

# *Renew your zest*

## Fun activities for environmental educators

Here are some energising exercises that release the power of fun, memory, creativity and adult play in environmental education.

As educators we continually work with teams and groups. These techniques aim to build group energy, create a sense of community, restore commitment, rediscover vision, and renew team spirit.

They are simple exercises you can use in your day-to-day work.

(The times assume a group of 10-15 people.)

There are 15 exercises. They focus on personal values, sensing the environment, strategy and communication, and (the all-important) post-lunch heart-starter.

The exercises came from a special World Environment Recovery Day event for the **Illawarra EE Network** held at the Wollongong Botanic Gardens on 12 June 2002, facilitated by Les Robinson and Michael Conner.

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## GET TO KNOW and VALUES exercises

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### 1) A quick get-to-know (20 minutes)

A simple get-to-know for a group of strangers is to ask people to form pairs, then query their partners about: their name, their work, their reason for coming to the workshop, and one unexpected fact about that person. Each person reports to the group on what their partner told them.

The 'unexpected facts' usually break the ice nicely, and remind us of the mystery and wonder of human life.

### 2) String of values (20 minutes)

Prop: a ball of string.

Stand in a circle. The first person starts to talk about the experiences that first motivated them to care about the environment. As soon as another person feels they have touched a common experience, they say so and the ball is passed to them.

Note to the facilitator: keep the ball moving, don't let anyone talk for more than 3 minutes.

The result should be a tangled web of memories and values that remind participants how much they have in common.

*Acknowledgment: Darlene Clover, The Nature of Transformation 2000*

### 3) How I become an environmentalist (1 hour)

1) Form pairs and share key environmental experiences from 3 stages different in your life (e.g. childhood, adolescence, adulthood) with your partner. Write them down. (15 minutes)

2) Then form into groups of 4 to 6 and discuss the experiences you had in common. As a group, choose 3 favourite experiences. (15 minutes)

3) In your groups, plan how to present the three experiences as 'freeze frames'. That is, all 4-6 people together figure out how to form a series of three different tableaux which represent the experiences. It's a bit like charades, except you do it in groups, and each picture is a still life. (30 minutes)

The audience close their eyes and only open them while each frame is 'frozen'.

This is lots of fun, and, once again, focuses on how seminal life experiences are so often shared.

Alternative options:

"My first step on the path to being an activist occurred when..."

"What makes me angry is..."

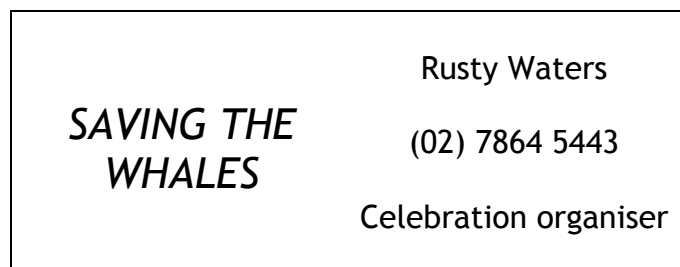
"What inspires me to keep fighting is..."

#### 4) Activist business card (40 minutes)

In pairs, participants ask each other:

- what issues are closest to your heart (reflect your deepest passions and interests)?
- what would you love to be able to do for your community?
- who would you like to join forces with?
- what is the simplest, most valued, contribution you could make to a group effort?

Now design your business card: Name/phone #/contribution/and make 'the issue' into a sort of logo on the side of the card: eg.



## SENSING THE ENVIRONMENT exercises

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#### 5) Sound mapping (30 minutes)

- 1) Everyone lies on the ground and closes their eyes.
- 2) The leader, speaking slowly, with lots of pauses, takes the group through a basic Yoga Nidra exercise (e.g. relax your left toes, relax your left ankle, relax your left calf etc... until the whole body is relaxed).
- 3) Then ask people to listen to their surroundings, e.g. "Listen to sounds next to you, sounds nearby, sounds far away, sounds to the right, sounds to the left, sounds inside their bodies, loud sounds, barely detectable sounds, natural sounds, human sounds" etc...
- 4) Then, ask people to sit up and share what they learnt about the particular environment they are located in.

## **6) Close up and natural (30 minutes)**

This is a 'getting in touch with nature' exercise.

