

**What impact has the Baldivis Children's Forest had on individual student's lives?**

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**Introduction**

The Baldivis Children's Forest is an area of natural tuart forest, in Baldivis just off of Mandurah Road, Perth. Green Skills and the local Baldivis Primary School, named the reserve in 2002 to ensure the survival of some natural bushland in a rapidly developing area (Baldivis Children's Forest Inc. 2008).

The forest serves as an outdoor classroom for many local schools, both public and private to teach conservation, science, arts and Indigenous education. Over the past nine years local students have planted native trees and weeded the reserve, each year the students return and observe the work of past years. They “direct and are involved in the management and ongoing conservation and education initiatives” (Baldivis Children's Forest Inc. 2008). Students also participate in activities suitable to their age groups that promote an understanding of the importance of ecosystems as well as develop essential life skills. The education programs also extend to the public, encouraging parents and children to enjoy the forest outside of school time through activities such as night stalks and bird watching (Baldivis Children's Forest Inc. 2008).

The Forest came about when students and staff at Baldivis Primary became concerned with the clearing of natural vegetation for the Kwinana Freeway and estate housing. They participated in a ‘Tree Walk’ in conjunction with the company ‘Stocklands’ to link together historically significant trees (Baldivis Children's Forest Inc. 2008). The conservation group Green Skills then approached the City of Rockingham and Baldivis Primary “to do on-ground

restoration projects” (Baldivis Children's Forest Inc. 2008), which resulted in the first tree planting at the Baldivis Children’s Forest. Since 2000 the Forest has had varied sponsorship from Green Skills, City of Rockingham, BHP billiton, Synergy, the Department of Education and Training, Stocklands, CALM, Disability in the Arts-Disadvantage in the Arts WA, Mission Australia Green Corps, Alcoa and the Department of Indigenous Affairs PALS (Partnership Acceptance Learning Sharing), Baldivis Volunteer Fire Brigade, Baldivis Community Association, Birds Australia and Peel Landcare to create a valuable learning tool for students which is also helping the environment (Baldivis Children's Forest Inc. 2008). The forest aims to educate “students and the local community in biodiversity, conservation, sustainability and Aboriginal cultural values” as well as promote “formal management, conservation and rehabilitation and passive recreation” (Baldivis Children's Forest Inc. 2008). The commitment of the forest’s carers is “conservation through education” and creating strong “links between the children, community, industry, educational institutions and all levels of government” (Baldivis Children's Forest Inc. 2008).

The Baldivis Children’s Forest brings together the diverse cultures in the school, students unite in a setting were they do not have to be achieving academically, but can strive with their peers for a common cause, conservation. The Australian Journal of Environmental Education (2007) states

“school grounds are an ideal environment in which to engage the potential of ESL students providing them with opportunities that can lead to improved attitudes and behaviours towards the outdoor school environment and better overall feelings for the school within the community and themselves as members of the school community.”

Participating in environmental learning experiences builds the school’s positive presence in the wider community and helps to develop a child’s sense of

belonging within the school and the local community. The Baldivis Children's Forest is making a statement in the wider community for the impact it has not only on the environment but also with the students. The *Sound Telegraph* newspaper (Unknown. 2008, July 2) printed an article about the accolades the Forest won during the year, two Sustainable Cities Awards for Biodiversity and heritage and culture. The *Sound Telegraph* (Unknown. 2008, July 2) states "the Sustainable Cities Awards acknowledge the hard work of people, organisations and groups to make urban and metropolitan environments sustainable and more liveable." These awards allow students to understand the direct impact their work at the Forest can have on the wider community and give their learning experiences purpose.

Furthermore the outdoor learning environment provides opportunity for students to learn about Indigenous culture. Learning about the culture is important to develop good relations amongst the students, parents and the community and makes the most of the community strengths and assets (Lee & Thompson .2007). The students experience and participate in Indigenous learning and ceremonies which in the *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* (2007) states "children can benefit by living in communities that have high levels of social capital, even if they are not themselves directly involved in the civic life of the community" (Lee & Thompson .2007). Social capital at the Baldivis Children's Forest is the Aboriginal elders that teach the students about their culture, though the children do not live in a traditional Indigenous environment everyday.

To further students educational experience more the outdoor learning environment “potentially provides powerfully affective forms of de-schooled environmental education” and “can allow powerful forms of environmental education to develop” (Gough .2007). The Forest allows for environmental education and values to be taught in a realistic and practical setting to “help participants understand that they have an inherited worldview and [to] become aware of the alternatives” (Gough .2007). Teachers that make use of the Forest have the opportunity to take text book curriculum into the real world, especially good for early education, making learning have more impact, creating students with more knowledge and desire to help sustain the environment in the future.

