

River Detectives Story of Change

Daylesford Dharma School, 2023

River Detectives is a cross-curricular citizen-science program connecting teachers and young people with their local waterway. Through water-quality testing, macroinvertebrate sampling, and habitat surveys students learn about the importance of catchment health and their role in caring for it.

The program is available to schools and youth groups in five regions across Victoria.

Tanya Wiggins is the Learning Manager at Daylesford Dharma School, a small primary school of 34 students near Daylesford in Central Victoria. The school is non-denominational, welcoming all students, but is unique in its Buddhist philosophical approach to teaching and learning with two key principles; interdependence and universal responsibility.

The school aims to foster a strong understanding of how students are connected to the web of life and their responsibility of non-harm to that web. They have been involved in River Detectives since 2014. Tanya explains that when she heard about the program she could see the benefits straight away;



Creek bed developed within the school grounds.

“We were going to Tipperary Springs regularly to learn about habitat, flora, fauna, and water bugs so I saw the program as a great opportunity for students to build that element of universal responsibility. Citizen-science gives them a great chance to contribute their observations while learning amazing skills which sit so beautifully within the Science and Humanities curriculum. It also allows students to explore the chemical science aspect which schools can find a little more difficult to cover.”

The school’s decade-long River Detectives journey revolves around their adopted site on Smiths Creek in Daylesford’s Cornish Hill Reserve where Grade Three to Six students have been involved. Junior students look forward to being a senior student, with River Detectives a highly anticipated rite of passage. Small class sizes and mini busses owned by the school means teachers can connect with their community regularly. On a whim, teachers can take their class to Smiths Creek and see first-hand what they are learning about. This means the learning is rich, meaningful, and can be continued back in the classroom.



Students enjoy a River Detectives excursion at Smiths Creek.

Cornish Hill Reserve, an 1850s goldmining zone, is being rehabilitated by the Friends of Cornish Hill. Former staff member Emily Wilden has developed a close relationship with the Friends of Cornish Hill Landcare Group and, in particular, group member Margie Thomas.

“The school has been involved in many initiatives and events with the Landcare Group over the years from Kids Teaching Kids events to cultural and environmental school field days with neighbouring schools. Parents are invited to come along and see the children’s learning in action with families visiting the reserve on weekends and holidays to see how the site is healing and changing.”

At the Dharma School, immersion in subject matter leads to interests that children have autonomy to follow.

“After a Landcare field day about frogs, the children kept talking about frogs, so staff harnessed this interest. Students from P-6 looked at frog distribution maps, identified the frogs of Cornish Hill, researched them, and created signs that were placed throughout the reserve.”

In 2022, teacher Mandy DeLacy and students refurbished the signs.

“If we’re interacting with a space then we have responsibilities to that space to ensure it is looked after. River Detectives has created a real care of Cornish Hill by students.”



Dharma students teaching their peers.



Frog signs made by Daylesford Dharma School students



Students are currently propagating plants for revegetation in 2024 that will involve designing and making signage from recycled timber.

Daylesford Dharma School is committed to nature-based, environmental learning but Tanya explains the key impact of River Detectives;

“River Detectives keeps the momentum up. There is so much curriculum to consider in schools, but River Detectives keeps environmental learning front and centre in staff and children’s minds throughout the year and over the years. Bush School has been another spinoff. We run Bush School at three sites; Cornish Hill, Tipperary Springs, and Merin Merin Swamp near Clunes. Students spend the bulk of their learning day on a Monday during terms two and three at one of the three sites focusing on experiential learning.”

Tanya shares other benefits the program has had on students, staff, and the school community;

“For students, River Detectives is powerful as a multi-generational program. Older students mentor younger students and students relate skills with the science and biology they engage in at high school.”



For staff, the River Detectives program gives us confidence to really think about how we want learning to look and the equipment, training, and support to make it happen. It has given our environmental curriculum form.

When we do lots of excursions around the community, there can at times be questions about whether this is time well spent for educational outcomes. The River Detectives program has helped us communicate the wonderful science learning that is happening when we visit environmental sites. The learning then flows back into our literacy and numeracy programs with the application of meaningful data we have collected,”

In 2023, Daylesford Dharma School received a Regional Recognition Award by the North Central CMA highlighting the contribution they've made to the goals of the Regional Catchment Strategy.



