

Mobilising rural communities to achieve environmental sustainability using the arts

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Abstract

Australia's environment continues to worsen in several key areas. This paper suggests that the visual and performing arts may be valuable in influencing environmental behaviour positively, at the individual and community level. The arts can aid engagement and participation by a broad cross section of the community, and can provide powerful vehicles for community mobilisation, empowerment, and information transfer.

Keywords: *Rural sociology, visual and performing arts, environmental behaviour, environmental sustainability, art and the environment, capacity building*

Introduction

Australia faces many serious environmental challenges. These include a high per capita level of greenhouse gas emissions, pressures on its coral reefs, large nutrient loads of nitrogen and phosphorus being discharged into coastal and estuarine waters, continued loss of vegetative cover and broadacre clearing, continuing soil erosion, continuing deterioration of the health of water bodies and an increase in salinity, declining biodiversity, and worsening pressures from human settlements (Australian State of the Environment Committee, 2001). Despite many years of Commonwealth and State government intervention in attempting to repair Australia's environment, improvements are patchy and in some critical aspects the environment is worsening.

Some types of arts based events can aid greatly in community development, increasing participation, and the building of social capital in rural areas (Kingma, 2002; Rogers, 2003). There are encouraging examples of the arts being linked with initiatives to foster ecologically sustainable development (Mills & Brown, 2004). The arts have an important role in changing shared perspectives and by questioning the consumerism which dominates our era (Curtis *et al.*, 1995; Fox, 2002; Gablik, 1993). This paper explores some of the ways that the visual and performing arts might assist in improving environmental behaviour at the individual and community level through community mobilisation, empowerment, and information transfer. It does this through an examination of three case studies in regional New South Wales (NSW), Australia.

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Methods

The case studies reported here are part of a larger study examining how the arts shape environmental behaviour, the methods of which are described in Curtis (2003b). The three case studies are a selection from about eight community-based art and environment events that were studied, which included concerts, festivals, art exhibitions and community events. They involved a range of participants including farmers, scientists, artists, performers, extension officers, community groups, and school and tertiary students and covered a range of environmental themes including rural and urban issues, natural resources and global environmental issues.

The methods used in these case studies are outlined in Table 1. They were based on methodological pragmatism and drew from a range of social science paradigms according to circumstance (Crump, 1995). I began the study using a quasi-grounded theory approach that interlaced data collection and analysis to ensure that emerging concepts and theoretical constructs were firmly grounded in the life experience of the research participants. The first case study studied was *Nova-anglica: the web of our endeavours* and the main data were participant observations. The insights gained from this allowed me to develop my methods for the second case study (the Bungawalbin Wetlands Festival). Nine people (seven women and two men) were interviewed using a standard questionnaire to get a more detailed response. They had an average age of 47, four were participants, four were in a Landcare group, seven were in a conservation group, most were rural landholders. To examine *The Plague and the Moonflower* I developed the methods further, adding social constructivist methods such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups and quantitative evidence from formal surveys. Eighteen semi-structured interviews and one focus group of 11 people were conducted after the 2002 performances. Seventeen 17 semi-structured interviews, 2 focus groups of 13 people (in total), and a survey of 100 participants and 70 audience member were conducted after the 2003 concerts. I acted as a ‘total participant’ in the *Nova-anglica* and *Plague and the Moonflower*, having helped organise both (Neumann, 1997, p. 357). I had access to

Table 1. Methods used in the case studies: Bungawalbin Wetlands Festival, Nova-anglica: Web of Our Endeavours, Plague and the Moonflower

Data collected	Bungawalbin	Nova-anglica	Plague
‘Total participant’ observations	✓	✓	✓
Survey of participants, focus groups			✓
Participant interviews	✓		✓
Audience survey	✓		✓
Audience interviews			✓
Project documentation (minutes etc.)	✓	✓	✓
Photographs	✓	✓	✓
Numerical data of attendees	✓	✓	✓

archival material and numerical data from organisers in each case study. This purposeful methodological diversity enabled triangulation between the different types of data, and in so doing, afforded greater confidence in the conclusions. Qualitative research methods were largely based on Neumann (1997).

