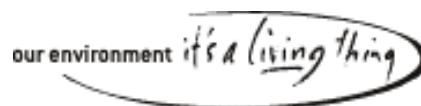


Write it up!

Sustainability education case study

**What if it's not in anyone's backyard?
Tom Thumb Lagoon**



What if it's not in anyone's backyard? Tom Thumb Lagoon

Snapshot

Aims

This project aims to restore Tom Thumb Lagoon, previously degraded by harbour reclamation, stormwater and a nearby rubbish tip. The project also aims to promote the importance of the Lagoon and inspire people to participate in conservation measures.

Location

Tom Thumb Lagoon is located 2km south of Wollongong on the NSW south coast.

Who's involved?

'Friends of Tom Thumb Lagoon,' a local community group, began working on the lagoon in 1991. A number of other organisations are now also involved: Conservation Volunteers Australia with their program 'Revive our Wetlands'; Wollongong City Council; the Catchment Management Authority; BlueScope Steel; university and school classes undertaking projects; corporations, families and individuals.

Good practice principles

The Tom Thumb Lagoon project demonstrates good practice sustainability principles through its high levels of community and stakeholder engagement, strong partnerships, effective communications and future focus.

Funding

The project receives funding and support from the Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority, the Wollongong City Council's Environment Fund, BlueScope Steel and Conservation Volunteers Australia.

Contact

Friends of Tom Thumb Lagoon
Susan McGregor
Ph (02) 4274 1424
caredesign@bigpond.com.au

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Sue McGregor	Friends of Tom Thumb Lagoon
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Katie Ross	AAEE Case Study Facilitator

The place

Tom Thumb Lagoon is comprised of an estuarine channel, remnant saltmarsh, and tidal mudflats with a small waterway, the Gurrangutty flowing into it. In 1958, dredging work in the Port Kembla shipping area to create the Inner Harbour reduced the wetland area from its original 500 ha to around 7 ha today.

The remnant wetland plays a vital role in providing habitat to a range of plant and animal life, including migratory bird species protected under international agreements and the endangered Green and Golden Bell Frog (*Litoria aurea*).

The challenge

Most people previously referred to Tom Thumb Lagoon as a swamp. In addition to the severe reduction in size, this unloved wetland was impacted by:

- leachate from the former Wollongong Builders Refuse Tip
- channelling of tidal flow between the lagoon and Port Kembla Harbour through a causeway that inhibits the passage of aquatic fauna into the wetlands and traps sediment in the wetland
- storm water and other effluent from the nearby steel works and other runoff from its largely urbanized catchment via major drains.
- Overflow in times of high rainfall from a sewer main running through the wetland.

The Lagoon was previously under the jurisdiction of three separate land boards, so it was not clear who was responsible for the Lagoon's deterioration. In the meantime, the Lagoon was shrinking, and fauna such as the Green and Golden Bell Frog and visiting birds continued to disappear. It was also a case of 'out of sight, out of mind' - not visible from nearby roads; the Lagoon was in 'no one's backyard'.

Sustainability education acknowledges the complex connections between diverse aspects of environmental problems.

Saving the lagoon

The fight to save the Lagoon began in 1991 with formation of a community group, the Friends of Tom Thumb Lagoon (FoTT). The successful work done by FoTT has attracted corporate and government sponsorship.

In 2000 Conservation Volunteers Australia (CVA) supported the reclamation program with funding from CVA and BHP Billiton's Revive our Wetlands Program. 'Since 2001, CVA has been coordinating teams of both international and local volunteers in undertaking restoration of the site through the Revive our Wetlands Program.' (Byrne, 2007)

Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority (SRCMA), now a significant regional partner, committed funding for 2004-2007 under the Revive Southern Rivers Wetlands Program.

Wollongong City Council became an active partner, supplying materials such as native plants, tools, and herbicides. Council has remained closely involved and later provided financial support for a part-time Project Officer to engage the local community in various on site projects. In August 2005, with support from the SRCMA and the Council's Environmental Fund, a Revive our Wetlands Project Officer was appointed. This allows for a works program on and around the wetland two days per week.

Industry involvement

BlueScope Steel has successfully integrated its staff professional development and environmental training into the project. Robyn Murphy, in charge of this training, had previously attended a 'NSW Our Environment – It's a Living Thing' sustainability education program.

'BlueScope Steel didn't actually donate to Tom Thumb, so I proposed that we use Tom Thumb as an education tool instead,' said Robyn. 'I think money is really important, but so is awareness. Our training program is over a million dollars. We use Tom Thumb Lagoon as a culture change agent in our organisation. It is such a great place to show people the nurseries and salt flats. Involving the Lagoon is strengthening our relationship with FoTT'.

