



# Children, Place *and* Sustainability

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*Margaret Somerville  
Monica Green*



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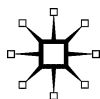
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*For our friend Max Sargent  
and all the frogs of the wetlands*



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# Foreword: Standing on the Edge of the Anthropocene

Education books that move us to imagine our own possibilities, and equip us with new maps for the journey, are a rare treasure. *Children, Place and Sustainability* is such a book. As the American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald intoned, ‘Draw your chair up close to the edge of the precipice and I’ll tell you a story’ (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 191). This is the alluring invitation I read in this new volume by Margaret Somerville and Monica Green. They invite us to come close to our own edge as we consider the ramifications of taking children seriously in the context of ‘place’ and ‘sustainability’ – vital constructs that stand for the cultural and ecological, local and global, issues and conditions of our time.

As is obvious to anyone who pays attention to the multiple challenges of billions of people living on a stressed planet of seemingly intractable social and ecological problems, this is a serious challenge. Sadly, too few educators acknowledge or feel capable of meeting this challenge. At the same time that human and natural communities are showing intensifying signs of strain, our educational systems seem more hell bent than ever to promote rigid proclamations of standardized curricula that dictate what students are expected to know at grade level. In the era of ‘evidence-based teaching and learning’ around ‘key academic subjects’ where students are prepared to be ‘career- and college-ready’ through regimes of ‘high-stakes assessments’, it is little wonder that, in the main, our educational institutions have not been at the vanguard of responding to our collective sustainability challenges. In short, the glaciers are melting faster than education is changing, and we need a new story.

Yet this is a hopeful book. Its hopefulness is not based on naive optimism for a world in peril, but on carefully documented and artfully rendered stories of adults and children developing learning relationships with each other, with their places and with the more-than-human and interdependent communities to which they find themselves connected.

The hopeful work of educators and activists in the Anthropocene is complicated and paradoxical. On the one hand we have the environmental and sustainability revolution enlivening communities across the planet. Everywhere we can witness large and small initiatives where people are joining together to fix the damage of colonizing industrial

cultures and their impacts on people, place and the planet itself. Educators are increasingly participating in what author Paul Hawken (2007) called 'blessed unrest': an otherwise unnamed and decentralized global movement for the linked aims of social justice, ecological sustainability, Indigenous and civil rights and non-violence and peace. As the inspiring periodical *Yes! Magazine* and so many other media sources regularly report, never before have so many people become so informed and so mobilized to consider the powerful ideas of sustainability and to develop practical actions to improve the wellbeing of human and more-than-human communities. As the chapters in this volume show, this work is taking place in a non-standardized and non-standardizable way that is responsive to the unique needs and characteristics of place.

Yet on the other hand, despite all the good work one sees everywhere, if one has the habit of mind to look for it, in terms of the many scientific indicators on the state of our linked social and ecological environments, things appear to be getting worse! Negative trendlines on issues such as poverty, homelessness, incarceration, terrorism, greenhouse gas emissions, ocean acidity, species extinction and so on – this news is as depressing as it is frequently reported. And in the field of education, despite several decades of research, scholarship and leadership around issues of sustainability and environment, dominant educational trends continue to foster the kind of managerial attitude that values efficiencies in decontextualized learning over the specificities of learning in place, and that is more concerned with aligning education with the 'global market' than with the prospects for localized citizenship in a globalized world.

Read in the light of these real tensions, *Children, Place and Sustainability* offers educators and other leaders a way of thinking about the possibilities for young people's learning in what will no doubt continue to be complicated and contradictory times. What makes this work unique is that it is one of the few examples in the educational literature that blends critical scholarship on sustainability and place with empirical research that features the voices and creative work of children and teachers themselves. Further, through a series of distinct place-focused inquiries, we are also led to attend to and appreciate the multiverse of the more-than-human world and the diverse global connections in which all of us are now embedded in the Anthropocene. Taken as a whole, the case studies explored here – from the pedagogies of map making and gardening, to the significance of children's rights and jacaranda flowers – provide us with fresh and enduring insight about teaching and learning with place and sustainability. And again, what

makes this work unique is not just the immediacy and variety of places and issues explored, but the presence of children themselves, always nearby, showing the reader what they see, hear and feel and what they are capable of doing.

