

# STORIES OF EXPERIENCE

## Learning from the environmental experience of older Australians

### overview of the project

This project by the Council on the Ageing (COTA) has drawn on the environmental experiences of older Australians to help promote sustainable living to the community. The project brings together personal stories with environmental themes such as energy use, waste minimisation, transport, biodiversity, water use and reuse, and chemical use. Each story is complemented by relevant information on the issue obtained from current experts and sources including available State and Local Government resources. The stories are illustrated with drawings or photos from the authors, their families and a professional illustrator.

*Stories of Experience* aimed to broaden the general community's knowledge and understanding of the older generation's experience in protecting the environment and promoting positive environmental behaviour, while at the same time helping older people to value their life experiences and give them an opportunity to play a more active role in promoting sustainable living in their local communities.



*One author shares her childhood memories of simple family holidays*

### how the project was carried out

Research indicates older people are engaged by and learn from their own stories and the experiences of others. Older people need to believe their life experiences had a purpose or impact. Illustrated story guides were developed to assist people to write their own stories. The guides aim to validate older people's life experience, and are based on adult learning principles such as valuing and sharing experiences, peer learning, reflection and self-direction.

The printed story guides were distributed through various networks including COTA, Seniors' organisations, writers groups and Adult Education Community Colleges. The initial response to the project was disappointing, and so a series of thirteen free story writing workshops were conducted through regional libraries across New South Wales.

All submitted stories were considered by two independent adult educators. The final selection was based on subject matter, originality and the range of environmental lessons they reflected. Stories were carefully edited with only minor changes made.

### outcomes now and in the future

73 stories were submitted as part of the project with authors ranging from first time writers to those with previously published work. The stories covered a range of creative styles from personal life

recollections to fictional work and poetry. The writing workshops were very well received by the participating libraries and the local communities. A total of 132 people of various ages attended the workshops. Evaluations from the workshops showed that participants found them to be interesting, enjoyable, and inspiring.

24 stories were selected for publication in a book. The Environmental Trust provided further funding to COTA through its Dissemination Program to cover publishing and printing of the book which has been distributed to libraries, non-government organisations, adult education centres and other relevant agencies.

### benefits, challenges & lessons learned

The main challenge for this project was to successfully engage the older community and motivate them to contribute to the project. The initial approach to finding stories through newsletters, webpages and email was not very successful even though a very wide range of organisations were approached.

It was not until the workshops were launched through local libraries that the importance of personal contact and a supportive workshop environment became apparent. The workshops became the key factor in the success of this project. The value of face-to-face contact and friendly encouragement in giving older people the confidence to write their stories was an important lesson gained from this experience.

*Stories of Experience* has taken an interesting approach to encourage older Australians to contribute to current environmental learning and debate. It has also provided recognition and value to the stories and experiences of the older generation who have grown up in an environment where the careful use of resources was a way of life long before recycling and environmental activism.

*Washing day*

