

REPORT ON “FINDING NEW KINSHIPS” WORKSHOP AT BALANCE – UNBALANCE CONFERENCE JUNE 2 2013

AUTHORS:

Zela Bissett, Master of Environmental Education, zela@spiderweb.com.au

Shawn Jarvey, SweatyChicken Productions, 255 Hasthorpe Rd, Kananga, Q, 4570, Australia,

Dr Tanzi Smith, Mary River Catchment Coordination Committee, PO Box 1027, Gympie, Qld 4570, Australia.

Submitted:

Abstract

The *Finding New Kinships* workshop provides participants with the opportunity to connect with the natural world in new and deliberate ways. It is based on the premise that strong feelings of connection, especially to a particular species can, foster deep insights, critical reflection and a sense of responsibility for our actions in relation to the natural world. This workshop focused on freshwater ecosystems and our connections to them. One special ecosystem, the Mary River, forms the context and framework for the activity. This paper reports on the process and outcomes of this workshop which was held at the Balance-Unbalance conference in 2013.

Keywords: Kinships, Experiential learning, Balance-Unbalance, Mary River

The Intention

The Finding New Kinships workshop was conceptualised and planned to offer participants an interactive learning experience that generates deep ways of knowing [1]. We aimed to enable participants to integrate scientific factual knowledge with a deeper knowing connected with their personal experiences.

As the conference formed part of the Floating Land environmental arts program, it is relevant to acknowledge the contribution of an earlier Floating Land program (2003) which brought artists to the region from the French *Artists in Nature* group. Flowing on from this Floating Land, site-specific arts events were based around the Mary River in 2004 and 2005. These events created connections between Mary River residents who later became pivotal in the campaign to save the area from inundation by a dam project [1]. Participants viewed images and accounts of site-specific arts activities centred upon the Mary River, which helped to connect and galvanise the very cogent and coherent resistance to the plan to

dam that river in the years immediately following the arts activities.

Artistic expression combined seamlessly with scientific credibility..... Papers were presented to a number of scientific conferences and seminars while, outside, costumed larger-than life Mary River creatures performed with No-Dam bikini-clad women and green-robed “Sisters of Mary” chorused in song [2].

The contention that relating to the environment on a deeper, more experiential level provides a creative approach that can provide on-going motivation and counter burn-out in environmental campaigns was central to the workshop’s intent. Finding a kinship with a member of the biotic community in which one is situated has long been a key element in rites of passage among First Nations communities. *Finding New Kinships* was conceptualised by the presenters as a transdisciplinary activity: a partnership between environmental science and the arts. We drew upon another First Nations’ concept; that knowledge implies responsibility and each person is tasked to become an advocate for the ecosystem in which s/he is enmeshed [3].

The workshop included five sections:

1. A general introduction covering the aims and philosophical underpinnings.
2. A description of the blending of scientific processes with creative and deeply personal and/or interpersonal processes in regard to the campaign to stop the construction of Traveston Crossing Dam [2].
3. A presentation about the scientific study of freshwater ecosystems by Dr Tanzi Smith. This presentation highlighted that freshwater ecosystems in general are among the least understood ecosystems in the world [4]. It focused then on the special features of the Mary River and the threatened species that call this river home.
4. A guided meditation segment where participants were put in touch with a significant time in their lives and were guided through a process connecting this experience with a particular creature. Participants were then invited to model forms, draw, write or otherwise express their response to this experience.
5. Participants were invited to share their artwork, to talk about their personal experiences during the workshop, and,

finally, to give feedback about the workshop itself.

During part four, some participants requested to hear more about the role of the arts in the successful campaign to prevent construction of the proposed Traveston Crossing dam on the Mary River. About 4 participants including two international guests took part in this discussion, which was essentially a question and answer session. The rest of the participants engaged in one-on-one or small group conversations with each other and the presenters. Most created artwork in response to their experience.

What Happened

The final session, part five, was a whole-group sharing in which facilitators drew together the common threads of the discussions, and invited participants to share their thoughts and visualisations. Nine of the ten participants still present (one had to leave early) elected to share. The cultural and experiential backgrounds of the participants came through in the life forms with which they connected.

