

Ripples in the Water: Kids' Congress for Catchment Care

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I believe that people should wake up to the pain that we are causing to our environment. Once it's gone it might not come back as easily as it went!

Jennine Bartsch, Year 7 student, Ardtornish Primary School

The Kids' Congress for Catchment Care concept originated from Ardtornish Primary School, situated in the foothills of Adelaide, South Australia. Since 1992 the school has developed, implemented and maintained an extensive range of high quality environmental programs as well as forming working links with farmers, other educational institutions, government and non-government agencies and corporate groups. The common denominator has been 'action for the environment' as partners in a common future. The success of these programs has been widely recognised with the school winning two National Environment Awards and a large number of State Awards. The birth of the Kids' Congress was a natural development of the work undertaken by Ardtornish Primary School as part of the Contributories Project, described briefly below—and so began the 'first ripple'

The Contributories Scheme, a joint project between Ardtornish Primary School and the City of Tea Tree Gully Council, involves the redevelopment of a small park situated across the road from the school. The main objectives of the project are to improve stormwater quality, and to provide areas for passive recreation and environmental education by creating a wetland habitat for native plants and animals.

Students are involved in: the regular removal and classification of litter collected in a trash rack in the upper levels of the wetlands; monitoring lower areas via surveys of litter and aquatic plant growth and of the levels of

ecological parameters including pH levels, salinity and turbidity; conducting a survey of plants and animals currently present; and the selection of plant species for revegetation, seed collecting, propagating and planting. Data collected by the students over a period of three years will be used to determine the effectiveness in nutrient removal of two wetland ponds and, therefore, their viability for other sites.

It was not long before students and staff at Ardtornish realised that the Contributories Project was an excellent example for others to follow. Students in particular wanted a special meeting with students from other schools to inform them of their success and the benefits of their project, and to obtain a commitment from others to similar projects. And so Kids' Congress was born.

How it works

'future adults need opportunities to take responsibility for their environments'

Much of the drive for Kids' Congress has come from an appreciation that South Australia is the driest state in the driest inhabited continent on Earth, and from the belief that future adults need opportunities to take responsibility for their environments. The main aims of the Congress, developed cooperatively between children and adults, are to:

- recognise the need to work together to solve problems in catchment areas
- raise school and community awareness of the link between personal practices and catchment health
- develop a range of skills in problem solving and decision making with a focus on catchment issues empower catchment carers to make informed and appropriate decisions about their environments
- identify the issues and use this information to compile an Action Plan to improve their local environments.

Since its inception in 1995 from 20 schools located in one catchment the Congress has grown to include more than 60 schools across 5 catchments in 1999. It directly influences 240 students and 75 teachers and, indirectly through the school community, about 25 000 students and over 50 000 adults.

Four student representatives usually from Years 5, 6 or 7—that is, 9–12 year olds—are chosen to lead the school's project. It is past and intended practice of the Congress that student representatives be exposed to a variety of experiences and qualified speakers so that the following objectives are addressed:

- ensuring that children have appropriate awareness, knowledge and skills about water management and related issues

- developing in children a Landcare ethic
- developing children's leadership skills, and their ability to 'sell the message' to their individual schools and communities.

In order to realise the above objectives the following kinds of experiences have been provided:

- investigating the causes and effects of various forms of water pollution
- training in the skills of identifying waterway weeds, and constructing herbaria for future reference
- using technology to assist in water management
- carrying out water sampling and testing, and developing the ability to interpret data collected
- acquiring information about the importance of riparian vegetation in stream bank stabilisation.

