

## **Kids on Country program - Coolgardie**

What happens when you bring together Aboriginal Elders, children and young people aged 10 to 25 years and scientists on country in a citizen science program, and ask the kids what and how they want to learn?

Over a series of weekend-based day-trips and group discussions, young people explored various sites in the woodland, learnt how to monitor local malleefowl for Birdlife Australia, produced a book and a film of their activities and hosted an international citizen science field trip, sharing their knowledge with other young people from Indonesia and Malaysia and are now working towards developing a sustainable business model that includes the development of a smart mapping application and tours for tourists to the local area.

### **Overview**

Since 2008 Millennium Kids (MK) has been working with young people in the Goldfields' Great Western Woodland using a 'skills for life' learning process in a co-designed program addressing: what do you like about your community, what don't you like, and what would you change?

In 2014, a Ngadju Elder invited MK to extend the program to the Coolgardie Aboriginal community. This invitation stemmed from a Goldfields field trip which travelled through Coolgardie, where MK invited the Elder to come and meet with the students to introduce and welcome them to the country they were travelling through.

The program started with a picnic being held on Country, which was attended by fifty-two children and young people and their families. Of those who attended, 90 per cent had not been to Cave Hill, a nearby camping spot, before. The Elders were shocked. Parents involved stated the causes as being a lack of suitable vehicles for bush trips, and no fuel money. One of the issues identified by the parents and Elders was that children and young people were stuck in the small township on weekends, and there was a lot of anti-social behavior created out of boredom.

### **Community engagement**

The program was developed through conversations with Aboriginal children and young people held around a fire, starting from the first day trip. As the facilitators, MK arranged food and logistics and asked simple, open questions to determine the priorities of the young people involved: What do you like about your community, what don't you like and what would you change? There was strong consensus between the young people that they were bored on weekends and wanted more activities like weekend fieldtrips, where they could learn from Elders, reconnect with country, share stories and get to know more about their landscape and their culture.

The young people also said that they wanted a program which ran on weekends and which was different to learning in the classroom.

MK then started talking to stakeholders about the project. It was important to MK for stakeholders to understand the co-design process and the objectives of the project – kids leading and a sound understanding of the methodology was required. Kids' ideas form the basis of the next steps. MK scaffolds each step and supports with grant writing, seeking partnerships and training opportunities to upskill the whole team.

With support from stakeholders, Wyemando Bequest supported the language acquisition, IGO Holdings supported the field trips and on country experiences, ERM Foundation and Tellus Holdings funds were used for training adults to support the initiative, and Gondwana Link was used for expert land use and biodiversity. These stakeholders provided an opportunity for kids out on Country, to learn new skills and to reconnect with Ngadju language. Each stakeholder had a certain role in the project. The aim is to keep these partnerships alive so kids can see connection to real work opportunities in the future.

MK worked with Elders and kids (MK members aged 10 – 25 years) around a picnic table in the local park to design *Kids on Country* - a program based around the kids' desire to learn more about the woodland, centered on traditional culture. As part of the program, kids explored various local sites with scientific and technical equipment including binoculars, iPads and GPS, and participated in painting, writing poetry, managing the barbecue and playing with each other. During this time, the kids also participated in skill-building workshops. Importantly, some of the local Indigenous stakeholders are employed through the program.

## **Project development**

Using the Millennium Kids inquiry methodology, young people have been visiting the woodland alongside scientists and Elders, showcasing cultural knowledge through citizen science applications. In the program kids are allowed to explore the woodland to discover areas of interest to them. These areas of interest form the basis of program planning and development with MK, creating a youth led process. Through the program kids learn life skills that can be used in the school setting and in the workplace. Areas of interest for the kids included:

- Can we build a fire? - taught risk management and Department of Parks and Wildlife fire and firewood protocols
- Can we cook on the barbecue? – the kids learnt about food preparation, nutrition and hygiene protocols
- What bird is that? – the kids learnt how to use binoculars, cameras and a bird-identifying book, as well as learning Ngadju language by experience – seeing

objects and animals and learning their names from Elders, the kids also learnt from Elders about Malleefowl Dreaming

- Can you eat that plant? – the kids had the opportunity to develop their knowledge by sharing with scientists and Elders.
- Why do you need a GPS? – the kids had the opportunity to collect information to help us understand where we live and to contribute towards Birdlife Australia's tracking and understanding of the malleefowl around Coolgardie.