Proud recipients of the award for their commitment to River Detectives, their partnership with Landcare and on-ground achievements at both Cornish Hill and at their school site

From a curriculum development perspective, Tanya's highlight is the power of ongoing data collection that provides meaningful information across the seasons and years for use by students;

River Detectives has been embedded into many other curriculum areas. Rather than using arbitrary data, water quality results have been used in graphing activities in Maths.”

Tanya is confident the school will be involved in the River Detectives program for years to come with Junior Landcare grant funding enabling another exciting project for 2024. Colleague, Rachel Taylor explains;

“For this project, aligned with our Compassionate Citizenship program, we plan to build nature observation boxes with the local Men's Shed and place them along tracks in the Cornish Hill Reserve. They will house journals and observational tools for people to record what they notice over different times of the year.

“The hope is these installations create greater community connection to the reserve and more awareness of the biodiversity in the waterway. Ultimately, the project will see the students use the data they gather from the observation boxes, and knowledge they glean from the excursions, to run another Kids Teaching Kids Day. Stepping up into the role of community educators, our students will run workshops about biodiversity.”

For more information about River Detectives:

Email riverdetectives@nccma.vic.gov.au or visit www.riverdetectives.net.au

Photos provided by Nicole Howie and Tanya Wiggins

River Detectives Story of Change

Bridgewater Primary School, 2022

River Detectives is a cross-curricular, citizen-science program connecting teachers and young people with their local waterway. Through water quality testing, macroinvertebrate sampling, and habitat surveys students learn about the importance of catchment health and their role in caring for it.

Since 2016, the program has been available to school and youth groups in five regions across Victoria.

In the North Central CMA region Chris Guinane is a teacher at Bridgewater Primary School, a small school of seven students half an hour west of Bendigo, set within a farming community on the Loddon River where the River Detectives program has been implemented over many years. Recently it has become the focal part of an innovative outdoor classroom program.

When Chris arrived at the school two years ago student numbers were dwindling. Chris and the principal at the time, Julie Ladd, realised there were local children living in close proximity to the school travelling straight past to attend other schools in nearby towns. School staff were keen to understand why.

Chris explains that they canvassed the entire Bridgewater community in 2021 to gauge perceptions and came up with a plan;

“A common theme was the need for the school to be visible in the community. We needed a way to re-engage with the community and offer a point of difference to schools attracting our local children. Given our location and proximity to the river we thought we could experiment with an outdoor learning model and make that the new ‘DNA’ of our school. Our goal was to create passionate students learning about their own backyard - to create a culture of sustainability and produce students who are environmentally literate so they might become custodians in their future personal or work lives and make valuable contributions to society.”

With Chris’s outdoor education background, Julie’s drive and the unwavering support of parents who could sense the excitement their kids felt at the prospect of learning outdoors, the outdoor classroom program was born. The school’s involvement in River Detectives provided the foundation and it was up to the staff, students, families and community to shape the program.

Chris outlines how the program has evolved;

“We started implementing the outdoor classroom late 2021. Every second Wednesday we take all the students, along with a trolley loaded with everything we need, down to the Loddon River. For the first session we do our river science. We visit various positions along the river each fortnight gathering a broad spectrum of data, collecting a waterbug sample and doing a habitat survey. Students analyse the results and discuss what they mean. The students are at a point now where they have done it so often and feel so confident they could run the session themselves. They’re still as excited about it now as the first time they did it which is a delight to see.





For the rest of the day we integrate our regular curriculum – literacy and numeracy – into the outdoors. The River Detective program support us with great resources and the Outdoors Victoria’s outdoor learning toolkits provide hands on ideas and resources linked to the Victorian Curriculum. They are adaptable to cater for our ranges of ages, abilities and learning needs.

In literacy, students use their writer’s notebooks to complete visual literacy tasks where they record and describe the things they can see, hear, smell, feel around them. In numeracy students work with waterbug data.”

On alternate Wednesdays learning is completed outdoors on school grounds utilising the great facilities, gardens, chooks and avoiding technology as much as possible.

