

**The State of the Nation: Environmental Education/Education for  
Sustainability  
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**Abstract**

This paper provides a starting point; a welcome to the conference and a context in which the remainder of the program is set. Developed totally from an Australian Association for Environmental Education [AAEE] perspective, this paper firmly establishes the conference as being 'owned by the AAEE' and identifies it as the flagship event for the premier EE professional association in Australia; a body which represents the views of those who design, deliver and/or evaluate environmental education/ education for sustainability.

By taking a 'state of the nation' approach' to delineate some achievements, identify some limitations and to set some strategic challenges for our future, the paper provides visibility for an AAEE view of the EE/EfS world. The Association has the potential to take a central role in developing and supporting a highly competent field of education practitioners who are well equipped to move the community towards more sustainable practice through vibrant well-resourced education programs. Now is the time when that potential must be turned into action.

**1. Introduction**

On occasions like this it is customary and vital to "acknowledge the indigenous owners of the land". With those seven words, speakers often then launch into their chosen topic.

But today, just for a moment I would like to challenge you to think about what that really means. Think about this site 200 years ago. What would it have been like? What would have been its most noticeable features? Now pay your respects to the indigenous dwellers on this land, think about their oneness with their environment and contrast it to what we do now.

Take yourself forward 200 years from now and imagine the AAEE in its 225<sup>th</sup> year is holding conference on this spot. What might it be like then? What is our role in maintaining this place and sustaining our world?

Form pairs or groups of three with people sitting near you that you don't know. Hold their hands and put your hands in the air to signify you have formed a group. You have 3 minutes to discuss the past and/or future.
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Along with paying tribute to the indigenous owners of the site there are other acknowledgements that I want to make.

Sandra Woollorton, and Jennifer Pearson our conference convenors deserve special words of thanks. I am sure that by Sunday they will need to just fall down. In anticipation, thank you all for a wonderful effort.

To the conference committee, indeed the entire WA Chapter of the AAEE thanks for all of the wonderful work that you have put into making this event happen. It is just a huge undertaking and your efforts are so much appreciated.

To Don and his staff at Promaco [especially Michelle] and to Phil Smith and Syd Smith from the AAEE Executive thank you too for so much hard work to support this conference. Thanks also to the staff of the school for providing such a great venue for our work.

Let's have a look at where all our participants are from:

<i>Signify by hand signals your State or Territory or international participant</i>
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## **2. AAEE and the State of the Nation**

It is with a sense of nervousness and occasion that I stand here addressing my peers in Environmental Education/Education for Sustainability. As far as I am aware this is the first time that the President of AAEE has taken the opportunity to make an opening presentation at the AAEE Conference. Why this is the case; I am not sure. But I do know that the current Council of AAEE were firmly of the view that we must stamp this as an AAEE conference. This should begin a tradition for the future

This is not the AAEE AGM, that happens this evening and we hope as members of the AAEE that you will all join us for this important meeting. That is the time for a report on AAEE activity. These remarks however will be by way of commentary and context setting about the state of the nation of EE/EfS in Australian. Some sort of summary of where we are at, where we might be going and what are our challenges as a field to get there.

This is indeed a lofty goal for a 25 minute presentation at the start of a conference. Lofty because:

- how do I get a handle on it?
- how do I be inclusive?
- how do I state the nation in a way that informs accurately and sets a challenging, yet achievable agenda for the future?

First of all what right does AAEE have to do a state of the nation report on EE/EfS. Well every right if we are truly the peak professional association within our sector! Every right if we strive to represent the views of the leaders in our profession and the practitioners on the ground. We have every right if we are truly independent and fearless in our views and hold clearly the right to express them openly yet with sensitivity. As an Association that is starting a position for this presentation the following quote Nelson Mandela establishes our context

*'Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deep fear is that we are powerful beyond measure  
It is our light not our darkness that frightens us'*  
[Nelson Mandela's Inauguration Speech]

Not all of you will agree with my upcoming view of our “state of the nation.” That’s good. A favourite quote of mine is *Dissent is not disloyalty* [source unknown]. Talk about it wrestle with it, tell me and others if you don’t agree; and even tell me if you do.

In your groups discuss the following

*If you had to present a State of the EE/EfS Nation what’s the one thing you would say?*  
Collect some of these

### 3. Overview of the Presentation

Given that this is not an academic paper, I am fortunately not constrained by sourcing each specific idea. But in presenting this state of the nation I have drawn a range of sources and experiences, including:

- The combined wisdom of and input from a lot of informants from the Council and the Executive of AAEE
- Significant interaction about EE/EfS at AAEE events with all sorts of people in all sorts of places, even lots of social events with family and friends.
- The perspectives of a range people involved in projects and activities that I have worked with in my private consultancy capacity. This provides opportunity to work with educators across a government/non-government and industry sectors from all over Australia
- The perspectives of a range people involved in projects and activities that I have worked with in my previous role as Director Industry and Community Education in the NSW Environment Protection Authority
- A number of key documents listed at the end of this paper
- Fourteen years of work in Environmental Education
- Thirty years of work in education for social change

In this presentation I will attempt to:

1. present a life stage analysis for EE/EfS
2. delineate some achievements in EE/EfS
3. identify some limitations and
4. set some strategic challenges for our future.