The kids were interested in malleefowl. They had seen them, knew where they crossed the road, and knew how to find their nests. Millennium Kids secured funding for a group of 30 young people from Coolgardie, based on their desire to learn more about the woodland, with a particular emphasis on traditional culture and protection of a threatened bird, the malleefowl. The program also gave the kids the opportunity to lead the program and found that with the recognition of their knowledge and skills and the opportunity to demonstrate leadership, they blossomed; keen to share their knowledge.

When the circus came to town, the kids met with the Chinese circus hands and decided that they wanted to take them out on country because they were from a different country and would not have experienced the bush that the children had become so familiar with. The circus moved on, but it gave birth to a new idea. Why couldn't the kids take tourists out bush and share their knowledge with them? The kids designed and hosted an international fieldtrip, starting with a list of important places and deciding what they wanted to teach their guests, before sharing their knowledge with other young people from Indonesia arranged through MK's partnerships. Each of the Indonesian participants paid their own way to the field trip, showing the local kids the value others place on their knowledge and country.

On a separate occasion, the kids also presented their work at the MK20 UNconference in Perth with over 150 young people and sustainability educators. They met with the previous Chief Scientist of WA and showcased the book they had created about their project. They reported to stakeholders from local, regional and international partnerships focusing on sustainability education.

At this event the kids also pitched new ideas for 2017. In 2017 we aim to meet indigenous rangers on country working at Credo Station. This opportunity has been facilitated by Department of Parks and Wildlife and will provide kids with invaluable interaction with indigenous role models.

## **Project outcomes**

Through the program, the kids developed real world skills that have application in the classroom and workforce. Indigenous adults participating in the program have also since been upskilled to lead part of the program, have achieved a formal

qualification in environmental work and found local employment, creating role models for the kids.

The kids also developed stronger relationships with local Elders and have developed from not knowing their cultural connections to proudly identifying with their language group, speaking confidently in public, and effectively communicating their project outcomes.

The kids have seen and experienced mutual respect between Elders and scientists and understand that their culture and ideas are important and have a place in the science world.

The kids are now independently reporting malleefowl sightings, contributing to the environmental knowledge and sustainability of their local area.

The kids have helped write a book, assisted in the production of a film about malleefowl and pitched new projects ideas as a result of their interest in the landscape and environmental health of their local community; they:

- want to help control feral cats
- are planning a revegetation project
- want to collect data on threatened species.

This shows the enthusiasm with which the kids have embraced the project and the potential opportunities to further develop their civil participation in the future.

### **Lessons learnt**

- It's important to be invited in to work with a community.
- It takes time and energy to connect with the families and guardians of children and young people to obtain their consent, we spent a lot of time going from door to door to introduce ourselves and the project to parents, carers and guardians and help them to understand our objectives.
- Support from local leaders is critical to the success of a project, the project would not be what it is without our local leadership team.
- When you listen to children and young people, innovative ideas can be generated. It was up to us to listen and work out how to respond to those ideas to put them in action.
- Upskilling local people, including young people, to implement the program is essential to its sustainability.

## Next steps

- When consent for a young person had not been obtained, or a young person was new to the group, the decision was to stay in town to ensure our duty of care needs were met. You need to learn to be flexible when operating in communities that experience transience.
- It is recommended that various communication tools are set up at the beginning of the program – whatsapp, instagram etc to ensure communication with kids.