

Return and Earn Program Leader

SCOTT THOMPSON

highly commended

Scott Thompson initiated Nabiac Public School's participation in the Return and Earn program. The school has since recycled 7900 containers, raising over \$790 for the P&C. Using the Return and Earn Impact Calculator, the school has saved 46,405.89L of water, equivalent to 5153 minutes of showering.

When setting up the initiative, Scott organised a recycling bin specifically for the program, with designated labelling, showing students what items were appropriate to recycle. He also included specific items from the canteen, in order to target and reduce in-house waste. Not only does Scott volunteer his time to collect and recycle the items from this bin, but he also collects and recycles from volunteer community members.

Thanks to Scott's efforts, students and the broader school community now have a greater understanding and appreciation for recycling.

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Return and Earn Program Leader

CHRISTIAN MAAIT

winner

Christian Maaait was 17 and a senior student at Marian College Kenthurst when he launched the Return and Earn initiative in 2021 with the help of Social Justice Coordinator, Meg Thomas. They have since recycled over 10,000 containers, raising over \$1000 for charities including St Vincent de Paul, Caritas, and Jesuit Refugee Service.

Christian's enthusiasm and passion have created an effective school Return and Earn program. With encouragement and education, students at Marian College are now onboard using the new bin system. It works well and enthusiasm is growing, with students motivated to recycle, fundraise and have both a positive social and environmental impact.

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Return and Earn Program Leader

MEG THOMAS

winner



Meg Thomas, Social Justice Coordinator at Marian College Kenthurst, alongside student, Christian Maait, launched the Return and Earn initiative in 2021. They have since recycled over 10,000 containers, raising over \$1000 for charities including St Vincent de Paul, Caritas, and Jesuit Refugee Service.

Meg has supported and guided Christian and other students to foster environmental stewardship in the school through practical outcomes. By utilising the Return and Earn program, Meg and Christian have been able to prove the concept of recycling as having benefits to the environment, as well as fundraising and social justice outcomes.

Meg and Christian have also taken this further by effectively communicating their efforts with others, using this program as an opportunity to change the mindset and recycling habits of their school community.

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Sustainable Schools NSW Teacher of the Year

AARON PARKER

highly commended

Aaron Parker is a motivated environmental educator who is empowering students to become active environmental citizens.

Through his Grassroots Program, Aaron is fostering environmental awareness and sustainable practice by involving students in real-world actions for positive change. Students are supported to develop problem solving and leadership skills, and are encouraged to become environmental advocates both inside school and within their local community.

Through practical action, Aaron has led the school community and students to address a range of sustainability issues, including enhancing biodiversity through revitalising neglected garden spaces, reducing the school's carbon footprint through energy saving measures and promoting proper waste separation and recycling practices.

By imparting practical skills and fostering community-wide engagement, Aaron is creating a lasting impact on both students and the broader community.

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Sustainable Schools NSW Teacher of the Year

DANIEL LEVITT

Winner

Daniel Levitt, Director of Entrepreneurship, Pathways and Partnerships at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, Kensington, is a motivated sustainability educator. Daniel is commended for his innovative pedagogical approaches and collaborative engagement with students, peers and local community.

Through professional learning, participating in professional networks, showcasing school STEM and sustainability achievements, he promotes the importance of school sustainability both within and outside the school community.

Daniel effectively engages curriculum to achieve school sustainability outcomes. He created a new school based Enterprise subject, incorporating the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals and encouraging student led strategies for school improvement. He co-designed an integrated STEM project that focussed on making the school Carbon Neutral, facilitating student led collaborative design solutions.

Daniel provides opportunities for students to engage in participatory action learning, through projects such as the creation and maintenance of an urban garden, a school gardening club, and food waste reduction initiatives such as Food Scraps Friday.

As a teacher and mentor, Daniel is developing practices that are now embedded in his school community and will have an ongoing positive impact.

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Sustainable Schools NSW School of the Year

QUIRINDI PUBLIC SCHOOL

highly commended

Quirindi Public School showcases some wonderful examples of water conservation and biodiversity management. Water tanks, water bottle refill stations, garden beds and different water conservation behaviours are integrated into daily operations. The school has a native tree corridor and a cultural meeting place and different waste initiatives. Sustainability is integrated within learning and teaching through practical real life measures including making bee and insect hotels, nesting boxes and participation in environment days.

