

# Environmental education in Australia

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## Shifts in environmental education thinking and practice in Australia

The last five years have seen significant changes and challenges to environmental education (EE) practice in Australia. The sustainable development agenda has been responsible for much of the shift in practice as policy-makers and practitioners rethink the role of education in achieving environmental outcomes.

This shift has been informed by three main arguments:

**1. No country is sustainable or has come close to becoming sustainable.** There is no proven recipe for success. As Prescott Allen (2002) reminds us 'Making progress towards (sustainability) is like going to a country we have never been to before... We do not know what the destinations will be like, we cannot tell how to get there'.

This has led to the realization that sustainability is essentially an ongoing learning by doing process that actively involves stakeholders in creating their vision, acting and reviewing changes (UNESCO 2002). This has broadened the scope of environmental education beyond the school walls and away from a list of key content to be learnt. It has supported approaches such as facilitation, mentoring and action learning which enable people to reflect and learn from their experiences.

**2. Need to challenge mental models rather than merely inform society.** Many current practices are unsustainable. To achieve sustainability, we need to challenge the way we think (UNESCO 2005). This involves questioning and reflecting upon current decisions. It redefines

the role of environmental education as being more than just assisting people in understanding how society, environment and economic systems are linked, which is the aspect of sustainability which is more immediately associated with the concept. (Sustainability is often graphically represented by three overlapping circles each labelled 'social', 'environmental' and 'economic dimensions'. This graphical representation is a simplification of what sustainability is really about). Environmental education has evolved to develop critical reflection about the way we think and act.

**3. From addressing symptoms to tackling underlying problems.** It has been suggested that environmentalism is mostly a movement against some things – for example stopping pollution and other harmful activities and complying with environmental regulations. The 'new' environmental stance is more forward thinking. It aims to do things differently in the first place, instead of just cleaning up the symptoms of underlying problems (Tilbury and Cook 2005). This perspective supports environmental education practice which develops skills to tackle the root causes of environmental problems and focus on creating a better future.

## **Current environmental education provision in Australia**

A review of environmental education (Tilbury and Cook 2005) in Australia documents recent initiatives which reflect the shifts in thinking identified above. These shifts towards a stronger sustainability agenda have been accelerated by a number of national developments.

The catalyst for these developments was the 'Environmental Education for a Sustainable Future: National Action Plan' launched in July 2000. The National Action Plan has led to a stronger engagement with the sustainability ideas across the sectors and resulted in better coordination and funding support for activities across Australia. It resulted in the establishment of the:

- a) **The National Environmental Education Council** (established July 2000) a cross-sectoral group which provides advice on the effectiveness and profile of Australian Government's environmental education activities;
- b) **The National Environmental Education Network** (established May 2001) composed of government managers from environment and education portfolios from across Australia. The purpose of network is to improve quality and coordination of environmental education at the national and state level; and.
- c) **Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability** (established Dec 2003) which makes recommendations to the Australian Government regarding environmental education policy decisions and identifies priority needs for improving environmental education practice.

The establishment of these strategic bodies have been well received by the environmental education community and have recently begun to influence environmental education practice. However, much more remains to be done:

## Formal education

Formal education continues to be the dominant focus of environmental education thought and practice in Australia. Environmental education is, however, a non-mandatory component of schools with the exception of New South Wales and, as a result, struggles for acceptance in mainstream formal and teacher education.

Formal education is the responsibility of each State and Territory, so it is not surprising to find that the status and place of environmental education varies across the country. New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria have an environmental education policy for schools. In the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and the Northern Territory (NT) there are specific curriculum guidelines while in Western Australia, Tasmania and South Australia, environmental education is integrated into the core curriculum documents.

The recent release of the *National Environmental Education Statement* for schools seeks to address this variation by providing a national agreement on key curriculum aims and pedagogical principles.

Environmental education has a presence in the curriculum, but remains marginalized in practice. *Science* and *Studies of Society and Environment*, Key Learning Areas in the curriculum, provide opportunities for students to learn about the environment and environmental issues. Reference to the environment can also be found in *Health and Physical Education*, *Technology* and *Mathematics* curriculum documents.

Opportunities for modeling and developing understanding of sustainability in schools are limited. However, the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative funded by the Federal Government and supported by the National Environmental Education Network is making in-roads in this area and significant developments are expected in the next few years.

## **Business and industry education**

Recent studies show that many companies are struggling with how to respond to environmental and sustainability agendas. Over the past five years, state and federal governments, industry associations and private consultancies are providing courses, educational toolkits and other resources to address this. Companies themselves are investing and developing educational resources for their employees and increasingly for their external stakeholders. A number of Australian companies now quantify the training they provide in their environmental and sustainability reports, detailing number of hours of training or number of employees trained. The next step will be to assess the effectiveness of this training and impact on organizations.

## **Community education**

Over the last five years community environmental education has played a critical role in building partnerships and influencing the course of action in relation to environment and sustainability issues particularly in local communities. It has recently evolved to offer a diverse range of initiatives which range from 'add-on' or 'feel-good' programs that focus on information sharing to participatory programs that focus on action to build healthy and sustainable communities. Social marketing techniques are also on the increase but the impact on attaining environmental outcomes is being questioned. Another trend is the number of environmental education programs available for communities of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Many of these activities have been supported by local government and state strategic plans for environmental education as well as by international initiatives such as the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). The Decade has stimulated activities in Australia and further promoted the shift towards the newer approaches to environmental education across the sectors.

Examples of state and local strategic plans for environmental education include:

- NSW Government (2002) Learning for sustainability Sydney: NSW Council for Environmental Education.
- Government of WA (2004) 'Environmental Education Strategy and Action Plan' Perth: Department of Environment.
- Balkan Hills Shire Council (2005) 'Education for Sustainability Strategy' Balkan Hills: BHSC.

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