

Re-invigorating environmental enthusiasm during a drought – a Waterwatch experience in North Central Victoria

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INTRODUCTION

Most prep students cannot remember seeing water in many of the terminal lakes in parts of the North Central region of Victoria. Many rivers have been reduced to stagnant pools and the word dry-land is probably more appropriate than wetland in our region. Does this sound like a place you could deliver a Waterwatch activity? These are some of the issues that North Central Waterwatch program (NC Waterwatch) has been dealing with over the past few years in parts of the region.

Victoria's ongoing drought has meant that participation in the North Central Waterwatch program has declined as rivers, creeks, wetlands and dams have dried out. While staffing levels for NC Waterwatch are currently at an historical high, the task of servicing all schools and community groups in the region is a difficult one – principally due to a lack of water and the remote location of potential participants.

BACKGROUND

The Central Murray area of the North Central region comprises four local government areas all of which are geographically remote and typically characterised by a lack of water. The region has experienced eight years of consistently dry weather conditions which has made it difficult to engage communities and schools in traditional Waterwatch activities.

There are a small group of educators in the region who work in various fields of natural resource management. Although regular meetings and smaller projects were common between the educators, the entire group had never worked together on a single project.

The concept of a series of Environment Festivals for schools was borne after it was recognised that schools in the Central Murray area are often restricted by their location and travel costs to attend events and festivals in larger centres. In addition to this, teachers who were interested in integrating environmental studies into their curriculum were often unaware of the key local contacts. The aim of the Festivals was to engage upper primary students in experiential environmental learnings specific to their region.

The range of educators in the region was diverse and subsequently the initiative of the Festival was to provide schools with a sample of all the environmental programs operating in their area. It was also designed to familiarise teaching staff with the educators running the programs and the programs themselves.

A pilot Festival was scheduled for the Swan Hill Rural City Council to celebrate World Environment Day in June 2004. Three more Festivals were scheduled later in the year in the Shires of Gannawarra, Loddon and Buloke to coincide with Biodiversity Month and National Water Week.

Educators from 12 different organisations and programs delivered hands-on experiential learning workshops at the four Festivals. While some working relationships were already established, the Festivals provided educators and other staff the opportunity to work more closely together toward a common goal.

The range of organisations presenting included:

Central Murray Regional Waste Management Group

Waterwatch

Shire based Stormwater Officers

Department of Primary Industries (DPI)

North Central Catchment Management Authority (North Central CMA)

Vox Bandicoot

Landcare coordinators

Indigenous educators

Coliban Water

Grampians Wimmera Mallee Water

Buloke Biolink

Parks Victoria

Green Corps – Kerang and Swan Hill teams

THE FESTIVALS

Event summary

No of Festivals	4
No of schools	25
No of students	1100
No of workshops	35
No of organisations	13
No of sponsors	23
Amount of sponsorship	\$23,632

The Festivals were aimed at educating students in upper primary school, Grades Five and Six – though due to the small size of some schools and the arrangement of classes, students from Grades Three to Year Seven were also able to attend. Students were able to experience five different environmental workshops over the day, which covered four broad topic areas including:

- ★ waste and recycling
- ★ water
- ★ land and biodiversity
- ★ energy and greenhouse.

Each Festival featured workshops tailored to suit the local environment by using examples of local issues and were delivered by education officers working in that area.

The Festivals offered a ‘litter free’ lunch and students also received calico showbags containing relevant information and freebies and a reusable drink bottle to promote sustainable use of materials. Lunch consisted of a BBQ, fruit and a drink. The local Department of Primary Industries provided their BBQ equipped fire trailer and staff to prepare lunch (with relevant food handling certificates and the prior experience of serving large hungry crowds).

Participating teachers received comprehensive information packages that contained background and reference information as well as CSFII linked curriculum materials to enable them to further develop environmental education programs and build on the themes covered during the Festival.

Workshop groups averaged 20 students (depending on the size of the groups the schools sent along) and rotated around the workshops. Although each group did not visit every workshop – each group did participate in at least one workshop from each of the four broad areas.

The popular environmental theatre group ‘Vox Bandicoot’ performed ‘Circus Sustainable’ which was a hilarious look at global warming and greenhouse gas emissions. It provided practical information about what students could do to improve the environment. As indicated by the roaring laughter everyone enjoyed the show including the workshop presenters, teachers and students.

Green Corps teams were invaluable in their support of all four Festivals. Not only did they help set up and disassemble the displays they also assisted in serving lunch. Green Corps participants were each assigned to a school group to guide them through their workshop timetable. The assistance of the Green Corps teams contributed greatly to the success of the Festivals.

LEARNINGS FROM THE NORTH CENTRAL REGION

The Environment Festivals were a fantastic opportunity for major environmental organisations, and smaller education programs to strengthen partnerships and renew enthusiasm in areas of the catchment that have been traditionally under serviced due to their geographic location.

The Festivals were an excellent example of how to draw on local people and organisations to achieve outcomes in some of the more remote areas of the region. It also highlighted the importance of initiating and maintaining good working relationships to turn good ideas into action. Effective partnerships enabled a logistically complex series of events to be organised in a relatively short period of time. The Festivals attracted a total of 25 schools, and over 1000 students, most of who had never participated in Waterwatch activities.