One participant from a northern European background saw a frozen cold white land in which he was a large furry white mammal, possibly a mythical, bear-like creature. In a subsequent conversation, he added that on reflection he felt that his visualisation indicated that he found himself in a harsh, inhospitable environment but was equipped with the warm blood, thick fur, size and power to deal with it.

An Australian woman shared her small plasticine model of a bird. She drew on her experiences as a bird-watcher around freshwater ecosystems. She recalled being beside a creek as an azure kingfisher, living by the water though not in it, being free to dart in and out as she pleased.

Her companion shared an event relating to one of the conference’s themes, bio-mimicry. As a coastal resident, he had enjoyed watching dolphins surfing waves near beaches around his home and spent a considerable amount of time observing them. Later, while in the Coast Guard, he was called upon to go to the assistance of two fishermen who had been taken ill out in the bay. His fellow Coast Guards insisted there would be no way to go to their assistance until the tide came in, because of a sand bar across the harbour entrance. However the participant recalled how he had seen dolphins ride

waves, and had timed his exit so the vessel could ride a wave out over the sand bar. He was elated by the memory, and declared that there had been only a metre of water under the boat at all times.

A US participant who had been an artist in residence doing community art activities in North American forests felt connected to a large tree near where she had stayed during a live-in residency. She felt she drew upon the tree for wisdom and a longer-range view of events. A Sunshine Coast woman shared that a time when travelling in Asia she had stopped by a waterfall in north Sumatra, where she felt an intense perception of being a Sumatran tiger. Interestingly, she had been propelled on her travels by becoming displaced from her home at Federal, in the footprint of the proposed Traveston Crossing dam. She felt that at times to defend nature we need the ferocious energy of the tiger defending its territory.

Another Australian from further inland, recalled growing up in Caboolture where she felt a strong connection with the carpet snake. In later life she met an Aboriginal ranger who had told her that many Aboriginal groups call the carpet snake *karbul*, and that Caboolture meant “place of the carpet snakes”. She made a small model of a snake, and added that she also felt a connection with the green frog, and had used this image in her art. She mentioned that she was aware that frogs are eaten by carpet snakes, but did not see this as a conflict, because in nature there are many such connections.

A participant with a European background shared that she had an intense experience of being a great sea turtle-like creature. Lying on her back with her carapace in the sand, and her belly exposed with tentacles and connecting fibres running from her organs to many different places and creatures. This person runs an extensive on-line matrix connecting many projects connected with water in diverse parts of the world. She also felt that she was nurturing eggs in her warm belly. Her plasticine model took the form of a curved shell containing a cluster of small oval eggs.

Another participant who came in slightly late, after being asked to conduct a discussion, shared that he appreciated the workshop and was glad he had attended because it addressed two very specific areas he had found under-represented at the Conference overall.

Firstly, that it dealt with art “in support of activism” through its information about how the arts projects “Bathing with Mary” and “Farming with Mary” had heightened people’s appreciation of their unique area, and empowered local residents to resist the imposition of an ill-thought out and environmentally disastrous scheme. Secondly, he commended the workshop’s use of experiential learning, personal introspection and non-intellectual ways of knowing.

Conclusions

Some recurring themes related to our kinships with the natural world can be observed from reported experience of the participants in the workshop. These themes include:

- The Kinships were diverse: people identified with a wide range of species, including both animals and plants that occupy a range of different ecosystems.
- That participants were keen to hear about the successful application of arts-based skills and perspectives to a real-world environmental campaign.

As presenters, we were touched by the participants’ willingness to trust us to guide them to a deeper level and to share generously with others. Although the time frame was a bit tight, the workshop was an exciting meeting of minds from many cultures and the discussion found an effective consensus across diverse endeavours and fields of interest,

Fig. 1. Mary River supporters take part in a flotilla along the proposed dam area in 2008 (Photo © Zela Bissett).



knowledge and expertise.

References and Notes

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