businesses, to develop new criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of community participation in achieving sustainability outcomes.

In the future, in order to strengthen its contribution to sustainability, community based Environmental Education will need to:

- Build the capacity of community based educators in learning for sustainability approaches;
- Provide incentives and support to include education and learning in community environmental and sustainability programs; and
- Develop strategic networks and partnerships between government, community groups and citizens for more coherent and consistent education actions for sustainability.



## Recommendations

The research undertaken by the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability has revealed a number of key needs. The recommendations identify practical steps at a policy, practice and research level that could strengthen the contribution of Environmental Education towards sustainability within the community sector.

### For Government:

1. **Realign existing funding programs to support funding for:**
  - a. Training **community educators**, both government and non-government, in learning *for* sustainability approaches to Environmental Education;
  - b. Programs from **community action groups and interpreters** that develop action-oriented, futures focused, systemic and reflective approaches - aligned with learning *for* sustainability approaches;
  - c. More opportunities in facilitation and mentoring;
  - d. Programs targeted at communities of **culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds** that go beyond the translation of materials into different languages.

### ■ Local Government Environmental Education Strategies

Many local government strategies have been informed by Local Agenda 21 and other international documents. 'The Manly Education for Sustainability Strategy' is an example of this:

'promote and guide a holistic, strategic and coordinated approach to education for sustainability, which builds the capacity of the community to be informed and active participants in moving Manly towards sustainability.'

Manly Council (2003, p 6) *The Manly Education for Sustainability Strategy*  
Available at: <http://www.manly.nsw.gov.au/>

### ■ LA21 Initiatives

'Alexandrina Council has successfully integrated its environmental, economic and social goals into its strategic planning process. The project is a solid demonstration that smaller, rural councils are able to engage in and benefit from applying Local Agenda 21.'

The Council's willingness to open up decision-making processes to the community is testimony of an open and inclusive Council. Engagement of younger people, older people and indigenous people is a reflection of intent to communicate effectively and be open to receiving criticism.'

Department of Transport and Regional Services (2003) *Leading Practice in Local Government: Integrating sustainability at Alexandrina Council*, Australian Government. Available at: [http://dynamic.dotars.gov.au/nolg/nalg/entry\\_detail.aspx?entry=2049](http://dynamic.dotars.gov.au/nolg/nalg/entry_detail.aspx?entry=2049)

### ■ 'It's How You Get There That Counts'

*TravelSmart* is a Western Australian Government initiative that began in 1997 with the aim of stimulating people to voluntarily change their travel behaviour. The initiative aimed to complement existing transport infrastructure and service provision through providing the skills and information needed to empower people to use alternative forms of transport.

The initiative involved an Individualised Marketing campaign, along with Workplace, School, Local Government and Major Destination Programs. It largely utilised social marketing and commitment strategies for achieving change. The campaign involved home visits, providing respondents with either a reward or information materials about public transport. Program participants were also requested to consider making a small change in their travel behaviour, to use an alternative to the car as a 'driver only' for 2 to 3 trips out of 19 per week.

In the City of South Perth alone the program has resulted in 90% increase in cycling, 20% increase in public transport use, and 16% increase in walking trips. Consistently, it involved a 10% decrease in single occupant car use. These results have been found to be highly cost effective both for the city, and the citizens, and have been maintained for over two years. The outcomes from this program are also expected to contribute to a reduction in greenhouse gases and improved health.

