

Submission on the role of the arts and artists in envisioning a positive future
– Christine Watson and John Pratt to ACT Standing Committee on Climate Change,
Energy and Water

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We thank the Standing Committee on Climate Change, Energy and Water for instituting this public consultation and for the opportunity to put forward ideas on how the arts can play a positive role in envisioning a sustainable future for Canberra. The ideas presented reflect our personal views based on some years' experience in community development and arts work.

Executive Summary

Einstein famously said that the solution to a situation cannot be found through the same thinking that produced the situation. Nor will solutions come through the sense of impending doom and crisis that surrounds the issue of climate change in media reportage in newspapers, radio and television. This submission proposes that the many artists, musicians and creative writers in the ACT are a largely untapped powerhouse of energy who can be used to help the ACT community to vision and create enduring physical symbols of a positive, desirable future in a clean energy society. The submission proposes taking action in line with the UN Decade for Sustainability Education (2005 – 2015) to add a small but effective Arts for a Sustainable Future stream to the existing ACT Weathering the Change Climate Strategy.

By establishing a program to foster the growth of a culture of welcoming the opportunities that transition to a green economy brings, a wave of new energy will result. Elements that could be included are:

- 1) creating a sustainability stream within all existing ACT community festivals and adding sustainability outcomes to ACT government festivals such as the National Multicultural Festival, the Canberra Festival, Floriade and Skyfire;
- 2) setting up a series of competitions to enliven the debate on climate change and move this from its current negative frame to a frame emphasising innovation, creativity and a positive future. Such a program would include comedy and short story competitions, and competitions fostering excellence in sustainable design in such areas as fashion, industrial design etc;
- 3) creating a small sustainability arts grant funding stream in artsACT to supply seed funding to artists and curators mounting exhibitions on sustainability. It is suggested that a series of exhibitions on sustainability be established to coincide with World Environment Day.

1a) Funding for sustainability components in ACT festivals:

Community festivals

A number of local festivals already exist within the ACT at Belconnen, Corinbank, Dickson/ Hackett, Weston Creek and Tuggeranong. Festival organisers such as Communities at Work are keen to add lively sustainability streams to enhance the experience they provide to festival goers. Making available small seeding grants to festival organisers to cover administrative costs and the cost of paying speakers fees

would be a cost-effective way of bringing sustainability ideas alive for a large number of Canberrans who have not been motivated to join community environmental organisations such as SEE-Change or Pedal Power. As Indigenous people have a deep understanding of human embeddedness in the environment, it is recommended that festival organisers involve local Elders as speakers and involve them in designing festival events.

Further grants could be made available to fund competitions to lighten the debate on climate change adaptation and to promote creativity in ways that accord with local interests. There is community interest in promoting comedy skits on the subject of climate change adaptation and moving to sustainability. Other organisers may be more interested in encouraging community creativity through short story or poetry competitions, or through competitions for house/ furniture or fashion design. Such competitions should ideally have categories for children, teens/young adults and adults.

Concerts visioning the future through music could also be part of such local festival programs. There are a number of local musicians such as Andy and George, Johnny Huckle and Peter Wood who are writing material on the need to care for the earth. Festival organisers should be encouraged to source prize money from local businesses and the tertiary sector, in this way fostering local buy-in to sustainability and making their festivals sustainable.

National Folk Festival –

The National Folk Festival began a small Earthworx tent for the 2008 festival. Seed funding to the National Folk Festival to coordinate a program of speakers and to finance travel and speakers' fees for significant climate change, sustainability and transition towns would add greatly to the tent's ability to attract festival goers and inform and motivate them to take action on climate change adaptation and sustainability issues.

Corinbank Music and Environmental Festival – this festival is the region's only dedicated environmental festival, having recently increased its environmental activities connected through the establishment of a Green Kulture Tent by ACT Otherwise. Corinbank attracts a considerable number of young people and the ACT government should continue its support for the festival.

ANU School of Arts Media Festival

The BEAM group (local and interstate artists) is committed to undertaking a number of Public Art Projections in the Civic precinct on environmental issues as part of the ANU School of Arts new media festival in September of this year. They envisage further contributions on this theme to the Canberra Week festivities in 2010.

1b) Festivals and Events under ACT jurisdiction

National Multicultural Festival

The debate on environmental damage and climate change began within the Anglo-Saxon and Indigenous populations of Australia, and with children of World War II migrants who reached maturity in the 1970s. It is suggested that National Multicultural Festival organisers in the ACT government consider ways of engaging recent migrant and refugees to vision a sustainable future for their community groups. One possibility is for a photographic exhibition on traditional life in migrants' home countries before peak oil. This exhibition could be toured to community venues such as libraries and schools.