The Anthropocene, as you will read in these pages, marks a time where we can no longer ignore the social and ecological impacts of modern industrial societies. From an educational perspective, the Anthropocene marks a time where we must call into question not only the problematic social, political and economic structures of an outmoded worldview but also the educational mindset that both reflects and reproduces it. It is not likely that the kind of engaged learning that you will read about in these pages will become the norm any time soon. Inviting children into experiences worth having, where they and their teachers are taken seriously as participants in their own learning and in the wider community – this kind of inspiring education will likely continue to exist on the margins. But just as in ecological systems, these margins, or these edge communities, are often places of great diversity and abundance. As such, they are places of hope. They are places that remind us of what is possible and that offer us accounts of collective action that can help us create our own edges, our own vital connections to place. These are the places that can open us, that can lead us to the precipice of our own shared lives.

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Hawken, P. (2007). *Blessed unrest: How the largest movement in the world came into being, and why no one saw it coming*. New York: Penguin.

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Margaret particularly acknowledges the many Aboriginal people who have been her teachers in Country and provided the foundation of her thought and practice. Her family have supported her through conversations, ideas, participation and their acceptance of the endless hours of solitary work that writing requires.

Finally we acknowledge each other's contributions to the book, and our ongoing collegiality and friendship that have made this work possible.

# About the Authors

**Margaret Somerville** is Professor of Education and Director, Centre for Educational Research at the University of Western Sydney. She spent several years in the central desert living on remote Aboriginal communities before becoming a subsistence farmer while bringing up her four children. Collaborative research with Aboriginal communities about their relationship to place led her to an academic pathway that has continued to follow an interest in different ways of understanding and living our relationship to the world around us. She has completed several large studies of sustainability education in primary and secondary schools, more recently in a project called 'Love Your Lagoons' in Sydney's urban and peri-urban water catchment. *Children, Place and Sustainability* grew from her long term collaboration in teaching and research with Monica Green and their work together in the Gippsland region of Victoria.

**Monica Green** is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at Federation University Australia (Gippsland). Her teaching and research interests are focused on place-based education for sustainability in primary schools and community-based learning. She has conducted extensive research in Victorian and Tasmanian schools investigating sustainability curriculum frameworks and pedagogies with a focus on the educational impact of teaching and learning in everyday sites such as school grounds, food gardens and local settings. Her current research *Sustainability and Me* examines children's perspectives of sustainability learning and practice in Gippsland, Victoria.

# Preface

## Magpie

Fluffy black and white body lies flat on road, only tiny sign of movement, one wing splayed out crooked. Monica says, 'We should knock it on the head, it's cruel'. Margaret says, 'I know but I can't'. Soft downy breast warm in two cupped hands, feel of rapid heartbeat, pump, pump, pump. Grey lids of eyes closed tightly shut and along rim of dark grey beak, fine line of bright red blood. Place gently amongst tangled bark litter under giant eucalypt tree festooned with ribbons of falling bark over newly exposed smooth white skin. Young magpie lies still. Each morning she punctuates our daily walk. On the next day, still lying in same bark place, heart beat slowed, eyes open, shuffles to move, but too hard to raise injured body from deep bark litter. Again cupped in hands, more life now, carry her to nearby soft bright green grass of early spring. Place her gently down. She stays. That night cold change blows through, howling gales, thunder, lightning and drenching rain. Worry about magpie freezing cold out exposed immobile in storm, but remember soft downy feathers warmer than doonas, made to endure weather. It's true. Next day on approach magpie struggles to leave her place of long soft grass, struggles more, sits upright stretches her long feathered neck this way and that, looking around, eager for life. Other maggies have come, warble in tree overhead, looking over her. Maybe she is thirsty, hungry. That night Monica takes shredded chicken from evening meal and dish of water. Next day bark nest and soft green grass empty, she has flown. If she was eaten, we say, feathers would all be there, like others we see up the road. We imagine her in full flight caroling her song through green hills of spring.

