

The Value of Community Participation

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Introduction

This paper will be presented in two parts. It will explore issues of community cultural development (CCD) practice and Earth Journeys, an enviro-cultural schools program and working collaboratively with communities in artistic and cultural expression to explore environmental issues. Different models and interdisciplinary approaches will be illustrated through work currently undertaken through these two programs and our work at the Blue Mountains World Heritage Institute, a non profit and independent organisation promoting the conservation of the natural and cultural heritage of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage area.

Our presentation will focus on combining the key pillars of social, economic, educational, environmental and cultural outcomes in building social and natural capital and the role of community capacity building and cultural development in a regional area.

Implementation and evaluation of pilot projects and CCD processes within the local community in an interdisciplinary approach combine shared knowledge and skills with artists, scientists, Indigenous, academic and communities to explore issues impacting on the of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage area.

Through this approach multiple perspectives are presented which highlight the capacity for communities to understand better issues of difference and commonalities and to create dialogue to potentially discover the synergy or common ground to solve complex issues and development of partnerships.

Issues such as raising community's awareness through CCD projects and public programs and engaging diverse communities of different ages in a holistic and cross cultural approach provide a rich insight to explore people's values, attitudes and behaviour to the environment and their relationship to it. Providing more creative and interactive opportunities for individuals in participatory processes potentially enhances community ownership and responsibility to encourage a more active role in local, regional and global issues especially in issues such as urban development and sustainable environmental issues.

The introduction and CCD program will be presented by Cheryle Yin-Lo, Community Cultural Development worker at the Blue Mountains World Heritage Institute and

Bronwen Maxwell, Blue Mountains World Heritage Institute Education Program Coordinator and Project Manager of Earth Journeys will present about the program's model of working with schools.

Community Cultural Development Program (CCD)

The role of the community cultural development worker based in a research institute such as the Blue Mountains World Heritage area was an experiment and pilot program initially funded by the Community Partnerships Program of the Australia Council for the Arts for 18 months in 2005 and now funded by Arts NSW.

The position was to develop a program of strategic and interdisciplinary projects that address environmental issues in promoting the conservation of the natural and cultural heritage of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage area and to explore how CCD processes can be used a research tool in an integrated part of the BMWHI organisational approach and its projects and partners to assist in informing policy and management issues of both the natural and urban development of the region .

Why is the process of CCD so important to communities and what are the main principles of CCD and how can it be applied and what are the benefits and outcomes?

CCD is a broad term covering an enormous range of activities through art-forms such as music, visual arts, performance, puppetry, photography, film & video, sculpture, storytelling and oral histories that give communities the opportunity to tell their stories, build their creative skills and be active participants in shaping the development of culture. It also encourages communities to participate in collaborations between communities and artists as equal partners using CCD projects to explore more complex social and environmental issues and using creative problem-solving and seeing things from a different perspective. More importantly, the process of CCD encourages cultural development and practice to empower communities to initiate, direct and manage their creative ideas and projects.

It is possible to achieve a wide range of social, artistic, cultural, economic and environmental outcomes and how it can raise new perspectives and change perceptions and attitudes in understanding environmental issues. I will illustrate a few examples of projects which I have been involved in nad the different approaches.

Case study 1: *Nature through fresh eyes*

This project was initiated by the BM Multicultural Residents Association and was in partnership with the Mountains Community Resource Centre and BMWHI with funding from BMCC Cultural Partnerships Program and the Australia Council for the Arts.

- It was a cross cultural environmental arts project to increase the awareness of multicultural residents and refugees of the World Heritage area and the Australian natural environment. It aimed to break the social isolation of residents from emerging and established communities who were 1st and 2nd generation.
- The project ran for over 6 months and achieved the following outcomes:
- Over 50 residents and their families participated from over twenty countries as part of the Blue Mountains community. The meeting of these cultures and of Aboriginal culture was a very enriching in acknowledging the cultural diversity of the Blue Mountains.

