

**4<sup>th</sup> National Waterwatch Conference**  
**Navigating the Rapids**  
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**Title:**            **Binding Rural Communities Together**  
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The Coomalie Region neighbours the Litchfield National Park and has two big river systems and catchments within its boundaries of the Adelaide River and Finniss River. It is located about 100km south of Darwin and covers an area of approximately 15 000sq km. It has about 1500 residents with two major town centres of Batchelor and Adelaide River. Approximately 300 residents live in the Batchelor township and approximately 150 residents in the Adelaide River township the rest are on rural properties. There are two schools within this area Batchelor Area School (BAS) which caters for students from preschool to year 10 and has 15 teachers and Adelaide River Primary School with 3 teachers and 45 students. The Batchelor Outdoor Education Centre is attached to Batchelor Area School and runs in house camps with outdoor themes and challenges.

As with other areas of rural and regional Australia it is difficult to hold on to education staff along with other public servants, employment opportunities are rare and many people who live in this region own properties, work them and also work away. Fortunately for Waterwatch and Landcare there has been a consistent interested staff base at both schools. To be able to explain the process of the increase in participation within environmental activities within the region it is necessary to break down the two towns and schools and tell their stories separately.

**Batchelor Area School (BAS)**

Batchelor has an unusual history, it was originally established to service a uranium mine called Rum Jungle in the late 1950's through the 1960's. It then serviced an iron ore mine at Woodcutters and is now a tourist town along with housing the only indigenous tertiary institute in Australia. Employment is at the college, at the school and other public service opportunities throughout town along with the usual services providers. There is also a considerable amount of rural blocks supplying produce for local markets. It is also known as the gateway to Litchfield National Park. Batchelor is part of the Finniss River catchment. The town members were not known for their participation in volunteer activities and this is possibly due to the highly transient nature of the population. This started to change during 1998 as the local Landcare group became more proactive and gave the Waterwatch monitoring role to the local area school. From this, many activities came into fruition. The school had already been involved in Arbor days and other activities within the school grounds and the students were proud of their surroundings.

The teachers involved in the Waterwatch program (2 high school and 2 primary) started to source educational material that could be taught within the classroom that would tie in with NTDE Guidelines. There wasn't a lot about so they started to write their own activities and apply them. This eventually evolved, with assistance from many others, into the NT Waterwatch Education Kit. They trained core groups of

students in the process of water monitoring and data collection. These students were then taken into the field and started water monitoring. As their confidence increased students were able to demonstrate to land holders how to do water monitoring and the reasons behind it. This was a huge achievement for the students as they had not had much to do with adults outside of their immediate group.

The Litchfield National Park Rangers assisted in increasing the student's knowledge on their local environment. Teachers ran camps where students were able to participate in Park operations and be seen by tourists. They were beginning to gain confidence in their local environment and to show an increased interest in numeracy and literacy due to their application of theory to practical situations. The high school science teacher continued to motivate students in the field of environmental education by successfully applying for funds to establish a wildlife corridor through to a tree farm which had already established pockets of native flora for local wildlife. Bruce Garnett's Environmental Education Elective in the high school was highly contested by students and was often the first to be filled ... it still is. This project incorporated the Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) students and staff. Conservation Volunteers were involved with the project and this enabled students to encounter different ways of conservation education. Students reported to the community via the school newsletter and the local Landcare group became involved.

The Landcare group encouraged the students to identify a problem area within the region that they would like to see improved. They picked Rum Jungle Lake and Little Finnis River at Nick's Crossing. The Landcare group assisted in the recognising of issues in these two areas and goals were established by the students along with an action plan. The students started to involve environmental education into a wide variety of their subject areas. Staff buoyed by their enthusiasm encouraged this with participation in such activities as Murder under the Microscope.

Rum Jungle Lake needed weed eradication and the establishment of native flora to prevent erosion. Students were encouraged to grow seed stock which the local community used in the planting of native species. This was the beginning of a partnership in conservation between the students and community members. Students continued to monitor tree growth and weed eradication.

It was decided that the site at Nick's Crossing was to be a rehabilitation and education site. Students and community members have prepared the site by participating in weed eradication, tree and grass planting along with preparing information for the people that utilise this area. The goal here is to provide a resource to educate community members about caring for catchments and encourage them to improve practices that impact land and water quality on their own properties. The community involvement is increasing along with the interest in what is available to them to assist in improving their property. The Coomalie Landcare Group is increasing in size and many students are encouraging parents and landholders to join. This is a significant milestone in a community that in the past had little to do with their neighbours or community involvement.