## Margaret

It's early spring and I have travelled from my current home in Western Sydney to Monica's place in Gippsland to work together on our book. Monica's place is a small farm with a big, well laid-out food garden where she grows vegetables, berries, nut and fruit trees. The citrus trees are laden with fruit at this time, brilliant oranges and golds among dark shiny green leaves, so plentiful they lie scattered on deep chocolate soil

under the trees. The garden is just emerging from the winter cold, new seedlings are planted and chooks 'brrk-brrk!' with pride as they lay their first spring time eggs. The house faces the garden and the rolling hills. We do most of our work together at the kitchen table and the rest of the time I hide away in the very pink girly bedroom space of Monica's daughter who is away for the week. We spend our days reading and writing, eating and talking, by the fire when the cold weather returns unexpectedly. Each day we walk through the rolling green hills resplendent with new lambs, a mother with newly born triplets who can hardly walk (we sympathise), a small flock of ducks who greet us each day as they complete their own daily rounds, and the little magpie drama that punctuates our everyday domesticity and writing. It feels like bliss.

I moved to the small town of Churchill in 2006 to work at the Gippsland campus of Monash University, a big move from the rural town of Armidale on the northern tablelands of New South Wales. Gippsland was a different place entirely. The Latrobe Valley, the (post)industrial heartland of Gippsland, is the site of brown coal-fired electricity generation in Victoria.

Before I moved to my new home in Churchill I visited the district. Driving the few kilometres off the Princes Highway from Morwell to Churchill the scene is confronting. Huge steel pylons that transport electricity wires dwarf the road. Transformer stations with a jungle of electricity connections disturb not only the visual landscape but car radio and mobile phone transmission. There are large and small power stations puffing smoke in every direction. I wondered if I would survive the visual pollution, let alone the air pollution that seeps into bodies with every breath. A colleague located Morwell on Google Earth for me. There, right next to Morwell, is a huge, uneven bright red shape that I can only see as a gigantic ulcerous sore. The open cut coal mines, normally hidden from public view, appear like this in satellite images of the earth's surface. This is my new home.

In this new place I became acutely aware of climate change. In Latrobe Valley we were surrounded by the smoke stacks of power stations that produced brown coal-fired power for the state of Victoria. Images of the smoke stacks were flashed across our television screens whenever climate change was discussed. The massive power lines connected Latrobe Valley to Melbourne, enabling Melbourne to be a clean and cultured city of the arts. I began to understand that the problems of climate change, like the long term drought that had gripped southeastern Australia for a decade, was a quintessential local/global problem of space and place. I understood the impact of climate change as having very real material

physical effects at a local level. In April of my first year there I wrote about the ground at the local wetlands being so dry that the community frog census activity had to be cancelled because of the danger of snakes hiding in the cracks. Walking over that ground with its deep cracks and shrinking pools of water, I knew the dryness of drought. Native fish completely disappeared from the wetlands during this time, only the voracious European carp survived.

These problems also appeared to be simultaneously global problems. Climate change will affect all parts of the earth, albeit in different local ways. We know that the Arctic ice caps are melting at a rapid rate, that sea levels will rise, that species are being lost at a far more rapid rate than anything previously recognised. Academic scholars were taking up the notion of 'the Anthropocene', the recognition of human entanglement in the fate of the planet. Philosopher Clare Colebrook said that climate change was not only a change of the climate but a change in the very way we understand being human (Colebrook, 2010). I decided that if the issues of space and place emerging in the phenomenon of climate change are to be confronted at all, they must be addressed by complex ecosocial, political and economic actions and decisions at all levels. I saw these as fundamental issues of educational thought and practice that required a deep transformation of our thinking and our way of life. It was at this time that I began to ask the questions that have guided my research since that time, and which underpin this book: what might be an adequate educational response to escalating planetary problems? How can a generation of children and adults who inhabit a global cyber world become materially attached to their local places, to inhabit and to know place differently?