The following points summarise the key learnings:

- Create a core planning group. If you plan on running the same event in multiple areas try to set up a group to include people who work across these areas for continuity of knowledge and experience and who can commit to supporting each festival.
- Brainstorm which organisations/programs are in your area and invite them to participate in planning as early as possible. Think outside the square as to who may be interested – sometimes organisations who you don’t normally engage really appreciate the opportunity to develop partnerships and be part of a larger network (for example local Country Fire Authorities, community health organisations, etc)
- Think about and target potential sponsorship early on to avoid disappointment. Finding sponsors at the last minute can be very difficult. Look into applying for some of the larger grants that are available so that you can start with a bulk amount.

- Research your venue carefully. Inclement weather is out of your control but by ensuring your venue has lots of undercover areas wet weather won't dampen your day too much. Space for students to play during breaks and ample toilets are other issues to think about.
- Consider engaging a professional theatre group – they are often humorous and get messages across in a different way to traditional education programs. It's proven that people retain information better if they have laughed during its delivery. Their light-hearted approach also helps to take some of the pressure off the organisers. They also make great MC's for your event.
- Have enough workshops running so that presenters get a break during the day. This allows presenters to rest their voice, take photos, grab a bite to eat and regroup for the next group of students.
- Don't make it too big! Keep the number of schools / students / workshops manageable – don't wear yourself out or you'll never want to do it again! It will also keep your costs down too.
- Employ St Johns First Aid to help out on the day. They are not expensive and it takes some of the responsibility away from you.
- Occupational Health & Safety is not something we always consider but by completing an OH&S plan you have the opportunity to look carefully at your site and identify any dangers. A plan such as this can be a very useful planning tool and helps to streamline the delivery of your event.
- Provide teachers with an OH&S summary before the day outlining their responsibilities and highlighting that their students are their responsibility. Also include a map of the Festival site so they know where buses are to arrive, where to register, etc.
- If budgets allow, provide each student with a reusable calico bag containing relevant information and / or water bottles (with the event sponsors logos or donated by an event sponsor, eg; water authority) and water fountains for refills throughout the day.
- Provide teachers with a Teachers Pack with curriculum linked activities and materials from each workshop to take back to school and integrate into the curriculum.
- Engage a group of people to help you with set up, pack up, lunch, orientation etc. We engaged two Green Corps groups who were really pleased to be part of something different and innovative. It also gave them an opportunity to network with people from a diversity of jobs in the NRM industry.
- Attract volunteers to cook lunch. We had the Department of Primary Industries BBQ equipped fire trailer and Department of Primary Industries staff – who were pleased to get out of the office for the day and were experienced at preparing and serving large groups.
- Indigenous education is often overlooked at events. Although we found it difficult to find an Indigenous educator, eventually we found one through the school network. This is another worthwhile network to tap into.
- Demonstrate to sponsors how they will be promoted at each event. We produced shirts for the event which has all the sponsors printed on the back and were a way for teachers and students to easily identify event organisers and workshop presenters.
- Alert your local media of the event. We had great support from our local print media and also from ABC radio. It another way to promote the sponsors of the event as well.

- Make it a rubbish free event – in keeping with the sustainable theme. Contact your council for WasteWise recycling bins.
- Consider holding your first planning meeting late in the year before you want to deliver the festivals. This way you can let schools know of the event as early in the year as possible, so that they can plan for it in their budget and curriculum.
- If you are able, offer remote or smaller schools money to go towards bus hire to encourage participation.
- Evaluate the event - which workshops were well received, feedback from teachers/students about lunch/venue/timing of the event, etc. This is great information for the next time. While it is difficult to get written evaluation from busy teachers, you can record the verbal comments that you receive during and after an event.
- Debrief – discuss what worked for you as a planning group, what didn't, and what you would do differently next time. Often this information is forgotten if it isn't recorded. Do this over lunch or a coffee. Treat yourselves as it is a huge job and you deserve it!

Quotes from participating schools

- “A well organised Festival. The broad overview of environmental issues was terrific. Gave students a taste. Well done and please keep us informed of future Festivals.”
- “Children thoroughly enjoyed the performance and the humour included, message was clear and easy to understand”
- “Very well managed and catered for - especially when organising such a large group”
- “It was extremely well organised. We enjoyed the day and please include us for future days in the future. Well done - a great idea.”
- “We thought the Festival was great – the activities were very relevant and enjoyable. The students learnt a lot and were very interested. Their feedback after the day was very positive. Well done.”
- “Thought the environmentally friendly bags were an excellent idea. A large number of students have been using the bags over the past week, bringing a variety of goodies to school in them. Retain for future years.”
- “So well organised. Really great workshops. Has expanded my knowledge of resources available for future work units and themes. Thanks.”
- “The Festival was extremely well planned and a great success. We appreciate the invitation and opportunity to participate”
- “Thanks for a brilliant day. The organisation and presentation of the day was spectacular. The kids really enjoyed it and it was a friendly and positive environment. We really appreciated the work that was put into the day. Thanks heaps!”

CONTACT INFORMATION

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