#### **Life Stage Analysis for EE**

In reality as a defined sector of influence we have not had a very long history of effort. And it needs to be noted that within the early years our history had a distinct schools emphasis. What follows is a short potted history of sorts:

**Internationally:** It is only 34 years ago that The United Nations General Assembly established World Environment Day.

In 1975: The Belgrade Charter and 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 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. Note that this was the first major call for the broad spectrum of Environmental Education/Education for sustainability that we see today and that all of us as participants represent

In 1991 the phrase *triple bottom line* was first coined

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

### **Nationally**

- 1970 the first EE conference in Australia was hosted by the Academy of Science
- 1979 AAEE established
- 1984 Victorian Association of Environmental Education [VAEE] formed\*
- 1993 Post Grad qualifications available in EE at Macquarie Uni
- 2000. Environmental Education for a Sustainable Future: National Action Plan released. National Environmental Education Council established by the Federal Minister for the Environment
- 2005 Decade for Education for Sustainable Development UNESCO Meeting in Melbourne
- 2005 National Environmental Education Statement 2005.

\* VAEE was set up in 1984 through the amalgamation of two existing organisations ETA (Environmental Teachers Association) and ESAV (Environmental Studies Association Victoria).

**At a State and Local Level:** Each of you could paint your own version of the key events, Time does not allow me to do so here but the history is not a really long one. For example in NSW the first policy promoting and guiding the implementation of EE in schools and the first state environment Plan [and establishment of the NSW Council on Environmental Education happened in 2002]. To my mind this document, entitled *Learning for Sustainability the NSW Government Environmental Education Plan 2002 to 2005*, was the first government document in Australia to promote a reasoned comprehensive approach to moving towards the Education for Sustainability.

There are two conflicting statements that can be made about this history.

The first is that as a sector of influence EE/EfS is in its early stages of development and should be allowed time to progress and mature into a real sector of influence.

A second and oppositional view is that we have had long enough and we live in a resource finite world. A world where sustainability is a breakfast cereal not a real working goal. A world where our children and their children will suffer dramatically for our decisions and greed. It is time we stood up with the big boys and girls and we delivered on potential. It will not come as a surprise to those of you who know me that I favour the second position and the achievements, limitations and challenges outlined below come firmly from this perspective.

## **4. Some achievements**

➤ **Gaining a 'licence' from the community and strong support from Government**

The Environmental Education/EfS Sector operates with a licence from the community. A licence that is promoted through government.

Put your hand in the air if the project/institution you are working on/in is NOT Government funded at least in part
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In this country we are blessed with strong support for EE/EfS from our governments. Sure we don't always agree with everything and we are a bit like Oliver in always wanting more and given the enormity of the sustainability challenge this is a reasonable desire, but education is seen as a credible player in the mix of tools used to move our community to sustainability.

Nationally the NAP and the work of the DEH gives us the policy framework, encouragement and acknowledgement to continue. It provides credibility for our initiatives and a mantle under which to progress. The recent announcement of the intention to review the NAP over the next few months is welcomed by all educators and the AAEE looks forward to making a significant contribution to the new plan, just as we did to the first one.

Governments and community/professional organisations need each other and AAEE looks forward to exciting and progressive years ahead. The DEH staff deserve credit for their part in fostering relationships to date and I look forward to continuing positive relationships in the future. A relationship where debate occurs, positions can be put firmly and listened to fully. A relationship that leads to more and better provision of EE into the Australian community.

Apart from the NAP there are now significant structures that DEH has put in place to promote and raise the profile of EE nationally - NEEN, NEEC and ARIES are important to our ongoing and improved use of education for sustainability. The States and Territories have also played their part in that they have resources a significant number of EE/EfS programs and have put in permanent structures like EE Councils with legislative backing – for example the N.S.W. Council on Environmental Education.

AAEE believes it is vital for us both to work together for our common goals and we have gained strength and direction through DEH support both financially and in kind especially in recent years.

➤ **Delivering a diverse range of programs across a diverse range of sectors**

At one time EE just focused in schools. Now it is much broader in its reach and approach. Let's have a look at who is here in more detail, in order to make this point.

