

Honouring Indigenous Cultural Perspectives for Sustainability Education



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White Australia is only 200 years old. Before that time, Aboriginal people lived throughout Australia sustainably for around 60,000 years – the oldest continuous culture in the world. Much damage has been done to the Australian continent over the past 200 years. What can we learn from the original custodians of this land to assist us to live sustainably? Moreover, how can we appropriately communicate this to school students?

Educators working in organisations such as zoos, wildlife parks and sanctuaries across Australia are holding in tension the requirements of interpreting the animals and the ecosystems of which they are a part (from a western, scientific position) together with the responsibility that we bear to interpret the indigenous perspectives of the land we now occupy.

From the early 1970s onwards there has been an increasing volume of research into how indigenous people managed the land and increasing consultation with Aboriginal people regarding land management issues:

There are now numerous policy and statutory documents at international, Federal and State levels which highlight the need for Indigenous people to be involved in environmental management. They seek to recognise the cultural, social and economic values that Aboriginal people ascribe to biodiversity and environmental health' (English and Baker 2003).

Where do we begin?

Murrundindi is the Ngurungaeta (leader, elder and custodian) of the Wurundjeri people in Victoria, Australia. He is a skilled teacher and provides the Sanctuary with cultural advice and first hand knowledge. Healesville Sanctuary, one of the Zoos Victoria properties, is on Wurundjeri land.

Murrundindi is always available for consultation and also runs a schools program called 'Burra Burra Yan' in the Sanctuary and in the adjoining Coranderrk bushland as well as one for adults. The program is

Murrundindi as an Aboriginal man.



highly sought after and reflects a real need for an indigenous teaching presence at the Sanctuary. It is through direct contact with students that the power of country, dreaming and knowledge transfer can be most fully conveyed. The oral history and information is infinitely precious and must be transferred in a relational context to honour the culture from which it comes in order to draw the students into examining how these perspectives would then lead them to live sustainably. This is an example of deep learning; learning that results in the mind opening to explore possibilities then seeking out ways to be expressed in action. An evaluation of how these personal actions are inspired by respect is another area for further study.

Into practice

At Healesville Sanctuary, students can participate in programs that explicitly address indigenous cultural

Murrundi with boomerangs.



Murrundindi teaching how to use a boomerang.



perspectives. We have two programs addressing indigenous cultural perspectives: Dreaming the Indigenous Way and Respect for the Land: the Wurundjeri Way. Both programs are run by our educators and were produced in consultation with Murrundindi's mother, Jessie Hunter.

We have been given permission to pass on some children's level Dreaming stories to visiting students participating in Dreaming the Indigenous Way. These stories are part of the intellectual property of the Wurundjeri people and the rights to such knowledge are graded. 'Gender and age restrictions apply to knowledge. It is intimately detailed at the local level and belongs to the people of the country ...' (Rose 1996). Permission must always be sought to pass on knowledge.

Students are introduced to the Dreaming, have the option of having Dreaming symbols painted on their faces and participate in a creation story. They are also able to try and light a fire the traditional way. Respect for the Land is more suitable for older students and explores the culture, beliefs, social structure, history and land management practices of the Wurundjeri people. Out in the bushland, students learn about bush food plants, fibre and medicinal plants, technology and tools and from there are encouraged to work out what this will mean for them as they try to live more sustainably.

We need to ask *how* we can learn from Aboriginal people and open our hearts and minds in relation to indigenous cultural perspectives, to allow us to understand how we can share in the regeneration of the ecosystems alongside Aboriginal people. Fortunately now, there is some movement in a collaborative direction and this information needs to be conveyed to students.

We must engage with the following questions: How will

imbuing indigenous cultural perspectives change what we teach? What do we believe about what we teach? How will we learn what to teach? How do we know what questions to ask and in fact what is appropriate to ask and what is not? Does there need to be a fundamental shift in the way we think?

Educators, on the whole, have received the benefits of studying in universities and teaching colleges. We are highly trained in western thought and we are experienced teachers, however, the opportunities for teacher professional learning in indigenous studies are scarce. Reading and research in spare moments, professional learning opportunities with Aboriginal people and ongoing discussions with colleagues are all available to educators – we are all able to participate in these to varying degrees over the course of our careers and we have a responsibility to pursue this as best we can.