'a comprehensive plan for the development of their catchment'

On the basis of the skills and information obtained each school compiled a comprehensive plan for the development of their catchment, and a detailed, achievable Action Plan in line with it. Each school was asked to address the following questions in their Action Plan:

- the Catchment Care site—What is it like now?
- what needs to be done?—erosion prevention, litter control, habitat construction,
- what can we do?—clean up, water monitoring,
- who can help?— local council, specific agencies such as Keep South Australia Beautiful (KESAB), parents, service clubs, government agencies,
- what equipment do we need?—water monitoring equipment,
- who will use the information?—media, local community, catchment boards, councils,
- how will we record?—journals, displays,
- how will we inform others?—council newsletter, local paper,

The Congress is managed by Student and Adult Organising Committees working in parallel. Students volunteer to be representatives on the Student Committee which allows representation that is as broad as possible across the participating schools. The Adult Organising Committee has representatives from all levels from reception to Year 12 in participating schools, and from government agencies, catchment management boards, local councils, community agencies and members, parents and tertiary institutions. One of the main tasks of the Adult Committee is to seek sponsorship and to provide support ensuring the success of the events program. Funding is an essential element in the

program's success so far. It has been provided collectively by the agencies mentioned above, and by many private businesses, there being about 25 sponsor organisations at present.

Congress program

A typical year's Kids' Congress for Catchment Care Program would involve the following major activities:

- Catchment Crawl from Source to Sea.

This, the main inservice workshop, now involves teachers and students after feedback from them indicated that greater understanding and cohesiveness could be gained if the two groups worked together. Over two days there is a walking and cycling 60 kilometre journey along Adelaide's River Torrens. It deals with rural, urban and industrial impacts providing student and teachers with opportunities to examine the nature of human influences on watercourses. Their learning together allows them to take back to their school communities a new awareness of how their patch of a catchment connects with the whole.



Catchment crawl—urban



Catchment crawl—rural

- ECO-Mission Possible

After the Crawl it's off to a local primary school to begin to play ECO-Mission Possible, a "Who—dunnit?" kind environmental game and the vehicle through which schools over the following months incorporate Catchment Care into their curricula and prepare for 'solution day' on World

to achieve this unifying project for the Congress the management committee worked on the following tasks:

- reaching an agreement about the site and project and obtaining sponsorship from a local refuse disposal company
- obtaining from the company payment of the power; designing a fishing method and attempting to apply it to the capture of European carp, one of several feral fish in Australian waterways; producing a photographic display or other piece of art work connected to their project; and presenting a performance to the rest of the students. Criteria and guidelines given to the students were used to judge the entries and presentations to the students were made by

Environment Day, June 5th. In the course of playing the game students and teachers carry out the following:

1. investigation of a catchment problem
2. identification of the common issues, and the use of this information to compile an action plan to improve local environments

each year we are working to refine and improve the delivery of the program.

Extending outwards

The ripple effects of the Kids' Congress extended nationally in October 1997 with the University of Adelaide

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attempting to capture European carp from the catchment

During the Kids' Congress I have learnt that you should never give up no matter how big or small the job is. Each person plays a part. Steven Brown, Year 6 student, Ridgehaven Primary School.

All up it was great and I have plenty of new information to teach people how to help our catchment. Lauren Burford, Year 6 student, Aldgate Primary School.

Highlights for teachers included:

Integrating Catchment Care into the curriculum was great! Supportive staff really enjoyed this. Karen Scott, Year 2 Teacher, Marymount Primary School.

I appreciated sharing ideas with other schools and having a common forum for acknowledging and developing student leadership in this area. David Craig, Principal, Upper Sturt Primary School.

Although all the workshops, field trips, presentations, displays and discussions proved extremely worthwhile the formulation and final production of 'National Kids' Congress for Catchment Care Charter' was one of the most important outcomes of the Congress.

Each day at the congress students gathered to reflect on what they had accomplished and how they could act upon issues which they deemed important. These ideas, and the contributions they had presented from their schools and communities representing several months of local discussions, were collated by an adult mentor. After consultation with the Student Organising Committee the charter was produced and presented to the National Congress for its approval. Copies were taken to all the schools and their communities.