The efforts of the community and students have been recognised by the achievement of a Landcare award for Rum Jungle Lake and the Tidy Town Environmental School Award. Recognition of effort has been rewarded by the successful application for a regional weeds officer and community equipment along with a variety of Green Corp activities occurring in the region. These things along with the social atmosphere of the meetings, the sense of achievement, and being able to improve their local

environment are rewards for the people this area. It also helps that there is a healthy sense of competition between Adelaide River and Batchelor!

### Adelaide River School

Adelaide River is a unique township; it is the home of Charlie the buffalo from Crocodile Dundee fame and relies heavily on tourism. It is like any other rural town in Australia. It has its annual show and its annual race meet. Many of the residents pursue recreational activities that are rural based. But there is something exceptional about this town and that's its dedication to volunteering for anything and everything. Initially its involvement in environmental activities started over 10 years ago with the Clean Up Australia Day activities which became a large social occasion. This went onto competing in Tidy Towns events which of course the school participated in and was recognised for its effort by continually winning awards. Due to this the school students led by staff began to upgrade the school grounds by placing edible gardens in strategic points around the school, this includes a productive vegetable patch which is used by the school canteen and the locals. Six years ago the school became involved in Waterwatch activities. Sites were picked for testing and a handful of students would go out once a month with a teacher and test the waters of the Adelaide River. These results were sent to BAS and of course at the end of the days testing would involve a swim in a safe area. Students would talk with landholders whilst visiting sites and show them how the tests were run and advise them on the use of pesticides and sprays along with erosion control. It was found that the adults listened to the children and then sought further advice on weed control usually becoming members of the local Landcare group. The visibility of primary students in the catchments caring for the country was a powerful impact on locals as they realised these kids were looking to the future and cared. On asking local community members on why they began participating in environmental activities around their community the generic answer was that if kids could do it then why couldn't they. They have a lot of respect for the country and felt that they owed it to give something back. Not only that they also received something for their efforts whether it be assistance in weed control or a social outing.

The primary school students were being praised for their efforts by members of the community that had little to no contact with the school. This increased their enthusiasm, which resulted in their increased interest in all things to do with their local environment. They were asking teachers to teach them about environmental issues and were attending school on a more regular basis. Teachers started taking kids outside the classroom into the school yard and into the town to participate in environmental activities even if it was as simple as picking up rubbish and clearing drains. The school started to plant native trees locally with permission of the local council. Parents came along to help along with people from local businesses. When asked why they were there they said the kids had asked them. Some students had even written letters to individuals for the use of equipment.

The staff realised that we were on to something big. Attendance was increasing at the school as more of the students became involved in the practical application of theory. Their literacy and numeracy skills were increasing as they were applying them to real life situations that they could see immediate benefits from. Parents were excited to see their children become more involved in school and community activities and their willingness to attend school. The concept of developing a connected life long learner was evolving before the school staffs eyes. Through environmental education the

school was obtaining outcomes of the Department of Education Employment and Training. (DEET)

Waterwatch continued on a monthly basis which was supported by classroom based activities, weekly gardening activities and assessments of our school grounds. Students began to notice and record the degradation of areas that they were visiting and asked if it was possible to do something about this. Greening Australia were contacted, yet again!, and a submission was put into place to rehabilitate a local swimming spot that is heavily utilised by locals and tourists. The school was successful in its application and the school council was extremely supportive of its new adventure into environmental education. Little were we to know what a huge impact it would have on the local population.

Impact studies were done by the upper primary class on the area with assistance from the NT Conservation Commission and Greening Australia. Seed stock was collected and plans put into place. The students wrote letters to businesses asking for quotes on concrete through to transport of supplies. Surprisingly the businesses all donated their time and supplies for nothing, this was due to the recognition that the school was receiving for its efforts in environmental education and they wanted to encourage the school population. This inspired the students even further to set up rehabilitation activities within the school so that we weren't reliant on Greening Australia and other organisations for support. What was happening was a community was assisting a school in their endeavours for a secure environmental future for the area. Each working bee that occurred at Robin Falls more people would arrive to assist. It was also not uncommon to find the odd person working at the area in their own time without any encouragement from team leaders. On some occasions it was impossible to find a park and the numbers attending surpassed even our expectations. New skills were learnt by those adults who arrived and skills were shared. People learnt fencing, weed identification, spraying techniques and how to operate equipment, water testing and area assessment, all types of things to do with catchment management. This sharing of skills between adults and children occurred throughout the rehabilitation project.