An environment plan for Quirindi Public School was developed in 2020 that planned out a strategic direction for the school in relation to waste, water, energy and biodiversity, with an initial focus on waste. Various leadership initiatives have been in play since 2021 to support embedding these projects including an “Eco Ranger Committee” for staff and a Youth and Environment Council. This year, the school has supported the celebration and integration of sustainability within the region by hosting a Sustainability Outreach Day. This had 500+ kids attend from around the Liverpool Plains district with Environmental Education Centre Staff from around the state conducting various workshops with small groups of students from K-6. This day included planting two hundred new trees and shrubs to create a future green corridor for the native wildlife.

We would like to commend Quirindi Public School on embarking on their journey and sharing the possibilities with others across the region.

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Sustainable Schools NSW School of the Year

REDLANDS *Winner*

Redlands School in Cremorne, Sydney, has successfully established a comprehensive sustainability culture throughout the entire school. They have created a Sustainability Framework and Policy, a Sustainability Strategy, and a School Environmental Management Plan, complete with targets and KPIs. The school conducts annual greenhouse gas assessments to monitor yearly emissions, and they conduct curriculum audits that implement programs from pre-school to year 12. Real-world challenges are also embedded in the curriculum to encourage students to lead and incorporate the practices they learn at school into their homes and communities.

Redlands School liaises with a broader community network of schools and hosts events like the World Ocean Day. Sustainability is a vital part of the school's strategic plan, and executive leadership widely supports it. They elect environment captains in years 2, 6 and 12 to support school environment groups, and a Sustainability Working Group includes 14 staff members, a board director, an executive sponsor, and the Environment Captains from Year 6 and Year 12. The school also has a Sustainability Community Advisory Group, which includes parents who are actively working in the sustainability field. This group provides advice and helps to discuss large-scale projects.

Redlands School has implemented incredible initiatives across both campuses, including a rooftop garden, pollinator and vegetable gardens, and a sustainable, plastic-free canteen that uses food from the garden. A cutlery library and mug station at the canteen, along with many recycling initiatives, have also been implemented. The school's leadership and commitment to sustainability will undoubtedly continue to inspire others and set an example for years to come.

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Sustainability Connect Business of the Year

mememe productions

winner

The Get Grubby Program, the educational arm of the TV series Dirtgirlworld by Mememe Productions, is a subscription service providing exclusive content for both educators and families. The program promotes sustainability through engaging video content, activity kits, educator guides, and email editions, as well as a podcast called Nature Detective Academy.

Mememe Productions also offers workshops, panel discussions, and real-world events to educate the public directly. The program has been adopted by 29 Local Government Areas and benefits approximately 1,700 schools and early learning centres, directly influencing the next generation's sustainability education. The company has a huge reach, engaging with 1 million families monthly on Facebook and Instagram and a mailing list of 230,000 subscribers, providing a dedicated audience for Mememe Productions' sustainability messages and initiatives. Post-COVID, Mememe Productions reached over 170,000 children and parents through performances at festivals and events, offering tangible experiences that embed environmental messaging.

Mememe Productions is committed to leading by example. The company operates on 100% solar power, harvests rainwater, and promotes organic and locally-sourced produce. The company divested entirely from fossil fuels and offsets all travel by investing in local tree-growing projects. Sustainability clauses are embedded in all contracts, and 95% of programs are delivered digitally. The company donates both time and funds to other eco organisations, events and initiatives, using its broad platform as a springboard for others.

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Sustainability Connect Business of the Year

KIDS CONNECTING NATURE

Winner

Kids Connecting Nature provides engaging, curriculum-linked workshops to preschool and primary school children. Kids Connecting Nature's community programs promote local biodiversity and go beyond teaching outcomes, fostering accountability and empowering participants with skills that are particularly useful for low socio-economic, all-female, and migrant schools.

Since beginning operations, Kids Connecting Nature's has worked with 217 schools, preschools, government and community groups, held workshops for 15101 people and provided 4848 bee hotels to support local native bees. Their most impactful programs have included: Super Pollinators, Insect Collection, and Hollow Heroes: Workshops inspired by the book "A Hollow is a Home" by Abbie Mitchell (CSIRO, 2019). Kids Connecting Nature's work is underpinned by academic texts including a forthcoming book about pollinators (CSIRO, 2025), accompanied by teaching notes.

Kids Connecting Nature has shown a deep commitment to modelling environmental sustainability through its resources, including locally harvested bamboo for building bee hotels, showcasing recycled insect habitats, using water-based and non-toxic finishes, and cutting timber and bamboo with solar power. The company also sources nest boxes from sustainable suppliers and displays ethically gathered insects for educational purposes.