Case study description

A snap shot of the three case studies is provided in Table 2. They included a broad range of issues and artistic approaches. The Bungawalbin Wetlands Festival was organised by the Bungawalbin Catchment Management Group which worked to conserve this wetland system. Biodiversity in the catchment is one of the highest in Australia, and its wetlands are listed in the Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia. Two highlights from the arts component were a play and dance by local Indigenous children about the wetlands in a welcoming ceremony, and a community sculpture. The play expressed emotions about Indigenous people being cut off from the wetlands and the hope for reconciliation and looking after the land. They sang a song to 'sing back' the various animals of the wetlands. The group received a grant of \$1,000 from the NSW Arts Council to commission community artist Pamela Denise to make a sculpture of two brolgas at the event. Brolgas are a charismatic water bird of the wetlands and are the logo of the Bungawalbin Catchment Committee. Denise visited three local primary schools beforehand and conducted workshops with the students who made 'feathers' for the sculpture. On the day of the festival a frame made from plastic pipe was constructed and the feathers pinned to it.

'Nova-anglica' means New England and 'Web of our Endeavours' symbolised the network of environmental repair activities throughout the region. It told the story of the devastation of dieback, when millions of rural trees died in the 1970s in the New England region of NSW (Heatwole & Lowman, 1986). The event celebrated the ongoing efforts by farmers, community groups, government departments and individuals to repair the land and to integrate nature conservation with farming (Dunsford & Curtis, 1998; MacKinnon, 1998). It grew from an initiative by local artist and active Landcare member, Leah McKinnon. In mid-1997 she decided to present to the public the 62 maps developed by Kath Wray and the Citizens Wildlife Corridors Group (a community group of 800 landholders who had agreed to conserve corridors of natural vegetation throughout their properties). The maps showed the properties involved in the corridor group and were a representation of the network of landholders interested in nature conservation on their properties. The event adopted an image developed by Curtis *et al.* (1995), properly rendered by artist Anna Curtis, which summarized the themes of the event. It included seven major art installations at the regional art museum, and performances and other activities at other locations.

The Plague And The Moonflower is an ecological chorale written for orchestra and choirs. It explores the dark side of humanity through the character of Plague. Its theme is the struggle for the survival of our planet in the face of apathy, pollution and greed. It is ultimately celebratory when Plague is transformed through his encounter with the

Table 2. Summary of the three case studies

Type of event	Bungawalbin	Nova-anglica	Plague
	Field day	Art event	Concert
Themes	Wetland conservation	Rural land degradation, dieback, tree decline, celebration of environmental repair	General human destruction of the global environment and the importance of nature.
Description	Field day/festival held in the wetlands. A focal area had marquees from which radiated activities.	Series of art and entertainment events. 7 exhibition spaces and central venue.	Composition for choir, solo guitar and orchestra by Ralph Steadman and Richard Harvey.
When held	Sept 2003	March 1998	Oct 2002, Dec 2003
Duration	1 day	3 weeks	2 weeks
Nearest town	Lismore, North Coast NSW	Armidale, Northern Tablelands NSW	Armidale NSW, Woodford Folk Festival, Qld.
Location	Yarringly Nature Reserve	New England Regional Art Museum	Lazenby Hall & (Woodford)
Type of location	Bushland and wetlands	Art museum and nearby creek lands	Concert hall, open air amphitheatre
Art forms	Drawings, colouring-in projects, sculptures, poems by 4 primary schools, featuring water birds & animals, music, community sculpture, face paintings, dance, poetry competition, displays, brochures, photographs, charts & posters.	Paintings, prints, photography, drawings, wood carvings, ceramics, floral art, stories, poetry, songs, cards, colouring-in competition, mugs, pots, embroideries, sculptures, posters, installations, music, collages, cabaret, lantern parade.	Orchestral music with adult & child choirs, actors, dancers, Indigenous dancers, projections, jugglers, acrobats and enormous puppetry.
Other activities	High school projects on wetlands, Talks by experts, guided walks & boat rides, self-guided walks, bicycle rides, children's wetland activities	Tours, demonstrations, public lecture, tree planting and weeding of creek.	Tour and six day camping of whole cast and crew at Woodford Folk Festival.
Participants	About 20	2,000	About 300
Audience	250	5,000	10,000