- A working committee with professionals and community people met regularly in planning and delivering the project
- Five bushwalks for residents and their families with Indigenous interpretive guides & arts tutors in the BM World Heritage area. Participants were supplied art materials with visual diaries and disposable cameras
- Structured practical art workshops to record experiences and responses with art tutors small individual canvasses and to produce a collaborative mural
- CCD worker was involved in mentoring component to build up arts project management skills with people from culturally diverse background living in the Blue Mountains.
- CCD worker involved in research & evaluation conducted pre, post and during the project with participants and partners. Quotes from participants about their association and values about the World Heritage included comparisons to Australia and their home country, their experiences living in the 'bush' and the World Heritage area and their experiences of bushfires and bushfire management. Comments ranged from exhilaration to overcoming the fear and mystery of 'the bush'. Evaluation of project indicated increased understanding of their immediate environment, increased social skills and confidence and making new friends, created interest to want to participate in future projects, reconnecting with their arts practice, created local employment and increased confidence to work cross culturally.
- An exhibition was organised at the Katoomba Civic Centre with adult and children's artwork.
- A DVD was produced which documented the process and participants experiences and responses to the project.
- Interest by other environmental entities in the region have expressed interest to display artworks at other community centre venues and environmental events throughout the year.
- SBS TV came to film a segment of project and broadcast on *Here Comes the Neighbourhood series*.

Case study 2: Giant dragonfly project

This project was initiated by a group of concerned individuals who wanted to raise the awareness about the threat to endangered habitats and species such as hanging swamps and Giant Dragonfly and the Leura skink and the human impact of the relationship of ground water issues. The group comprises of people from various background and experiences- from artists, retirees, teachers, nurses, bush care, scientists, Indigenous and conservationists.

The group work with the CCD worker as facilitator to meet regularly as a group and explore visually how they could communicate their message to the wider community.

Through the learning of lino cut printing and working with an artist, the group made individual prints informed through various environmental and scientific visuals and talk by a scientist and drawing from their own direct experiences.

These prints were then mounted in a group work and shown in Paddy Pallins shop-window as part of Artstreet and the Winter Magic Festival in Katoomba. Through this event many community people were interested in the issue and interest of commissions of prints.

The group continue to still meet to explore ideas to work on a larger scale and to find and refine effective ways to communicate important environmental messages to the wider community. Projects such as this provide the opportunity for sharing interdisciplinary knowledge and skills (existing and new), research and build up resources and encourage leadership and community building skills in working collaboratively and as a team.

Case study: Working with local Aboriginal communities

Working collaboratively with local Indigenous artists and communities and creating opportunities to work more closely with policy and management bodies and with environmentalists and scientists has created a stronger knowledge and skills base. Through developing exhibitions for 2006 NAIDOC Week and Rock Art Lives On! It has resulted in short and long term outcomes-building trust with the community and BMWHI, producing new and shared cultural knowledge within and with other language groups and increased respect for the diverse Indigenous language groups in the region. Increased profile of Aboriginal culture and artists and contemporary work generating increased skills development, employment, tourism and cultural opportunities.

Enriching our social capital through caring for our natural capital

A schools program model conducted in the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area and Penrith regions

Aims and approach

Living in a World Heritage Area comes with the responsibility of maintaining certain requirements laid out in the WH Convention. The responsibilities are to value our natural and cultural landscapes by conserving and protecting our heritage and to pass on knowledge to the next generation.

Earth Journeys is a leading, award winning World Heritage “enviro-cultural” education schools program. It is an integrated, high quality cross-cultural and cross-curricular education program that engages students in experiential learning and creative application. Working at a “grassroots” level, it is a program about teaching and learning and which involves a real and relevant community interface. *Earth Journeys* aims to engender within school students a sense of place, a positive connection with the natural environment and cultural landscapes and the knowledge, skills and understanding that will foster responsible stewardship of their local environment and, in general, the earth.

The model structure

Endorsed by UNESCO, *Earth Journeys* is an initiative of Earth Partners Inc, a not-for-profit association of Blue Mountains professionals with diverse specialisations as artists, storytellers, environmental scientists, educators and filmmakers. Earth

Partners Inc. is a recipient of a Keep Australia Beautiful “Sustainable Cities” Award (2005), is endorsed by the Blue Mountains City Council Cultural Partnerships Program and has the support of the Penrith City Council, Sydney Water and the Dept. of Environment and Heritage (the Asia-Pacific Focal Point for World Heritage of Australia).

The success of *Earth Journeys* is interdependent on the strength of its cooperative partnerships. To this end the program is currently supported by and works in partnership with the Department of Education (DET), the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSW NPWS) and the Blue Mountains World Heritage Institute (BMWHI). Corporate sponsorship also plays an essential role in helping the program to achieve its overall aims.

Our target audience is school students and includes teachers and, more broadly, families and local communities. In the initial development stages of the program the target is primary schools, with the objective of developing the program to extend into the middle stages of secondary schools. The *Earth Journeys* “model” has been piloted and is being established initially in primary schools within the Blue Mountains and Penrith Districts. There is a symbiotic relationship between the two areas, one being a World Heritage Area and the other, an area directly on its doorstep. The bigger picture message about caring for our place extends beyond both areas, as the responsibility to protect the gum trees, the ecosystems and most importantly our water and catchment systems, is a responsibility we all have to share.

