



*ecologically sustainable
development*

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2. Ecologically Sustainable Development

Since the early 1990s, all spheres of government have been responding to environmental, social and economic challenges within a framework of ecologically sustainable development (ESD). Several related projects and programs have involved community cultural development. The case studies we include are:

Sunrise 21

A multi-artform program concerned with natural resource management, addressing the viability of Mildura's farming community and irrigation practices on the Murray River.

CERES

A community-based festival and educational program addressing the challenges of ecologically sustainable development in urban regions.

Murray River Story

An example of participatory community theatre involving scientists and decision-makers; exploring the knowledge-building and decision-making functions of community cultural development.

In an ESD framework, 'development' is concerned with maintaining equity within and between generations, preserving biodiversity and adopting a precautionary approach. The challenge is to resolve the tensions between economic, social and cultural development and environmental protection.

Until recently much of the emphasis on sustainability has been on resolving the tensions between economic development and environmental protection. Much less progress has been made on resolving the social aspects of development. *The Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy* provides one example of how state governments are attempting to tackle this:

To incorporate the social dimension into sustainability by demonstrating that it is possible to create a stronger economy and a healthier environment by more fully integrating the social dimension. It suggests that by thinking differently and more inclusively the 'deep clues' as to how to resolve fundamental environmental and economic conflicts can be discovered. The solutions are not to be found only in environmental science and engineering, but in social sciences, humanities and business. (Western Australian Government, 2002)

The *Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy* also recognises the critical importance of a 'sense of place', heritage and symbolism for the success of this strategy, with 'civil society' being seen as the repository of the long-term values and visions necessary for a sustainable future. The strategy acknowledges the role of the arts in raising community awareness and interest in sustainability. However, it goes further than this in recognising the role that the arts and intellectual life can play in resolving conflict between social, environmental and economic development by providing:

the creative edge needed to face the new and potentially difficult problems of sustainability, to find the *ethics* [our emphasis] which underlies every element and every issue in sustainability. (Western Australian Government, 2002)

At local government level, the internationally recognised strategy, *Local Agenda 21*, focuses on the development of local solutions and the mobilisation of community involvement and commitment to sustainable development. Community cultural development projects have been used by a number of local councils to illuminate particular local environmental issues, to galvanise local action and to educate communities on issues to do with natural resource management.

To understand the existing scope and potential for community cultural development related to ESD, we began with an examination of a number of national and state government initiatives which are directed towards the preservation of natural water resources. These include the Murray-Darling Basin Commission, the work of state-based environmental authorities and the Natural Heritage Trust with its four main programs in Landcare, Bushcare, Rivercare and Coastcare.

Such programs are confronting environmental problems that have profound consequences for community wellbeing. These include salinity and water quality, two of the most significant issues confronting Australian communities. Salinity currently affects 2.5 million hectares (5 per cent of cultivated land). This figure could increase to 12 million hectares over the next 20 years and to 17 million hectares by 2050. Salinity threatens more than farming land. Currently over one-third of rural river systems are adversely affected (Kenyon and Black, 2001).

As one federal government response to such issues, the Natural Heritage Trust was set up in 1997 to help restore and conserve Australia's environment and natural resources. To 2003, \$1.4 billion was invested in the Trust and related programs for more than 11,900 projects around Australia involving 400,000 people. Through its programs funds are delivered to three levels: national, regional and local. Regional investments are the principal delivery mechanism for the Trust and include the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality.

The Murray-Darling Basin Commission is a statutory body established as part of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality to coordinate the activities of the 17 agencies involved in the management of the Basin and to tackle the salinity problems of the Basin through research and education. The Commission has adopted an integrated catchment management process and has argued that, in natural resource management, changes need to be addressed at the social and cultural level, as well as the technical and economic:

Human behaviours, needs and priorities are the central elements of resource management ... any large scale or comprehensive changes to the condition or management of the resource are only possible through changes to human behaviour ... it is important to know about the contexts in which (people) operate ... economic, social, cultural and institutional.
(Murray-Darling Basin Commission, 2001)

Community cultural development processes are an ideal way of raising awareness of natural resource management issues, and are applied in this way by a number of local and state government agencies. However, governments are yet to fully recognise the potential of these processes for effecting a *transformation* in communities' understanding of sustainability issues.

