

FOCUS

Students have a wild time with eco-education

Sustainability education offers students and teachers alike wonderful opportunities for spirited and rewarding learning.

Raising students' awareness about the environment, biodiversity and why species are threatened is the aim of Western Australia's EcoEducation program.

Manager of the program, Elaine Horne, says the activities offer a fun way for students from pre-school through to year 12 to learn about the environment.

'The main focus is hands-on experiences and for students to learn about biodiversity conservation, threatened species, ecosystems, how to behave appropriately in the environment, how Aboriginal people took care of the environment and the impacts of our own activities,' she says.

The courses take place in established environment centres where Ms Horne and her team organise a diverse learning program of forest activities. All programs are closely linked to the curriculum. Upper school biology and geography students, for example, undertake field work, focusing on local biodiversity, species adaptation and associations.

Three Aboriginal culture programs led by Aboriginal instructors have also been designed for different age groups. In one activity, primary students are taught to make fishing nets, catch fish and search for turtles with their feet in swampy areas.

EcoEducation provides a combination of pre-excursion and post-excursion activities, as well as resources to help teachers to continue the learning process back in the classroom. 'It is about connecting with the environment and educating children in making responsible decisions about it,' says Ms Horne.

While Elaine Horne and her team bring students to their environment centres, 'Wild Man' Philip Green of Eco-Interp Services takes his wildlife education programs to the students' own backyards. Over the past 20 years he has worked with more than 300 000 students in Australia and New Zealand, in about



'Wild Man' Philip Green in action. He sees amazement and enthusiasm from kids who participate in his 'eco-interp trails'. Kerry Brown/Eco Interp Services

1200 primary and secondary schools.

Green describes his 'Wild Man' character as a cross between Steve Irwin and David Attenborough. 'It's solid science but it is exciting and interesting.' His current program is on water, with a focus on getting kids interested in, and excited about, biodiversity in their local area.

He has developed a concept which he calls 'ephemeral eco-interp trails', where he takes students into local habitat. He initially makes a site visit to the park, river or vacant bushland to assess what is there and marks out a trail with stops along the way, before taking groups of students through.

'Even in the inner city, there is habitat, wildlife and nature wherever we are,' says Green. 'Birds are in every school ground. You don't have to get a bus to go and see them and you don't have to pay entry fees. It's something that's not used universally in the curriculum.'

The lowest bird count he has ever got is eight, in an inner city school in Sydney, and the highest is about 40.

The trails are cheap to set up; for signage Green uses simple laminated A4 or A3 sheets, which can be handwritten. He takes digital photos of the significant features, such as birds, insects and flowers, and enlarges them in quick printouts. When students arrive, they see the photos then go and look for the real thing, using a magnifying glass or binoculars, or just by using their own eyes and ears. This can be a profound learning experience for many city-based children.

Green also provides post-visit curriculum support material to help teachers continue the education after he has left.

The Wild Man recounts how at one small rural school, Riana Primary in Tasmania, the whole community got involved after he did a show in the grounds. More than 100 parents and students joined together for a community school barbecue followed by a night-time bush trail.

'It was a fantastic example of something in the curriculum not only inspiring students and teachers, but also translating into the wider local community, which is one of the objectives of sustainability education.'

The school's Principal, Sue Tucker, says Philip's infectious enthusiasm motivates and inspires students, firing their imagination to take an interest in the natural world around them and to consider their responsibilities in ensuring we are all working to create a sustainable environment for the future.

'Students have responded with such enthusiasm and amazement at how much there was to see and find on their walks.'

'As a school and community we are now exploring ways to further utilise our nine hectares of bush as a valuable learning resource for developing students' understandings in managing our natural resources. One of the first things we would like to do is have an environmental audit of the area completed.'

● Robin Taylor