## **Encountering Max**

One of these projects evolved from my relationship with Max Sargent, an extraordinary teacher from Commercial Rd Primary School in Morwell. I don't even remember when I first met Max; it feels like he has always been in my life as one of those extraordinary people who give life hope. When I met him he was leading a programme of learning from the Morwell River wetlands that was integrated across all grade levels and all subject areas. He conducted a monthly 'frog census' at dusk to monitor the frog calls in these part natural, part artificial power company wetlands. His focus in teaching was on his own grade 3/4 of eight and nine year olds which included regular wetland visits and in-school wetland activities. I was transfixed on one visit to his class when I viewed the

children becoming-frog in a frog dance they had choreographed entirely to frog calls.

I had visited the crowded portable classroom earlier in the day and watched the children navigate desks, chairs, boxes, hanging artworks and other objects that make up this decidedly working class school classroom. I thought about Lefebvre's idea that the whole of social space proceeds from the body (Lefebvre, 1991). The social space of this classroom is produced by these movements, bodies and objects, producing in turn the subjectivities of the children there. My attention was especially drawn to Mary, a child with Down syndrome, moving awkwardly in this crowded space accompanied by an integration aide. When I returned after school, Max and the integration aide, still working in the well-worn classroom, invited me to watch a short DVD of the rehearsal for the Christmas concert. There on the interactive screen, larger than life-size, the children came to life as frogs, dancing their frog dance to music made entirely of frog calls. In the wetlands the children get to know the frogs from their calls. Each frog has its own distinctive call and each species of frog calls in unison to attract the female by the measure of their voice. The classroom, cleared of debris, becomes the space of the wetlands. Children becoming-frog moving frog limbs, fingers splayed, jumping, leap frog, becoming-frog to frog music. Mary, in particular, loves the performance, moving freely in this frog dance collective, unaccompanied by her integration aide. In one brief sequence towards the end she smiles pure pleasure into the camera, body liberated in frog dance.

Max came from a family of beekeepers: 'I have a love of beekeeping so I'm always out in the bush and my beekeeping is a family tradition between parents, grandparents, great grandparents, and I've got about 40-50 beehives so that's one of my Saturday jobs, going out collecting honey'. Beekeepers develop an intimate relationship with their bees. More than any other form of agricultural work, the practice of beekeeping requires an understanding of cycles and seasons, of weather and place, in order to follow the flowering that produces nectar and pollen for the honey flow. Once, when the wetlands were very dry and I asked him why the frogs weren't calling, he replied in a characteristic way:

Well I can't answer it for sure but if I try to think like a frog I would not want to be about tonight as the moonlight was strong making me more visible, the ground was very dry when I need to keep my skin moist. Perhaps the males said it was no point expending energy

croaking for a mate, one who wouldn't want to travel any distance in these conditions.

He would send me updates if I couldn't make it, about the wetlands through all of its seasons. One time when the floods came he said:

The wetlands experience was exceptional tonight. We watched the floodwaters filling the wetlands, to cover the sampling platform steps, over a period of an hour. It was fascinating to watch. The depth pole was 75 cm on arrival and went over 120 cm within the hour and soon the pole was submerged. The last photo, in the dark, had the reflection from the eyes of a spider as the last sight just before the pole went under.

When I Google 'Morwell River wetlands' I can observe how the children present their observations from Community Frog Census. I navigate this populated and complex site along multiple pathways of desire. I listen to the calls of many different frogs and match their calls with a photo and common and scientific names. My greatest excitement is when I find photos and audio recordings I had witnessed the night I visited and watched the children playfully using their Pentax Optio digital cameras and taking photos and audio recordings of the place. I see those same photos on the site now: Dragon fly, Yabby hole, Kangaroo prints, Kangaroo scats, Brown Tree Frog and Common Froglet. Yes, we were here. Then there is Kylie's brief voice recording:

Quarter to seven pm  
29th of March 2007  
Morwell River Wetlands  
A half moon  
getting bigger  
it's pretty dark,  
about to record  
some frogs.