“The students lead work in the vegie garden seasonally; planning what will be planted next, calling suppliers, purchasing, planting and weeding. We use this produce in our kitchen to cook on Wednesday afternoons, having lunch together using produce we’ve grown. The kids cook and clean. We also have a waste management system with scraps being shared between the chooks, compost and worm farm.



Students identify the native plants on our grounds, care for them and observe what fauna is using them. These experiences form the basis for inquiry projects on flora and fauna around the school. We’ve just started sinking our teeth into learning about pollinators and plan to make a bee hotel. This has been a real eye opener for us all and is changing perspectives about the insects we encounter and creating more respect.”





Bridgewater relies on the Loddon River for tourism, sport, recreation and farming. Sharing their outdoor learning with the wider community in an important goal of the program;

"We have a public [Bridgewater Primary School facebook page](#) with nearly 200 followers and regularly post photos and summaries of what we are doing. We also share to the broader Bridgewater on Loddon community facebook page. In future we'd like to share our data with the community to upskill others about what our river is telling us and what the possible threats and opportunities are.

We hope that by sharing our journey it will attract the attention of others, even experts in entomology for example that may wish to collaborate with our school. We figure that the further we can cast our net, the more chance we'll have of garnering support from people who wish to contribute and deliver incursions / masterclasses or upskill staff so that we can run a program that will produce the best outcome for our students."

The outdoor classroom program has been a tremendous success so far with very positive outcomes for all involved. It was a significant drawcard for new principal, Linda Kingsley;

"The program really brings down those ideas of climate change and global warming to something really tangible for students. Their changing environment is literally on their doorstep and they feel less powerless with these issues. Students can feel overwhelmed by the daily news but our students are thinking more of the good news story and how they can contribute."

For Chris, Wednesdays are his favourite day of the week;

"I spring out of bed on Wednesdays. Rain, hail or shine I know that everything we do on those Wednesdays will be highly engaging, super positive and will make an impact on our students and community. On these days we know the students are ready to learn with no anxiety and it's a treat to be a part of."

Chris and Linda are confident the program enhances learning outcomes for students. Senior students are demonstrating increased vocabulary and fluency in their information writing. Staff are witnessing their students being healthy, happy, active and connected to their local environment;

"The health of our river and the ecosystem is crucial to the wellbeing and daily lives of the people we care about here. The kids initially saw the program as a bit of fun but increasingly they're gaining a very clear picture of how things in their local environment are connected. They are understanding the importance of learning and passing that learning on to others. Students really care about what they're doing, taking pride in the program and the service we're providing to the community and environment."



Students play a large role in suggesting ideas for the program and this is reflected in their enthusiasm, effort and learning;

"I enjoy going down to the river doing learning. We do lots of waterbug testing to see if the water is ok." (Marley)

"We're lucky. Not many other schools get to do this. We are outside instead of being inside and we are learning about the environment. You can learn anything outside – even Maths!" (Isaac)

"When tourists come along the river path they are interested in what we're doing. We do a little session with them and show them the waterbugs we have collected." (Rylea)

"Every school should have an outdoor classroom because it is fun and we learn a lot." (Emily and Amaya)



Parents are learning a lot as conversations happen around the dinner table and the school is getting wonderful feedback from the wider community we interact with whilst at the river as Chris proudly explains;

"There was one occasion when a group of tourists stopped as they were walking past and I stepped back to encourage the kids to lead the conversation. The students were really insightful talking about the outdoor classroom. As it turned out the group were all ex-teachers and principals and were blown away by what they saw and heard. They loved seeing the engagement, the passion and how well the kids could articulate the purpose of what they were doing."

Chris and Linda agree they are excited by the way the program could evolve in future. They are determined to find innovative directions to take the program and undertake deeper investigations. In future they'd like to provide PD to other schools looking to begin their own outdoor learning programs. Schools can struggle to know where to begin but Chris's advice is to jump in and do it.

"We were lucky to have two principals who have given us the autonomy to have a crack. For other schools who are feeling averse to the risk or thinking of reasons why they shouldn't do it, just give it a go. The rewards will soon be clear in the way students engage so wholeheartedly with a program like this."



For more information: Email riverdetectives@nccma.vic.gov.au

or visit www.riverdetectives.net.au