Wave hands if your employer is
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|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The federal government</li><li>• A State or Territory Government</li><li>• Local Government</li><li>• An NGO</li><li>• Industry</li><li>• A private business [eg private school]</li></ul> |
|--|

- An academic institution
- Self employed/a consultancy
- Who have I missed?

Who is your work [mainly] focused on:

- early childhood
- young people between 5 and 18 [schools]
- tertiary level students [TAFE/VET and University]
- adults [at home]
- adults [at work]
- people in a specific group [eg people from a CALD/NESB community; indigenous people [etc]
- Who have I missed?

➤ **There are many more of us**

Clearly following on from the point above, there are many more people 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 often education is delivered by people who don't have a specialty in this area and thereby hangs a challenge.

➤ **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 like the amazing resources and tools available to engage people in learning processes.
- We are making significant strides in some sectors, particularly in schools. There is a need to continue to push for whole school approaches, but there is evidence of significant growth within school curriculum and teacher training.
- We need to improve our impact within industry.

It is clear that as a field we are setting ourselves loftier goals and testing if we are reaching some of them. We are trying to work out what works in a more strategic and tested way.

➤ **We are learning more from each other and we want to learn more from others**

The strength of the networks that exist around Australia and the desire to belong, attend conferences and workshops, piggy back on the ideas and programs of others is a real and emerging strength of our work and one that we must continue to grow.

## 5. Some limitations

- **We have not yet been far reaching or successful enough**

*Your sector has not been successful in bringing industry to sustainability*”Tim Costello [World Vision 2006]. For example in Australia only 34% of large corporations undertake Corporate Environmental Reporting... 81% in Japan and 71% in the UK].

*The world's 20% richest people consume nearly 75% of the planet's natural resources.* Akpezi Ogbuigwe [UNEP].

Despite the fact that in a sense the sustainability problem is really a simple one we have not made an impact at a level that satisfies any of us in our heart of hearts.

That's because the solutions are more difficult, especially when our politicians and many other community leaders constantly ignore or speak with forked tongues about the problem.

*“The infinite growth model is not feasible because it relies on finite resources. There is an urgent need to restructure the economy so that it functions within the renewable capacity of the earth”*Mark Patrick Taylor: Director of Environmental Science Macquarie University Letters to the Ed.

Yet economically and as part of our Australian culture we continue to see growth as the only real goal.

Franklin D Roosevelt had it right in the following quote many years ago. In Australia we are yet to learn this.

*‘The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much, it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.’*

➤ **The change is not extensive enough**

We are seeing real change in some sectors [for example, schools] and some actions [for example resource recovery or household water use]. But our efforts in changing community norms and moving the Australian community towards real, far reaching sustainable behaviour have been patchy, at best.

➤ **Some states and territories have no overarching framework for EE/EfS. Where this is the case AAEE has a responsibility to push hard for this.**

We will make real progress when all States and Territories have a policy framework and put real resources into EE/EfS; a framework that demands real action across all sectors and not just schools.

➤ **We are missing some really important opportunities and issues**

We are currently almost two years into the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development and where have we got to? We need to take big strides quickly to further the Decade.

Clearly also there are some issues where education lags behind; for example while some good pockets of work as being done in some places, we have generally been slow to uptake climate change as a real issue.

➤ **We fail to evaluate and report on our efforts extensively enough**

There is still too little evaluation of our efforts and when evaluation is done it is often poorly planned and/or reported upon. All of us must get better at determining whether our efforts work or achieve the objectives that we set for them.

➤ **We lack professional standards and accreditation**

Unlike other professional groups we do not have a ready and mandated set of standards that drive our practice. We lack an educator accreditation system and we in a sense promote the premise that 'anyone can do EE/LfS. While that is clearly not true, the significance of the lack of professional standards is cannot be understated. It is one of our biggest limiting factors. Imagine working in public health [nursing Physio doctors etc, without having undertaken some sort of registration process. Not only do we not have that, we have not even got a set of agreed standard that guide employers and training providers.

➤ **We still have not sorted whether we are EE, LfS or ESD**

The Bruntland Report in 1987 was a key focus for an already existing conceptual process that put Ecologically Sustainable Development [ESD] in front of us and presented us with a challenge. The movement towards sustainability as a concept and LfS as a vehicle was amplified at Rio, and through the Kyoto Protocol shambles from 1997 onwards, and it gained significant momentum in Johannesburg in 2002. The label given to the 'Decade' – 'Education for Sustainable Development' adds more complication and the shifts backwards and forwards has confused the process a little. Are we talking about LfS or Education for Sustainable Development or Sustainability Education? Or are we talking about just a 2006 version of Environmental Education.

And does it matter?

Yes it does and as a field we need to sort it out if only because confusion reigns and we need to bring everyone along together.

