

Cultivating Green Awareness: Specialist Tracks and Programmes for Young Children at the Australian National Botanic Gardens

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Botanic gardens throughout the world are visited by over 150 million people each year and they provide an ideal environment for educating people on the beauty, importance and diversity of the plants in their lives.

The Australian National Botanic Gardens (ANBG) situated in Canberra, the capital of Australia, was opened in 1970. It occupies an area of 90 hectares close to the city centre and contains the world's largest collection of Australian native plants with more than 6,000 species in cultivation. Its objectives are to 'increase knowledge, appreciation and enjoyment of Australia's plant heritage'.



Face painting at the Australian National Botanic Gardens - become your favourite flower or animal.

About 380,000 people (including 40,000 students) visit the Gardens each year. Many visitors come in family groups which, include young children and it is for this group that the ANBG developed special self-guided tracks and activities based on one of the major display themes of the Gardens – the ecological plantings. These displays feature plants which grow together, such as plants in the Rainforest, the Sydney Basin and the Mallee Shrublands. Other themes include taxonomic displays, rare and threatened Australian plants and plants used by Aboriginal peoples.

Plants do not have the intrinsic interest to young children that animals have. However, botanic gardens can use this to their advantage by focusing on plants which provide food and habitat for animals. Ecological plantings provide the ideal opportunity for this.



Leaf Tail by Narelle Oliver (1989, McCulloch Publishing). The storyline from the book was the basis for a children's track in the Australian National Botanic Gardens.



What's for Lunch? Track - ACT primary school children looking for a koala.

Temporary Self-guided Children's Tracks

Leaf-tail – The Leaf-tail Gecko Track

This track followed the adventures of a Leaf-tail Gecko (lizard) in the Rainforest area of the Gardens. It was based on the children's book *Leaf-tail, the Story of a Leaf-tail Gecko* and was in place for three months including the summer holidays. This track was very successful. It used a simple story line and creative and original model animals with clear interpretive signs. The Leaf-tail Gecko models were so lifelike that a number were attacked and pulled to pieces by hungry kookaburras. At each stop along the track the story and some artwork from the book were displayed. The story could be read to younger children as they searched for Leaf-tail and friends – a frog, a pademelon or a bowerbird – up a tree or under a log. Activities related to the track were held during the summer holidays. The author of the book conducted workshops in creative writing and printmaking for children and adults.

What's for Lunch? Track

The What's for Lunch? Track was aimed at pre-literate children. Based on the popular children's book by David Miller, the track was uniquely suited to the Gardens' environment as it featured many local animals, which need the plants of the Gardens not only for food, but also for shelter and sometimes for nesting.

David Miller's paper sculptures, which are the basis for the vibrant illustrations in the book, were on display in the Gardens' Visitor Centre. A free activity book and map provided resource material for both children and adults. At intervals along the track the animals featured in the book could be found and the question asked – 'What do they eat for lunch?' The answer was under a flap

on the displayed interpretive sign. David Miller conducted workshops showing children how to make their own paper sculptures during the summer holidays.

In the Visitor Centre children could also play with feltboards and felt animals and plants to make up their own pictures showing the inter-relationships of plants and animals. The feltboards had previously been used very successfully with major ecological exhibitions as a creative and educational diversion for children as accompanying adults viewed the exhibitions. A range of animal puppets from these habitats was also available for play.

Snugglepot and Cuddlepie

Another track for young children titled *Snugglepot, Cuddlepie and their Friends* meandered amongst plants which grow naturally on the sandstone soils of the Sydney region. The track used characters from a well-known Australian story book by May Gibbs and focused on the flowers, fruits, leaves and bark from a variety of plants of this region.

Before commencing the track a story book, map and activity booklet were collected from the Visitor Centre.

At each stop the accompanying adult read part of the story to the children and they made drawings or completed similar activities in their booklets. This type of track has a limited life as plants stop flowering or their fruit are eaten by parrots or possums, however coloured beads can be used to replace soft fruit such as Lilly Pilly and laminated pictures can be used in place of the flowers of boronias and wattles.

Temporary tracks can also be put in place to celebrate special events such as Wattle Week. The taxonomic wattle display is an excellent site for such a track.

The Wattle Week Track

About 600 of Australia's more than 1,000 species of *Acacia* are represented in the Wattle Section. The Wattle Week Track passes all kinds of wattles – those which have special flower or leaf features, those which were significant to Aboriginal people or early European settlers or those which have a significant place in Australia today e.g. Australia's floral emblem, Golden Wattle (*Acacia pycnantha*). This track was designed for children who can read and the accompanying booklets contain a variety of activities.



The Snugglepot and Cuddlepie Track - a scribbly gum letter.



The Wattle Walk - children feel the soft Wattle flowers.

Other programmes to engage children and help them learn the messages of conservation have included puppet shows, story telling and painting competitions. Another programme popular during holiday periods was Face Painting, in which children changed into flowers or animals. The children could also discover parts of the Gardens where the plants or animals lived using specially prepared activity sheets.

Setting up an interpreted track

It is important that discussions are held with all relevant staff before any decisions on a new interpreted track are made. This can help to

ensure that potential difficulties can be dealt with early. Curators, gardeners and interpretive staff as well as those from visitor services, education and promotion could be involved. Paths may need upgrading or extra plantings required. Understandably gardeners and curators are often apprehensive about the idea of large groups of children moving through the areas for which they are responsible.

Prior to final installation of the new track and its promotion, it is important that people unfamiliar with the Gardens walk the track to test it. They can help to identify problems related to instructions, directions and interpretation. Tracks must be marked clearly and the accompanying maps need landmarks such as bridges or seats shown clearly to assist people with orientation.

Maintenance

Tracks must be checked daily and any signs cleaned and repaired or replaced if necessary. This is best done by staff who have installed the track. Some tracks can be very time consuming to maintain. Interference with and damage to directional signs and props are problems often encountered.

Evaluation

Many of the tracks prepared at the ANBG are in response to suggestions and requests from visitors. Visitors are encouraged to provide written feedback on their visit and to suggest any improvements to programmes, labelling and interpretation. An important part of the planning of an interpreted track includes a decision on the method and process by which it will be evaluated.

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