The aims of the Children’s Forest are essentially to provide a future for the natural bushlands in the Baldivis area. The purpose is to “To provide educational opportunities for children and the wider community which promote biodiversity, conservation, sustainability, and Aboriginal cultural values and perspectives at Baldivis Children's Forest” (Baldivis Children's Forest Inc. 2008). The Forest teaches to the participants “formal management, conservation and rehabilitation of flora, fauna and fungi... in order to sustain the biodiversity and ecological values in the area” (Baldivis Children's Forest Inc. 2008). It also provides opportunity for passive recreation and “foster partnerships between children, community, industry, educational institutions and all levels of government” (Baldivis Children's Forest Inc. 2008). In addition the Forest aims to inspire lifelong commitment to “conservation through education” (Baldivis Children's Forest Inc. 2008). The forest aims to inspire students to commit to the Forest and

develop lifelong learning skills to help students in everyday life.

### **Student Interviews**

To evaluate the impact the Baldivis Children's Forest is having on students I interviewed a small number of students with parental permission. During this informal interview that I adapted to suit the age group, I tried to gauge the student's prior experiences and then encourage them to discuss what they are currently engaged in and their hope for the future.

*Ella was interviewed on June 17, 2009.*

Ella in year one has attended the Forest since Kindergarten. In the early years, students experience tree planting and an interactive presentation from 'SQUIRT' and the Volunteer bushfire brigade. This year Ella participated in a treasure hunt, making insects from potatoes and tree planting. She enjoys going to the Forest because she doesn't have to be at school and believes that the skills she has learnt tree planting will be helpful at home. In the future she wants to be a scientist and would like to interact with the possums at the Forest.

*Georgia was interviewed on June 10, 2009*

Georgia is in year four and has been to the Forest since year two. In the past she has enjoyed the fire brigades, tree planting and obstacle course. She has fun at the Forest because every year they do something different, and she also believes that the knowledge she has learnt about plants and edible foods is very important to her everyday life. In the future she believes her education will help her in high

school, and she would also like to be a vet or a zoo keeper as she enjoys most learning about animals.

*Owen was interviewed on June 10, 2009*

Owen is also in Year Four, he has attended the Forest since Pre-Primary, he enjoys the Forest every year because he has fun there and the tree planting skills he learnt helped him when they moved house. In addition he stated that when bush walking he could identify animal trails and knew how to bush walk safely. He would like to be a carer at the Forest when he is older and is looking forward to participating in promotional events, such as this year's trip to Canberra to present to other school students from all over Australia.

*Tegan was interviewed on June 12, 2009*

Tegan is the 2009 Forest Ambassador; her role is to provide a strong link between the students and the adult carers of the Forest. Tegan is in year six and has attended the Forest since kindergarten and many times outside of school. This year her class has been creating a book and presentation to take to Canberra, they have also enjoyed talks on plant bio security. She enjoys the Forest because it is a free, open place where you can run around with friends, helping everybody's future. Outside of school she has used skills learnt at the Forest to identify snakes as well as bird watching and using a GPS. Tegan also believes in the importance of community service in local high schools to build a respect between the Forest and older students, hopefully reducing graffiti and fires to ensure the Forest's future. She wants to see more animals in the Forest and

would like to work with Australian animals, in particular marsupials and she recognises that the work she does at the Forest has influenced her ideas.

## **Conclusion**

The research I conducted indicates that the Forest provides a basis for large amounts of learning opportunities for teachers to take advantage of. Students want to learn about the Forest, they and the bush receive rewards for their work and teachers should make the best of the students' positive attitudes for real life learning experiences. These real life tasks are important to the students, they consolidate the work they did at the Forest and provide the students with relevant learning experiences. In the Early Childhood area students identify their feelings and express them into their school work, drawing and writing, procedures and recounts. Older students work at the Forest, activities such as weed control, mapping as well as creating promotional presentations for competitions and sponsors.

The Baldivis Children's Forest has huge positive impact on individuals as well as the community and will definitely continue into the future provided land developers do not destroy the land. The Forest has many partners that are outside educational facilities and with the support and funding from these partners the Forest will continue to teach children and benefit the local environment. The Forest has its future secured as students will always be in the area, and children will always be learning about the environment. By naming the Forest after the

children, the founders have provided a tool to evoke emotion in the local community if developers want to destroy the land.

The research I conducted was very limited. I could only assess a small selection of students with the limited time available. The information collected gave me an overview of students' opinions but nothing more to base action on. Over an extended time frame more student work samples could be collected and the attitudes and values of the participating students could have been assessed and monitored. Over time students' development of attitudes and values could be assessed with in depth interviews. This one sample interview (See attached appendix E) only shows the students current knowledge and does not show the progression of any one student, though the questioning of different age groups shows a small progression. It would also have been beneficial to interview students that have graduated Baldivis Primary to see what impact the Baldivis Children's Forest has had on their lives. I could have assessed their current attitudes and values in accordance to the importance of environmental conservation as well as their future hopes for themselves and the Forest.

To adapt my research I would make an interview that further question and challenges students' perceptions. It would have more specific questions in relation to their perspective to make the qualitative answers more valid over a large sample of students. A rating scale may be more effective way to grade students' opinions and attitudes. I believe that the Baldivis Children's Forest has a large positive impact on students' lives but it is important to continually assess the value of the learning tasks undertaken.

## REFERENCES

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