Kids Connecting Nature's work is underpinned by thorough science research and interpretation, aiming to increase bee populations by informing participants of best practices. Their highly targeted messaging promotes sustainable practices, such as minimising chemical use to promote insects, planting flowers to attract insects, and emphasising the importance of pollinators for biodiversity.

Kids Connecting Nature also expands the reach of this environmental knowledge by liaising with The Jane Goodall Institute Australia to write their education programs.

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NSW Emerging Leader in Environmental Education

SALLY GIBLIN

highly commended

Co-founder of Be The Future, Sally Giblin's journey is characterised by a relentless pursuit of knowledge, an unwavering commitment to the environment, and a profound impact on her community. Sally has shown exemplary dedication to developing her skills and understanding of environmental issues. This continuous learning reflects her commitment to staying informed and well-equipped for the challenges of environmental education.

What truly sets Sally apart is her effective action for the environment. She has a substantial online presence, where she writes thought-provoking pieces for publications like Peppermint magazine, co-hosts the widely followed 'Hope. Act. Thrive' podcast, and engages in climate storytelling on social media. Her impactful climate workshops for children have made a significant difference, as have her roles as a spokesperson for Australian Parents for Climate Action and a Greenpeace General Assembly Member.

Sally has pioneered innovative eco-play workshops, partnering with organisations like the Coal Loader Centre and Mosman Council to inspire young minds. Moreover, the 'Little Future Makers' and 'Growing Future Makers' experiences have garnered positive feedback and are poised for expansion. Her co-hosting of the 'Hope. Act. Thrive' podcast introduces global climate leaders to a broad audience, furthering her influence.

Notable achievements under Sally's leadership include creating the Happy HabitART children's nature art competition and the impactful Reclaimed Waste Mermaid campaign, which achieved widespread media coverage. Her work has been recognised with prestigious awards and grants, underscoring the value and impact of her contributions to environmental education.

Sally's exceptional dedication, commitment to empowering her community, and creative approaches to environmental engagement make her a standout candidate for the Highly Commended Prize for the NSW Emerging Leader in Environmental Education Award. Her influence extends beyond her immediate circles, shaping a more environmentally conscious and active society.

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NSW Emerging Leader in Environmental Education

JESS MENENDEZ

highly commended

Jess Menendez has showcased a remarkable commitment to personal and professional growth, continuously enhancing her leadership skills. Her actions exemplify an individual who is not only eager to learn but also determined to apply her knowledge.

Jess's leadership in the field of environmental education is evident through her role as Education Manager at Sydney Zoo, building the education program from the ground up and creating an extensive network of educators and community members who are working towards enhancing environmental awareness. Her collaboration with First Nations elders and local schools to develop the Bungarribee Wildlife Experience and her work with Roots and Shoots to establish the first Western Sydney cohort of the National Youth Leadership Council demonstrate her capacity to influence and inspire others. Furthermore, her creation of innovative programs like Science Week events centred around reusing materials and the introduction of community programs like Mini Keeper for a Day highlights her innovative achievements in environmental education.

Jess's tireless efforts to instil a sense of environmental responsibility in students, educators, and her community are an invaluable gift to those who will follow after her.

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NSW Emerging Leader in Environmental Education

SALLY ERIKSEN

Winner

Sally Eriksen has exhibited a remarkable blend of dedication, innovation, and leadership. Sally's journey is marked by her transition from a background in classroom teaching to becoming a Sustainability Education Officer at Ku-ring-gai Council, where she managed the Smart Schools programs.

What truly distinguishes Sally is her impactful leadership in the field of environmental education. She has shown a remarkable ability to inspire and guide teachers, students, and parents, serving as a catalyst for sustainable change. Her leadership has been exemplified through various initiatives, including hosting the annual 'Smart Schools Update' webinar, piloting the 'Speaking 4 the Planet' competition, conducting presentations at schools and community groups, and co-hosting webinars on sustainable practices. Sally has actively engaged with schools, forming vital relationships and assisting them in navigating the integration of sustainability programs into the curriculum.

Her notable achievements in environmental education are substantial and multifaceted. She has successfully engaged with numerous schools, including primary and high schools, schools for specific purposes, and early learning centres, showcasing her ability to reach diverse educational settings. Furthermore, Sally's leadership of the 'Young People for the Environment' stall at the 'Sustainable Futures Day' event, encouraged students to communicate the benefits of renewable energy, demonstrates her strong commitment to nurturing other emerging leaders in the environmental field.

Sally's commitment to inspiring the next generation and creating lasting change is evident in her exceptional contributions to environmental education.