From this involvement and through other initiatives run by the school has inspired the community to move on to other areas of concern such as weeds identification and eradication. This has resulted in the inclusion of government agencies in training days for the community which have been well attended. Land holders are now assisting each other with weed control along with general members of the township who only have a garden are involved in controlling weeds on private land.

The school also became involved in the EnvriSMART program which involved auditing five areas of the school – water, land use, waste, energy, and air. The results from this gave the school an environmental policy, written by the student's along with a mission statement. The local community body were consulted on this as they indicated interest in what the students were doing at the school. They had input into the mission statement and the policy. From this a demand was created by the local businesses for an auditing process for their work places. The students shared with them the processes that they used and demonstrated the changes that were made within the school for their environmental benefit and to assist in becoming a sustainable concern. Business adapted what the students demonstrated and some of

them now have in place their own auditing process and environmental plans. These businesses consistently support the school and now proudly advertise the fact that they are attempting to do their bit for their local environment.

The arrival of the cane toad in our region this wet season has created another community effort in the attempts of eradication and recording of movement. The students have assisted the community in the identification of eggs through to toads. Community members often take students with them to assist in identification of *Bufo marinus*.

The recognition that the people of the Adelaide River Community receive is through the school winning many awards and grants to continue and expand their projects. Businesses are recognised by the school through certification and advertising space on rehabilitation signage. Of course the media is an important tool that recognises individuals and group efforts. Adelaide River is often in the local media through its efforts with environmental programs. Recognition through the application of awards within Landcare, Tidy Town and the successful application for grants is another way that inspires people to continue their participation. As with all environmental projects and activities maintaining momentum is a problem and community leaders, self appointed and community appointed, recognise this and allow the ebb and flow of interest to not affect what is going on in the projects. They understand that with a small community that there are many demands on time and resources and that the projects must fit in with this. This lack of pressure on the community is appreciated and due to this they are more willing to participate in isolated activities or to do small projects of their own. They have been encouraged to ask for assistance from many members of the community that do not have rural commitments and do so without fanfare. The school is used as a source of information and a base for the projects to be initiated and organised from. It is the hub.

What directs and drives the projects in our region is the pride, respect and enthusiasm our students have for their country. The adults respond to this and participate where they can and when they can. The increased involvement and empowerment of our members is a reward in itself and it is hoped that the driving force behind this, the schools, continue to involve themselves wholeheartedly in environmental education. The teaching and support staff that are heavily involved in environmental education within our area are consistently rewarded by their communities for their dedication and enthusiasm. They are recognised by the NTDE and by outside agencies as experts in their field and are often called upon to contribute to various projects. They were the initial push behind their communities becoming involved because they themselves are long term residents that are not just teachers but community members as well.

### **Recipe towards Binding Rural Communities Together – NT Style**

What you will need:

- Committed, innovative and enthusiastic school staff with keen interest in Environmental Education.
- Supportive principals
- Students
- Local project- simple yet important to the local community
- Interested locals.

- Environmental Education Materials that are easy to use

What to do:

- Teachers implement environmental education that is pertinent to their area. The most effective approach is through integrated curriculum so that all the learning areas are being explored through the topic.
- Application of learnt information to practical situations outside of the classroom. Practise new skills.
- Display new skills to landholders and other community members through organised visits.
- Students advertise what they are doing in the school to the wider community through newsletters and info sheets put up on community education boards.
- Students choose a site that they feel is important to them and the community that needs some assistance in the conservation area.
- Students go through process of planning, goal setting, contacting relevant individuals such as stakeholders, individuals who can assist and sourcing resources + finance to implement conservation activity.
- Students + whole school involvement on a regular basis on initial activities at project site. Let the wider community know about these activities through above listed processes.
- Invitation to whole community from the students to participate in a working bee and training morning including food and soft drink!
- Project projections to be kept simple and achievable and as each aim is achieved students and teachers consult with the community on what the next one should be.
- Recognition of efforts of individuals through thankyou letters, certificates and media releases.

**Always work with the natural ebb and flow of the local community**

**Know your clientele group**

**Show you are a dedicated community member**

These steps have proved successful for us in the Coomalie Region.