And then the sound of frog calls.

As I listen to the frog calls I am returned again to that autumn night in the wetlands, a cool breeze, a half-full moon, just on dusk as the frogs begin to sing. There are two things that strike me about listening to these words. One is that the words are so precise, so of the moment, so spare and simple as to be poetic, a poem made of the moment in voice sounds

and frog calls, a precise conjunction of time and place. The second is the significance of that moment being communicated globally on a website dispersed through time and space. The moment itself is so significant because it is about knowing place in all its intimate detail as a place of inhabitation, a place where we dwell with other creatures. It is only by knowing place in its ever changing forms through thousands of such intimate moments that we can read a place, that we can know how a place is going, how well it is. It is only through knowing a place in those thousands of intimate moments that we can learn to love a place and have the knowledge to be able to take care of it. It is what Max knows and does in his teaching.

Max began his professional career as a literacy teacher, always interested in words and stories, and trained later as a science teacher through 'Primary Connections', an innovative place-based science programme. He loved the children in his class, tolerated chaos happily and was full of creativity and imagination for what to do next. He worked closely with his mate Kevin Jones, a mining rehabilitation engineer who actually built the wetlands on the original site of the river overflow. Kevin once famously said, when the wetlands were threatened, 'Over my dead body'. Max had many other community members involved in his wetlands teaching days – bird watchers, Gunnai Elder Doris Paton, water-watch scientists, newspaper journalists – anyone who wanted to join him and work with the children in their place. I took my class of Professional Experience students each year to witness his teaching day in the wetlands, fascinated to see how children of different abilities, ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic status learned so well there. I remember a Chinese girl building a shelter under Doris' tuition and an intellectually disabled boy painstakingly weaving his shelter from twigs.

Then one day, I watched, puzzled, as new teachers took over Max's wetlands activities and this curriculum got relegated to Term 4 as a kind of optional excursion. Max told me he was transitioning to retirement and would no longer be leading the programme across the school and teaching his own class. It was then that Monica and I developed a project in collaboration with Max to 'clone' his knowledge onto the other teachers and our teacher education students.

## **Monica's story**

Soon after my move to the Latrobe Valley, Monica took me on a drive to all of her special places in Gippsland and in each place we recorded

our conversation as she told me the stories of those places. This story is based on extracts from that conversation.

Monica: Having grown up in the Latrobe Valley myself, I was always very conscious of the heavy industrialisation of that particular location. We lived right on the edge of the open cut mine, at night you could hear the machinery. We were on the southern outskirts of Morwell, that's where the houses stopped; the open cut was next to us. It was kind of urban too, all bitumen and established, houses and a little bit of play area, an oval, but it was all fenced off and beyond that fence you didn't venture because that was State Electricity Commission land. Coming back to live here as an adult, driving past Morwell and seeing that area every time I head to work, I've been catapulted back into my time there. Even now, sitting here, that mine is really familiar to me. Where I played as a child was right on the periphery of the open cut, but as much as we could we escaped the Valley, and I use the word escape intentionally, because that is what it was. We went to the beach most weekends and that was the place where we did most of our playing. I got to know what the bush was there. In those days it was the bush and the beach, all the different spots there. So I guess even though we lived in the Latrobe Valley, home was very localised, just the streets and other people's backyards. We were just in this little neighbourhood, never ventured too far, except down the creek as I got older, but my strongest memory is of our old house, the front yard and back yard. Of course where we were there were always neighbours so we played with the other kids. I remember the Devlins had a cow and chooks, they had a really big family; when I hear my chooks now they remind me of when I was growing up.

I think my time in that beach environment got me very interested in land and the sea, what goes on in those places. I was very young when we started going to the beach, four or five maybe, and every holiday we would pack up the car, two cars because eventually there were so many of us, and go over to Inverloch and that's where we would stay for weeks on end. In Morwell we were heavily involved in sports, athletics and all that sort of thing, but the beach was about play and exploration. We played in the sand near the bush, building, damming creeks, in the sun all the time, no hats, no block-out, just constantly outside.