Sustainable
Communities
and **Waste**

National Environmental Science Program

The Nature Connection Storytelling Project: Connecting all Australians to nature

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Figure 1. Storytelling in the pod at the Nocturna Beaker Street Festival, Winter 2023. Photo by the Nature Connection Storytelling Project (NCSP) team.

Why connect with nature?

Australia's Strategy for Nature sets connecting all Australians with nature as its number one goal. This aim reflects the breadth of research that now demonstrates strong correlations between greater nature connection with positive benefits for people and the environment. For example, greater nature connection is associated with improved life satisfaction, lowered stress levels and participation in pro-environmental activities (Mayer and Frantz 2004; Pritchard et al 2020; Schultz 2002; Soga et al 2016). As the *Strategy* states: "Connecting Australians with nature is essential to our long-term mental and physical health, economic prosperity and national identity." But what do we mean by nature connection?

What is nature connection?

Broadly, nature connection refers to our human affiliation for non-human nature; and this affiliation is multifaceted. UK-based Miles Richardson, a leading academic in the field, defines it as the *"realisation of our shared place in nature, which affects our being – how we experience the world here and now; our emotional response, beliefs, and attitudes toward nature" (Reconnection* 2023, p58). Richardson argues that it is not just the 'minutes' in nature that count, but the 'moments' also. Thus, nature connection is partly experiential (what we do and where we go to be connected), emotional (how we feel about connecting) and cognitive (making sense of the connection).

We know little about nature connection in the Australian context. How do people living in Australia experience nature connection – where do they go, what do they do? How do they feel about nature and their relationship with natural spaces? What meaning does nature connection bring to people's lives? What effects does this have on the way we live our lives, our health, wellbeing and how we treat nature? These questions are the drivers for the Nature Connection Storytelling Project.

Figure 2. The nature connection project logo

Telling Stories

There are various tools for measuring the strength of people's connection to nature, for example the Connectedness to Nature Scale, Emotional Affinity Toward Nature and the Inclusion of Nature in Self (for an overview see Tam 2013). These go part way to helping understand the scope of nature connection and who across the various population groups or geographic locales is more or less connected. However, to help us understand the nuances and richness of nature connection requires research methods that can unlock and articulate its multilayered complexities. To understand *why* some people feel more connected than others or *how* people connect across different rural-urban gradients, for example, requires giving people space for reflection and explanation.

Storytelling is the ideal method to do this (McCall 2021; Milligan 2016) for several reasons (Fig. 3):

