

GETTING STREET SMART

A growing suburban conservation movement is rolling out across Australia, nurturing local community groups who are working to live sustainably and to save their particular patches of natural assets.

That ecological sustainability needs to be about grassroots action is the realisation at the heart of Sustainability Street, an initiative of Frank Ryan and others from Vox Bandicoot, an organisation which started out in community theatre 20 years ago before coming up with a community engagement and education program for the natural environment in 2000.



Residents of the Dalray St. Village, Blacktown, Sydney, celebrate their Sustainability Street graduation. Frank Ryan

Their endeavour is backed by extensive pedagogy aimed at countering the negativity, lethargy and sense of helplessness that the environment movement has to deal with when individuals feel the global environment crisis is all too much.

Sustainability Street is based on a 'one street at a time' approach, where local community members teach each other through a concept called 'communiversity', or a sharing of expertise in sustainable living and nature conservation via learner-centred swapping of information through word of mouth, the form of education most likely to last, according to Frank Ryan.

'I'm only one person and what can I do?' now has an answer, found in Sustainability Street's *Southern Cross of Optimism 'ee'* book, for environmental education.

'As a species we've always passed on stories of danger, and the message now is that we can't clean up the whole world,

but we can all clean up our little bit of it,' Ryan explains.

'Information gained from a trusted source increases credibility. Someone in your community might know a lot about peak oil, and another has a fund of knowledge about chooks, so this information can be shared through regular meetings where a community evolves its own plan of action.

'Our deep sustainability pedagogy involves spurning doom and gloom, not getting on your soapbox, and understanding the link between turning on a light switch and its effect on biodiversity and the fate of

Australia,' Bergin explains.

'Plans are underway to fund the purchase of two buildings on the site for a centre to educate more people in the suburbs who are increasingly urbanised and disconnected from the earth.

'The program has proven a great platform for bringing the community together and we appreciate the role Whitehorse Council played in introducing Sustainability Street as part of their "Eco-Vision" policy,' he says.

Another Sustainability Street is just getting underway in Marion, South Australia, supported by the Adelaide & Mt Lofty Ranges Natural Resources Management Board.

Anne Gibbons, Marion Council's Sustainability Planner for Environment, is overseeing a pilot program that encourages



The Sustainability Street group from Cromwell Court, Blackburn, are custodians of valley heathy forest trees – individually numbered – and resident fauna, such as rainbow lorikeets. John Bergin

a mountain pygmy possum, for instance.'

One Sustainability Street group which has its epicentre on Cromwell Court, Blackburn, in Melbourne, can point to real results after forming four years ago. It has committed to the conservation of five hectares of rare bushland, the precious 'valley heathy forest' habitat type, adjacent to Blackburn Lake Sanctuary, and a corridor of habitat along Gardiners Creek, which eventually flows into the Yarra River.

John Bergin, from the Blackburn Sustainability Street group, says there are only 400 hectares of this habitat type left in the Gippsland bioregion, yet it used to cover most eastern Melbourne suburbs, extending to Sale.

'Our land features over 390 indigenous trees, including two stringybark types, native grasses, groundcovers and fungi. There's also a breeding pair of powerful owls, one of only 500 thought to exist in

people to transform their homes and neighbourhoods into enduring 'green' environments.

Local residents have met monthly to explore their interests in education to protect their own local environment.

'It takes a little while for members to settle on a project for development, one that they feel they "own". So far the pilot is going well with more people coming along each month,' Gibbons explains.

Now with over 150 active communities, Sustainability Street is up and running in several states, primarily Victoria and New South Wales, but does not yet have a presence in Tasmania or the Northern Territory. Several projects are about to get underway in the ACT and Queensland.

● **Christine Williams**

More information:
www.sustainabilitystreet.org.au