

# River Stories



**Council Name:** Hunter & Central Coast Regional Environmental Management Strategy (HCCREMS)

**Web Address:** [www.hccrems.com.au](http://www.hccrems.com.au)

**Size:** 39,021 square kilometres

**Population:** 1 million (14 councils combined)



## Abstract:

The Hunter and Central Coast Regional Environmental Management Strategy (HCCREMS), along with the Maitland Regional Art Gallery (MRAG), partnered with ABC Newcastle 1233 to deliver the RiverStories community engagement program. RiverStories explored the Hunter community's relationship with the Hunter River, and traced the stories of those who have lived, worked, studied or connected in some way to the Hunter River, from its source to Newcastle Harbour. RiverStories also charted the social and environmental changes to the system over the past 10 years through a series of radio interviews, films, photographs, music, artworks and community and school workshops. RiverStories the radio series was broadcast weekly on ABC Newcastle and ABC Upper Hunter and was available, along with other project resources, through a dedicated website. The Program included a total of 22 workshops (covering the river, arts, ecology and cultural history) and an art exhibition.

## Background:

10 years ago, ABC Newcastle 1233 sent a reporter to the source waters of the Hunter River. Over the subsequent weeks, he travelled all the way to Newcastle Harbour, along the way documenting the trip through interviews with residents and observations of the River and "what it meant" to the people who lived on its banks. 10 years on, the walk was repeated and provided a unique opportunity to gauge the social and environmental changes that have occurred.

The RiverStories program was developed to actively engage the community surrounding the Hunter River in a dialogue about the river, what it means to them, and help them to understand they have a role to play in the river health. The partnership between media outlets, artists and environment was necessary to provide an innovative and holistic approach to the project.

The River Stories Partners Program Workshops and Events objectives were to:

- 1- Increase community interaction with ABC's RiverStories broadcast (Jul- Dec 2011) by supplementing the program with coordinated events and workshops
- 2- Foster a sense of appreciation and ownership of the river in the communities that surround it, encouraging long-term interest in the river and its health,
- 3- Engage community members in skills acquisition workshops,
- 4- Engage school aged students in arts/science workshops that promote the use of art across KLA's.

## Implementation:

HCCREMS (and ABC Newcastle 1233 and MRAG) developed and delivered RiverStories over 12 months (April 2011 – 2012). The Program consisted of:



- 1- A 6-month radio serial on the health of the Hunter River, and changes residents have noted over the last 10 years, broadcast to the whole Hunter region. The location and timing of the stories aligned to the delivery of community and schools workshops.
- 2- Design and delivery of Art and Environmental Science Schools Workshops - involving eight schools located on or close to the Hunter River, three high profile artists, an indigenous storyteller, two senior ecologists and a leading oral historian. Each school attended workshops:
  - (i) at the river focusing on local ecology (river flow, flora and fauna and ecosystem health) and on artistic creation (leaf rubbings, drawings, sculpture, mud mapping);
  - (ii) in the classroom and explored the ecological significance of the river by a vegetation scavenger hunt, creating sculptures using natural material and dreamtime stories.
  - (iii) visiting the final art exhibition and producing further artworks for incorporation.
- 3- Design and delivery of Community Workshops - a series of 8 artistic workshops and oral history workshops aimed at the local community living alongside the Hunter River. The Community Workshops were hosted by well respected, high profile, professional artists, and covered skills of illustration, mixed media and oral history.
- 4- Delivery of a regional art exhibition featuring works from the schools and community workshops, along with commissioned artworks from professional artists. A selection of artworks from the workshops (community and schools), were collected and included in the main exhibition.

Funding for the project was provided by the ABC (the full costs of the RiverStories broadcast series, photography and filming) NSW Environmental Trust (\$30,000 contribution to workshops), HCCREMS (project coordination, workshop development and delivery, ecology staff, environmental input) and MRAG (coordination of artists, workshop delivery, major exhibition). In-kind contributions of partner organisations exceeded \$250,000.

### **Outcomes:**

RiverStories has delivered the following outcomes:

- Development of a dedicated website as part of the ABC Newcastle 1233 website.
- Development of 13 video stories available to watch or download from the website
- Development of 45 audio stories broadcast, available to download from the website.
- Development of 22 photo galleries used in the art exhibition and available to view from the website.
- Engagement of 8 schools (240 students) in workshops and visits to the final exhibition.
- Delivery of 8 community multi-media, illustration and oral history workshops. Over 70 community members participated in the workshops with a number of works included in the final exhibition.
- RiverStories Art Exhibition – MRAG developed an exhibition based around the broadcast stories.
- School resources - A workshop resource kit which included satellite map of the river, allowing students to continue with ongoing lessons on the river and its importance to the region.

Results included:

- 100% acknowledged the importance of outdoor activities in environmental education
- 90% felt the workshop content was relevant to students age and ability Children comments included - 'My favorite part of the day was dip netting and finding water bugs' - 'I really like to draw and look at the different shaped leaves' - 'I loved collecting the bits of bark to make my dragon fly' Community workshop participants were provided with a feedback form and major results included;
- 70% intend to visit the MRAG River Stories exhibition
- 65% agreed the workshop increased their awareness of the river
- 60% attended to develop their artistic skills and connect with their local environment

### **Future:**

RiverStories has highlighted that engaging appropriate project partners, assists and increases the ability to disseminate information throughout the wider community. In particular, the project promotion obtained

through the regular (twice weekly) radio sections was incalculable.

The oral history workshop was particularly successful and planning is underway to investigate how this workshop could be expanded into a wider program connecting local history with the environment.

Key learning outcomes gained from the project include:

- Combining a number of different activities that target different community sectors (age, gender, and ethnicity) into one project produce flow on effects through the whole community. This project reached not only the broadcast listeners and participants, but also friends and family members, thus increasing its impact
- It was evident throughout the workshops that much of the local community doesn't visit the river on a regular basis, and although the river is an everyday feature of the Hunter lifestyle, it isn't something they actively thought about. One of the comments received in the feedback forms stated; 'I have lived in this area for 30 years and have never sat on its banks or enjoyed its serenity. The river will now feature heavily in my art as this workshop has inspired me to not take it for granted.'

Councils and project partners now have information on how the community considers the river has changed in the past ten years.

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