- Storytelling combines structure with freedom of expression: Australians know how to tell a story and they can readily provide the content from their own lives.
- It is inclusive: cross-cultural, ancient, oral, visual – stories can be communicated via a number of means that suit the skills, knowledge and cultural context of the teller.
- Stories help us to explain and understand the context of people's experiences – they portray a richness that can accurately reflect real-life situations.
- Relatable stories generate empathy: we see ourselves in the stories of others, and we feel the emotional impact of the story.
- Telling a story can be therapeutic; sharing that story with others can be empowering and enabling.
- Stories help us make sense of life – they give us insights into the different ways of knowing and being that exist in Australia.
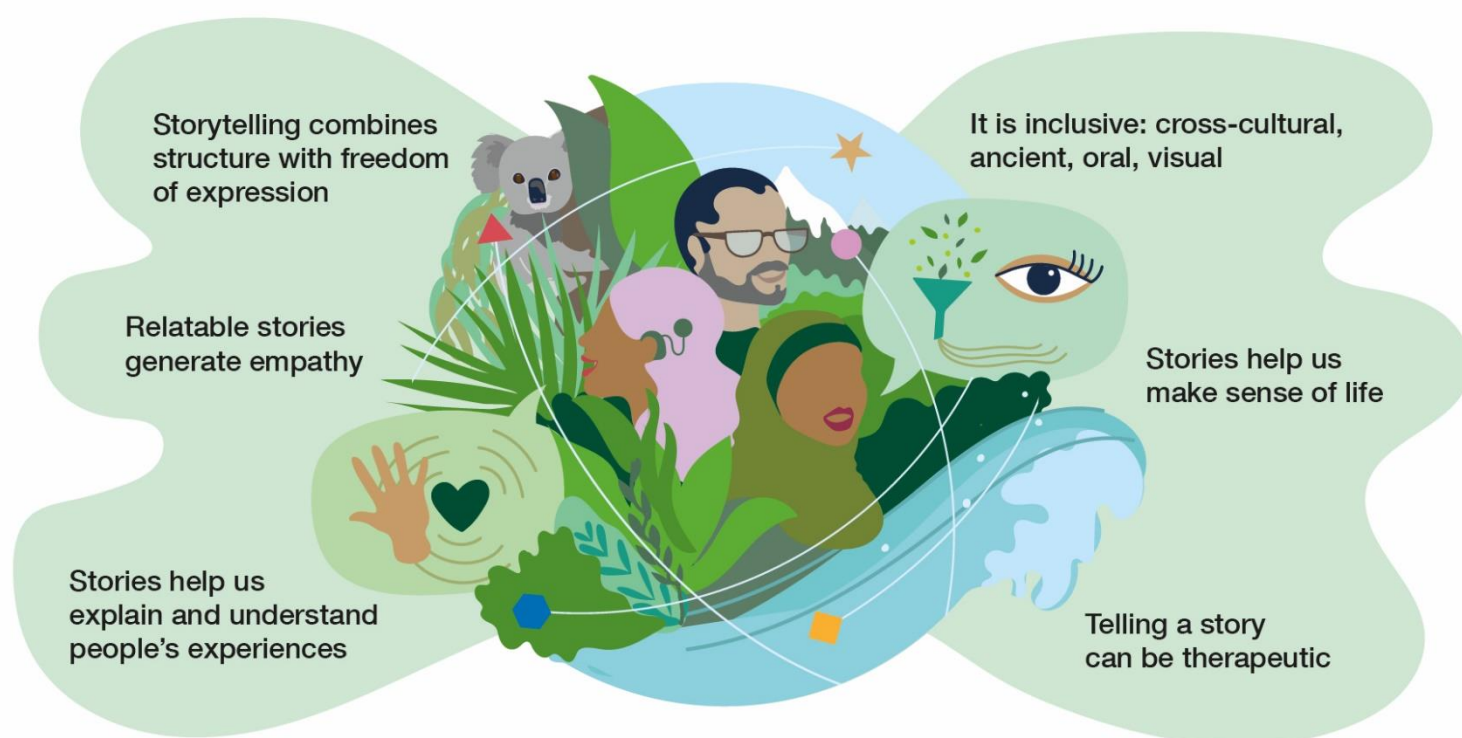
Figure 3. The benefits of storytelling for understanding connection with nature in Australia

This report tells the story of the launch of the nature connection storytelling project, focusing on three key project components:

1. Developing a repository of stories about nature connection and its impacts on a digital platform.
2. Working with partners to gather stories in a range of forms (written, oral, visual) that collectively demonstrate a diverse variety of experiences, impacts and implications of engaging with nature.
3. Contributing new insights and knowledge about nature connection to multidisciplinary fields of research and scholarship.

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1. Developing a story-sharing platform and repository

Beginning with ethics approval from UTas, we undertook an extensive co-design period with stakeholders to develop the story platform functions. We then worked with a web designer (Brand Whisperer, Naomi Gora) to develop the technical and stylistic elements of the storytelling platform. The design focus was on accessibility, ease of use, engaging and inviting branding and ensuring a broad representation of Australians were depicted in images on the site. A digital map was included to note the location of storytellers. The first iteration was reviewed by 15 community members who gave feedback. Changes were made including the addition of an explanatory video to assist inclusion of people with lower levels of literacy.