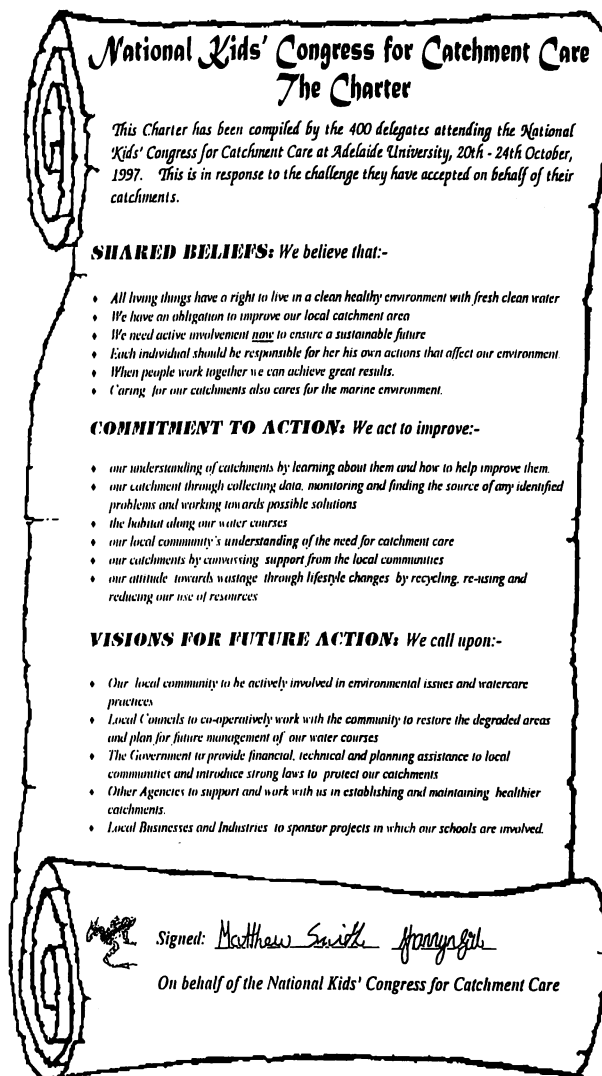
The purpose of the Charter was to give everyone involved a clear set of guiding principles when undertaking catchment management projects and to inform potential partners and agencies of the vision of the Kids' Congress.

Delegates delivered their Charter to Government House, Adelaide City Council, the media and business and industry houses around the city and, parading through the Central Business District with banners and colourful boards, spread the catchment care message of 'the need for clean water and community care' They also conducted an environmental survey with a very cooperative public.

One of the positive consequences of Kids' Congress activities has been the establishment of 'mini-ripples' in various parts of South Australia. However, the most ambitious development is that the Kids' Congress Committee is now in the process of arranging an International Kids' Congress to be held in Adelaide in the year 2000. The event will be held between the Summer Olympic Games and Para Olympics enabling participants to utilise the possibly empty flight seats between the two games, one way of reducing the greenhouse gas 'load' created by an international congress. The International

Kids' Congress, with the theme 'Making a Difference', will be modelled on the first International Children's Conference on the Environment which was held in Eastbourne, United Kingdom, in 1995.

The Congress Charter



Educational impact

The Congress initiative has powerfully demonstrated that an outstanding program can be developed by a group of people from different schools and organisations working cooperatively to address the needs of students and their communities. It has empowered students in the making of decisions, and has allowed them to see those decisions valued and acted on. School communities have gained satisfaction and pride in working collaboratively on a common program with readily visible outcomes. It has allowed for an effective and efficient use of time as the planning, organisation and the resource gathering is done for all the schools by a group with appropriate skills and knowledge. It has allowed for a free exchange of ideas, for

students to know that others outside their school communities have similar ideals and concerns—and it has demonstrated that funding for school based programs may be obtained from sources outside the norm. Two ‘success stories’ follow.

Action breeds satisfaction

Year five students at Glen Osmond Primary School had planned to take monthly readings from the water in a creek running through a nearby park but their first test results showed the water to be highly polluted with nitrate and phosphate. Follow up testing on the following morning confirmed this and students also noticed a grey sediment resembling cement in a pond near the outlet pipe where they were testing. These results were collected about the same time as cement was being sprayed on exposed rock faces along freeway roadworks occurring upstream in the catchment.