Government of Western Australia (undated) *Travel Smart* \*. *Helping to create a more Sustainable WA by Empowering People to Use Alternative to Car for their Transport Needs.* Available at: <http://www.sustainability.dpc.wa.gov.au/CaseStudies/travelsmart/travelsmart.htm>

### For Community Educators:

- Value add to current Local Agenda 21 initiatives by introducing a **mentoring program for local governments** across Australia, in sustainability and learning for sustainability approaches to Environmental Education.
- Develop and deliver **programs for environmental educators** that expose a range of different approaches to Environmental Education (e.g. community engagement, social marketing, facilitation, mentoring and action research), including their features, benefits and limitations.
- Develop and deliver **programs for interpreters** in conjunction with peak industry bodies (such as Interpretation Australia Association) which highlight the processes used to engage citizens in 'critical' and action-oriented interpretation aligned with learning *for* sustainability approaches to Environmental Education. These programs should be practical in nature and cover a breadth of environments, including national parks, museums, urban environments, indigenous sites and heritage.
- Develop a **resource**, based upon the action research program for communities of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (see recommendation 12). This resource should focus particularly on the success and effectiveness, as well as the issues and limitations, of **aligning culturally appropriate education with learning *for* sustainability principles**.
- Establish a **scholarship program** for the education and training of bilingual educators and learning *for* sustainability.

### For Researchers:

- Research needs to be undertaken to determine how **social marketing** approaches can be better integrated with other more participatory approaches to ensure environmental outcomes.
- Research and develop a **national framework for learning *for* sustainability within the community**. This framework could be made available via the web and would guide community educators struggling to engage people in sustainability issues as well as those wanting to improve environmental outcomes of their programs.
- Research and develop a **case study resource for local government educators** on the principles of Local Agenda 21, learning based strategies for change and community engagement processes. The resources would support the mentoring project described in recommendation 2.
- Research and develop a **web site targeted towards community action groups** demonstrating practical examples of how to best achieve environmental outcomes through learning. This website should be practical in nature offering examples of how Environmental Education contributes to sustainability and processes relevant to action groups.
- Research and develop **guidelines for interpreters** on learning *for* sustainability approaches to Environmental Education and their implications for interpretation.



12. Undertake an **action research program** with project officers involved with communities of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to assist with the development of programs aligned with learning *for* sustainability. A resource could be produced to document the learning of this experience for others to use (see recommendation 5).

### ■ Market Gardeners and Participatory Action Research

For the past decade, market gardening communities of non-English speaking backgrounds have been participating in action research projects which focus on environmental and health impacts of pesticide use. The projects involve farmers and their families from Chinese, Cambodian, Lebanese, and Vietnamese backgrounds. The project led to the empowerment of the communities and the formation of the Premier's Task Force on Market Gardens. As a result information, resources, and support have been developed by, and for, the farming families. Consequently, the project has empowered communities to be able to demand safe work regulations, and has improved environmental management, ensuring the farmers that their future continues in this area.

Parker, F. Jarecki, S. Lai, K. Strong, V. Aditya, D. and Lee, N. (2002) 'You've got to start somewhere: Learning with Chinese market gardeners through partnerships.' *Popular Education and Social Action*. UTS December 2002.

### ■ Collaborative Partnerships

The *WA Collaboration* is a partnership of Western Australian non-government organisations that shape and promote the sustainability agenda for WA. The *WA Collaboration* uses dialogue as an education tool by encouraging broad community discussion on important regional sustainability issues. Community engagement workshops and sustainability summits resulted in the development of the document '*Community Sustainability Agenda: Creating a Just and Sustainable Western Australia*'.

WA Collaboration (2003) *What is the WA Collaboration?* Available at: [http://www.wacollaboration.org.au/whatis\\_wacollaboration/index.htm](http://www.wacollaboration.org.au/whatis_wacollaboration/index.htm)

**‘Community  
Environmental  
Education should strive  
to be a continuous,  
lifelong process that  
focuses on the values,  
skills and capacity that  
communities need  
to affect change for  
sustainability.’**

■ **Disclaimer:**

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■ **Full Report:**

This is an executive summary derived from a research report titled ‘*A National Review of Environmental Education and its Contribution to Sustainability in Australia: Community Education*.’

The report is available for download in PDF format from [www.aries.mq.edu.au](http://www.aries.mq.edu.au) and [www.deh.gov.au/education](http://www.deh.gov.au/education) or contact the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability to obtain a hard copy.

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