

## Committing to Place: museum outreach as NRM extension

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### Abstract

The Committing to Place research project was funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant involving the Tasmanian Institute of Agricultural Research (TIAR) at the University of Tasmania, the Murray-Darling Basin Commission and the National Museum of Australia. The overarching aim of the research was to investigate means of activating and maintaining community participation in natural and cultural resource initiatives in the Murray-Darling Basin. The main research activity of the project was to evaluate and reflect on a series of outreach, extension and education projects. The project considered three research questions: (1) In what ways did these outreach and education activities engage diverse communities? (2) Did these outreach and educational activities influence engagement in NRM issues? (3) What methods are useful for organisations to use in developing and implementing outreach and educational activities that are meaningful for communities? The full final report of the project can be downloaded from the project website: <http://www.utas.edu.au/ruralcommunities/committing-to-place.htm>

*Three key learnings:* (1) There are considerable advantages in using indirect ways to promote natural resource management. (2) There are considerable advantages in developing outreach programs that integrate the principles of community engagement into the development and delivery of collaborative and participatory projects. (3) There should be a continued focus on local places in outreach and extension projects, however, in order to appeal to broader audiences, there needs to be an embedding of these local stories in wider contexts.

### Key Words

Museum outreach, community engagement, participation, extension, natural resource management, Murray-Darling Basin

### Introduction

With natural resource management (NRM) requiring new approaches to enhance community involvement, NRM agencies, including the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC), are seeking new ways to engage people in NRM (Aslin and Brown 2004; Vanclay 2004). The MDBC, therefore, has been willing to try a range of partnerships with diverse agencies and to consider indirect means to interest people in NRM. The Committing to Place research project evaluated and reflected on a suite of four museum outreach activities which were developed by the NMA in partnership with the MDBC: *Basin Bytes*, *Murray-Darling Basin TalkBack Classroom*, *Pass the Salt*, and *Many Rhymes, One Rhythm*. In addition, a MDBC sponsored environmental

education event, the *MDBC International Riverhealth Conference*, was assessed.

## Methods

The Committing to Place research project considered three research questions:

1. In what ways do these outreach and education activities engage diverse communities?
2. Do these outreach and educational activities influence engagement in NRM issues?
3. What methods are useful for organisations to use in developing and implementing outreach and educational activities that are meaningful for communities?

The approach was primarily qualitative with methods varying depending on the actual case study. In general, however, the methods included participant observation and indepth interviews with project participants, developers and other stakeholders. Participant diaries, with participants recording their feelings, perceptions and comments using portable cassette recorders, were also frequently used. The methods are fully spelt out in the final report which can be downloaded from the project website: <http://www.utas.edu.au/ruralcommunities/committing-to-place.htm>

## Results

The final report (Lucas et al. 2005) contains the full statement of findings, including a summary of each outreach project, as well as some general lessons and specific recommendations for the National Museum and the MDBC. In this paper, the general lessons will be highlighted, but primarily as an advertisement for the full report. Other results have been reported in Vanclay et al. (2004) and Lane et al. (2005). In addition to the final report, the reports of the individual project evaluations are available on request.

### ***Engaging diverse communities***

Facilitating community involvement is an important component of a successful project, however, it requires particular skills and capacities from project developers and institutions. Community involvement poses particular challenges for institutions, for it involves giving a degree of control over project elements to people outside the institution. In addition, these people must be provided with adequate resources for the community facilitation tasks and have a clear understanding of the parameters they must work within. The research identified for the industry partners a number of principles for facilitating community involvement in projects, many of which are well established in the community engagement literature.

- Selection of community partners, to clarify that parties in the community are actually interested in working on the proposed projects.
- The importance of boundary setting – being clear about what is negotiable about a project and what is not, also for setting boundaries of creative control of elements of projects.
- The importance of project resources, such as technology, being available in stated timeframes.
- The importance of adequate resourcing of local facilitators and the need for face to face communication.
- Flexibility within institutions to respond to changes requested by community participants.
- Develop protocols for dealing with material considered controversial.
- The importance of having a clear outcome at the end of a project, such as a launch, to recognise the achievement of completing the project. Communicating the outcomes of a project to wider audiences is an important way enhancing the importance of a project. In addition, an end point is important for marking and clarifying the formal end of a project.