Particular outcomes which can be achieved using collaborative creative processes include the enhancement of leadership and commitment, the introduction of new conflict management techniques, the awareness of new kinds of social relationships, and the building of trust between the parties involved. Competing knowledge bases can be reformed and extended, and bridges built between communities and decision-makers, between localised groups and expert systems such as those bureaucracies charged with environmental management and informed by scientific, ecological knowledge.

The case studies show:

- how the concepts of 'ecological sustainability', 'sense of place', 'heritage' and 'natural resources' are negotiated in community cultural development projects and programs
- how community cultural development raises community awareness of the issues and challenges of ecologically sustainable development and natural resource management
- how community cultural development projects and programs give participants 'deep clues' about how to resolve conflict between social, environmental and economic dimensions
- how community cultural development programs can provide the knowledge needed to establish new policy directions and solutions

- the potential for community cultural development activities to help determine appropriate government structures and organisation of ESD programs
- how community cultural development may assist public bodies to be more responsive to the views of the parties involved as they develop natural resource policies.

Notes

In addition to the case studies presented in this section, there are others in this guide with a strong environmental focus. The Small Towns Big Picture case study (see page 91) concentrates on communities attempting to resolve environmental problems; for example, the issues associated with energy use. In Appendix 3 we have included three examples of the potential for further integration of community cultural development within ESD processes.

SunRISE 21 Artists in Industry

SunRISE 21 is an excellent example of an integrated arts, environment and business program which had the objective of fostering sustainable development. Conducted in the latter part of the 1990s, it has been proclaimed as one of the most ambitious arts activities undertaken in regional Australia.

The program, centred in Mildura, arose through the efforts of industry, the Mildura Arts Centre, the Murray-Darling Basin Commission and the then Department of Primary Industries and Energy, through that department's Rural Partnership Program. It picked up on local debates about sustainable development in a region where degradation of land and water systems threatens the viability of industry and the social fabric of a community.

The program explored ecological and resource use issues alongside planning objectives linked to rural town rejuvenation and development.

SunRISE 21 Artists in Industry: Collaborations

- Sculptor Chris Booth hosted by CSIRO/Riverlink Consortium produced a large scale rock sculpture with the themes of knowledge about land and water.
- Craig Christie, theatre director and playwright, developed a musical play with community members that explored the role of women in Sunraysia. The host was the Horticultural Consortium.
- Digital media artist Megan Jones worked via the Salinity Management Consortium to create a photographic exhibition and a CD-ROM of virtual reality landscapes; the work raises important questions about what is natural in a highly engineered and now degraded environment.

- Michael Doneman and Motoyuki Niwa are the multimedia artists who worked with the Murray-Darling Freshwater Laboratory, responding to the linkages between science and the arts to create an interactive exhibition.
- The First Mildura Irrigation Trust hosted Rodney Spooner to develop a giant sculpture, a video and an exhibition exploring the history and preoccupations of irrigators and engineers on the Murray River.

SunRISE 21 as an organisation with objectives beyond the Artists in Industry program, assessed the program as follows:

The name 'SunRISE 21' stands for Sunraysia's Regional Initiative for a Sustainable Economy in the 21st Century.

SunRISE 21 Partners

- Murray-Darling Basin Freshwater Research Centre, Lower Basin Laboratory
- Mildura Arts Centre
- CSIRO
- First Mildura Irrigation Trust
- Salinity Management Consortium
- Horticultural Consortium

The SunRISE 21 vision and achievements have arisen from the concerted efforts and inspiration of many stakeholders, from individual horticulturists and community groups, to industry agencies and all levels of government. This coordinated approach, combined with a regional perspective and community direction, has shaped and supported the development of SunRISE 21 as a successful model for sustainable regional development in the Murray-Darling Basin of Australia. (Ian Ballantyne in Vivian, 2000)

Significantly, the SunRISE 21 Artists in Industry program seems to have promoted rigorous debate both locally and in national forums about the meaning of sustainability. In most, if not all of the arts projects, the history of engineering and economic approaches to the Murray-Darling Basin were both celebrated and brought into question. Through such an exploration, the ecological dimension of sustainability has been brought into focus for further debate within the community and among interested parties.

