

***THE AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION: A
PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION ADAPTING IN A CHANGING WORLD***

Grahame Collier [President]

tissues@acay.com.au

www.aee.org.au

Phil Smith [Vice President AAEE]

rephilled@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

Australia is a country with major sustainability challenges, with a sparse population and a sparser but growing population of highly competent environmental educators. The professional development needs of these educators are met in part by the Australian Association for Environmental Education [AAEE].

This paper will chronicle the development and current vision of the AAEE and its role in supporting education practitioners to effect significant impact on the sustainability behaviours of Australians. It will review the key drivers for change within the growing and increasingly credible field of environmental education in Australia and identify how practitioners can be supported to deliver programs efficiently and effectively into the future.

KEYWORDS

Environmental Education, Professional Associations, effectiveness of education

WHY ARE WE TELLING THIS STORY?

In this paper, we want to tell you a story - one of change in our country and change in our Association - the Australian Association for Environmental Education. Change that demonstrates growth in environmental education, movement towards a broader conception of environmental education, and growth in the role, function, and credibility of our professional association.

Essentially we are telling the story to chronicle a path that might raise some points of similarity and difference that could be useful for you; a path that identifies some of what we have learnt, some directions we have taken. It is a story about an Association trying to keep its eyes on the big and small pictures and the human elements while, at the same time, coming to terms with change and the complexity of balancing paid work and volunteerism.

On occasions like this in my country, it has become customary and vital to acknowledge the indigenous owners of the land. We would like to do this here, too. The original inhabitants of the land in the area now called Durban are acknowledged. Importantly, this is also a part of the story: this acknowledgement back home is an example of the evolution of relations between our Association – and many other Australians – and Australia’s indigenous past.

AAEE strives to represent the views of the practitioners in our profession. We aim to tell this story fearlessly, independently and sensitively. It has been expressing its views openly and firmly for more than 25 years, and members of other Associations in this room may be proud of a similar approach.

The Association has three major roles:

To promote the most extensive and effective use of education to help people to live more sustainably.

To support its members and others in the sector via professional development.

To develop local networks that facilitate people to share programs and skills.

In this industry in Australia and internationally, we deserve vibrant professional associations; bodies that work to improve the capacity of environmental education to influence people’s attitudes, knowledge and skills, and ultimately to increase the nature and quality of sustainable behaviours and practices.

Easy to say! Maintaining such an Association requires intense work, focus, energy, flexibility and a capacity to breathe deeply and shrug one’s shoulders in wonder, forget the frustration and keep going.

The next four short stories locate the Association in the changes of time and space. The fifth story is about the evolution of AAEE itself. The stories intertwine and exert reciprocal influence on each other.

STORY 1: WHERE OUR STORY TAKES PLACE

Australia is a country of 21 million people spread across the largest island in the world. Most live on the coastal fringe where agriculture flourishes and the climate is more temperate. Inland Australia is characterised by low rainfall and desert. Australia is rich in mineral resources and increasingly much of its wealth comes from the mining industry.

The Australian constitution establishes the nation as a confederation of states. There are three strong levels of government [local, state and national] each with jurisdiction over and responsibility for aspects of environment protection, community behaviour and business and industry practices. Key environmental sustainability issues in Australia are water, climate change and the focus on growth and economic development.

Like much of the rest of the world, Rip Van Australia has only been half awake to the advice, the warnings and the evidence. We have not yet engaged quickly or thoroughly enough with the challenges of global warming, biodiversity depletion, water shortages, emission reduction and other environmental issues. It's seemed at times that the national head has been not so much in the sand as in the pocket: policy and politics have urged and encouraged us to keep working, get comfortable, have it all, don't think and don't worry.

STORY 2: THE EVOLUTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

Education activity has been happening in Australia for a long time. A potted history shows that our history is linked with more global movements. In 1970 the first Environmental Education [EE] conference in Australia was hosted by the Academy of Science

1973 First World Environment Day held
1975 The Belgrade Charter
1977 The Tbilisi Declaration (1977) developed under

the auspices of the UNESCO and United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) outlined specific objectives for the implementation of environmental education.

In 1979 the AAEE was established and various state groups were established soon after; for example in 1984 Victorian Association of Environmental Education [VAEE] was formed.

In 1991 the phrase *triple bottom line* was first coined
In 1992. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio, known also as the Earth Summit, prepared a framework for international action known as Agenda 21. Chapter 36 entitled "Promoting Education, Awareness and Training", called on nations to integrate environmental education throughout all levels and sectors of society.

