

THE WATER EDUCATION NETWORK (WEN) – CONNECTING WATER EDUCATORS NATIONALLY AND BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS TO PROMOTE THE SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF WATER

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BACKGROUND

The Australian Water Association (AWA) is a member-based not for profit association with a national membership of 4,000 individual and corporate members. AWA's mission is 'to promote the sustainable management of water'. AWA has seen education as an important part of achieving its mission for many years.

In 2002, AWA produced a suite of materials titled 'We All Use Water' as an initial step to help support educators and work towards its mission. 'We All Use Water' is a set of educational resources providing information in a non-technical way. Topic areas covered in the resources include: water sources (surface water, groundwater, rainwater tanks, desalination), water storages (water uses, environmental flows, stratification), catchments, pathogens and disinfection, water treatment plants (drinking water monitoring, endocrine disrupters, understanding risk), sewage treatment plants (water quality, case studies of STP's), on-site systems and effluent management.

The 'We All Use Water' kit is designed for use by teachers and community educators and contains the following: 230-page resource folder, a set of 30 flyers covering the above topics in the resource folder, Coetanger Poster and Storybook Set, Community Involvement Presenter's Manual, Water Quality Star Rating System Video and Water Quality Star Rating System Poster.

With the realization that education was a potentially large new area for AWA, it was decided to secure AWA Board support for a full-time Education Manager within the association. To justify the new position, a significant amount of research was carried out to determine what role the AWA could play. This involved engaging an external consultant to scope the water industry and specifically, the water education sector, to identify any gaps and therefore define AWA's potential role in water education nationally.

Almost one hundred key informants were surveyed nationally. The following summarises the findings of the research, 'Of the many possible and acceptable options, the most important gaps in water education nationally that coincide with what AWA would be most supported in delivering, are concluded to be:

- providing a national independent advocacy role including promoting the importance of water education and the need for consistent and adequate on-ground staff and cash resourcing;
- offering networking and facilitation opportunities through conferences and interest groups;
- providing practical reference guide for user-friendly, accurate terminology and concepts;
- partnering with key agencies, nationally and otherwise to cross-support water education; and

- searching out, defining and disseminating national and international best practice in water education in terms of both delivery and performance assessment.’ (Porter, Jarman, Collier and Deer, 2004).

Consequently, the AWA Board approved appointment of a full-time Education Program Manager in mid-2004 and the role was filled in August 2004. The key priority areas for the new role were outcomes of the research conducted. The Education Program Manager will focus on the fourteen points shown in Table 1, over the next 3 years.

Table 1 AWA’s key priority areas for education 2004-2007

Key priority area – description	Timeframe
1. Establish and manage a national network of water education professionals and stakeholders, to ensure that better outcomes are achieved, resources are shared and ideas are exchanged.	2004 and ongoing
2. Establish a senior level Water Education Key Informant Working Group to drive the process and raise the profile.	2005
3. Build and operate a water education web portal , useful for water education practitioners, community members and school pupils, mindful of the need to keep people connected to their local water utility wherever possible.	2005/2006 and ongoing
4. Develop and maintain a database of water education resources , accessible on the web portal, to minimise the risk of duplication of effort.	2005/2006 and ongoing
5. Provide ongoing national coordination and promotion for National Water Week .	2005-2007+
6. Coordinate an awards program to raise the profile of water, industry careers and the important role of coordinators (incl. Australian Junior Water Prize and Undergraduate Water Prize).	2004 – 2007+
7. Coordinate conferences and events including a major biennial water education conference and several regional events to provide networking and professional development opportunities for water educators and stakeholders.	2004 – 2007+
8. Take a proactive position on water training at vocational and tertiary levels to ensure that appropriate courses are offered, cognisant of the imperatives of the National Water Initiative agenda.	2005 and ongoing
9. Develop consistent, positive terminology to ensure uniformity, improved understanding and a positive approach to water quality. This will take the form of a glossary of terms or, if support warrants it, a dictionary of Australian water terms.	2006
10. Where specifically agreed as a need, take responsibility for developing and disseminating specific education	If and when required

resources , for community, school, vocational and professional education.	
11. Commission longitudinal surveys to observe the progress of community awareness and knowledge about water in Australian.	2007
12. Report to all stakeholders on the status of water education and collect feedback.	2007
13. Generally promote water information and awareness at all levels, through popular channels.	Ongoing
14. Pursue the idea of building a National Water Education Centre , supported by one or more mobile water education units.	2006/2007

THE WATER EDUCATION NETWORK

The AWA's Water Education Network (WEN) was established in September 2004. There were approximately 600 inaugural members. The first issue of the electronic newsletter, WEN e-news, was circulated to a list of contacts which comprised of those registered on AWA's Education Special Interest Group and delegates at AWA's first Education Conference, 'Education: The Key to Sustainable Water Management – Going Beyond Conservation' held in early 2004.