A bird of prey.



Helpful cultural perspectives: 'Country'

In 'Nourishing Terrains' written by anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose for the Australia Heritage Commission in 1996, several Aboriginal cultural perspectives are discussed that are very helpful in comparing their differences with those of western thought. It is the application and honouring of these Aboriginal cultural perspectives that assist us to see how we can live more sustainably with the earth and it is these that will help us to educate for sustainability.

Aboriginal people successfully used land management practices for 60,000 years. These arose from a world-view that had no place for consumerism. Land cultivation through the use of fire, seed placement, ensuring sufficient food was left for other animals and leaving parts of plants to regenerate for the following year was daily practice. Many Australian plants need fire to germinate their seeds, or to induce flowering. Aboriginal people used patch burning or 'mosaic burning' of different areas over many years to ensure that food plants would grow at different times of the year and for other areas, the fresh new growth would attract kangaroos to graze and thereby provide hunting opportunities. The fire was low intensity and carefully managed in relation to the time of year, the wind and the temperature. Women dug for tubers with their digging sticks, cultivating the soil, opening it up to the rain.

A marsupial.



Arbor day planting.



White settlers could not see the cultivation that was in harmony with the land. The seasonal and daily rhythm of Aboriginal land cultivation was torn apart as the white settlers introduced fences; cattle with their hard, ground-compacting hooves, green European grasses and the sheep to feed on it.

Aboriginal people successfully managed the land, because they respected the relationships among and between living things and the seasons. They also understand human society as part of the living ecosystem without it being the most important part. They see humans as being just as interconnected within the system as for example, the bandicoots sheltering in the bases of the native grasses.

Aboriginal people use the phrase 'caring for country' to describe their relationship to the land. Rose (1996) writes '...the word 'country' (is used) not only as a common noun, but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness and a will toward life.'

There are hundreds of whole countries in Aboriginal Australia, in spite of the white demarcation of states. The communities in each country knew the networks for trade with other countries, the seasonal animals and their homes, the climate and the ceremonies of their own country. The knowledge in each community was and is local.

Melbourne Museum has researched the descriptions of the seasons for the country of the Kulin people, in Victoria near Melbourne. Each of these seasons also carries information about the plants, animals, weather and constellations. For example, the Buath Gurru Grass Flowering Season is in November, when bats are catching

insects, the Victorian Christmas Bush is flowering, there is an increase of Common Brown butterflies and the Orion constellation is seen setting in the western sky.

The seasons are marked in the following pattern:

Iuk Eel Season [March]

Waring Wombat Season [April-July]

Guling Orchid Season [August]

Pooneet Tadpole Season [September-October]

Buath Guru Grass Flowering Season [November]

Kangaroo-apple Season [December]

Biderap Dry Season [January-February]

For students to absorb this information, we are asking them to pay attention in a way they may not have done before. This intensely personal and yet communal relationship to country opens students' eyes to a life changing worldview and this is something we need to evaluate specific to our indigenous programs.

'Dreaming'

The Dreaming is fundamental to Aboriginal people. It is the time of creation and yet it transcends time and continues into the present and the future. Different groups of Aboriginal people prefer different names for the Dreaming – Story, History or Dreamtime being a few. The Dreamings are the ancestors of all the animals, plants, humans, the elements and the Law. Each person has an individual 'dreaming' species for which they are responsible. This dreaming is embodied and the person's well-being is dependent on the well-being of their dreaming species. Here is

A wetland environment.



a deep alliance and responsibility that students find extraordinary and inspirational.

By accessing professional learning and then exploring cultural perspectives in consultation with the custodians of the land is an inspiring way to begin learning with students how best to live sustainably.

There is so much to be learnt! ☺

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For more information see:

<http://museumvictoria.com.au/forest/climate/kulin.html> for full descriptions of the interactions between the animals, plants, weather and constellations of the different seasons, together with some descriptions of the seasons by Aboriginal people.

http://www.zoo.org.au/Learning/Programs/VCE/Healesville/Wurrundjeri_Way

Teachers Notes and Student Trail for Respect for the Land: the Wurundjeri Way.

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