

WHAT'S IN A SWAMP?

overview of the project

The executive of the Booroongen Djugen College in Kempsey coordinated a project to create an outdoor learning environment for local Aboriginal young people. The group converted a small wetland on college land to an easily accessible educational resource equipped with outdoor furniture and interpretive signs marking important features of the site. Access to locations for outdoor study had previously been difficult for local Aboriginal students, and this project created a dedicated learning space on Aboriginal owned land.

The result is a tranquil and comfortable wetland area for study and relaxation. The group has also created a database of technical information about the site, which includes facts about flora and fauna and water quality. This can be accessed by students for their studies. The scheme has promoted a sense of ownership and awareness about the environment in local Aboriginal people of all ages, but particularly in young people.



The Booroongen College Wetland

how the project was carried out

From the outset, it was considered vital to include college Elders in all planning decisions, while still meeting the needs of the potential users. The parties agreed on a plan that included providing outdoor study areas, collecting scientific data on wetland plants and invertebrates, constructing fencing and clearing the area of weeds. An important consideration for the project was the creation of interpretive signs around the area to inform visitors about many aspects of swamp ecology, including plants, animals and the damaging weed species. Local Aboriginal artists were employed to create the artwork used in the interpretive signs. People from the University of New England and Wetland Care Australia collected the technical and scientific data. Local Conservation and Land Management students helped with the weed elimination and children planted seedlings of wetland species to improve water filtration into the area.

The group used the local media to emphasise the positive outcomes of the project. An article in a local newspaper outlined the social and educational benefits for local youth and community Elders.

outcomes now and in the future

The project achieved not only its basic objective to create an outdoor environmental learning place, but provided added benefits for wider community usage. Both Elders and young people gained valuable experience in environmental rehabilitation and a sense of ownership in the project that should ensure continuation of care for the site.

This project will continue to provide social and environmental benefits to the local and wider community. The use of the site

by aboriginal TAFE and school students should have the flow-on effect of ensuring long term maintenance of the wetland, as it provides a practical resource for these students. The College group will continue to encourage a range of positive uses of the site. Continued use as a recreation and meeting place will be monitored to ensure that the site retains its natural integrity. The sense of pride in the environment that has been fostered by the users and developers of the site will help to ensure that appropriate uses of the area continue into the future.

benefits, challenges & lessons learned

Several benefits flowed from the 'What's in a Swamp' project. Local people developed an increased environmental awareness, and the continued emphasis on consultation strengthened ties in the Aboriginal community. An added advantage was the wider use of the facility for interaction and relaxation by Elders. In addition, the scientific data collected during the project will be valuable for future monitoring of the health of the wetland.

The consultative process created some challenges. It was sometimes difficult to coordinate the presence of Elders at meetings and field trips for collection of technical data, and this greatly increased the timeframe for delivery of the project. It was considered crucial, however, to maintain the spirit of consultation, and any difficulties with gathering people together were minor compared to the benefits gained.