

Wetlands studies: an arts-aesthetic view

Boris Danilchenko

Abstract:

Watch young children at play. With bright eyes and boundless energy, they rush like whirlwinds from place to place, accompanied by a constant stream of excited chatter as they explore their surroundings with a wholehearted zest for life.¹

This article grows out of a fascination for the innate learning style of children and the wonder created by a unique and diverse wetlands setting. It explores how a group of educators, from Jacobs Well Field Study Centre (in south-east Queensland), developed an arts-aesthetic approach to environmental education as a joint project with the staff of Numinbah Valley Field Study Centre. 'Project Ozone' and the Boat Project are described as examples of what can be achieved by insight, and commitment to new directions in environmental education.

The wetland areas of Southern Moreton Bay, south-east Queensland, are the main teaching resource of the Queensland Education Department's field study centre located near the small village of Jacobs Well.

The use of the estuaries, sand bars, mud banks, *Melaleuca* forests, mangrove forests, freshwater streams, pools and rivers — as a focus for Environmental Studies — has been continuously evolved at the Centre over the last ten years.

This excellent location, plus the interaction of past and present staff with teachers, students and other interested people have helped mould the programs that are now individually designed for groups visiting the Centre.

The main inspiration though, has been the environment that we have ... waded through, swum in, been bogged and lost in, photographed, smelt, felt, sketched, slept in, fished, watched sunrises and storms in, sailed, motored and paddled through. This experience has shaped our view of what environmental education should be. Our approach hinges on two fundamental beliefs.

We believe that ...

For adults to be able to solve our environmental problems, they as children must first be made fully sensitive to their environment. In developing a 'feel' for the environment, children establish a sense of place, and an awareness of the roots of their relationship to it.¹

Also, ...

... people need to understand the symbols and codes of their technological culture, and be re-

introduced to their surroundings by first hand experiences with the interlinked rhythms of life, growth, and decay, in the widest sense.¹

With these two ideas constantly in the background, the challenge then for the staff at the Centre has been to design programs of study for the many and varied visitors undertaking field studies. With visiting groups ranging from pre-school to tertiary, we have sought to satisfy both their needs and our own in a mutually agreeable blend.

During the last four years or so, the Centre has responded to this challenge with help from the Agricultural Project Club Branch of the Department of Education and the Federal Government's Participation and Equity Program, (P.E.P.) as well as countless people. Two separate but essentially complementary projects were undertaken, "Project Ozone" was developed to provide a philosophical statement as to 'what we were on about', and the Boat Project offered the vehicle for extending our efficiency and effectiveness in mounting wetlands studies programs.

"Project Ozone" became a mammoth task, involving deeply the staff of Jacobs Well, Numinbah Valley Field Study Centre and the Art Education Section of the Department of Education. To be published in late 1986 or early 1987 as an (approximately) 100-page illustrated book, "Project Ozone" hopes:-

- To provide an alternative to the traditional, empirical approach to the investigation and appraisal of any environment. This still includes the academic aspect, while stressing a creative-expressive component.
- To facilitate development of methods by which all students can learn about and for the environment, using techniques that allow every participant to succeed, not only the intellectually gifted or academically skillful.
- To attempt to open doors to a new awareness and levels of sensory perception, leading to a fuller understanding, appreciation, and concern for the quality of one's environment.
- To foster the development of adults who are technologically skillful, but also have a sensitivity to the needs and qualities of the environment to which they are inextricably linked.

The other project, now complete, was the building and fitting out, using P.E.P. funds and the enthusiastic support from many high schools, of a 9.2 metre trawler and two 6.5 metre dories based on an English design. The addition of these three vessels — the "E.R. Duke" (sharpie), the "Albatross" (sailing dory) and the "Jabiru" (motor and oar power) — to the well-travelled runabout "Uca Marina" means that the Centre now has the wherewithall, as well as the philosophical outlook, to mount diverse, stimulating and safe wetlands excursions.

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Both “Project Ozone” and the Boat Project offer a flexible medium through which to design and implement an exciting variety of environmental education programs. In planning excursions of one to five days, the Centre relies heavily on an arts-aesthetics approach as a medium for the integration of subject areas.

What do we mean by the Arts?

The Artist is concerned with the totality of life, with continually rediscovering oneself, one’s environment and one’s interactions with it. The function of the Arts is to project, interpret and elucidate human experience.

The “Arts” extend beyond the visual arts, painting, drawing, sculpture and print-making, to include verse speaking, music, poetry, calligraphy, prose, singing, dancing and photography. They extend into the technological world of computer graphics, laser holography and video production.

The Arts facilitate extensive first-hand observation and personal involvement throughout the learning process — a process which educators should see as a link between affective experience and conceptual development.

Two assumptions generally underlie integrated studies — that human knowledge is not divided into well defined segments, and that education is primarily concerned with the total development of the individual. In this view, curricular approaches based upon discrete subject principles may prevent the learner from assuming the ‘seamless cloak of knowledge’.¹

This ‘artistic’ approach has meant for us the development of a whole new direction in wetlands studies. It has clarified our understanding of what environmental education should be concerned with, and changed us in the process. The following is a progression of ideas, quoted selectively from “Project Ozone”, that have been useful in mangrove studies:-

Mangroves

The mangroves offer their guests an unexpected and generally unknown learning environment.

This can be a stimulant, but in some it may initially create a negative reaction. Reassure students that it is acceptable to have these doubts. They may progress through a number of stages before they feel empathy with this seemingly bizarre environment. It is therefore essential that you be attuned to each student, to recognise these stages and guide them through.

The steps your students go through:

Stage One —

Leaving their folders safely on the perimeter they approach the mud with feelings of excitement, uncertainty or perhaps even fear.

Stage Two —

Taking those first cautious steps they squeal

‘Ooh it’s sticky!’

‘It oozes!’

‘What will Mum say?’

Stage Three —

With more confidence, they walk a little faster and begin seeing things:

‘Hey! There’s a crab.’

‘Where did he go?’

‘Look at all of those holes’.

Stage Four —

Once they start seeing things they forget about themselves. Now they’re ready to immerse themselves fully in this experience.

It has become their adventure.

Stage Five —

They are feeling confident with all their senses acting as receptors. They slide on the mud and race after toad fish — they want more! ...

Be aware that, regardless of age group, students won’t arrive at Stage five in unison. There will be those needing more time than others: here you are, after all, struggling with years of their conditioning about this mud, getting dirty and ‘YUK, it’s sewerage!’

Some students may not progress further than Stage two during their first mangroves experience. But all must experience success at their own level. For some, success will mean not having fallen in the mud, while for others it will be an understanding of the complexity of this environment.

However, it is only after having experienced these five stages that they’ll begin to care. That is when they’ll want to hear more about this habitat, how it affects them and how they can care for it.

This is your role: try to get as many of them as possible through to Stage five. Your main tool is your enthusiasm. By verbalising astonishment at the ability of crabs to moult or whimsically wondering why an ibis’ toes don’t tangle, you’ll be taking them through the stages to a new beginning.¹

In developing mangrove and other studies we have been fortunate in having access to a unique wetlands and marine environment, enhanced by the facilities of the Boat Project. An arts-aesthetic approach to environmental education has provided for us a broadened vision of knowledge — one which balances conventional approaches to field studies.

Footnote

1. All quotes are from “Project Ozone”, soon to be published by the Queensland Department of Education.

The author sincerely thanks all people concerned with its production.