During the training the workers complete health and pollution audits and brainstorm corrective actions. The training looks for ways to foster ownership and involvement. Robyn said: 'We look at the connection between upstream activities and downstream impacts. You see people's jaw drop. This is where everyone's heart is touched and you don't get any change without that.'

'The impacts are greater in their own circle of people because the 'dread-locked' don't quite cut it for them. In that team of 10-12 people, there will a couple of blokes who will step up and those guys are reputable, so others will listen,' said Dan, an original member of FoTT.

Sustainability education promotes social change through the initiatives of individuals and organizations.

Partner relationships

The key is to have a champion within each organisation, and to build and maintain strong personal relationships. This helps others promote the program. FoTT have formed a productive relationship with Wollongong University, for example. Student theses have focused on the lagoon, university classes visit the site, and students work as volunteers.

FoTT knew people must go to see and appreciate the lagoon if they were to get involved. A staff member from Freight Corp, for example, was 'blown away by how much rubbish he saw on the other side of the railway. He stayed to help us in his own time,' said Dan.

FoTT have actively broadened the circle of involvement: volunteers from CentreLink are now on board, and people with disabilities can participate in volunteer work through Volunteer Illawarra, a council-based unit. According to FoTT, the BlueScope environment training model, partnerships, throngs of volunteers and now a paid project officer have been really beneficial.

Community involvement

The project has integrated community members and a wide cross-section of stakeholders to restore and manage Tom Thumb Lagoon. Increasing community involvement was one of FoTT's biggest motivators—boilermakers now know about CVA and Tom Thumb Lagoon, for example.

The Friends of Tom Thumb Lagoon have been the backbone of this project since its beginning. Many working with them have felt inspired by their dedication to the project.

The development and delivery of sustainability education aims to assist the community to move towards sustainability.

Effective communications

Both individuals and organisations need to feel their presence is worthwhile and making a difference. The CVA acts as a conduit for communication between the various organisations involved. Damion (CVA) said it is important to report 'up' on progress—and that while the informal communication was good, now a communication strategy is needed to report back and see how effectively money is used on the ground, for example.

Comprehensible and meaningful communication is an underlying basic requirement for all sustainability education projects. It should receive frequent critical review.

Future focus

As Dan said, FoTT found it is important to 'think ahead, know what you want and then build the structures, frameworks, programs and visions so that when opportunities emerge, we are able to act on them, take up the funding or put in the bid.'

'It is an infrastructural readiness that can be found in Goethe's quote, "Just begin. For action has grace and magic and power in it." '

Funding

According to an officer from Wollongong City Council, 'It was easier for us to say we would fund Tom Thumb Lagoon because they could match money. Projects have a much better chance if they have funding from other groups because it allows us to maximize the value of our money.'

From the CVA perspective, 'There has been a real push from the funding agencies wanting to know if we can see other investment happening. A focus on the future brings in the funders or keeps the funders happy.'

Future plans and actions

Friends of Tom Thumb Lagoon aim to:

- celebrate progress, identify realistic and achievable goals, smarter ways to do things, be more strategic and stay fresh
- identify the responsibilities of other stakeholders and future players, such as the Port Kembla Port Corporation, coal terminal, Sydney Water, the car industry, users of Tom Thumb road
- install an education centre, composting toilets, a wind turbine, and rainwater tanks (with funding from the Catchment Management Authority and the Wollongong City Council)
- explore the possibility of changing 'Tom Thumb Lagoon' to an aboriginal name.

Tom Thumb Lagoon will also become the focus of more educational resources and curriculum development:

- a local teacher is writing a teaching resource for the wetlands with funding from Conservation Volunteers Australia
- a lecturer at Wollongong University is integrating the project into courses with a social geography perspective.

Outcomes

According to Conservation Volunteers Australia, between 2001 and January 2006, volunteers with 'Revive our Wetlands' have:

- planted 6121 native plants
- controlled weeds over 21.3 ha
- collected 661 kg of rubbish
- coordinated 2072 volunteer person days (mostly local community volunteers)
- conducted flora and fauna surveys and monitoring, vegetation mapping, seed collection, mulching and habitat restoration (Byrne, 2007)

Tom Thumb Lagoon activities have trained about 1900 people so far. By partnering with youth organisations, for example, the facilitators have 'seen some naughty teenagers come out to be some of the best workers and good people,' said Sue (FoTT).

Tom Thumb Lagoon is no longer considered a 'wasteland but a wetland.' There is a real commitment to the Lagoon, and the community now values their environment.

Reference

Byrne, Jen (2007) *Restoration of Tom Thumb Lagoon*. Wetland Restoration Case Studies, Wetland Link, Conservation Volunteers Australia. (Viewed 31 May 2007)
<http://www.wetlandlink.com.au/content/restoration-of-tom-thumb-lagoon>