Agenda 21 was first enshrined in law in Australia in 1993. In 2000 the Environmental Education for a Sustainable Future: National Action Plan [NAP] was released and the National Environmental Education Council [NEEC] was established.

2002. Johannesburg Summit
2004 UNESCO Decade of Education for Sustainable Development

In 2005 a Decade for Education for Sustainable Development UNESCO Meeting was held in Melbourne and the National Environmental Education Statement for Schools 2005 was released.

As can be seen, the evolution of EE in Australia mirrors what has happened on a global level. EE has evolved from nature studies through environmental education to sustainability education. AAEE was born towards the end of the nature studies era and has always focused on environmental education. It is acknowledged however, that practitioners more often than not

operated within a broader conceptual framework – which has come to be known as sustainability. While in earlier times EE in Australia tended to operate in content silos [for example waste education], more recently it has focused more broadly.

Schools have been the sector where change and leadership have occurred. Over the past 30 years in NSW, for example, there's been a shift from the random (unsupported) teacher in the random school teaching EE – through to teach via mandatory curriculum statements – and now to a supported EE Policy for Schools with an emphasis on sustainability education. In 2003, NSW and Victoria piloted sustainable schools programs and in recently a national Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative has been established. The uptake of EE in schools began slowly with little or no support and in the face of challenge to its curriculum relevance. The second half of the 1990s saw steady growth in the nature, extent, integration and quality of EE in schools. Perhaps though teacher training institutions are lagging behind in approaches to whole school sustainability and this will be a part of the next stage in the evolution of EE in the school sector.

In a similar fashion there has been growth in extent and impact in the non-formal community education sector with shifts towards a more community development approach - from providing education to communities, to enabling people to do it themselves. Increasing amounts of industry training has also occurred.

Education has been increasingly recognised as an important means to achieve sustainability. For years it was considered the soft option, often conducted by people who were not educators. Now education has finally come into its own. Indeed, other environmental management tools – policy, legislation, regulation, incentives and infrastructure development (considered by some as the *real* stuff!) are using/integrating education approaches to carry forward their impact. There's more talk of engaging the community, inspiring and motivating, informing and building commitment and strengthening action capacities within these other approaches. Perhaps the world is catching up with education.

AAEEs continuing efforts to support and represent practitioners in the classrooms, in the suburbs and fields and in the offices of governments, have speeded the evolution of EE and education as a recognised tool for sustainability.

STORY 3: LEADERSHIP FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

In order to move forward education for sustainability, strong leadership and direction are required. It is easy to say that ‘we need to educate the community’ – in Australia this is a catch phrase whenever we are faced with an emerging social issue. It is another thing, however, to frame the education effectively, to fund it appropriately and to ensure that it has impact on the problem and that the impact can be evaluated.

Education is delivered with a licence from the community - a licence that is promoted through government. In our country we are blessed with strong support for EE/EfS from our governments. Our National Action Plan [NAP] - currently being revised - gives us the policy framework, encouragement and acknowledgement to continue. It provides credibility for our initiatives and a mantle under which to progress. The AAEE looks forward to making a significant contribution to the new plan, just as we did to the original.

Apart from the NAP there are now significant structures that the national government has put in place to promote improved EE – National Environmental Education Network, the National Environmental Education Council and the Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability [ARIES] are important to our ongoing and improved use of sustainability education. The States and Territories and local government have also resourced a significant number of EE/EfS programs and often have significant policy and planning in place.

The non-government sector also provides important leadership. It raises environmental problems and promotes solutions. It is an important voice into the community calling the community to action and promoting advocacy and commitment.

In its leadership role, AAEE believes that it is vital for Government at all levels, the community sector and professional associations to work together to meet our common goals. Part of the

change in recent years for AAEE and indeed for all players has been a rethinking about the nature of 'leadership'. In the past leadership was focused on the need to go out into the world with answers – to be the 'expert' and protect the expert position. In the midst of social, economic, political and environmental complexity and uncertainty, we need to have the courage to go out into communities with questions and to propose some solutions. We need to acquire many of our solutions from stakeholders themselves. They know what is possible and what messages will work.

