



WILD EARTH BLANKET

Wildscapes of Warringine Community Art Project

Jenny Macaffer, Coordinator, Social Planning & Community Development, Mornington Peninsula Shire

The Wild Earth Blanket (WEB) encourages us to engage in a dialogue with ourselves and others. It is a symbol for self reflection, a beautiful piece of community art, and a story of the sacred ways of nature, and our place in the world.

The WEB started as a community art project to connect health and well being with the natural bushland of Warringine Park in Western Port, Victoria. It was initiated at Wild Discovery Day at the Park on 6 October 2007. The day also included interpretative walks with park rangers, a traditional aboriginal welcome, animal sand footprints, friends of the park information stall, community plantings, weaving, and a community photographic project entitled Wildshots.

The WEB was intended as a 'metaphor' to inspire love and respect for the land, sky, and earth, and represent our interconnectedness with all living things. Renoir said, "To be an artist you must learn to know the laws of nature." (Heffron. M, 1994. p. 36). Perhaps to know the laws of nature you must also be an artist.

The WEB activity invited people to contribute artwork or a message about nature in the park, using a piece of calico, fabric paints and pens. The plan was to later join the pieces into a community blanket.

Approximately 60 contributions were made by community members for the Wild Earth Blanket from people aged 4 to 70 years. Participants varied with a mix of locals plus visitors from Melbourne. Some participants contributed more than one piece, families and children worked their ideas together, as they designed their material at the table, swapping paints, pens and conversation about the Park.

The finished pieces were pegged by participants onto a washing line tied to trees and stakes. The outcome provided a strong visual presence in the Park and a colourful draw card. The WEB stall was one of the most popular activities on the day. Participants also filled in forms to be credited artists and contacted about the future of the blanket.

The success of the activity prompted the Committee to continue the Wild Earth Blanket concept throughout the life of the Wildscapes of Warragine project into 2008. It would build on the momentum from Discovery Day and display the journey and connections throughout the life of the project. Other people would be invited to contribute to the WEB at displays and workshops. The WEB would serve as a record of connections over time between people, communities, and nature.

At the least, the WEB is bits of calico expressing individual art about nature. At most, however, the blanket acknowledges the human spirit in the nature of things. It prompts us to consider a destiny that is shared, and encourages us to explore our interconnections through the development of the Wild Earth Blanket.

At first, the WEB may seem a soft touch, a piece of artwork, nice in itself, but not significant enough to change anything. Except that now, the time is right, and community cultural development (CCD) has never been more relevant to humanity as a tool to raise awareness to the truth. The truth is that we have stepped so far away from our selves and nature that we need reawakening. It's through acts of CCD that we get another chance to go forward together.

When we look at what we are doing to the earth today we are reminded of the words of Gerald Durrell:

“The world is as delicate and as complicated as a spider’s web. If you touch one thread you send shudders running through all the other threads. We are not just touching the web; we are tearing great holes in it.” (Grieve, 2002, p. 117)

Everyday we're bombarded with global warming issues, environmental disasters, and indicators that people are increasingly dissatisfied and disillusioned with the state of things. People seek new ways, looking for different solutions, and a more meaningful existence to engage with the world of elements in which they live and

interact. CCD provides a basic framework for us to do this. The collective art experience empowers us with a choice about how our piece of the Wild Earth Blanket will be and how it will be together with others.

The idea for the WEB was first inspired by Nancy Turner who wrote the book, *Earth's Blanket*. Nancy combines her knowledge and intimacy with the land and her experience of working with First Nation people of North America. She encourages us to transfer our way of thinking about the earth and our place in it and asks us how we can better understand how to live in greater harmony with our natural surroundings.

The concept for weaving the blanket together comes from 'The Blanket of Hope'. A real blanket that was woven by Elders in the Big Mountains of South West in North America. It tells the story of hope and despair and speaks about the need for balance between masculine and feminine side by side as equal strengths. It provides a roadmap that lies in the sacred ways of nature (www.theblanketofhope.org,2007) and highlights our relationship with the whole of life.

What greater way to represent this than through our own creative blanket of artwork developed and woven together by a range of people of all ages, in the knowledge that it would go out for public exhibition and contemplation. The finished product presented to the local authority as a legitimate record of local understanding of the need to foster more creative ways for a better earth and future together.