- The importance of having a safe place or environment for conducting workshops and liaison.

### ***Evaluation and institutional learning and flexibility***

Institutions need to be flexible and learn from experiences in order to successfully develop and implement projects. A key finding was that being flexible when developing and implementing collaborative projects should be seen as a strength, not a weakness. This indicates that project developers are responding to new information and changing circumstances. The research identified two key points for institutional flexibility: skills for collaboration and capacity building; and the importance of evaluation.

Institutions and the staff developing projects need specific skills to effectively facilitate collaboration and community involvement in projects. Some of these skills already reside in the organisations, however, these skills and capacities must be enhanced for projects to be developed and implemented successfully. These skills may not have been a priority within either museums or NRM organisations in the past.

Evaluation is an important tool to inform project development. It is critical for understanding how a project actually plays out for participants, collaborators and audiences. Evaluation provides important feedback to refine projects and to stimulate project development. The project demonstrated the benefits of incorporating feedback from progressive evaluation and identified a number of key principles. Evaluation should:

- be conducted routinely and genuinely embedded in the organisational culture;
- take account of the experiences of project participants and audiences;
- take account of the experiences of partners and stakeholders;
- take place throughout the life of a project – to track project development; and
- be communicated in a way to stimulate project development and engender reflective practice by project developers.

### ***Increasing attachment to place***

A focus on place was important for increasing attachment to local places. Documenting, celebrating and validating personal connection to place, as in the *Basin Bytes* and *Many Rhymes, One Rhythm* projects, enhanced connection to local places. Many participants said that through their participation, they came to see their local place in new ways and developed more pride in their place. Research in the community arts sector has emphasised that the more people are connected to place, the more they are interested in sustaining those places (Mills and Brown 2004).

A key consideration in focusing on local places is to recognise the diversity of what people regard as local places, and what is considered to be meaningful and significant about these places. This strategy only works when this diversity is anticipated and catered for. Projects cannot be prescriptive about what are local places. This was clear in each of projects evaluated – what was considered to be significant by participants would not necessarily have been thought of by the project developers.

### ***Creating effective learning experiences***

Promoting community engagement in NRM relies not only on increasing awareness and knowledge of NRM issues, but also on increasing the capacity and motivation of individuals to actively respond. Learning experiences must cater for the needs and interests of diverse participants. The research project reflected on key strategies for creating effective learning experiences. The case study projects all had a learning agenda, and used a range of approaches to

learning. The projects designed for the school sector – *Riverhealth*, *TalkBack Classroom* and *Many Rhymes, One Rhythm* – had a formal learning agenda. The *Basin Bytes* and *Pass the Salt* projects can be seen as providing informal learning experiences for participants and audiences.

### **Creating engagement**

The projects studied illuminated a number of aspects that were important for creating engagement. Firstly, connection with place is acknowledged as an effective means of engaging people in learning activities. Current theories about learning emphasise the importance of providing opportunities for learners to make connections with existing knowledge and experiential frameworks (Bull & Anstey 1996; Muspratt et al. 1997). Secondly, the strong emphasis on active participation, for example in the *Riverhealth Conference* and *Basin Bytes*, is a key factor for achieving high levels of engagement. Much emphasis is placed on the value of active learning as contrasted with passive learning in current learning theory. Thirdly, the validation of individual and collective lived experience and concerns is a key factor in all these projects and current learning theory suggests that this is also a significant factor for engagement. People are more likely to engage with an activity, or content, which not only reflects or connects with, but also validates, their own experience and concerns.

### **Learning Outcomes**

Projects such as the *MDBC Riverhealth Conferences* and *TalkBack Classroom* have a clear focus on articulated learning outcomes which inform project design. Current learning theory suggests that projects involving learning should have clearly defined learning outcomes and should be designed with these as a starting point and/or framework. Furthermore, learning outcomes should facilitate continuous project evaluation and assessment. The success of the *Riverhealth Conferences* as effective learning experiences is attributable in part to the integration of learning outcomes, a clearly articulated pedagogical framework linked with contemporary theory and continuous evaluation.