STORY 4: GROWTH OF THE FIELD

At one time EE was just focused in schools. Now it is much broader in its reach and approach. Across Australia there are an increasing number of us involved in education now than there were in years gone by. Undoubtedly this gives us more strength and higher levels of competence, because people are drawn into the mix from other backgrounds. It also means though, that at times education is delivered by people who don't have a specialty in this area, and thereby hangs a challenge. For example, at times community environmental education is the province of non-education specialists - often engineers [or industry specialists] - and this often results in wordy, knowledge oriented programs.

Over 400 local councils exist across Australia and these have a solid history in meeting the needs of their communities. In the past, the emphasis was on roads, rates and rubbish; approaches were more centralised and directive. Now communities are asking to be involved in local decision making and education programs and councils are adapting and shifting their approaches and skills base towards community development. Education is also receiving support and its role is becoming more significant at the local level.

Alongside this we are becoming more strategic. ARIES reports in their review of Environmental Education and its impact on sustainability, that:

“We are moving from doom and problem focus to the sense of we can create the future.

We are moving from isolated problems 'solving' to systemic thinking.

We are taking more time to study and learn from others.

We are making significant strides in some sectors, particularly in schools.

We need to improve our impact within industry.”

It is clear that as a field we are setting ourselves loftier goals and evaluating whether we are reaching some of them. We are trying to discover what works in a more strategic and tested way. Educators in Australia are learning more from each other and want to learn more from others as well. The strength of the networks that exist and the desire to belong, attend conferences and workshops, share successes and adapt ideas and programs of others is a real and emerging strength of our work and one that must continue to grow.

STORY 5: THE EVOLUTION OF THE ASSOCIATION

From the perspective of AAEE we have an integral role in supporting, promoting and encouraging the first four stories. Reaching our lofty goals requires work from people working voluntarily - and even the most committed of these people feel the pressure of time in the other parts of their lives! Making a vibrant association is about time, vision and structure.

Vision

In 2005, AAEE state convenors were asked for the first time to prepare their annual reports against the Association's existing objectives. Many questioned their relevance with comments like: *“What are these? Where do they come from? They are awful!”* Our look at the objectives of AAEE over the past 2 years has also meant taking a closer look at its vision.

The review of the Association's vision and purpose has suggested the need for a broader statement of where we want our community to be in the future; our draft vision is currently with our members for comment and amendment and includes such statements as:

Every member of the Australian community and every visitor to Australia is educated about sustainable practices and provided with relevant infrastructure and appropriate choices in all aspects of their lives.

The vision needs to give us direction for the future. It must be something members really agree with - something that describes what is important to us without requiring explanation.

Structure

Atlas tricked Hercules into holding the earth. Once Hercules had hold of it, Atlas prepared to leave - pleased with himself that he'd shifted his permanent burden to another. Hercules acknowledged his predicament and defeat he agreed to hold the planet if Atlas would hold it for him while he made himself more comfortable.....It has been a bit like this in the leadership of AAEE.

There has never been a more important time for us to have a vibrant Association, but a couple of years ago the Association was at risk of stagnating unless significant restructure and rethinking occurred. Part of the reason for this is that the leadership passes from state to state each two years. This means that the learning curve is great and the opportunity to effect change is short.

A new structure is slowly evolving to accommodate new challenges, but growing it has put real pressure on the Association. We need to provide ongoing services for our members [and potential members], work effectively with government and industry; produce products and activities that meet higher and broader expectations; while at the same time reinventing ourselves. This is a major challenge for a basically voluntary organisation.

To broaden our association and grow it into a real voice in the Australian community we need to look after our people in the processes of facilitating and making changes. A professional body rests on its people and so we need to build systems that are efficient not time consuming, responsive not restrictive, and overall that are effective and have real impact.

THE ONGOING STORY

Chapter 1: How we talk about ourselves and what we do.

Critics of 'environmental education' say that it is too siloed; it focuses extensively on knowledge, is too didactic and does not prompt behaviour change sufficiently. Others would say it targets the wrong people, with its major focus in schools and it does not link well with other environmental management tools like regulation and enforcement, or financial incentives and disincentives. It is too soft and fluffy is difficult to prove its impact.

Those critics would be wrong most of the time: they fail to do as de Bono suggests – ‘to recognize that it’s not just the car, it’s also how you drive it!’ It is the educator - the person delivering education - who makes the difference. The person who drives the car matters.

It may be that there is more convergence than we think between EE and what we call education for sustainability. But it is important that we share a common view of who we are, what we are and what we do. The terms we use will help us in this regard and the AAEE is promoting a resolution to the fact that we are a sector with many names.