Moonflower, and pledges to provide a future for the child (and hence future generations). It is the discovery of the rare Moonflower by the botanical artist Margaret Mee that provides the inspirational aspects of the work. The Moonflower is a rare epiphytic

cactus that grows in the Amazon rainforest and only flowers under a full moon for a few hours, emitting a beautiful perfume while it flowers (Mee & Morrison, 1988).

The city of Armidale boasts a strong tradition of the arts, and supports and nurtures a strong music and theatre culture. In 2002 local medical practitioner (and part-time French horn player and conductor) Bruce Menzies put together a production team and 170 performers and crew to perform *The Plague and the Moonflower* (Curtis, 2003a). It had never before been performed outside Britain and the production was hailed locally as 'possibly the most significant musical/theatrical event of Armidale's past two decades' (Bill Driscoll, *Armidale Express*, 1 November 2002, p.8). A year later the production was transported by bus to the Woodford Folk Festival to appear twice as one of the main amphitheatre acts (Curtis, 2004). The production team had been expanded and the cast had grown to over 250 people, including an adult choir, children's choir, orchestra, a group of about two dozen dancers and jugglers, indigenous dancers, several actors, and a large support crew. In addition another performance was held in Armidale before transporting the production to Woodford (www.moonflower.org.au; Curtis (2004)). The incorporation of the didgeridoo into the orchestra and the cleansing and farewell ritual performed by Indigenous dancers provided the work with special significance for an Australian audience.

Results

About 250 people came to the Bungawalbins Wetlands Festival, over a half of whom were adults, and a high proportion were rural landholders (Table 3). The art displays and sculpture activities expanded the audience beyond those who came on the day, with a further 300 school children participating. While few people appeared to come to the festival just for the art (most of those interviewed said they would have come regardless of whether or not the arts component was present), many were attracted because it was a festival and a special occasion. Organisers said that a normal farmer field day on catchment related issues attracted only 6-20 people in the Bungawalbin district. Sixty attendees would have been considered a successful field day and more than 20 farmers would have been considered as 'increasing the audience size'.

The arts introduced an affirmatory and celebratory component into the occasion. The dance and song by the Indigenous children provided a vehicle to express sentiments and to build bridges between the black and white communities. It also helped to build confidence for the children who were nervous about performing. It was rare for them to perform outside their school and to a white audience. Their dance was successful in engaging people's emotions. For the children the dance was not just token but an opportunity for them to reinforce cultural practice and to expand that to a non-Indigenous audience. Other arts activities engaged the emotions (made people feel happy or moved), in particular the poetry, face painting, and music.

The arts assisted in creating an atmosphere, which enhanced the experience of the wetlands. The music and performance in particular helped achieve this. The artworks done by the school children enabled them to learn about the importance of the wetlands.

Table 3. What people did at the Bungawalbin Wetlands Festival

	No. adults	No. children	Total No.	Liked best by those interviewed
Watch welcoming ceremony	90	30	120	
Participate in welcoming ceremony	4		4	
Participate in Bora Ridge play/acting	1	9	10	
Watch indigenous play/dancing	90	30	120	****
Participate in poetry competition			4	
Listen to poetry entries	90	30	120	
Listen to music	Most attendees			*
Assist build wetland sculpture	20	330	350	
See wetlands sculpture	Most attendees			*
Participate in wetland art displays	0	215	215	
Look at wetland art displays	Approx. 50			
Senior Science wetlands project participants	0	4	4	
Look at Senior Science projects on wetlands	Approx. 50			
Look at other displays	Approx. 50			
Listen to wetlands talks	20-25	A few	30	
Participate in face painting		Approx 30	30	
Activities in the wetlands				
Guided walks of wetlands				
Wetland Waddle in afternoon (1hr)	5	0	5	
Wetlands/birds walk	11	2	13	
Lagoon walk (2hr)	6	3	9	
Wetland waddle (1hr)	18	6	24	
<i>Total participation in guided walks</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>51</i>	**
Self-guided walks and self-guided bike rides	Large proportion of attendees			***
Guided boat rides up Bungawalbin Creek	Approx. 60			*
Children's wetland activities (2hr)	4	8	12	
Total number of attendees	135	93	228	