### **Active Learning**

Active learning is an important component of effective learning experiences (Gardner 1993), and active learning was a significant feature of each of the projects studied. The notion that ‘learning by doing’ and experiential learning is deeper and more enduring than surface learning achieved through passive experiences holds a high degree of currency in the field of education. Furthermore, changed behaviour and practice is arguably more likely to result from active learning experiences in which new knowledge is acquired through a process of co-construction involving the learner. Experiences of actually doing something, for example engaging with and addressing a complex environmental issue in a local context, are more likely to contribute to the development of a sense of agency and motivation.

### **Capacity Building**

Capacity building is an important component in promoting engagement in NRM (Macadam 2004). Learning that was focussed on building participants’ capacities was a significant element of a number of the projects. This was partly due to the effective use of active learning methods and participatory strategies. Learning was achieved through a number of means:

- experience in action;
- through the development of communication skills;
- through the development of digital photography skills;
- through the development of networks and communication channels through the development of self-confidence gained through acquisition and practice of new skills; and

- through the experience of acknowledgement, public recording and validation of local experience and concerns.

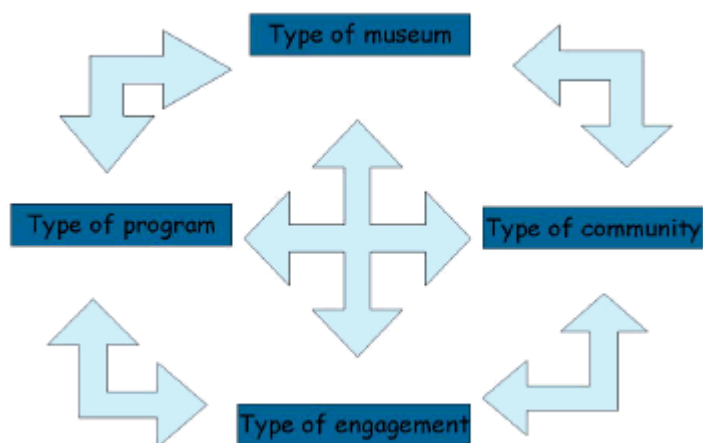
The knowledge of how to do something, for example participating in a local interest group, can be imparted to an individual by simply telling them and creating awareness that the option is available and desirable. However, this knowledge will not necessarily be sufficient to motivate the individual into actually doing it, or to convince them that they can. Conversely, providing experiences of actually doing something – rather than just descriptions of how to do it – will be more likely to stimulate motivation and confidence. Students participating in the *Riverhealth Conference*, for example, learned not only how to communicate with people in positions of power and influence, and that such communication is a democratically desirable thing to do, but they also learned that they can do it themselves. They learn this by being provided with actual experiences in real life contexts.

Many of the older participants in the *Basin Bytes* project had little or no experience with digital cameras and photography. The initial workshops provided simple demonstrations and instruction cards. As a result, many of the participants created work in formats hitherto inaccessible for them, an experience which was thus particularly empowering.

### **Principles for developing participatory museum projects**

From the range of projects studied, it is possible to provide an overarching set of guiding principles which can be used to assist the development of subsequent projects that utilise community participation. Community engagement and collaboration cannot be replicated between communities because different communities have different needs and dimensions, and these provide context that is crucial for developing the engagement strategy required to implement a project (Schaffer Bacon et al. 2004). Diversity, location, gender, subject, climate, landuse and local government are variables which make it impossible to provide a blueprint for ‘doing’ community engagement.

Many writers have developed ‘ladders of participation’ (e.g. Arnstein 1969; Pretty 1995). But it is not only the extent of participation/engagement that needs to be considered, there are other factors as well. When institutions seek to engage a community in a project, particularly one with participatory dimensions, they need to consider: the types of communities that comprise that community; the types of issues that are considered important; the types of projects which might have relevance and interest to them and the types of engagement techniques appropriate to enhance the collaborative experience and output for all parties (see Fig 1). Further, institutions need to reflect on the ethics of developing projects that require community engagement and collaboration and to consider how these can be integrated into the way the project is developed, designed and delivered.