The SunRISE Board and also key funding bodies such as the MDBC believe that in addition to the benefits noted above, the Artists in Industry program will have positive effects on local industry. It is helping to lay the groundwork for a learning community by helping to strengthen networks and providing different approaches to the establishment of indicators for growth and sustainability, while facilitating commercial development and linkages.

For further information

Key publications:

Sunrise 21 (1999), *Sunrise 21 Artists in Industry Information Package*, Mildura Arts Centre, Mildura.

Vivian, Helen (2000), *Interceptions: Art, Science and Land in Sunraysia*, Mildura Arts Centre and Artmoves Inc., Mildura.

SunRISE 21 Artists in Industry

Some key objectives

- A process of community and industry consultation that complements the SunRISE 21 integrated plan for sustainable regional development.
- A creative process that will engage the interests and challenge the thinking of community and industry networks.
- A synergy generated by the convergence of industry and the arts.
- Promoting local issues as relevant subjects for interpretation by artists.

Commentary on the achievements of SunRISE 21

- Assessors of SunRISE 21 have suggested that, at a minimum, the diverse arts projects functioned as an innovative and effective communication tool, facilitating increased critical engagement and positive attitudinal change amongst individual and stakeholder participants.
- According to its Chief Executive, the First Mildura Irrigation Trust, a cooperative society of growers, through its involvement with the program has arguably re-evaluated its approach to sustainability questions. The organisation also came to better understand the diverse perspectives of other involved parties in debates about irrigation.
- Scientists saw engagement with the arts as a means of raising community awareness of the scientific undertakings of the Murray-Darling Basin Freshwater Research Laboratory, a step regarded as crucial in building cross-sectoral knowledge about the river and its problems.

(Vivian, 2000)



Above: *Mosaic Gateway*, CERES Community Environmental Park.
Photo: Daller James.

CERES (Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies)

CERES is a longstanding East Brunswick (Melbourne) community-based program with the Festival of the Sacred Kingfisher as the centrepiece. It is located on a 5 hectare site, boasting interactive environmental and cultural displays, alternative energy projects, public artworks, community permaculture gardens, creative play equipment, farm animals, an Indigenous plant nursery, a café and a stage. Supported by government agencies as an arts, environment and education program, CERES arises from an exploration of sustainability in the urban context. Education and celebratory functions are driven by artists, academics and scientists.

The Tenth Festival of the Sacred Kingfisher took place in November 2003. The festival's name originated from the observation that after the community had conducted extensive rehabilitation of an inner city urban waste dump, the migratory kingfisher began to re-visit its habitat. The festivals have included large scale theatre events (involving shadow puppetry, giant puppets, music and storytelling) exploring the perceptions of both nature and of people, who represent the unknown in both the modern parable of the kingfisher's return and the current stories of migrants in search of sanctuary. Themes include displacement, journey, hardship, place and community, and the celebrations aim at encouraging people to share their experiences and build relationships with other cultures and nature.

Support for CERES comes from a wide range of related organisations and agencies: Cultivating Community, Field Naturalists Club, Friends of the Earth, Friends of the Merri, Future Rescue and Otway Ranges Environment Network, Merri Creek Management Committee, Permaculture Melbourne, Australian Conservation Foundation, Gould League of Australia, The Wilderness Society, and Birds Australia.

Funding for the annual festival has come from: Australia Council for the Arts, Festivals Australia, Arts Victoria, Parks Victoria, VicHealth, Moreland City Council, The Victorian Community Foundation Trust and the Albert Edward McKay Trust.

Typical events might involve participation by:

the original owners of the land the Wurrundjeri, local councils, AMES students, five local schools, two local choirs, CERES Stompers, Darebin Walking Group, Dominique's dancers, Earth Parents and kids, NMIT Theatre students, Leisure Action, Soulmates dance company, Wild Moves Centre for Drum and Dance, International Volunteers for Peace, Little Big Tops (youth performers), Merri Creek Management Committee, Asylum Seekers Resource Centre, Te Aka Matua Maori Performers, The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture and support services (social justice groups) including The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, Ecumenical Migration Centre, and Urban Seed, Consumer and Tenants Advisory Service, Victoria Peace Centre, the Fitzroy Learning Network.

