

Junk and nature play: Sustainability through play

By Glenn Wagland

Once there was a powerful wizard, with a very impressive wand made of locally sourced melaleuca decorated with a slight collection of parrot feathers, and lizard bones attached using tree gum. One day, during a rather spirited spell casting session the wand broke, leaving the wizard feeling powerless. He sent his two imp helpers to source a new wand. Within 10 minutes imp number 1 returned with a beautiful gemstone encrusted silver wand. "Here you are master" uttered the imp. "What a fine-looking wand" exclaimed the Wizard. "where did it come from?". "Just around the corner at 'Cheap as chips' replied the imp. It was only two dollars". The Wizard, never happy with such simple explanations wanted more information. "Where did they get it from?" he prodded. "A truck delivered it to them" replied the imp. "How did the truck acquire such a wand?" Asked the wizard. "From a warehouse down the wharf" said the imp. "How did the wharf come by this wand" explored the wizard. "Another truck" whispered the imp. "And this truck obtained the wand from.....?" searched the wizard. "A grand ship!" proudly stated the imp. "A ship from where?" questioned the wizard. "from a wharf in China" murmured the imp reservedly. "I suppose another truck delivered it to the wharf in China" bemoaned the Wizard. "Yes master. Another truck from a wand factory" breathed the imp, trying to preempt the wizard's line of enquiry. "Where did this factory obtain its resources to create this wand?" inquired the wizard. "from a truck that came from a wharf, where another ship delivered raw materials sourced from another corner of the world" lamented the Imp who was over this line of inquisition. "So" declared the wizard "a place at the other side of the world sent materials across the sea to a factory, that sent the wand, via a truck, to a ship across another sea, to another truck to a warehouse then another truck to a shop just around the corner from our house". "correct" whispered the imp, deflated. Just then Imp number two came in. "I have a new wand for you master. It is a fine piece of sheoak found in our back yard. I used some tree gum and snot to stick these snake bones on it." The wizard, being a clear headed, permaculture kind of guy, chose the sheoak.



I large cubby with a balcony on the roof that can hold the weight of an adult.

I run a mobile junk and nature playground, and I travel all over South Australia setting up an open-ended pop up playground, advocating for play that is based on kids creating their own fun using nothing more than nature and societies discarded resources. I tell the kids this wizard story to illustrate how ridiculous the norm is, regarding children's playthings. Why buy a cheap plastic climbing gym shipped from Mexico, when the kids could create a climbing gym made from disused plastic drums, pallets, crates and sticks. The recycled parts don't require a trucking company, and shipping company to get it to you. Anyway, when you factor in the cost to the world and its communities, the Mexican plastic castle isn't really cheap. It has created a lot of pollution and land degradation to create and supply. Every community has its own locally source junk that is perfect for open-ended kid's construction. I was at a site near a major

trucking route, and they were using giant plastic truck mudguards as loose parts, while a kindly near Mount Gambier had access to tons of pine branches. Reimagining recycled resources, especially locally sourced ones, teach children another important concept. The concept of refusing. Refusing to buy into the idea we need to consume all the time, refusing to buy into the idea that products have a limited life based on whether they are no longer new, out of fashion, or obsolete, and refusing to buy into the concept of retail therapy as a way towards happiness. Also, unlike the mass-produced plastic climbing gym, the one made from 'junk' can be a dynamic, ever-evolving structure. One day it could be a castle, a space ship, or a dangerous bridge. These open-ended resources, like loose parts sourced from nature and junk get the children's imaginations working. You have to be creative to imagine a lump of rock is in fact a baby wolf. The mass-produced plastic climbing gym from Mexico has been pre-designed. If it's a castle, it will always be a castle (unless you have very creative kids who have access to fire, then it can be whatever they think it is, once they melt it down).