In November 2023, we launched the Nature Connection Storytelling website, which now functions as the means for story collection and publication and simultaneously as the portal for research data. Anyone with access to the website can upload their story of nature connection. In the first few months of the project, approximately 10 stories were published on the website each month. To ensure a steady increase in new stories, we developed personal, individualised contact with potential storytellers. As the number and diversity of stories increases, so does the visibility of the website and the likelihood of people finding a story that speaks to them. Behavioural change theories support the notion that the more relatable something feels, the more likely it will result in adopting a new practice or behaviour (ref). If people see the relevance of a nature connection story, they may recognise the importance of their own story and feel encouraged to contribute and it may also prompt them to engage in other nature connection activities.

The Storytelling Pod

Figure 4. Storytelling Pod at Mannalargenna Day. Photo by the NCSP team.

Another key strategy to increase the size and breadth of the story repository is the Storytelling Pod.

To promote the website, raise awareness of the project and function as an additional means to build the story repository, we worked with artists Tim Whiteley and Sue Hall to create an inviting, portable storytelling space. Inside the pod we can collect audio and video stories on the spot, obtaining signed consent forms in real time. This is proving to be a successful story gathering strategy and allows us to hear voices that would otherwise be missed on a standard web-based platform. Lesser heard voices include people with low digital literacy or poor internet access and people with lower literacy or English-language proficiency. Another more difficult population group to reach are people who don't think they have a story to tell or are reluctant to talk about their

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relationship with nature due to particular social or cultural norms (Marsh et al 2023). Taking the Pod to events allows us to reach people from diverse geographies and communities that may not associate their activities with nature connection, for example, fishers, hunters or farmers.

Attending events with the Pod also allows us to raise awareness about the project; we have developed a range of merchandise (stickers, magnets, postcards and cloth badges) and (re)use laminated posters with a QR code linking to the website to support the visibility and accessibility of the project.

Figure 5. The Nature Connection Storytelling Pod sign crafted by Tim Whiteley. Photo by the NCSP team.

To date, the Pod has participated in numerous events across Tasmania:
- AgFest (a festival celebrating agricultural and rural lifestyles in Tasmania's northwest)
- Nocturna Beaker Street Festival (a science and art festival celebrating dark skies on Tasmania's east coast)
- Health Fest (an informative and fun event about healthy living in northern Tasmania)
- Love Your Wildlife (a community event celebrating our native wildlife in southern Tasmania)
- Mannarlagenna Day (melythina tiakana warrana Aboriginal corporation's annual celebration of the culture and ancestral history of the Coastal Plains Nation, held in northeast Tasmania)
- The Tamar NRM Sustainability Festival (an informative and inspiring gathering focussed on sustainable living in northern Tasmania)

In the future, we will also use the Pod to host storytelling workshops. Upcoming events include:

- Day of Delights
- Harmony Day
- Agfest 2024
- Margate Primary School Storytelling Workshop
- Landcare Know Your Patch Nature Journaling Workshop
- Tasmanian Storytelling Festival
- Mental Health Week events
- Outdoor Health Australia national forum

2. Working with partners, ensuring diversity of voices

Working with partners has been a central and positive element to the project. Community groups, organisations and individuals understand the importance and relevance of the project and are keen to be involved. Our strategy is to engage with groups/organisations that represent diverse community voices and have a reach across different regions of Tasmania and nationally. We offered a half day of training to partners, equipping them with skills and confidence to gather and submit stories from amongst their networks. We continue to work closely with individuals and groups including:

Partner	Focus of engagement
melythina tiakana warrana Aboriginal Corporation (MTWAC)	Cultural training for project team; project guidance from UTAS Indigenous Research Fellow Rob Anders; Connecting with storytellers through Mannalargenna Day
Neighbourhood Houses	Support and promotion; connection to storytellers through various Neighbourhood House events
Libraries	Support and promotion; connection to storytellers through Literacy Coordinators and English Conversation classes
Children's University	Connection to storytellers through story workshops across Tasmania
Schools	Connection to storytellers through story workshops across primary, secondary and tertiary education centres
Surfing Tasmania	Support and Promotion; connection to storytellers through Women In Waves event
Australian Deer Association (Tas)	Support and Promotion; connection to storytellers
Tas Recreational Fishing	Support and Promotion; connection to storytellers
Conservation Volunteers Australia	Support and Promotion; connection to storytellers through Mental Health Week activities
Landcare Tasmania	Support and Promotion; connection to storytellers through Know Your Patch Nature Journaling event / 2023 Conference presentation and promotion table
Wildcare	Support and Promotion; connection to storytellers through Get Outside Program (new migrants)
Mental Health Council of Tasmania	Support and Promotion; connection to storytellers
Council on the Ageing	Support and Promotion; connection to storytellers through Carers Expo, Seniors Week event
Tamar NRM	Support and Promotion; connection to storytellers through The Tree Project – Nature Journaling workshop, Sustainable Living Festival
26 Ten (Literacy)	Support and Promotion; connection to storytellers through Harmony Day events

Tas Story Telling Festival	Support and Promotion; connection to storytellers
Australian Women Veterans Network	Support and Promotion; connection to storytellers
Tas Land Conservatory	Support and Promotion; connection to storytellers
Local Governments	Support and Promotion; connection to storytellers through Mental Health Week events; Health Festivals
State Health Department	Support and Promotion; connection to storytellers through health promotion avenues

Table 1: Nature Connection Storytelling Project partner organisations and engagement focus.

Future partnerships are continually in development and include Working it Out (LGBTIA+), School for Seniors, Mental Health Families and Friends (Tas), Parks Discovery Ranges Program and Former Foresters.

When collecting stories, we, the research team, give very little instruction, other than inviting people to tell us *their* story of nature connection. We are careful not steer people to respond in particular ways or encourage participation from people who connect in one way or another. We intentionally set out to encourage widespread participation to capture a range of voices (Fig. 6).

Ready to share your nature connection story?

Your story can be about any way that you connect with or experience nature – where you go, what you do, what you see, feel, hear. You can describe a place, or your experience, or tell us about something that happened. The Nature Connection research team will use all the stories to build our understanding of what nature connection is, and its benefits. Your story will help create positive changes to health and environmental policies, and help connect others with nature too.

Figure 6. Invitation to contribute a story to the Nature Connection Project Website: https://thenatureconnectionproject.com.au/

Increasing diversity

In addition to building in website features for inclusivity, we have undertaken training in storytelling facilitation and nature journaling, and offered this to others, to improve our skills in story elicitation. We seek to promote the project at a range of community events, keeping a map of diverse interest groups and locals to ensure diversity.

Our website launch at the Botanical Gardens was attended by over 40 stakeholders and supporters, many of whom are promoting the project now through their own networks. Some people attending the launch have offered to volunteer their time for the project, others have written stories for the website. Now that the story portal/website is live we are shifting our focus to expand beyond Tasmania. We are applying our 'connect with the connectors' approach to work with interstate and

national partners that are either supporting nature connection (e.g. conservation-based organisations) or the wellbeing diverse communities (e.g. Council on the Ageing). We work closely with the Sustainable Communities and Waste Hub communications team and knowledge brokers to extend our reach.