The WEN aims to promote a more cooperative and coordinated approach to water education nationally by bringing together individuals, community organisations, government agencies, local government, industry, teachers and educators. The WEN is open to anyone who has an interest in water education. It does not aim to replace existing networks but rather create a link between those networks nationally. In only five months, the WEN has grown to almost 1,000 participants nationally. Membership is via email request and is currently available to those outside of AWA's membership. WEN members receive WEN e-news monthly which contains relevant information and updates to those interested in water education.

In addition, WEN Network Meetings are also held around Australia. Since its inception meetings have been held in Sydney, Melbourne, Mildura, Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth. The aim of network meetings is to showcase local and national initiatives, gather feedback on what participants in the network would like the WEN to do and provide face-to-face networking opportunities. Feedback from meetings to date has suggested that the WEN could provide networking opportunities locally and interstate, professional development and training, encourage sharing of ideas and resources, and develop consistent messages about water nationally.

In 2005 AWA is launching its new website which will contain a comprehensive section for education and the WEN. Online forums which will be available on the new website will enhance networking and ease of contact for those involved in the WEN.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CONFERENCES

To date, the WEN has received an enormous amount of feedback that there is a need by water educators for professional development opportunities. Whilst conferences are important opportunities for networking and professional development, short course and workshop type professional development opportunities are also required to satisfy this need.

AWA held its first education conference 'Education: The Key to Sustainable Water Management – Going Beyond Conservation' in January 2004. The conference was held in Canberra and attracted more than 120 delegates from across Australia. An education conference to support the WEN is being planned for 2006 to ensure that AWA continues to provide networking and professional development opportunities on a national scale.

The first professional development opportunity for WEN members is currently being organised, 'Fostering Sustainable Behaviour – A series of workshops presented by Doug McKenzie-Mohr in Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney'. Dr Doug McKenzie-Mohr, author of 'Fostering Sustainable Behaviour – An introduction to community-based social marketing', is a professor at St. Thomas University in Canada, and has been incorporating scientific knowledge of behaviour change into the design and delivery of community programs for more than a decade. This is an exciting opportunity for professional development of WEN members and anyone involved in behaviour change for sustainability.

There are many possibilities for professional development in the future and AWA is continuing to look at courses in areas such as learning for sustainability and public participation. To best meet the needs of the WEN, AWA will provide an online survey in 2005 to determine the areas of greatest interest and priority.

RESOURCES

Another way in which AWA, through the WEN, can assist educators and stakeholders is by coordination of water education resources. In developing a water web portal, which includes a comprehensive searchable database of education resources nationally, information sharing will be enhanced. AWA hopes that this will enable educators to become better connected and prevent 'reinventing the wheel' when designing water education resources. The benefits to water education will include better use of funds and in the longer-term common key messages across Australia.

AWA is currently seeking funding for development of the water web portal and water education resources database. As indicated in the key priority areas for education in Table 1, AWA is working towards developing the water web portal and database by 2005/2006.

PARTNERSHIPS

AWA has always tried to foster partnerships with organisations which have synergies that would benefit AWA's membership. The value of partnerships cannot be underestimated as often organisations working towards similar goals can save time and resources and be far more effective by working together in partnerships. In fact, many projects may not be achieved by one organisation alone but require involvement with partners for success.

Partnerships between key stakeholders and AWA through the WEN are important, as these will enable the network to reach its full potential. AWA has strong links within and outside of the water industry and this history has provided advantages to the WEN. An example of a successful partnership is that between AWA and Waterwatch Australia developed in recognition of a common vision 'to achieve sustainability for Australia's water, for the community to be involved in and to better understand water issues'. Benefits to both AWA and Waterwatch are a result of this partnership. For example, AWA offers individual membership to all Waterwatch Coordinators at student membership rates and Waterwatch provides a network among school and community groups for dissemination of information on water issues in Australia. Many Waterwatch Coordinators are also now part of the WEN.

Another example of a fruitful partnership is that between AWA and Questacon. The aim of this partnership is to create a major interactive water exhibition in collaboration, which will be housed in the Questacon museum during 2007 before potentially being toured around Australia. This partnership will give WEN participants the opportunity to provide a direct contribution to the water exhibit. The water exhibit will ultimately be the largest of its kind in Australia providing a fantastic opportunity for the network to disseminate key messages about water to the community using a new and exciting interactive medium.

THE FUTURE

As the Water Education Network continues to grow and new partnerships are formed AWA follows its vision 'to promote the sustainable management of water' at a time when water issues in Australia have reached a critical point. The role of water education cannot be underestimated and AWA is committed to supporting those delivering water education initiatives and programs in Australia.

REFERENCES

Porter, C., Jarman, I., Collier, G. and Deer, D. (2004). *Identifying Australian Water Education Priorities and Potential Roles for the Australian Water Association – A Survey of Water Education Activities and Professionals*. Australian Water Association. p2.