Concerned about their results over several tests, students contacted the Catchment Water Management Boards, who then discussed the results with the State Environmental Protection Authority. Students have started to develop a plan to clean out the creek and to replant the area with local plant species, hoping that the presently polluted water does not destroy the environment for replanting the creek in the future. (From an account by Year five class, Glen Osmond Primary School)

School initiative

Clare Primary School, one of the rural schools involved in the program, was the winner of the Kids’ Congress for Catchment Care’s ECO-Mission Possible environmental contest and is now at the forefront of environmental education in the local community. The school has decided that it—and the entire town—needs wetlands. Having done their research they have found that this is the easiest way to improve the quality of water flowing through the town’s Hutt River.

Said teacher Mr Andrew Clucas. “I think that we’ve realised that the school has an educative role to play in the community and that we can raise community awareness and lead the way to trying to help repair the damage” Kate Burge, a member of Clare Primary School’s Student Representative Council, speaks confidently about “making the world a better place to live”, and Kate’s mother Wendy, who travelled to Adelaide with the Clare delegation for World Environment Day, said she believed working with the environment had a positive effect on the children. “It’s been very interesting. Not only have I been learning important things from the children but it’s been really good to see them so involved.” (Klaric 1998)

The popularity of the Kids’ Congress is such that schools have had to develop selection procedures involving students making submissions to be selected for one of the four student representative positions—and 80% of the students re-nominated themselves for the second year of the Congress. This keenness to be involved may, in part, may be due to there being special benefits of Congress uniforms and involvement at no cost in the 6 day program. However, it appears from evaluation sheets completed by students that their motivation, enthusiasm and commitment was due to their desire to be involved in an action related

program intended to produce results of obvious benefit to their futures. They also stated that the program had challenged them, and significantly, that they felt valued at the Congress and back at their own school because their involvement made them feel ‘important’. They were able to learn, and to put their learning into practice.

‘Students have.....successfully initiated and supported environmental projects in their own schools’

Students have become more aware of environmental issues and confident about their ideas, and have successfully initiated and supported environmental projects in their own schools and their communities. Outcomes like Environmental Clubs, special Environmental Newsletters to the community, displays, workshops, debates, and so on have all been directly related to the Congress experience.

Congress students have initiated within their schools Action Plans to address the needs of their particular part of a catchment. These areas are now beginning to show benefits through refuse reduction, weed eradication and raising community awareness. Participants have also shown increased leadership skills by articulating their views at assemblies and class meetings, and by helping other students to change their attitudes and behaviours towards environments. Closer links and collaborative activities which have enhanced social development and tolerance have been initiated by the students between schools, their communities and other agencies.

In closing

Having been involved with this program since its inception I believe that, as a means of connecting schools, communities and other agencies, it has been highly successful. The opportunity schools have had to achieve curriculum outcomes through student action programs is one that I wish all schools could have. The most significant value of the program is in the opportunities it provides for students. To see them develop positive environmental attitudes and become aware from a young age that they can participate, inform and be change agents in their own community is very encouraging. Knowing that the next generation is already developing a very strong sense of environmental stewardship and preparedness to take action for the environment, more so than our generation, should give us all the impetus to join in and support them.

The ‘ripple’ from one school, one project would then have reached one world. 🌊

Acknowledgments

Jan Fitzgerald and Alex Staritski have contributed to Kids’ Congress organisation with enormous enthusiasm. Jan, environmental education support teacher at Ardtornish

Primary School, has managed its environmental education program for the last six years. A tireless and creative colleague she has been a key figure in development of the on-ground activities and the ECO-Mission Possible Game. Now principal at another school, Alex was principal at Ardornish Primary School during much of the time of the Kids' Congress program. An awe inspiring ability to obtain sponsorship for Kids' Congress and related activities has been accompanied by a degree of commitment and vision instrumental to the success of the program. Many thanks to them both for this—and to Alex for much assistance in the production of this story.

David Larritt worked in middle and secondary schools teaching science and geography before coordinating an Environmental Education centre for the last 10 years. Programs at the centre included Earth Education, Aboriginal Studies and a range of environmental education courses. He is a member of the organising committee for Kids' Congress for Catchment Care and on the executive committees of the Australian Association for Environmental Education and the South Australian Studies of Society and Environment council.