- 1) Form a tight circle in middle of an open park or natural area, with everyone facing outward.
- 2) Everyone focuses on a single natural object directly in front of them e.g. a stick, a leaf, a tree trunk, a rock.
- 3) One step at a time, with your eyes remaining fixed on the object, advance towards the object of your choice.
- 4) Get right up close.
- 5) Everyone returns to the centre and talks about things they noticed or learnt.

## **7) Become YOUR own sculpture trail (20 minutes)**

This is another getting in touch with nature exercise.

You need a path through a park or bush area.

- 1) Ask the participants to space themselves along the path and select a natural thing to 'become'. Each person then mimes the object, using only their body.
- 2) Then the leader starts walking along the path. They try to guess the first 'natural thing' they see being mimed.
- 3) As you walk along, you collect the participants, and the growing group tries to guess each successive 'natural thing' along the path.

This is a fun exercise that breaks the ice and opens people up to further group activities.

## **8) Freeing exercises**

Here are some more freeing exercises to activate the senses about the environment:

- **Blind Trust Walk:** Take a person by the hand, and while they close their eyes lead them to spot nearby. Guide their hands to the spot so that they may FEEL the environment. Get them to use as many of these senses to explore their spot. Lead them back to the start open their eyes and ask them to find the spot.

- **Leaf Hunt:** Each person finds a leaf that is no longer on the tree. Tell others what is special about your leaf.
- **Environmental Creative Writing:** Find something in the environment. Write down some thoughts about it. What caught your eye about it, why is it interesting?
- **Ant's view of the world:** Crawling on hands and knees, imagine you are an ant.
- **Tree Stories:** Pick a tree shape yourself to it. What can it see? What does the rest of the forest look like from this tree?
- **Tree Sounds:** All in a circle like grove of trees. One tree makes a sound. Others pick it up and carry it until it dies.
- **Blending into the Environment:** Pretend your part of environment. Make yourself like it. What is its view?
- **Myths:** Each person in the group is given a card with an environmental word on it. [Rainbow, rain, sun, river, wind etc.] . They are asked to explain the interaction of the natural thing in the environment.
- **Tree Spirits:** Aboriginal belief that trees are spirits of people. Participants suggest stories to explain human origin of a particular tree.
- **Earth spirits:** similar to the preceding, except with landforms: river is snake spirit, rock is a turtle asleep etc

## 9) A bush fantasy

The exercise aims to centre the participants on the experience of being in the environment.

The facilitator asks participants to find a place to lie down, then gently speaks a script that goes, loosely, like this:

"Place yourself in a comfortable position.....just focus on your breathing.....focus on parts of your body which are not feeling comfortable.....move those parts so that they are comfortable....listen to your breathing and let it take a slow rhythm.... Take long deep breaths... and sigh as you let the air out..... take another deep breath and smell the smells around you....let your breathing become a comfortable relaxed pace... you are feeling peaceful... listen for the sounds of the bush... try to imagine what they are... hear the sounds... hear the stillness... feel the environment as it affects you...where you are sitting... the breeze on your face...the cold stone...the warmth of the sun....quietly enjoy the sensations as you centre on being in this environment...."

"Take as much time as you want in the next sixty seconds to bring yourself back to this place."

Ask participants how they feel now.

## STRATEGY and COMMUNICATION

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### 10) Situation report (1 hour+)

This is a great all-purpose exercise for solving practical problems and developing strategies. It usually leads to free and informative discussions, as some people realise that others' 'successes' are the answers to their 'obstacles'.

In pairs, introduce yourselves, then ask:

- What was your biggest success in last 2 years?
- What is your current major challenge?
- What do you think will be your biggest (internal ie. self or group) obstacle?
- What will be your biggest strength?

Report back on your partner's answers. The facilitator should encourage an open discussion as each person reports.

### 11) Front page success story (1 hour)

Sometimes you have to imagine success in order to find the optimism to move ahead with difficult tasks.

So...this is about imagining a newspaper front page story that announces success on the issue closest to your heart.

Brainstorm these questions (as a group):

- What does the headline say?
- What does the opening paragraph say (who, what, where, when)?
- What's the photo?
- Who is quoted?
- What are they saying?
- What reasons are they giving for their decision?
- Imagine you are quoted in the article, being asked "How do you explain this unexpected turnaround?" and you say: "The minister/council/developer had no choice, because...."