Chapter 2 professional standards and accreditation

Unlike other professional groups we do not have a ready and mandated set of standards that drive our practice. While engineers and other professions have agreed professional standards - we do not. We lack an educator accreditation system and, in a sense, we promote the idea that ‘*anyone can do EE/EfS*’. While that is clearly not true, the significance of the lack of professional standards cannot be understated. It is one of our biggest limiting factors. Imagine working in public health [doctor, nurse, physiotherapist] without having undertaken some sort of registration process. We lack that and we even lack a set of agreed standards that guide employers and training providers.

Chapter 3. We require adequate public policy

Internationally, many countries are deliberating about sustainability issues in a way that is similar to the challenges we are facing in Australia. Time does not permit an overview of the international approaches but some interesting and far-sighted work is occurring in many OECD countries, especially in Sweden.

In Australia, it is unrealistic to think that education can drive the entire sustainability agenda. Most jurisdictions in Australia lack public policy about sustainability in which to place Education for Sustainability. It seems that we have by default, become the driver for sustainability rather than a tool for pushing it further. For example nationally, the National Action Plan *Environmental Education for a Sustainable Future*, first linked EE and sustainability; in NSW the *Government’s Learning for Sustainability Plan 2002 -2005* took this a step further. Neither

jurisdiction had 'Sustainability' policy but they did have approaches to education that placed it firmly within a vacant framework.

Chapter 4: An outward looking Association

Associations like ours have lessons, ideas and resources that we can adapt and share. Already, AAEE has signed Memoranda of Understanding with other national organisations such as the Australian Water Association and it has a partnership agreement with the Marine Education Society of Australasia. AAEE also has MOUs with EE associations in New Zealand, North America and India. This year, AAEE and the Centre for EE India are undertaking a unique school and community exchange initiative. It is hoped that this will be the first of many.

This conference is promoting the idea of a World EE Association. From Australia, we will continue to talk with peer associations about a global coalition of associations that can facilitate resource-sharing and information exchange, and build credibility. The AAEE is looking for other friends and partners.

WHAT ARE THE LESSONS FROM OUR STORIES?

In Australia, we are learning from the past, to reflect and to grow a future for EE that is strong, communicative and successful. That means growing a professional body that meets these requirements as well. From an AAEE perspective to achieve this requires:

- A vibrant well governed professional body, full of active workers.
- A body that takes people with it in promoting change.
- Acknowledgement that we need strength by working together.
- Clear objectives and vision – an organisation of power and punch.
- A means of balancing volunteerism with funded support.
- Strengthened strategic thinking and planning.
- Building membership and being receptive to emerging member needs

Our lessons and our futures are likely to be not too far removed from yours.

References

ARIES and Australian Government, Department of Environment and Heritage. (2005) A National Review of Environmental Education and its Contribution to Sustainability in Australia. Five Volumes: Frameworks for Sustainability, School Education, Community Education, Business and Industry Education, Further and Higher Education.

Commonwealth of Australia Department of Environment and Heritage. (2000) Environmental Education for a Sustainable Future: National Action Plan, Department of Environment and Heritage, Canberra.

Commonwealth of Australia Department of Environment and Heritage. (1999) Today Shapes Tomorrow: Environmental Education for a Sustainable Future A Discussion Paper, Department of Environment and Heritage, Canberra.

Henderson, K. and Tilbury, D. (2004) Whole-School Approaches to Sustainability: An international review of whole school sustainability programs. Report prepared by ARIES for the Department of Environment and Heritage, Australian Government.

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage *Sustainability Charter* (2006).

NSW Environment Protection Authority. (2003), Patches of Green: A Review of Early Childhood Environmental Education, NSW EPA, Sydney.

NSW Environment Protection Authority. (2001) Learning for Sustainability
NSW Environmental Education Plan 2002-05.

Smith P. 2006. Cows are Home. June 2006 AAEE OzEEnews

Tilbury, D., Coleman, V. and Garlick, D., 2005, A National Review of Environmental Education and its contribution to sustainability in Australia: School Education. Australian Government

Department of the Environment and Heritage and Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability, Canberra.

UNESCO (2005) Initiating the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development in Australia. Report of a National Symposium Melbourne 7 July 2005.

UNESCO. (2004) United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development Draft Plan of Implementation.

Western Australian Government. (2004) Hope for the future: the Western Australian state sustainability strategy.