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GRAHAM VALENTINE

highly commended

Graham Valentine, the General Assistant at Quirindi Public School, has gone above and beyond his job description to lead his school and community in environmental education. Over the past four years, he has implemented the School Environment Plan, led the Eco Rangers and School Environment Council, and found creative solutions for the school's recycling program.

Graham has been instrumental in creating a culture of sustainability in his school and local community. He regularly applies for grants to implement environment projects, such as the 6 bin process in classrooms, which ensures waste diversion to recycling, worm farms, and composts. Graham has also rehabilitated a native habitat at the school, involving over 500 students in the process. He uses his practical skills to build sustainability infrastructure and learning tools, such as weather stations in his school.

Graham leads the Eco Rangers group, which includes staff and students, and encourages staff to adopt environmental sustainability values. He provides leadership and support to ensure the success of sustainability initiatives in the school. His passion for environmental education is contagious and has driven his leadership of staff, students, and executive.

Thanks to Graham's dedication, Quirindi Public School has won numerous awards and diverted more than half its waste into beneficial resources. His commitment to environmental education has resulted in both immediate gains and long-lasting positive impacts in his broader community.

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NSW Environmental Educator of the Year

PETER RUTHERFORD

highly commended

Peter Rutherford has been a champion for environmental conservation for 25 years, working tirelessly to engage both the local and wider communities. His expertise in organics, permaculture, and biodynamics has been shared with thousands of people. He has delivered workshops, guest-speaking engagements at various events, written books and articles, and appeared on television and radio shows to share his knowledge. Through his efforts, he has trained numerous educators, community garden members, business owners, and residents across Greater Sydney and beyond. He has also developed standardised School Composting and Waste Management systems and processes for schools, pre-schools, and community facilities on the Northern Beaches.

Peter's engagement of thousands of students, community members, educators, council teams, and businesses has been instrumental in educating them around the 4 R's and creating the ADAM principles. His initiative has led to the creation of the Eco Garden project - a demonstration centre of excellence for thousands of individuals and groups. As the patron of the Kariong Eco Garden, Peter has been recognised for his innovative and creative leadership. He received the Community Leadership in Composting award at the Compost Ball's Compost Leadership Awards in 2007. In 2015, he created and delivered the Serious about Soil event at Dee Why RSL, where he presented to approximately 500 people. His ethos of "taking care of everywhere you go" has inspired thousands to take personal action to nurture our environment.

Peter was one of the founding members of the NSW EPA "Earthworks Community Education Program" in 1993. He co-designed and presented the Environment Protection Authority's Earthworks and the Waste Board's Healthy Gardens courses. His creation of the Eco Garden at Kimbriki as a demonstration space for the Northern Sydney Waste Board has educated the community about organic waste management, permaculture, growing soils, and organic food. He was also instrumental in trialling and providing guidance on water-reduction and organics products for two Australian-owned and manufacturing companies – Tumbleweed and WaterUps.

Peter's impact and reach have been phenomenal. His work has started a generational change in attitudes to sustainability and the environment.

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NSW Environmental Educator of the Year & Overall Winner

JULIA BARNES

Winner

As a trained teacher and scientist, Julia has developed a depth of knowledge over many years of dedicated work in environmental education. Julia works alongside schools, teachers, Councils and community groups to embed climate, waste, biodiversity, water and sustainability initiatives into everyday practice.

Julia's ability to manage events, think strategically and generate innovative ideas has allowed her to build networks of people and unite them towards common goals. Her work in catchment protection with WaterNSW Urban Program has been particularly impactful, working alongside 5 Councils and their communities towards a vision for water sensitive towns across the Sydney Drinking Water Catchment.

Julia's coordination of the Sustainable Schools NSW initiative has progressed the incorporation of sustainability principles into school curriculum, campus and culture. The program is a key touchstone for schools, with professional development opportunities and a newsletter reaching over 5000 educators across NSW.

Julia is an active member of her local community, including championing the Illawarra Regional Sustainability Network, volunteering for Gilly's Community Kitchen, and presenting at the Independent Planning Commission in advocacy for the Gomeroi people against the Narrabri Gas Project. She played a crucial role in delivering the Biennial Environmental Education Conference in Wollongong earlier this year. She is also pioneering new projects with EE NSW such as the Sustainability Connect platform which enables schools, local government and community groups to connect with local sustainability education providers across NSW.

Through her unwavering dedication to environmental education, Julia is a beacon of inspiration and a model of effective action, creating positive outcomes for those around her.

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