

GREEN AWARENESS - WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS?

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INTRODUCTION

The Australian National Botanic Gardens (ANBG) contain the world's largest collection of Australian native plants. A great many of these plants were (and in some cases, are still) used by Aboriginal people for food, medicines, and tools. More than one third of the approximately 20,000 students who visited the Gardens in 1992, came to take part in activities and programs related to Aboriginal plant use. Some had specific interests such as the use of timbers in tool making, use of fibres for basket making, ethnobotany and music and dance while others had a more general interest.

Aborigines have lived in Australia for at least 50,000 years. In this time they have developed a deep understanding of the environment. One of the aims of the ANBG is to encourage an understanding of the use of plants by Aborigines. This is done in such a way that it develops in students an awareness of the care and respect for plants and the environment shown by Aborigines.

In all Aboriginal cultures the emphasis was on the richness of the ceremonial and spiritual life with the material culture reduced to a minimum.

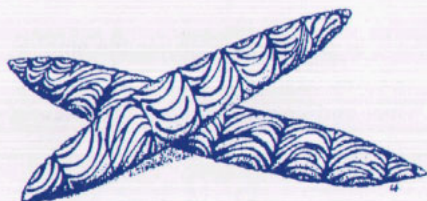
THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM AND BOTANIC GARDENS

The new national statement on curriculum guidelines in education includes Aboriginal Studies as a compulsory subject for all students aged 5 to 15 years. It is to be taught across the curriculum.

It is hoped to develop in all children an understanding and a pride in Aboriginal culture as part of the heritage of all Australians.

Botanic gardens have an important role in this area. Most botanic gardens in Australia grow many of the plants used by Aboriginal groups for food, shelter, tools, other implements and medicines. At the ANBG students can experience the collection and preparation of food as well as making baskets and string bags from fibres used tradi-

tionally. They can play traditional music on instruments made from timbers of trees grown in the gardens, participate in dance and learn of the complex technology possessed by Aboriginal people in the functioning of the boomerang and spearthrower and the production of cutting tools.



knocking sticks used to provide music in ceremonies

Theatre

One of the most effective ways of conveying positive messages to children is interactive theatre. It has the potential to change attitudes in an atmosphere of fun and enjoyment.

A pantomime titled *To the Forest Born* was performed at the Gardens by **The National Indigenous People's Theatre Group** during January, February and March 1993. The performers took the parts of native animals such as the kangaroo, lizard and emu and wore very evocative make-up and head-dresses. The theme of the pantomime was the animals' need for trees, grasses, fresh air and clean water. The pantomime also considered the

inter-relationship of Aboriginal people and the environment. There was much audience participation.

The cast painted the children's faces and taught them a number of traditional dances. The children also learnt how to play a toy didgeridoo, using plastic pipes. These were highlights of the show and gave children some insight into the ceremonies of Aboriginal people.



Sign made for *To the Forest Born*

Most of the performances were outdoors beneath large trees with occasional cries of kookaburras and parrots providing an ideal setting. Here the performers could demonstrate the importance of the trees and the land around them. Each child promised to plant a tree this year.

A total of 5400 children attended the 40 performances.

To complement the pantomime

most of the groups completed the **Aboriginal Plant Use Trail** and spent time using some of the ANBG's collection of Aboriginal implements and artefacts such as grinding stones and fire sticks.

Special groups such as students from non-English speaking backgrounds and special education students were given conducted tours of the Trail.

There is no entry fee to the ANBG however a charge of \$2.00 per person was made for the pantomime. The show was promoted through the local press and Tourism Commission during the summer holidays. For the school term performances, promotional flyers were sent to all primary schools in the ACT and surrounding areas of NSW (about 200 schools).

This performance and associated activities provided an excellent introduction to the **International Year for the World's Indigenous Peoples** for most school groups attending.

TEACHER TRAINING COURSES

These form an important part of the educational function of the ANBG. Two to three courses on topics related to Aboriginal plant use are held each year. Each is half a day and there is a fee. A course titled **Aboriginal Plant Use and Technology** was held to co-incide with the production of *To the Forest Born*.



Wooden bowl or coolamon made from *Acacia* sp.



Shield made from *Casuarina* sp

Each participating teacher is required to complete a comprehensive evaluation of the course and to pass on to staff at their schools details of the course. This is an excellent method for disseminating information.

There are many Aboriginal people teaching about their culture and the importance of the natural environment. During **The Australian Science Festival** Aboriginal people from a NSW coastal area demonstrated the collection and preparation of some of their foods and medicines as well as how to make and use a variety of implements.

Many medicines were made by boiling up the leaves or flowers of selected plants and drinking the resulting potion.

Other treatments involved applying a poultice to an affected area e.g. one made from the large fruit of the crinum lily was used to relieve the pain of a sting ray barb.

The techniques involved in cutting a boomerang from a curved branch were demonstrated.

Their deep understanding of plants and obvious empathy for their environment were inspirational and very popular with students as well as the general public.

It is preferable to have Aboriginal people demonstrating the use and conservation of plants. During spring a number of Aboriginal people will spend 2 weeks in the ANBG. Students will have the opportunity to make tools and baskets as well as collect and prepare foods and medicines, another group will teach dance to the sounds of the didgeridoo and knocking sticks, both made from trees which grow in the Gardens. However, with increasing numbers of students visiting the ANBG as part of their Aboriginal Studies programmes it is necessary for non-Aboriginal staff to participate in these activities.

An appreciation of the use of a wide variety of plants in Aboriginal societies for medical purposes provides students with the understanding that we must conserve the world's plants if only for their great medical potential.

It was essential for Aborigines to understand the environment as their existence depended on it. To assist them with this they used calendars based on the seasons (solar calendars). The Ngemba people from western NSW had a calendar with six seasons based on food cycles and determined by the movement of stars, the presence of birds and insects, the blooming of trees and other plants, rain and the rising of rivers. To help students get in touch with their environment they can visit the ANBG at different times of the year to see what is flowering or fruiting, what birds are nesting, when the lizards or echidnas are about.

This exercise will help them become aware of the subtle changes in the environment and hopefully with knowledge will come a desire to conserve.

Aborigines took only what was needed from the environment, for example only a small amount of a tree was taken to make a didgeridoo, a canoe or shield. Trees were not cut down or ring-barked, they were seen as homes for animals who would provide food.

Australian Aborigines have a very close association with the land. They are taught from very young that they are a part of the land and it is up to them to respect and care for it. Institutions such as botanic gardens can provide a real learning experience for children and help them develop this attitude of caring for the environment.