Canberra Festival

The BEAM group envisages further contributions on environmental themes to the Canberra Week festivities in 2010.

. Skyfire

A program of tree and bush planting on the day of Skyfire to offset the carbon emissions of the fireworks to be released that night and from cars travelling to the venue would change the sustainability profile of this popular event. Radio coverage around dusk until the beginning of the fireworks performance could give air time to the tree planting activities and include young people who have been active in ensuring that the light spectacular is balanced by the growth of vegetation.

. Floriade

Floriade attracts a huge crowd of local, national and international visitors, and has great potential for communicating sustainability messages. The attraction of the event is the marriage of the colour of massed flowers with the landscape gardening skills of the plantings which transform flower beds into works of art.

It is suggested that the initiative taken some 5 years ago to include displays of aesthetically beautiful vegetable gardens within Floriade should be expanded to inspire festival goers with the potential of what they can do in their own backyards, no matter how big, to reduce their reliance on supermarket vegetables. When Floriade moves to its permanent location, the opportunity should be taken to recast the festival as an inspiring sustainable flower and vegetable gardening festival. Displays of beautiful vegetable gardens should become permanent plantings, maintained perhaps by community garden groups, with vegetables grown to be provided to local organisations.

Floriade offers a wealth of creative possibilities in fostering sustainability education. Starter courses could be offered on permaculture design, crops suitable for the Canberra climate, seed starting, soil preparation, and organic pest control. Each year a theme is chosen for artworks for Floriade. Many themes are possible, including a sculpture competition for school students expressing their vision for a sustainable ACT, sustainable transport, and an outdoor photographic exhibition showing vegetable gardens established under the ACT Sustainable Schools initiative with information on winning entries. Floriade night festival activities could include a slow food feast.

2) Creating a culture of creativity and innovation

In order for a society to find ways forward out of difficult situations, governments must inspire people with hope for the future, and breed an atmosphere which encourages its people to be creative. This can be done through action at Territory level as well as at the level of local population hubs.

Creative writing competitions

Creative writing competitions could be established to encourage various sectors of the Canberra population to envision a positive and sustainable future for the ACT. In terms of short story writing competitions, there could be segments for older Canberrans to write about what life was like before industrialisation and peak oil, and a segment for young and not-so-young people's short stories envisioning the features of a sustainable future they would like to see. There should also be segments for Indigenous people's stories of caring for the land, and for migrants and refugees to write about traditional life ways in their countries in order to continue these traditions into the future. The

competition should include publication of the winning entries and publicity for the competition as a whole.

3) artsACT Sustainability Arts Program

It is suggested that a small visual arts program with grant funding for artists and curators dealing with environmental and sustainability questions to provide financial support for exhibitions. This program could form part of the Community arts program of artsACT. It is also suggested that artsACT encourage public and private galleries around the ACT to set up a series of exhibitions on sustainability to coincide with World Environment Day in June each year.

The sustainability arts program should be linked to scientific resources and statistics on climate change adaptation from the new ACT Department of Climate Change, Energy and Water in order to ensure that initiatives are informed by best practice and that their effectiveness in providing sustainability education and creating real behavioural change can be assessed.

While any action to promote community visioning of a positive sustainable future will be beneficial, funding a small ACT Sustainability Arts Program until 2020 is recommended as action to ensure a sustainable future must be in place by this time.

Yours sincerely,

Christine Watson and John Pratt

Christine Watson is a curator of twenty years' standing. After working predominantly on Indigenous art, since 2004 she has organised exhibitions and seminars/ workshops exploring the use of visual art to express deeper layers of Australians' relationship to land and environment, through a small community arts business, Common Ground Exhibitions and Research. Participants' feedback on these projects shows that the arts can provide insight and inspiration to people to change their relationship with the environment that exposure to statistics alone cannot offer. This experience has also shown that unless public funding is available for arts and environment work, its huge potential to inspire change will be lost to the public.

John Pratt is an artist and lecturer at the ANU, School of Art. He has been involved in a number of Public Arts Festivals since 2003 including Domain (06 & 07), 24/7, Vivid (08) and In2change (09). His participation and coordination of a number of a number of Community Arts Programs has focused particularly on the art of young people (The Free Milk Workshop, numerous young peoples' arts courses with Arts Access ANU and Learning the Land 08) all of which has provided a broad recognition of the urgent value of creative arts programs within the general community. He is also a practising artist in his own right with works held in numerous public collections including the NGA, ANU, CMAG and the University of Canberra. On the environmental front, he coordinates the Mt Ainslie Park Care Group.