

## Case Study / Reflections

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# PAST REFLECTIONS, CURRENT CHANGES AND FUTURE HOPES

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The Victorian Ministry of Education, Children's School Camp at Somers has been in operation for twenty-nine years. Over eighty-four thousand students have participated in the socially orientated program of which environmental education forms an integral component. The author of this article looks at past happenings, his view of current trends in students and looks at a government sponsored initiative in providing finance for the building of a new environmental studies complex at the camp in the future.

This article is a look back on an environmental education program that has been running at the Children's School Camp, Somers since 1959. When the program was started by Alan Reid it was known as nature study but, in reality, was exposing students to their environment and the effects that humankind has had upon the environment.

Environmental Studies forms part of the program at Somers. It does, for students, supplement the basic objective of social integration and understanding of themselves and other students. The environmental studies program promotes social awareness and the responsibility of individuals to their place in the world around them. Environmental studies is integrated into many facets of the camp program. This has happened as other staff members have become aware of their environment and their responsibilities to the environment. Often it is very difficult to ignore natural happenings particularly when honey-eaters are squabbling in the tree above where a lesson is being taken, or a koala wander across the roadway and

pauses to watch a rope course session in progress.

The environmental studies sessions change not only with the seasons, tides or weather but also with the changing interests of the teaching staff and the perceived backgrounds of the students who are in camp at that point in time. There is now a greater need to be able to provide a link between the student's home/school environment and that of Somers. It is important to be able to have some knowledge of many of the local environmental problems or situations and be able to relate these to Somers - for example, the problem of soil erosion and its causes in the Mallee area compared with the beach erosion problems of the Somers area. For many students Somers is a starting point for environmental learning and awareness that may last for the rest of their lives. It is very rewarding when a parent is 'dragged' along by a camper on visitors' day to look around the environmental studies complex and in some cases remember their stay as a student years before. This haphazard return encounter with Somers Camp is the only follow up that the environmental studies staff have, albeit many years later.

Modern day technology has proven to be quite a boon to many facets of education. However, in the years that I have worked at Somers there has been not quite the same amount of change. Initially adapting and scrounging were the order of the day. From this came many weird and wonderful articles. For example reptile enclosures from old wardrobes and chests

of drawers, underwater viewers from plumbers' cast off pipes and marine aquaria filters from scrap roofing, electrical conduit and foam rubber. The last item has proven to be so effective that the record for not cleaning marine aquaria is now just over two and a half years. This particular tank has so much life in it that it is supporting many marine species that we have never managed to keep before. The current range of experiments/ adaptations involves using alternative technology (solar electric panel) a discarded fibreglass garden pond, a bilge-pump and plastic rubbish bins. From this it is hoped to be able to simulate tidal movement and aerate water at the same time. This recycling of so called junk is a lesson within itself. Many visiting teachers, when they realise the ease with which many things can be made or adapted, are encouraged to 'have a go' at environmental studies.

One of the more disturbing trends that is becoming more and more evident is the increasing inability of many students to utilise the senses they were born with to learn about the world around them. In many instances the world is regarded as just being there for their convenience. Consequently the Somers program has had to revert to providing more and more basic sensory experiences which are based upon the need to get students to realise that sensory utilisation will open up a new world. Differences in sensory awareness varies greatly between areas of the state and between rural and urban students. Along with developing some sort of sensory awareness there is also emphasis placed upon attitudinal development, knowledge and action. The environmental action that is encouraged is meant to occur when they return home and is meant to happen at a personal level. For example, not using aerosol cans, walking or riding their bicycle instead of asking for a car ride, turning off lights when not using them, using the rubbish bins, etc. All very basic but still positive action. Unfortunately, Somers caters for less than 5% of the senior primary state school students in Victoria and so the message and experiences do not reach as many as I would like.

The greatest hope that I have had at Somers is a new complex. The buildings that form the Environmental Studies Department are old, temporary. World

War II Air Force huts. At long last this dream looks as though it is to be realised. The Ministry of Education has allocated \$550,000 for a replacement complex and at present the architects have been working on drawings. Whilst there have had to be compromises in some areas the dream is about to be fulfilled. The main building is of a passive solar design with a large and small teaching area, a central foyer and general purpose area which will also house aquaria. The staff preparation area overlooks this foyer from a mezzanine with an outside balcony which will be used for astronomy. Nearby will be a barn/workshop, aviaries, farmyard and vegetable garden/orchard. If the money is sufficient it is hoped to have a building that is independent of external services such as power, heating and water. Many of the adaptations and inventions will go with the move, others sadly, in some respects, will not.

The future at Somers for environmental studies looks assured. The Ministry of Education has recognised the Somers Camp's contribution to the children of Victoria as being worthwhile. Hopefully the planned redevelopment of the rest of the camp facilities will proceed in an orderly, well planned manner. However, for environmentalists, a hopeful commitment is made for the building of a new environmental studies complex.