

# Caring for the environment

A photograph of two young Indigenous Australian women in profile, smiling and looking towards the right. The woman in the foreground has her hair in a bun and is wearing a dark shirt with a white strap over her shoulder. The woman behind her has curly hair and is also smiling. In the background, a small white propeller plane is visible on a tarmac under a clear sky.

*Real and lasting impact on young people's lives through supporting them to participate in and lead environmental projects*



# Background

The June 2021 launch of VFFF's new five year strategy *Backing Young People* was the culmination of a ten month strategic review process.

Led by expert research, VFFF developed four grant-making focus areas: *Decent Work, Contributing to Society, Caring for the Environment* and *Exploring Christian Faith and Values*.

In July and August 2021, VFFF consulted with more than 20 environmentally-focused organisations to help inform our funding under *Caring for the Environment*.

We asked questions to better understand how this funding might best support initiatives that engage young people in Australia to participate in and lead environmental activities.

The following pages summarise this consultation and what the findings mean for the *Caring for the Environment* focus area.

***“Much of the good things we have are despoiled by thoughtless waste... It is not too late for Australia to preserve most of its natural beauty and its native animals if only we can start conserving and replacing without any further delay.”***

Sir Vincent Fairfax, “Along the Scouting Trail”  
in Scouting in NSW newsletter, July 1968



# WHAT WE HEARD – KEY INSIGHTS

- **Capacity building:** Environmental initiatives must be informed by science. Young people should also have access to information about economic and political systems that impact the environment, so they don't only see climate as an overwhelming abstract problem and can turn their concerns into effective action.
- Young people need spaces and platforms to share ideas about environmental sustainability. Their ideas are often exciting, highly creative and inspiring. Provide young people the information and tools to plan their own actions. **In the process of taking action, they build practical skills and confidence to become leaders.** These skills are transferrable, e.g. communications, event organising, action planning, leadership and self-efficacy.
- **Mentoring, coaching and guidance** from adults is integral. Young people can also be effective educators and motivators of adults, “educating up”.
- **Networks:** The process of training and organising enables the creation of networks and spaces for relationships to build. These peer networks counter a sense of isolation and create social capital. Engaging volunteers at high-school age often leads to longer-term engagement and transitions into staff positions.
- **Volunteers:** Most environmental organisations are supported by unpaid volunteer hours. A strong volunteer network is important, but needs an adequately resourced team of core staff, and pathways to develop into paid positions. Young people in these staff roles need professional development and upskilling.
- **School programs** are most effective when tied to a specific event or themed week, and relevant to the local landscape or geography. Input from Indigenous Elders has a “huge impact” on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, increasing engagement and interest.
- **Indigenous land management** can be transformational for regional and remote communities, and youth engagement is a dominant theme for most ranger groups. Rangers can be role models, and training and working in land management can provide a positive pathway for Indigenous young people in remote communities.



# WHAT WE HEARD – OPPORTUNITIES

- Only 0.5% of philanthropic funding and 2.5% of PAF funding is directed to the environment in Australia.
- In the environment space a small amount of funding can have a large impact.
- **Need for core support:** Many small to medium environmental organisations are predominantly run on volunteer time and lack core funding.
- There is a big gap in funding for **Indigenous-led youth environment work**.
- **Regenerative agriculture:** Focus at the tertiary level would be most effective, e.g. embedding thinking about sustainability in agricultural colleges. Young and aspiring farmers benefit from supportive peer networks when facing extreme weather challenges.
- **Indigenous ranger programs** lack a model for youth engagement. This would work best as a grassroots rather than top-down approach, testing at a local level then replicating if successful.
- **Youth innovation and solutions:** School students are often handed pre-formed environmental solutions. Innovation or awards funds could encourage young people to assess problems, design solutions and implement plans for environmental sustainability.

# WHAT WE HEARD – CHALLENGES/RISKS

- **Scale:** Local, grassroots approaches are as important as larger-scale initiatives, and they need to happen alongside each other.
- **School programs:** Teachers respond well to professional development and training about environmental issues. There are barriers for teachers in rural and regional areas to access professional development. However teachers are very pressed for time, and the resource development space is competitive.
- Additional work is needed to establish and grow supportive relationships with smaller local or rural and regional groups, as well as mainstream metropolitan young people who are already highly engaged.
- **Agriculture:** Land access and ownership is an issue for young farmers. Young rural and regional people need networks and moral support, as extreme weather events make remaining in the agricultural industry seem daunting. Environmental challenges are much more confronting for those who are living on the land.



# WHAT THIS MEANS FOR VFFF – *Caring for the Environment*

## Goal

Real and lasting impact on young people's lives through supporting them to participate in and lead environmental projects.

## Outcomes

Young people gain new environmental knowledge, skills and networks

Advance youth-driven approaches to environmental challenges

We have consistently seen and heard that young people are experiencing anxiety, concern, and a sense of responsibility as our environment changes, and associate environmental issues with fear for the future.

**Young people are embracing this responsibility with determination, courage and creativity.**

When provided with the right information, tools, platforms and guidance, young people can plan and **take effective action on environmental issues in their own way**. In the process of taking action, young people develop the skills, confidence and networks to become leaders of environmental change.

We also know that many environmental organisations significantly lack capacity and resources, so many young leaders' ideas and initiatives are not able to reach their full potential.

VFFF has a long-standing commitment to **supporting rural and regional communities to drive change**, and environmental issues such as extreme weather are much more visible for these communities.

**First Nations knowledge and practices** should be at the forefront of discussions about caring for the environment in Australia.

The opportunity we see is to **build the capability of young people in Australia to turn their environmental concerns into action**.

We aim to do this by advancing approaches to environmental challenges that are **identified and driven by young people themselves**.

We aim to support initiatives that help young people **gain new environmental knowledge, skills and networks**, for example through local sustainability programs, First Nations land management and supporting young rural and regional leaders.



# WHAT WE NEED TO DO WELL

- Ensure that young people are adequately supported with **coaches and mentors**.
- **Good funding design:** we know the need for core operations support, and in a volunteer-heavy space this is especially crucial. Often funding is not accessible or flexible enough for organisations to seize opportunities and 'strike while the iron is hot'.
- **Straightforward process:** smaller, grassroots and rural and regional organisations may have limited experience with philanthropy, and sometimes find the process "bamboozling". Simplify processes as much as possible, and emphasise good communication and building relationships with grant seekers.
- **Outcomes:** Recognise the development of soft-skills and more abstract measures (e.g. confidence and self-efficacy, hope for the future) as a legitimate and powerful outcomes.
- **Hear directly from young people** as much as possible, beyond just the loudest and most active voices.
- **Stay open minded!** Most organisations working in the environment space emphasise traditional knowledge and Indigenous land care practices. Most youth-led organisations are looking to shake up the status quo and do things differently.