3. New Insights and Knowledge

The pilot phase stories to date show great promise of a future rich and diverse repository. Artwork, poetry, narratives and photos have been submitted – and a collection of 'postcards' by children and adults from workshops and festivals (Fig. 7).
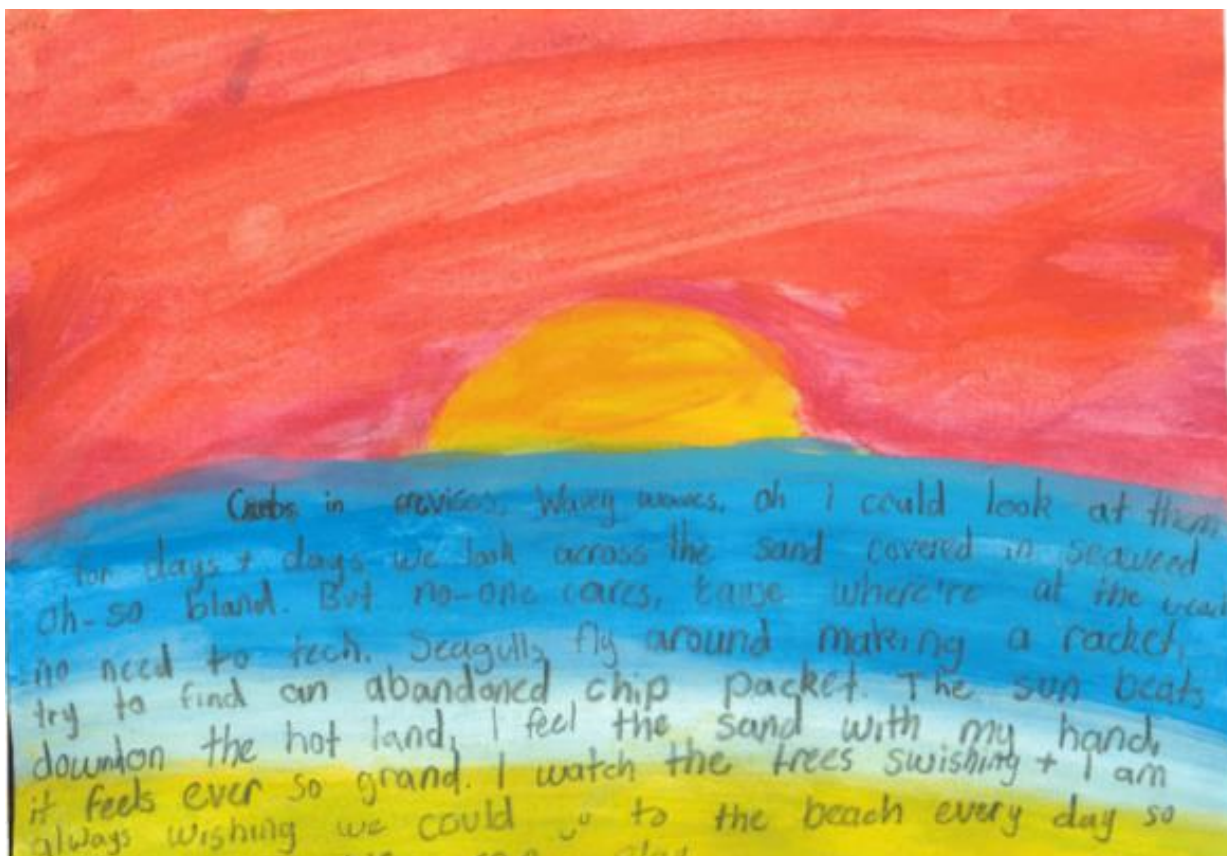

Figure 7: Postcard art and poetry by Sophia

In these early days of story collection, the content is already vast (Fig. 8) and two key overarching themes are evident: stories that respond to habitat loss – actual or threatened – and personal stories of the embodied and emotional experiences and impacts of nature connection.

As the collection grows and more diverse voices heard, we expect to discover more detailed and nuanced information about nature connection. Even at this early stage, there are clear indications that the stories will provide evidence of the relationships between nature connection and wellbeing and pro-environmental behaviours – key areas of interest to policy makers and practitioners alike. We are working with our collaborators in the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and

