

## Chapter 3

# Sustainability in Photography Can Change the World

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### ABSTRACT

*Photography plays important, but undervalued and misunderstood, roles in how modern urban humans relate to nature and how nature is mediated to us, forming our perceptions and national identity. Typically landscape photography depicts nature aesthetically as sublime, picturesque and beautiful. Photographs have been powerful raising awareness of sustainability and communicating political messages. The chapter reviews the influence of two great Australian wilderness photographers, Olegas Truchanas and Peter Dombrovskis, as well as Edith Cowan University's (ECU) Photography for Environmental Sustainability Competition. In conjunction with World Environment Day, the university invited students to submit photographs that showcase the principles and practices of environmental sustainability. This chapter describes the history, purposes and impact of photography and the competition. Starting as an engagement partnership between the environment coordinator, academics and the Perth Centre for Photography, it is now an international competition across Australia and New Zealand, not exclusive to photography students, hosted by Australasian Campuses Towards Sustainability (ACTS).*

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to elevate the reader's appreciation, not only of photography, but of artistic endeavour in the quest for sustainability, and therefore education for sustainability. It aims to

bring into sharp relief the potential for art to help us engage in sustainability. This chapter offers a description of how photography contributed to the effect of campaigns to save rivers and vast wilderness areas in the south-west of Tasmania from being flooded. Two great Australian wilderness photographers Olegas Truchanas and Peter Dombrovskis used photography to encourage

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Australians to recognise and value Australian natural landscapes.

This chapter also describes a case study of an environmental sustainability photography competition in a university. The idea for the competition was prompted by an environment officer who inspired a research academic who spoke to a photography lecturer. The chain of social discourse jumped like a little stone skimming the flat surface of a pond. Such communication was dependent on the good relationships and meetings between facilities and services staff with academics who had a common interest in the environment and students' learning. The university's cross-disciplinary composition of the environment committee nurtured these relationships. The importance of these social aspects is a focus of this chapter as part of the description of a case study of a creative arts pedagogical innovation for sustainable development.

This chapter does focus on an environmental problem. Yet its main focus is on making a dramatic effect on the physical world by making an effect on our social world. In particular this chapter describes how modern perceptions of our environment and our impact on our environment are often formed by images (photographs) seen on television, posters, computer screens and billboards. Not only in advertising and recreational television time, but all around us in modern city life, we are surrounded and bombarded by images that influence our thinking and our behaviours. These images have the potential to pleasantly surprise us, to provoke our thinking, to subliminally alter our ways and our decisions.

There are many specific objectives of this chapter. One objective is to describe the development and history of a sustainability photography competition, its purposes and potential impact. From its simple beginnings as an environmental officer's great idea, it was nurtured to become an assessment in a photography unit in one university and currently to a competition across Australia and New Zealand viewed on a public website and

inspiring international attention. By describing this initiative, another objective is that readers may be inspired to consider sustainability in roles beyond those of scientists, engineers and politicians. An objective is to describe the position of photography in our visual culture. Also, an objective is to describe the history of the contribution of photographs to stop the destruction of Australian wilderness. Yet another objective is that readers may replicate these ideas in creative arts or other disciplines throughout primary, secondary, other higher education institutions, community groups and diverse organizations. Maybe this chapter is also selling the possibility of photography being a change agent in the sustainability agenda.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND**

### **The Influence of Photography**

Visual images have dominated our culture and education in the twentieth, and indeed the twenty first century. Yet, universities have devoted little attention to visual media (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). This chapter highlights how, as an education tool for photography students as well as those who view the photographs, photography could raise awareness about sustainability as the broad view of respect for people and places, showing that decisions have environmental, social, economic, cultural and political implications. Such a body of photographs could explore, document and develop earthly symbiosis by showcasing communities working the land in ways that conserve or rehabilitate biodiversity (Giblett, 2009; 2010). Images could show Indigenous people living traditional lifestyles, permaculture practitioners, organic farmers and gardeners, and natural energy technologists (Giblett, 2011). 'Ordinary' people could be depicted as they go about their daily lives meeting their personal and professional needs in ways that show thoughtfulness and consideration of future generations (World Commission on

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