The processes used constitute community cultural development. For example, in the last festival, storytellers worked with the different ethnic communities to develop theatre work on the issues surrounding migration. Many other community groups were involved in the incorporation of puppetry, music and storytelling. Themes were expressed and explored successfully by the members of the asylum seeker and refugee community with the help of the Kingfisher artistic team.

CERES achievements

- The festival brings together disability services, the local council, schools and community groups, and has contributed to strengthening community ties.
- It is a meeting place for different 'communities of interest' – environmental, educational, multicultural.
- CERES can be interpreted as a spontaneous renewal not only of a degraded urban environment and habitat for a migratory bird, but also of a sustainable human relationship to nature.
- CERES is regarded as a 'ritual' that approaches ecological sustainability in a positive (rather than reactive) way, relying on a shared sense of 'place' where multidisciplinary exchanges and interactions take place between diverse cultural groups.
- Through this a central achievement is the reflection and re-negotiation of human relationships with the environment.

CERES is not the only permanent festival celebrating the relationship between the arts and the environment. For example, one has been established on the Sunshine Coast, also inspired by a combination of community environment groups and scientific researchers exploring the cultural context of water.

For further information

Website:

www.ceres.org.au

Key publications:

Filor, Lucy (2000), 'Sacred Kingfisher', *Artwork Magazine*, Issue 47, Community Arts Network SA Inc., Adelaide.

Murray River Story

Murray River Story was a large scale community play about the ecology of Australia's largest river, put together by the Albury-based Murray River Performing Group (now Hothouse Theatre), and performed at an Aboriginal meeting place on the Murray in March 1988.

The purpose of this case study is to present in some detail the methodology of this particular community arts project, as a means of exploring how the arts assists in the making of new knowledge about human-nature relationships. It also explains a particular 'tool' of community cultural development—Community Theatre, which can be defined as participatory theatre of local relevance that will develop local culture and help achieve local aspirations by building empowerment and trust.

The company initiating the project, the Murray River Performing Group, had more than ten years of experience within its community, and through informal networks had judged that the time was right to tackle the threats to the ecology of the river through theatre. The company invited in professional theatre workers and also established a steering committee of local residents to provide initial guidance for the project. The idea of presenting the play event-style, on the river itself, arose from the earliest meeting of the steering committee, as did the writer's brief, which was to develop a play based on the personal anecdotes and impressions of people living and working along the river.

Dozens of local organisations contributed to the project. Apart from professional theatre workers, there were involved scientists, anglers, farmers, conservation group members, tourism operators, journalists, bird observers, industrialists, students, drug rehabilitation inmates, bureaucrats and local politicians. These people were not only participants in the research phase, but contributors to the performance, playing the parts of explorers, irrigators, flood refugees, 'recreationists', gamblers, farmers, politicians, and 'ratbag de-snaggers', or providing river craft, construction materials, props, PA equipment, farm animals and labour.

Murray River Story Synopsis

The play was performed on, in and over the river itself, with the audience seated on the bank. Subtitled 'an epic love affair between woman, man, and the environment', the play tells the story of a new settler on the Murray who, with her husband a homecoming WWII soldier, tries to establish a modest farm in the era of rapid engineering development along the river. They become embroiled in the contest between two modernising forces—the engineers/irrigators wanting to dam, weir and drain the river to within an inch of its life, and the tourism developers whose dream is a series of permanent picturesque lakes. As damage to the ecology intensifies, in particular as wetland salinity takes hold, all these human uses of the river prove unsustainable. The play gives no final easy answer (not surprisingly given the problems of the Murray-Darling Basin), but as a precondition it does look to increased cooperation between stakeholders.

(Brown, in prep)

Murray River Story: How did it work?

To develop the play, researchers interviewed about 100 people living and working along the Murray. By the time rehearsals began, a great deal of oral history material had been collected, within which emphasis was given to recording what people had *seen* and *heard* along the river. Another 100 people became involved as writers, performers and backstage staff. The engine room of the project was a series of writing, acting and music workshops in which ideas about the play were processed using participatory activities that were both theatrical and social. Actors workshoped potential scenes for the play under guidance from the director and a group of facilitators, with only raw research material as a starting point. Scripted scenes both reflected what the actors had devised and fed in new ideas from the research. Many people lived and breathed the project for more than three months, and this is how participants in the project developed their collective wisdom about the river and its problems.