Some build cubbies. Some build rafts. These guys were surprised when it didn't float in the nearby creek (the barrels were open in the back)

Design is a prominent feature in permaculture, and it is also a salient feature of children's play. Children spend a lot of time designing their play environments. From designing background stories for their role playing ("I will be the aunty who grows sharks"), to the props they introduce ("these bricks will be our walkie talkies. Or maybe our grenades"). I have observed children spending days creating a pet shop out of pallets and sticks. They added holding pens, grooming parlours, and breeding areas. It took days of design and construction before they were ready to do what they originally thought of, which was to 'play'; pet shops. Could you imagine the days of collaborative design and construction foregone if a readymade plastic fantastic 'made in China' pet shop (with real plastic dog poo) was introduced. Why should toy companies have all the fun when it comes to design and construction. Marketing pressure from massive companies convince children happiness comes from Mc Donald's, Batman toys, and giant pink plastic mansions with a plethora of accessories to purchase separately. You could be mistaken to believe, with this barrage of disinformation, that children these days are addicted to bright colours, flashing lights, and screens, and you may assume they have forgotten how to play like we did in the 'old days'. Over the 18 odd years of working with children in outdoor environments, my personal observation is 99.6% of children know how to play like we did in the 'old days'. They just aren't given the opportunities. A recent report questioned a group of children asking them what their favourite thing to do was. Not surprising, playing video games, watching TV and getting on the phone were top of the list, however when asked what were the things they

would love to do the most, riding bikes, visiting friends and doing things with Mum and Dad were on top of the list. When choosing activities available to them in their normal lives, screens rate high. When given choices of activities they may be able to engage in if given the opportunity, screen time is not up there. Kids remember that day they built an underground cubby with their friends, but they don't remember that day they got to the next level on a video game.



What looks like a pile of rubbish is actually a jet powered car made by a group of 4 year olds.

Many of the philosophies of Permaculture align with the nature play movement. For starters, it is about rebuilding the connection between humans and the natural world. Disconnection has led to most of society falling asleep at the wheel when a large corporation decides to destroy an old growth forest, pollute a reef, or extinguish an endangered life form. True, most of us aren't too happy about it, nevertheless we don't act on our feelings (too much sports to watch I suppose). Richard Louv, who wrote the book 'Last child left in the woods' believes, by connecting kids to nature, we are assuring future custodians of the earth. He is not alone with that idea, as most of the world's leading conservationist connected to the land when they were young. The Earth is not the only entity that benefits from this connection. A plethora of research supports the benefits children get from this connection:

- The dirt contains probiotics that encourage healthy microbiota in children's bodies (it has to get in though, that's why we have mud pies and dirty sticks).
- The diverse stimuli of nature (its colours, smells, sounds, flavours and textures) provides a 'living in the now' wellbeing focussing benefit.
- The physically activity nature affords, leads to better health. (I use the word affords, as while being in nature is a beautiful calming thing, it won't get you fit unless you make yourself active in it. That's where play comes into it)
- Nature encourages proprioception development (Body in space awareness. Remember to duck when you walk under a tree branch, dodge to the left when your mate throws a padymelon at you, and identify the feeling of a padymelon impact if you don't dodge)
- Being in nature develops our observational abilities (why is that branch slithering away?).
- Nature gives us many questions, that we feel the need to answer (why some ants wait until they climb up to my jocks before they decided to bite while others bite straight away?)



Playing the drums in a group is fun. Playing the drums covered in mud in a group is more fun.

When children aren't given experiences in nature, research suggest Biophobia may develop (A fear of nature). Yes, it is true, some people fear nature. While they might not think a forest is going to uproot and invade the cities destroying every non-vegetative life form (like a Lost in space episode), they may fear aspects such as the dirt containing harmful diseases, the trees dropping limbs on you, or those pesky bushrangers jumping out behind thick vegetation and robbing you. Let's not even mention the fear of Australia's famous killer fauna; sharks, snakes, spiders and kangaroos. This fear keeps a lot of people at home where it's safe. All they have to worry about is a sedentary life style that leads to obesity, diabetes, heart attacks and poor mental health (at least it's better than a 1 in 3,748,067 chance of getting eaten by a shark!). On the contrary, early nature engagement is linked to the development of Biophilia. The love of nature. Many a permaculture musing links permaculture principles with an Indigenous outlook on the world. The love of nature is a strong attribute of the Indigenous cultures. They are connected. Connection to the world means, when a part of Earth is destroyed, we feel the pain. This is evident when we look how Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders have fared over the last 200 odd years, as we have ravaged their land. When we, as non-Indigenous Australians, connect with the land, and feel it's suffering then we become greater advocates for conservation, and an Ally to the Indigenous peoples cause. When we connect with the land and the land is strong and healthy we too become strong and healthy. Playing in nature, playing with nature, observing nature, and living in harmony with nature all have the same outcome. Humans and the land in a reciprocal relationship. This is one of the main tenets behind the nature play push.