Discuss: what have you found out about the nature of a "winning strategy".

## 12) Campaign role play

This is an educational exercise in communication and message development. . It can be lots of fun. You can do it with 15 to 60 people - the more the better.

*The situation:* a local developer wants to build a housing estate on some degraded bushland (that they own) next to a wetland (that's a nesting area for migratory birds) on the edge of the local town/suburb.

The facilitator selects people to be the following players:

- Mayor
- a local councillor
- Council planner
- Developer
- NSW Minister for the Environment.

Everyone else plays residents who live near the wetland.

- 1) The main players all take seats in front of the 'residents'.
- 2) The residents form themselves into groups of 3-4 and brainstorm their case against (or for) the development.

Warn the residents that they will have to think hard to come up with convincing reasons to support their case.

The aim is to influence the main players to block or modify the development. It won't be enough just to have facts in your side, you will need to see things from the point of view of the particular player you are addressing, and pitch your case in a way that genuinely influences that person.

Each group of residents needs to elect a spokesperson.

- 3) Residents spend 15 minutes developing their arguments.
- 4) The facilitator invites the residents' groups, one by one, to present their 'case' to one or more of the main players.
- 5) After each case is presented, the facilitator asks that player 'are you convinced?'

The aim is to examine what makes a convincing case, going beyond the usual environmental facts (endangered species etc) to matters that affect the interests of the players. The successful cases will be those that best understand the worldview of the targeted player.

This can be an active, rambunctious and educational exercise, however the facilitator will need to brief the main players to act as reasonable people. If they take cartoon-like hard lines they can block the dynamics.

*Note:* The facilitator should start with a pep talk about effective communications.

"To reach people you should try to:

- put yourself in their shoes: ask 'why should I?'
- provide hope (from the audience's point of view)
- describe the impacts in concrete, everyday terms, or word pictures
- provide a practical alternative
- provide a simple, easy action they can take
- include endorsements from 'unlikely' allies
- have succinct and relevant messages
- use humour/fun."

Residents should write this down and use it as a check list when developing their messages.

## WAKE UP exercises

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### 13) Streaming

This is a short wake-up exercise for the early afternoon 'graveyard shift'.

The leader says (deadpan): "There is an important environmental management technique I forgot to tell you about in the morning session. It's called 'streaming'. Has anyone heard of it?"

The participants will look doubtful and shake their heads.

"OK, well first you have to stand up and bend over (leader demonstrates by bowing deeply).

"Then you do this...Follow me exactly!"

The leader then brushes their legs upwards and makes a loud 'woop woop' sound. Make sure everyone is copying you. Then move on to another weird sound, each time brushing a different part of the body upwards, wobbling hips or vigorously shaking limbs. Eventually you get to the head...brush the hands vigorously up the back of the head while making the biggest, weirdest sound of all.

Then announce "OK, now you're streaming".

*Acknowledgment: We borrowed this idea from Ken Rubelli of Wangat Lodge, who taught it to us at the Myuna Bay EE conference in 2001.*



## 14) Assassins and bodyguards

This is a fabulous wake-up exercise that will get everyone's hearts pumping. Ideally, it needs a group of at least 15.

Form a circle.

Everyone in the group pretends to be a bodyguard ( suitable muscle pose) and then each person selects a body guard without telling who it is.

Everyone then pretends to be an assassin ( suitable menacing pose) and each person selects their assassin. Same deal - don't reveal who you have chosen.

The object of the game is to put your bodyguard between you and your assassin. On "go" everyone runs around trying to make sure that they are safe from their assassin.

If you have a large group then it can be repeated again with those who were successful in not being "killed" the first time.

It's really good for that post lunch energy hole.

*Acknowledgment: Leesa Swan picked this one up from local government trainers, Terra Cordis.*

## 15) Serious chant!

You get people to gather round in a group and tell them that they're about to start an ancient tribal people's chant to help get the blood going.

You ask them to chant after you:

"Owa..." (repeat several times)

"Tagoo..." (repeat several times)

And finish with a loud yell "Siam!" after.

The chant starts slow and then gets faster and in no time everyone's chanting "Oh what a goose I am!". Very funny when everyone realises.

Acknowledgment: Emma Williams, Kiama Council.