After all, the earth is a living being and it's time to recognise how it nurtures and sustains us. Being part of the web of life, we too are made from natural elements. In the book, 'The Sacred Balance,' by Suzuki, Luther Standing Bear reminds us of our belonging:

"Dakota children understand that we are of the soil and the soil of us, that we love the birds and beasts that grew with us on this soil. A bond exists between all things because they drink the same water and breathe the same air." (2002, p. 83)

The WEB throws us a challenge to look at the world in a different way, to re-orient our thinking and to direct it towards rediscovering and exploring our own interconnectedness. The crisis of sustainability in our time is really not one of global warming; it is a moral and spiritual one, about our increasing withdrawal from the natural world.

So here's the thing. The thing is that our collective subconscious is uneasy with our way of living. It rises up with a new concern for global warming, but in fact, it is only the tip of the iceberg. Many people are yearning from the heart, to restore the balance. Our alienation from the natural world and one another makes us destitute.

Depression is fast increasing. The World Health Organisation estimates that depression will be the largest killer in the western world after heart disease by 2020. The percentage of depression in population is doubling every 20 years. (www.who.int/topics/depression), 1 November 2010). Increased loneliness and sense of separation continue to plague us.

“Contact with the natural world awakens a direct experience of what it means to live cyclically. Nature is a powerful antidote to depression and fear and offers us a direct way by which we can attune our bodies to the cosmic cycle.” (LaCappell, 2001, p. 81)

We have lost ourselves in a sea of material madness and our thirst for something deeper, without awareness of what that really is, drives further exploitation of the planet and each other. Leopold, in Heffron, has this to say,

“We abuse the land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see the land as a country to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.” (1994, p. 32)

The Wild Earth Blanket asks us to undertake a critical reflection of our living. By “daring to be an artist,” (LaChapelle, 2001, p 28) on a piece of calico in the WEB you dare to share your views on what's happening in the world. Your patch of calico on its own can be a beautiful thing, but woven together, in awareness, it displays the uniqueness of the individual, yet supports the collective artistry of humanity.

If you can see your small patch make a difference then CCD has done its job. That job is to awaken us to the possibilities of our own creation and that working together we can weave a future that is more thoughtful, colourful, connected, and inspiring than we have ever done before. "The poetry of the earth is never dead." said John Keats (Suzuki, 2002 p.75). This hope unites us in our endeavours.

The irony of the Wild Earth Blanket is that while it is symbolic of our own connections to the elements, in practical terms, it can also protect us from these elements by keeping us warm and sheltered.

The WEB promises something more. It prompts us to ask questions of our collective conscience. Isn't that what CCD is all about? It asks us what we might do personally and/or with others to demonstrate how to better care for ourselves and the world in which we live, to restore equilibrium and balance.

First, CCD principles indicate we must become more informed. Search the internet (the WEB!), libraries and other sources, particularly ones that raise the profile of nature and people working together. Look for lectures, forums, or documentaries that might awaken what you already know deep inside: that we must respect from the heart. Respect comes naturally when we recognise the inherent value of things. To respect is to acknowledge the sacred in the earth and all that is living (Hawes, 2007). We can especially learn from traditional aboriginal culture. After all, their expertise comes from thousands of years of cultivating a rapport with the earth, wind, fire and water of this land.

Second, once informed, talk about the Wild Earth Blanket with friends. Enrich your life by telling the story of the WEB to others, many people hunger like you for these opportunities. Together we can ask intelligent questions about the fundamental principles, by which we live, relate to one another, and the world of life around and through us. What do we value?

Third, with heightened self and global awareness, more people will raise their level of respect for the earth and be encouraged to act with integrity and love. Yes, love is a cliché. But the WEB asks that we love more in a big way and not be afraid. Not lustful, jealous or obsessive love, but open and unconditional, in the way we were meant to; exposing ourselves to new perceptions. Insights lead to new experiences and a new destiny. Having faith that our piece of cloth will be treated with dignity and

respect and connected to others can evoke a love for the whole as it grows from one creative piece to a myriad of many that make up the WEB.

In November 2007, the Wild Earth Blanket was displayed at the Wild Art Show at Mornington Peninsula Council offices in Hastings. Previous participants were acknowledged, invited along to see pieces of the blanket on display, and find out about its growing story and future. In this way, people have an opportunity to develop a long-term relationship with the WEB.