(Brown, in prep)

There are complications with getting information to the community and secondly the problem of getting the needs and desires out of the community into management arenas. These are problems which community theatre, such as the Murray River Story, can attempt to address.

Dr Terry Hillman, director Albury Laboratory, Cooperative Research Centre for Freshwater Ecology, and participant in Murray River Story.

When people from all walks of life participate in shows such as *Murray River Story*, the projects become meeting places for the various attitudes and arguments that shape individual perceptions. The effect is that they negotiate (though it's called 'rehearse') a common understanding (though it's called a 'performance') in a situation where they have considerable power to shape ideas, to compose the words that are spoken and ultimately to directly address their fellow citizens from the stage, effectively inviting them to consider and follow particular plans of action.

It was the processed *lay* knowledge about the river which gave participants the authority to 'stand up for the river'. The knowledge built in *Murray River Story* is better described as 'hybrid'—since 'lay', 'Indigenous' and 'scientific' inputs were all important. Community theatre provides the social processes by which otherwise competing or incommensurable knowledge bases can be reformed and extended. (It shares this with other forms of participatory decision-making.)

Murray River Story was about economics and ecology. At the time of the play, important changes in administration of the river were being made, most notably the formation of the new Murray-Darling Basin Commission. There was a strong sense that the play provided a conduit for community opinion about this new body and its responsibilities, and articles in local newspapers helped give context to the play in this way. It also lent strength to organisations such as the local Anglers Association, the local

Environment Centre, and the Murray Valley League (which represented farmers) and to scientists working at the Albury Freshwater Laboratory who were project participants and also involved in submission writing and research about the river's ecosystem.

Although community theatre draws heavily on past community experience, neither audiences nor participants become involved to have what is already their common understanding simply played back to them. They instead want to take a

journey away from what's already been socially negotiated, in order to educate themselves about new possibilities for taking action in their lives. This is the key to *extending our collective stock of knowledge*. In plays like *Murray River Story*, the experience of intensive involvement in community theatre shapes the attitudes and develops the knowledge that individuals and communities need if their aim is to re-think the position of humans in nature and to take action on environmental matters.

This case study has focused on community theatre. But equally we could be looking across the broader field of community arts to understand how environmental issues have been interpreted through cultural development activity. For example, there is a considerable body of visual art and urban design projects that, through participatory processes, have creatively explored the human-nature relationship.

Environmental education is built around the concept of environmental citizenship—that state of being in which awareness of environmental crisis and of human responsibility for nature are married to capacity and skills for taking action, individually and collectively. At the very least community arts has a role as an educational process which can help achieve environmental citizenship for its participants. Moreover, its power is as a form of public participation by which communities negotiate their way through critical questions in search of change, building the necessary knowledge and meaning from their collective experience of environmental matters as they are refracted through the intense (trust-building) processes involved in creating plays and other artworks.

For further information**Website:**

www.hothousetheatre.com.au

Key publications:

Brown, Paul (in preparation), 'Nature Moves Centre Stage: Knowledge Making and Australian Ecotheatre', in McAuly, Gay (ed.), *Contested Ground*, University of Sydney.

McDonnell, G (1997) 'Scientific and everyday knowledge: trust and the politics of environmental initiatives', *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 27, pp 834–835.

Just because scientists have some particular knowledge it doesn't give them any particular right to make the decisions more than anyone else. There needs to be an opportunity in the process of knowledge-building to allow individuals to question the safety of the reliance on scientific knowledge. Theatre can allow the public to raise these questions and challenge these systems.

Dr Terry Hillman, director Albury Laboratory, Cooperative Research Centre for Freshwater Ecology and participant in Murray River Story.

Community theatre – what it can achieve:

- Participatory processes provide a working environment that is trust-building.
- This allows hybrid knowledge to be produced.
- It also builds consensus about what actions should be taken on environmental matters.
- Performances convey such agreements in a public arena.
- This can build bridges between communities and decision-makers.