

PRACITIONER PRESENTATION

Connection, Ownership and Change - fostering engaged, active citizens of the future through student-led learning in the World Heritage-listed Blue Mountains of Australia.

Emma Kennedy, Blue Mountains City Council

Abstract

Connecting Kids to Nature is an outdoor experiential learning program aimed at fostering a sense of connection and ownership to place among students and young people in the World Heritage-listed Blue Mountains of Australia. The program has been running since 2014 and caters to around 1,200 children and young people from schools and Early Years Learning Centres each year.

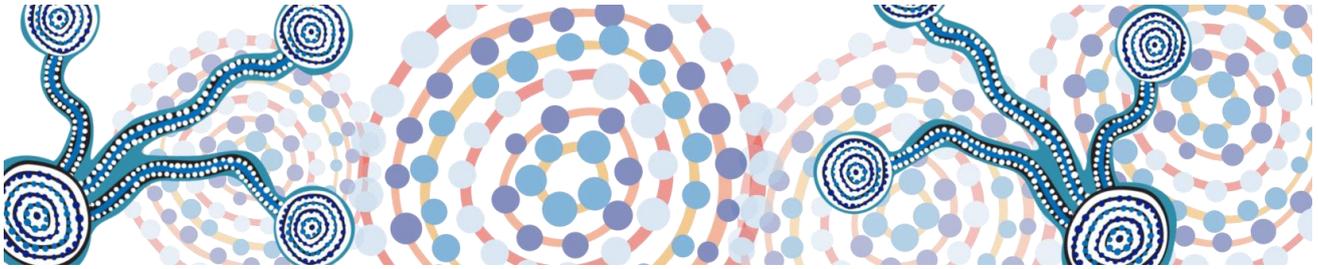
We acknowledge that people will only seek to protect something if they care about it first; so we begin by offering children and young people positive outdoor learning experiences in nature.

Our core principle is to place student voices and interests at the centre of their experience, by offering choice, providing multiple experiences, and designing learning tasks where students do the thinking. We challenge participants to see the world differently, whether its from the perspective of a raindrop or a water bug or understanding what it means to be a predator / prey.

We are equally interested in outcomes for children's learning, health, resilience, and social-emotional well-being. We create spaces for children and young people to just 'be' in nature – and take time to explore 'valuable time-wasting opportunities.

Our program is not a one-size-fits all affair – it changes and evolves depending on the context, student needs and collaborative partners involved. Collaboration is both the cornerstone of our program and the source of its richness and vitality. From local schoolteachers and Traditional Owners to experts-in-the-field and passionate community members, we draw on a deep well of expertise, creativity, and energy, constantly evolving and changing our program to create rich, meaningful experiences for young people.

By grounding our program in local, real-life experiences and stories, we can also provide pathways for meaningful, effective action. From citizen science projects aimed at protecting koalas from climate change and the design and build of water sensitive systems, to kids-teaching-kids, we bring people together to create positive social and environmental change.



Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that we work on the traditional lands of the Darug and Gundungurra peoples and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

We also acknowledge Jenny Hill, who guided, mentored, and inspired us during her 6 years developing and running the Connect to Nature Program at Blue Mountains City Council. We are indebted to Jenny for her strategic thinking, born-to-teach abilities, capacity to form connections, and generosity of spirit.

Speaker Profile

Emma Kennedy has a background in communications, languages, and environmental education. She has co-developed environmental education programs at Blue Mountains City Council since 2011. Prior to this she worked with Communications Agency Social Change Media on public education programs for government and not-for-profit organizations. As an environmental educator and scout leader, Emma loves taking clean, dry, neat children out into the bush to discover mud, waterfalls, creeks and their happy, inner 'feral' selves. She loves taking time to explore – looking up, down, under and through, to listen deeply, smell, tread respectfully and make friends with caterpillars.

Gillian Fitzgerald has a background in journalism, aquatic science, and environmental education. She has co-delivered environmental education and aquatic monitoring programs at Blue Mountains City Council since 2016. A quirky mix of scientist and artist, Gillian loves to seek out birds and aquatic animals and create ephemeral artworks with found objects. She has a knack for being fully present in the moment - seeing, hearing, and feeling. She can be relied on to connect with young people in her care, taking the time to observe, listen and respond to their interests and questions. Her 'superpower' is water-bug catching.

Website links