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Water to ensure the storytelling project can support *Australia's Strategy for Nature's* primary goal to connect all Australians with nature.
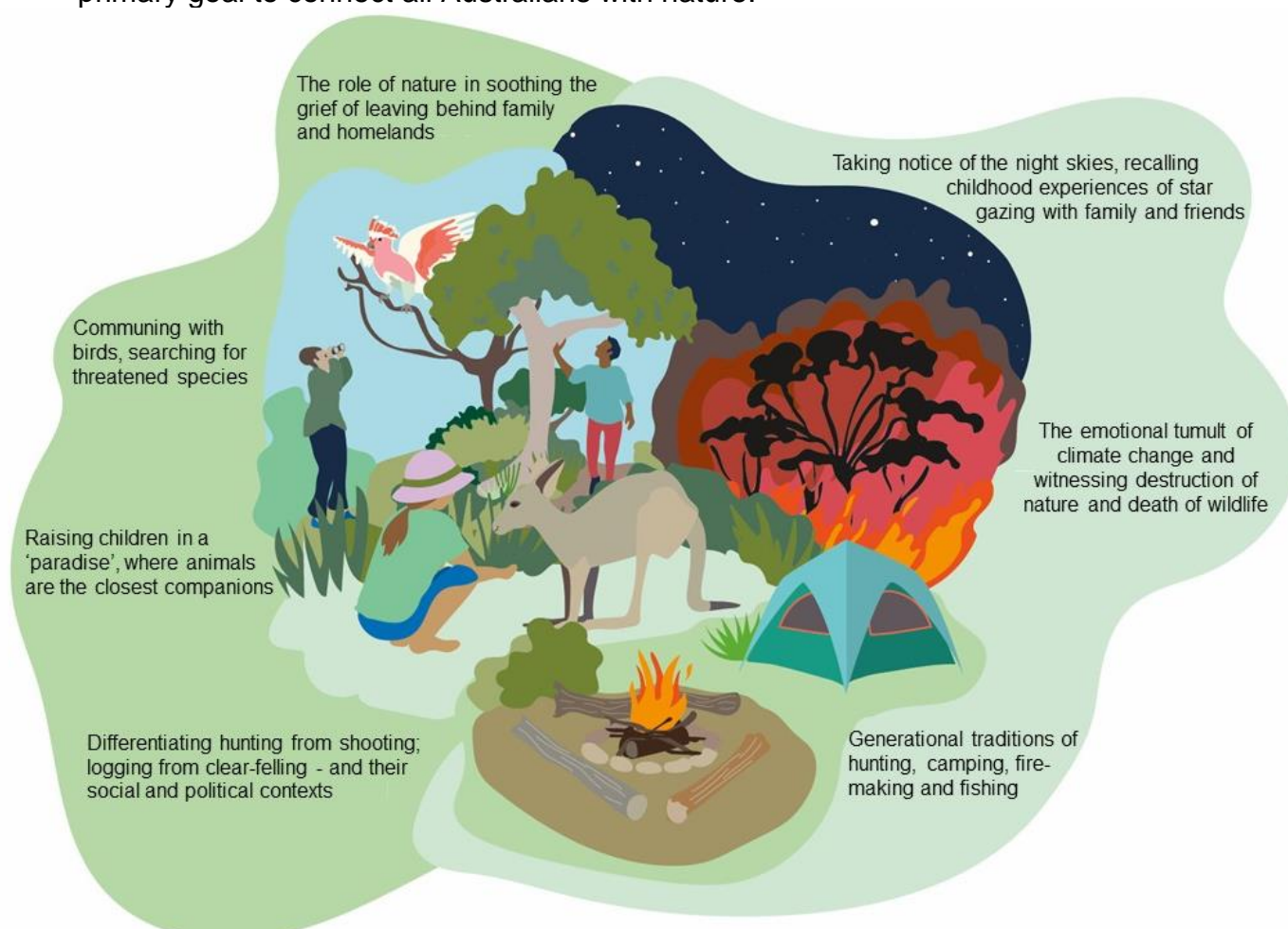

Figure 8. Emerging themes from initial story collection and analysis

As our research output (story analysis work) has commenced, we look forward to sharing these with stakeholders and the broader nature connection research and scholarship community. To boost the research capacity of the team and project we are applying for nationally competitive research grants, as well as smaller targeted funding schemes. Philanthropic support, a donation portal and running fee-for-service nature-journaling workshops are options being explored to support the project expansion.

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