Many hands on deck. Cubby building is a social experience.

Not all of us can be lucky enough to live in the bush though. Most of Australia's population, in fact, lives in the major capital cities. Just as the permaculture movement identified this and looked at ways of designing urban, and suburban permaculture philosophies, the nature play movement has looked at how to bring nature play into the cities, in a non-tokenism manner, that still allows children to gain benefits from nature engagement. Non for profit organisations like Nature Play SA, and NRM education have been leading the charge, identifying urban based nature play experiences readily available to all. Small businesses have popped up inviting children to the many parks and augmenting the experiences with natural loose parts and play ideas. For the last five years I have travelled all over South Australia with a trusty ute and trailer full to the brim with sticks, branches, rocks, mud and junk (and now and then a stowaway huntsman spider). I have gone to education sites and turned football ovals into junk and nature wonderlands where kids can build forts, throw mud at each other and look for gems within the rocks they crush. Many of the teachers reflect on the play they observe noting its similarities with how they grew up. Once upon a time, even in the cities we could find nature. Disused factories were goldmines. Weeds would grow 6 foot high and invade bitumen carparks and concrete walkways. Sleepy lizards, rats and snakes would hide under discarded sheets of corrugated iron. More importantly, there were no adults telling us the place was too dangerous and we had to get out. Adelaide's countless creeks and rivers meant perfect out of the way cubby building experiences could be had without 'the man' finding them and pulling them down (In those days I think 'the man' did find them, but instead of pulling them down they just stole our secret smoke stash).



City kids building a power station



Country kids build sheep holding pens.

Just as it needs a wider community effort to establish urban permaculture practices, the same can be said for nature play opportunities. There is no point planting out a street with edible fruit if the council come along in four years' time and chop it down replacing it with claret ash. There is no point trying to get kids out into nature, if the council keeps chopping down what is left and selling it to the highest bidder. A great place for nature play to flourish, grow, and feed knowledge into the broader communities are the kindergartens and schools (that could be said for permaculture as well). I feel the nature play movement is taking hold in South Australia. Five years ago, my mobile junk and nature playground slowly (I mean SSSSLOOOOWLY) trickled along. Luckily, I'm an early childhood teacher, so I had a real job to pay the bills. Now, I rarely get to work as a teacher as I am fully booked up sharing nature play experiences all over South Australia. The impressive thing is, the schools are getting involved. Most Kindys have, dirt, mud, rocks and trees, and the children are encouraged to engage. Whereas many schools had policies such as 'don't play with sticks', 'stay out of the rain' and 'keep away from the out of bounds area' (most schools have an out of bounds area. It is normally the nature part). At one time schools would have never seen the potential learning outdoors offered. The Department of Education's own standards pushed for clean well managed environments (think vast water hungry ovals for football kicking). Sticks were a no-go (potential weapons, maybe an AK47) and a zero tolerance for injuries was insisted. The 2016 standards, however, discuss nature based loose parts, mud, rocks, tree climbing and animals as important features of the outdoor learning environment (it was handy to have Nature play SA help write the standards). Even injuries are considered learning tools. Instead of risk minimizing, risk benefits are looked at. I don't know much about the South Australian permaculture movement, but I suspect it is also growing. A symbiotic connection is apparent, as I have set up

many nature play sessions alongside community garden openings, National park open days, seed bank 'give away seedling' days and community sustainability festivals. If there is something in the community promoting sustainability, growing food, and community connection then I am usually there in the carpark with nearly two ton of mud, rocks sticks and recycled junk getting messy with a bunch of kids and their families. An awareness of organic produce, ethical business practices, fair trading, sustainable living and getting back to nature is growing beyond the traditional 'lunatic' and 'hippy' fringe and becoming mainstream. All of these ideas are connected and regarding them all in a holistic manner will see them blossom. After all, like a good permaculture garden, the interdependence of systems is what it's all about.