## **6. Challenges for the Future**

➤ **The challenge of framework, direction and credibility**

*'If you don't change where you are going you might get where you are going.'* Akpezi Ogbuigwe [UNEP].

*Credibility:* From a range of needs studies of educators it is clear that many of us still lack credibility in our workplaces, we are seen as the lowest player on the totem pole; education is the last tool that is reached for when any environmental management program is being developed and we are tied to that tool.

This challenge requires us to take a new view of professionalism. A more strategic view of what we do.

An important part will be marketing a professional approach - becoming critically reflective practitioners - forming networks that dialogue about practice and becoming more clear about where we can improve our performance.

*Framework:* In addition, as indicated above we have a challenge in finding, agreeing and sticking to the label for what we do. To my mind, what we do must be strongly linked to 'sustainability outcomes' and if the Decade drives that then we use the DESD label.

*Direction:* We need all jurisdictions to develop and drive policy and activity that promotes the extensive use of education, integrated with others, as significant tool for environmental management and change.

➤ **Make the Decade work for us**

According to Carl Lindberg, the Adviser to the DG of UNESCO on DESD *“Education must inspire the belief that each of us has both the power and the responsibility to effect positive change on a global scale.”*

ESD envisages a new approach to education that will simultaneously protect the environment and provide for social, cultural, economic and personal well – being, which together form the foundation for human and global security.

We know that DESD has provided us with a ten-year period to focus our attention on education for sustainable development. *‘Let us infuse the underlying values of sustainable development into education and infuse that education into our institutions and organisations; our highways and byways; our offices and houses; into our lifestyle and of course into governance!’* Akpezi Ogbuigwe [UNEP].

Integrated in this could be a rally call to using the Decade of ESD as a means to gain profile for ESD. It can be the responsibility of all of us even in the absence of a national framework. Can I suggest creating a vision with your organisation about where you want to be 2014 and back casting to set the steps to reach it? Think about and discuss what indicators you would use to achieve it.

➤ **Learn it’s a sophisticated business and we are in a time of change**

- EE moving to EfS
- The notion of sustainable..... [schools business agriculture]
- Movement from schools and outdoor education to also encompass community and adult education
- From end of pipe to top of pipe.
- Working closely with other professions, often these people do not share our world view. Engineers, lawyers, planners, community members of all sorts. Requires ‘artful’ communication
- Is the word ‘education’ our problem? Is that just what happens in school?
- We need to fight being the soft and fluffy part of the game. We are that in the minds of some.
- Does education work? Well if we were not convinced that it does than we would not be here. But, how do we convince others?
- Improved interventions with industry and the adult community.

➤ **Identify, promote and improve our professional standards**

We’ve got to continuously improve in what we do. We especially need to demonstrate improved program design and evaluation. We also need to identify what professional standards are required to work in our field and to promote them with vigour. Not everyone can develop education that works, education that really impacts upon what people do and what people believe.

➤ **Deal better with the overwork and over expectation issues**

Clearly for most of us there is too much to do and too little time. All of the limitations and challenges detailed above make this an even bigger quandary.

For all of us this means working smarter to achieve more.

## **7. How might the Association Help?**

The Association has three major and important roles.

*It has a responsibility to promote the most extensive and effective use of the tool of education to help people to behave more sustainably. It must advocate and lobby strongly to reach this reality.*

*It has a responsibility to support via professional Development and other more direct means the work of its members and others.*

*It has a capacity and responsibility to develop local networks that allow people support and promote the sharing of programs and skills*

In this industry we deserve a vibrant association, where membership is a norm for us and all of our peers. We deserve a professional body that works for us and with us to improve the capacity of education to influence people's behaviour, attitudes, knowledge and skills.

In this regard it is a pleasure to invite you the AAEE AGM tonight and to draw to your attention the following new products of AAEE.

Today I launch the new document ***A Guide for Planning AAEE Professional Development Events.***

- This document is an example of what the association can do to build the skills of members
- It also increases the professional capacity of the Association itself
- And it demonstrates the expertise of Association members.

It is a good example of the new role the Association can play and we are indebted to Phil Smith and Katie Ross for their work on it. It will be a living document on the AAEE website.

I also want to draw to your attention that the Western Australian Chapter has created a website that was designed to be a useful tool for educators, children, parents and the broader community about the rich tapestry of support available for environmental education. The site has a directory reflecting the main concepts of sustainability with accurate information about how to find what is required for any project. This networking tool will be a valuable addition to the many websites available and as the President of the AAEE Association it is my pleasure to acknowledge the efforts of one of our Chapters in providing such a valuable resource for their community.

As I said at the outset I would like your views throughout this conference [and beyond] on the state of the nation as you see it. Even more valuable though will be your concerted and continued involvement in changing the state of the nation.

## **Some Helpful References**

The following documents provided some of the thinking underpinning this paper

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