Fourth, like a key CCD principle, take action. Take responsibility for yourself. Make your vote count at the ballot box and when shopping. Look at how you live in the world and make it better than before. Buy environmentally and people friendly products where possible. Espouse the philosophy of CCD in your way of living. Support a local park friends group or community garden and get your fingers into the soil, build relationships with the earth and other people simultaneously. Invite friends for a walk or picnic in Warringine Park or investigate other parks and marvel at the awe and wonder. Rachael Carson said,

“Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is a symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds, the ebb and flow of the tides, the folded bud ready for the spring. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature – the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter.”
(Heffron, 1994. P. 6)

Make more community art inspired by the natural world. Find your local neighbourhood house, community arts centre or contact your local council to see what is available in the right art form for you.

Nature has a natural intelligence of its own. It's bigger and better than us. It can swallow us whole and indeed is doing so in many places around the world. Old cultures knew the power of nature and practiced many rituals and designed artworks demonstrating respect for the natural world.

The Wild Earth Blanket demonstrates this respect. The earth is our home. We better look after it. In the end we return, each of us, to the arms of nature. To see the

beauty of our story in our rightful place, through patches of cloth woven together like was done in ancient ways, with a living spirit, to help restore balance, is a testament to the deep longing within us to the calling of the wild. Without it we would not be human.

Cynics might see these aspirations as naïve, but CCD provides us with tools to weave the narrative of the human story into a better one. One with imagination, because in the end, don't we create our own world?

Robert Theabold, a futurist and economist once argued that the 21st century should be called the Healing century, filled with a positive vision of hope. He said,

“This is the time for courage and risks. It is a time to argue for a higher vision of human purpose than we have accepted in recent years. It is time for us to face the challenges to resolve to meet them. This is the moment when the actions of each of us can make a profound difference.”

(Theabold, 2001)

Now it's up to you. The Wild Earth Blanket asks that you become more conscious. Integrate more harmonious ways into your life and work to ensure, health, hope and happiness for you, others and the world in which we live. Tell the story of the Wild Earth Blanket to anyone that will listen. They are waiting for you. Whenever you feel all is lost, that nothing has meaning anymore, that all hope is gone, remember the story of the Wild Earth Blanket. Your small piece is important to the whole human story and the history you are making for the future. CCD works by bringing us together in the making. As George Perkins said,

“All nature is linked together by invisible bonds, and every organic creature however low, however feeble, however dependent, is necessary to the well being of some other among the myriad forms of life with which the Creator has peopled the earth.” (from March, Man and Nature, quoted in Suzuki, 2002, p. 103).

Thanks to the beautiful setting of Warrigine Park for giving us the inspiration for the Wild Earth Blanket. It symbolises the best in us: it celebrates our individual creativity, our interconnectedness, and our respect for the natural world.

There is an old Kenyan proverb, "Treat the earth well. It was not given to you by your parents; it was loaned to you by your children." (Hopkins, 2004, p159). If you haven't given much thought to these ideas before, then do it now, do not hesitate, there is no time to waste; nature calls.

- ChoQosh, *The Blanket of Hope*, www.blanketofhope.org; accessed 11 September 2007
- Earth Song Journal; www.earthsong.org.au; accessed 28 Septmeber 2007
- Greive. B. T, Priceless, *The Vanishing Beauty of a Fragile Planet*, Random House, Australia, 2002
- Hopkins, R., *One Planet*, Lonely Planet images, 2004, Australia
- Hawes, M., *Twelve principles. Living with Integrity in the 21st Century*, Finch Publishing, Sydney, 2003
- Heffron. M.F., *Reflection of Madison County*, Express Bridge Publishing, Vermont, USA, 1994
- LaChapelle, D., *Navigating the Tides of Change, Stories from Science, the Sacred and Wise planet*, New Society Publishing, Canada, 2001
- Simpson. L. *The Healing Energies of the Earth*, Axiom, London,
- 2000
- Suzuki, D. & McConnell, A. with Decambra, M., *The Sacred Balance; A Visual Celebration of our place in nature*, Allen & Unwin, Australia, 2002
- Theabold, Robert, *The Healing Century*, Wiseworld, 2001, Melbourne (poster)
- Turner. N. *The Earth's Blanket*, Douglas & McIntyre, Canada, 2007
- World Health Organisation, www.who.int/topics/depression; accessed 1 November 2007

Jenny Macaffer
Coordinator Social Planning and Community Development
Mornington Peninsula Shire
Private Bag 1000
ROSEBUD 3939
macaj@mornpen.vic.gov.au
Telephone (03) 5950 1684