Although the arts component may not have increased knowledge much, the event itself did. Most of those interviewed could highlight something new that they had learnt about wetlands. All of those interviewed appeared to be committed to conserving the wetlands and the event simply reinforced those feelings rather than changed attitudes and had an above average score on Environment Protection Agency test for environmental behav-

ious. Interviewees thought that the arts components made a positive contribution to the event. It did this by fostering community interaction and involvement, raising awareness, providing a medium for children to express what they saw or felt about the wetlands, creating a nice ambience for the event (particularly the music), and in the case of the sculpture visually highlighting aspects of the wetlands.

In this setting the main effect of the arts was probably to reinforce people's pre-existing convictions. The experiential aspects of the event probably had the greatest effect - opening peoples' eyes to the richness of the wetlands. The arts enriched the atmosphere, turning the event into a special occasion and thus possibly allowing it to create a more lasting impression and helping attract a larger level of participation.

Nova-anglica offered farmers, scientists, government workers and others involved in landscape change, new and creative ways of expressing their feelings for, and knowledge about the land and the natural environment. Participants were able to tap into their expressive sides and describe their involvement with the environment and their farms using stories, paintings, photography, sculpture and poetry. For some participants this creativity flowed back into their work.

The event affirmed people's beliefs in caring for the environment and celebrated the work they did to repair the environment. It provided a vehicle for community education, information transfer and networking. By linking the environmental educative elements with the arts it led to people associating the environment with positive thoughts and images. The diversity of methods used meant that the themes of *Nova-anglica* could be understood and accessed by a range of visitors.

The event exposed its audience to environmental issues and it enabled a broad participation by a cross-section of the community for people to work together for environmental change. The number of interpretive and educative techniques adopted and the vast numbers of people involved in the event made it a diverse and dynamic project for the community. This was the result of input from many individuals with an interest in the environment. Its success owed much to the strong foundation of pre-existing networks of people in the community who were eager for an opportunity to celebrate efforts in land repair. Furthermore incorporating music and art forms into the planning meetings improved processes by helping find new ways of looking at a problem, stimulating creative thinking, motivating participants and helping improve the cohesiveness of the group.

An analysis of the surveys from *The Plague and the Moonflower* provided deeper insights into the effects of a art-environment event (Table 4).

The production had a strong effect in engendering an appreciation and pride of community. The fact that the work was of high quality added to the pride people felt in their community. It provided an opportunity for substantial community involvement, networking, meeting new people, working with people one already knew, the building of bridges between different groups within the community, and the strengthening of bonds. The bridging elements of the production were emphasised by many participants in interviews, and in particular the coming together of Indigenous and non-Indigenous performers was considered very positively.

Table 4. Combined responses of all respondents to the work. Percentage scores is of the total after missing values are excluded (2-6 people)

Responses to the work (* participants only)	Number	Negative to neutral response Valid % of all respondents	Positive response Valid % of all respondents
Moved me emotionally	169	26.6	73.4
Made me reflect on humanity's relationship with the natural environment	168	26.2	73.8
Made me feel strongly towards the natural environment	168	40.5	59.5
Made me feel an appreciation and pride in community	169	19.5	80.5
Exposed me to ideas I had not thought of much before	167	69.5	30.5
Affirmed my beliefs about people's relationship with the natural environment	167	41.3	58.7
* Allowed me to express my feelings for people's relationship with the natural environment	98	50.0	50.0
* Allowed me to strengthen my beliefs about certain issues	98	46.9	53.1
* Allowed me to learn about some environmental issues	96	57.3	42.7
* I enjoyed being part of a large team working together	98	6.1	93.9