**Figure 1: Museums and Community Engagement**

**Type of museum (or institution), community, program and engagement all have an impact on the development of collaborative and participatory projects. Consideration of these factors will assist the development, delivery and reception of projects that integrate community as part of the project development strategy (Wills forthcoming).**

***Guiding principles for developing collaborative participatory outreach projects***

- Define and clarify the institutional requirements from projects.
- Ensure there is enough time to undertake participatory outreach projects.
- Undertake research into the subject area/group to identify key stakeholders.
- Develop transparent selection criteria for choosing a target group.
- Ensure institutional staff loads can accommodate the additional communication and management required to oversee participatory projects.
- Devise a strategy of reciprocity with the target group to ensure all collaborating partners benefit.
- Develop policies to ensure appropriate management of any project material collected or produced.
- Develop multifaceted project instructions that cater for different levels of the project and that are available in different formats where needed.
- Strive to develop projects that utilise local facilities and personnel.
- Consider the activities and needs of other stakeholders in the project or area.
- Incorporate training workshops to facilitate greater participation in projects.
- Incorporate learning opportunities into the project to enhance participation and uptake of ideas and skills.
- Include the target group in the planning process.
- Develop clear communication channels between project developers, communities and participants.
- Ensure face-to-face interaction is part of the engagement process (i.e. ensure that project developers visit the community).
- Integrate reflective periods and conduct ongoing evaluations to assess project development and identify problems or issues.
- Explore the appropriateness and functioning of any technology intended to be used in participatory projects.
- Ensure all technology and equipment is working properly prior to project beginning.
- Articulate a formal follow-up strategy, making it clear what intentions exist for further

projects.

- Ensure an exit strategy is in place for all projects that incorporate community engagement.
- Ensure that communities and participants are left with a local expression of the project, such as with copies of outputs, mementoes etc.

## Recommendations

The report's recommendations are summarized here. For the full text, please refer to the full report.

1. The MDBC should continue to collaborate with the NMA on projects of mutual benefit.
2. The MDBC should continue to collaborate with the NMA in the Murray-Darling Basin Outreach Project as opportunities arise, especially in the Basin Bytes, Pass the Salt and TalkBack Classroom projects. The MDBC should continue to keep a watching brief on the Cultural Mapping Service project, to identify if and when opportunities arise to develop this project further.
3. The MDBC should continue to pursue partnerships with a broad range of partners to promote community engagement in natural resource management issues.
4. The MDBC should develop training and mentoring in skills for building collaborative relationships as part of their core business.
5. The MDBC should continue its involvement with and support of the International Riverhealth Conference. The MDBC should continue to encourage the development of smaller Riverhealth events throughout the Basin.
6. The MDBC should continue to pursue projects that utilise ICT. However, in the planning and scoping of such projects, it is important to recognise the limitations and potential complexity in developing and implementing ICT-based projects.
7. The MDBC should take account of the benefits of the local scale and local places as a focus for projects promoting engagement in natural resource management issues.
8. The MDBC should consider community participation as a key element for communication and education programs.
9. The MDBC should consider methods for creating learning experiences for promoting awareness in natural resource management and community capacity building.
10. The MDBC should recognise the value of storytelling as a way of facilitating capacity building and community engagement in natural resource management.
11. The NMA should continue to pursue outreach projects which focus on the topic of community experience of natural resource management issues – in particular the topic of communities actively confronting environmental change.
12. The NMA should continue interactions with the MDBC including running projects of mutual benefit in partnership.
13. The NMA should continue to work with the MDBC on specific projects: Basin Bytes, TalkBack Classroom and any follow-up projects from Pass the Salt. The NMA should continue to pursue opportunities to progress the Cultural Mapping Service project.

14. The NMA should provide training and mentoring in skills in developing cross-institutional collaborative relationships and should consider how its institutional procedures can be enhanced to facilitate collaboration.
15. The NMA should continue to pursue ICT as a medium for delivery of outreach projects, however, it needs to streamline processes for using ICT for outreach, and recognise the limitations of this approach.
16. The NMA should ensure face-to-face engagement is included as a key strategy in the development of community engagement and outreach projects.
17. The NMA should continue to use local places as a focus for outreach projects, however it needs to ensure that local stories are situated in wider contexts.
18. The NMA should continue to use community participation as a key strategy in developing and implementing outreach projects.
19. The NMA should consider formally adopting “The guiding principles to inform community involvement in projects” as presented in the report (Chapter 18) as a policy document. However, these principles should be adapted and negotiated in relation to each project that is developed.
20. The NMA should develop training and mentoring in facilitating partnerships and community participation.
21. Evaluation should be a routine and regular part of all outreach projects. Evaluation should take place through the life of a project and take account of project stakeholders and participants.

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