With the support of the Department of Education, the program has run annually in the Blue Mountains and Penrith schools districts since 2004. *Earth Journeys* has been conducted as a highly successful and visible program in a number of primary public schools throughout the Blue Mountains and Penrith LGA, and has to date involved over 2, 850 students. Students’ artwork of sculptural gum tree creations have been showcased at a number of public exhibitions, including the venues of Songlines Festival, Mt Tomah Botanic Gardens, the NSW NPWS Blackheath Visitors’ Centre and the National Eco-Tourism Conference held at the Fairmont Resort, Leura.

The method

The *Earth Journeys* program is designed to run for the duration of a school term or more, thus providing an opportunity for a concentrated focus on environmental and cultural matters. This creates a platform interface through which there can be more integrated community involvement with other cultural and environmental groups and services such as local Councils, National Park agencies, bushwalking groups, historical societies and, especially, local Aboriginal communities.

The integrated package presents four components:

1. The *Earth Journeys* Work-Units are cross-curricular work-units for primary Stages 1-3 (at this point). Based on three books about people and place by Australian authors they are written in partnership with the NSW Department of Education (Penrith Schools District) applying quality teaching through the integration of key learning areas of literacy, HSIE, science and creative arts.
2. The “Gum Tree Stories” creative art units and workshops focus on the eucalypt.

The tree becomes a metaphor for the students themselves, on their journey of development through school and then ‘branching out’ into the world. The gum tree is the central link of the workshops and reflects the interconnection of all the processes involved in the workshops. In the ‘Meet Your Tree’ workshops students engage with ecology stories, from an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspective, about their particular gum tree native to their area. Their tree is “painted up” with ochre; a small ceremonial fire is lit; the wood makes charcoal. This charcoal is then used in the enviro-art sculptural workshops as part of the observation drawing exercise. This process of exploring form, colour and light aids and informs the creative crafting process of sculptural creatures and gum trees. Woven into these activities is an introduction to art history and vocabulary. A further integration experience occurs through connecting the body to the dance and music of the Aboriginal creation stories of the land and the creatures.

3. The “Boundaries” Field Trip is an experience of an “immersion in the bush” journey. This component is run in partnership with the NSW NPWS Discovery Rangers. Based on methodology of the Earth Education Institute the program is designed to stimulate a confidence in and a curiosity and respect for our natural landscape.
4. Documentation and research is an additional component and service offered by Earth Partners. A DVD is made of each year’s program process, which serves as both as a tool for promotional purposes and a visual documentation record. A current PhD research work is investigating and measuring the outcomes of the process to establish a benchmark. This research work will be supported through a video documentary of interviews and responses from selected students.

The focus on a specific “iconic” gum tree is designed to act as a catalyst for behavioural change, encouraging students to develop an appreciation not only of the characteristics of their gum tree but also the water systems and the surrounding biodiversity and habitat. Through developing an attachment to their particular gum tree, students may be better placed to engage with environmental issues such as impacts of urban encroachment, pollution of water systems, threatened species and the importance of sustainability and maintaining and protecting a natural biodiversity.

Whether one is living in the middle of a World Heritage listed Area or on its doorstep, the relevance and objective of *Earth Journeys* is to provide children in the 21st century with the tools necessary for their future in being responsible citizens caring for place.

Conclusion

In tackling problems affecting ‘community wellbeing’ governments have begun to find that an integrated and whole-of government approach is necessary, one which links policy, planning and delivery of mechanisms between government agencies and between different spheres of government and partnerships with government and non-government agencies.

“This re-examination , the balanced and integrated approach is gaining recognition and a vital step towards increased community wellbeing and ecological sustainability. This new balancing act often requires the reformation and/or extension of ideas and information, a shared understanding for a ‘suspended moment’ for working towards a shared vision. This results in the establishment of shared understandings of the meaning of sustainability and the building of shared commitment to solutions.”¹

CCD processes can help break down some of the barriers in centralising power and the over-reliance on scientific and technical language and knowledge only which can act to prevent communities from expressing their values, realising their self-determination and acknowledging their sense of identity.

Community engagement is now gradually realised and acknowledges the potential for ‘active citizenship’ or ‘participatory democracy’ as a building block for sustainability and wellbeing to increase ownership in shaping our community, culture and society.

¹ Art & Wellbeing: p.7 securing the connections Paul Brown and Deborah Mills. Published by the Australia Council for the Arts, 2004.