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The Plague and the Moonflower is not a work that lays out a program for action. Instead it seeks to engender respect and appreciation of the natural environment and is critical of the destruction of nature by modern industrialized societies. It operates mostly on the heart, attempting to move the emotions into a love of the natural environment and expressing repugnance at what industrialized societies are doing to it. Because of this it could be expected that it might not lead to an immediate behavioural change. Respondents were asked whether participating in or seeing the production made them feel like doing something different for the environment. 36.5% of respondents answered 'Yes', 20.6% answered 'No', 30.6% answered 'A bit', and 9.4% were 'Unsure' (2.9% did not answer the question). By combining the 'Yes' and 'A bit' responses it revealed that about two-thirds (67%) of respondents said the production made them feel like changing their behaviour to some extent. Forty-three percent of respondents

listed things that they would do differently, such as not using plastic shopping bags, recycling more, reduce waste and pollution, planting trees, saving water, joining or donating money to community groups, using the arts to raise environmental awareness, practice organic gardening, or by 'spreading the word'.

Responses from some participants indicated that the event was a pivotal moment in their lives. In others it is likely that the event will open their minds to information that they receive at a later time. One of the major values of the event was its genuine act of altruism which was an important counter to the consumerist message of industry.

Discussion and conclusions

The capacity of the arts to foster cooperation, demonstrated in these case studies, provides an important role of community arts in fostering environmental sustainability. Many communities are hampered in their capacity to work together due to internal divisions and philosophic differences. Involvement by families in musical or theatrical activities, however, can be unthreatening and can often help heal social divisions or at least 'soften' resistance to the idea of communities working together. Such involvement, then, can potentially foster an improved social climate from which community-based environmental work may more readily emerge.

The case studies showed that the visual and performing arts have great potential in encouraging people to reflect on the consequences of their actions and the nature of the environment itself, and to show us ways to change our behaviour to lessen our impact on the environment and to enhance the environment through our activities. These characteristics have been pointed out by other authors (Green, 2002; Kastner & Wallis, 2001; Norman, 2001). Various art-forms are used effectively by different groups in society to affirm pro-environmental belief systems (Gold & Revill, 2004). Particular artists are often at the forefront in challenging dominant paradigms and are often active participants in attempts to change society, e.g. Cembalest (1991), and the libretto of *The Plague and the Moonflower* is an example of this phenomenon. As the case studies show, the ability of artists to synthesise complex ideas into powerful symbolic images, songs or performances can be important in influencing individuals and even the greater community. This characteristic has been used affectively in environmental education programs in schools and in community education and extension (Andrew & Eastburn, 1997; Evergreen Theatre, 2002). The celebratory aspects of the visual and performing arts also make them a useful tool in affirming ecological restoration and environmental repair activities, and this was evident in all three case studies. The association between artists and those who attempt to conserve the natural environment has a long history (Bonyhady, 2000) and many artists use their work to communicate important insights into human relationships with the natural environment (Pollak & MacNabb, 2000). Indeed poets and artists have been influential in reshaping attitudes about the Australian landscape (Papadakis, 1993).

Our relationship with the environment is determined by our entire culture. Since the arts are integral with the culture, a society that is living sustainably within the environ-

ment will reflect it in its arts. Cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability (Hawkes, 2003). The case studies presented here are examples where arts based events have aided participation by a broad cross section of the community, have strengthened a community's abilities to promote inclusion, and have been vehicles for community mobilisation, empowerment, and information transfer. They also show how arts-based activities might be able to effect environmental behaviour at the individual and community level. It is hoped that community development workers, group organisers and extension agents might draw ideas from these examples to better utilise the arts in creating changes in environmental behaviour in the rural context.

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