

# Youngsters' hands-on feel for the bush

By Lucy Donoghue

Using the environment around them to create unique artworks has given a group of preschoolers on the Liverpool Plains more than just a new appreciation of art.

For the past nine months children at Quirindi Preschool have taken part in a "Collaborations with Children in Nature" project working with ephemeral artist Shona Wilson to create sustainable artworks and have thrived on the opportunity to interact with the natural world.

"There are many different ways to learn to read and write and our time in the outdoors has helped the children in many ways, including teaching them how to think about everything around them," Quirindi Preschool director Alison Thompson said.

Each week the preschoolers have taken part in excursions to a Quirindi property where they explore the bush and learn about the environment.

During the visits they have also made "ephemeral art" from whatever materials they can find.

Some of their creations were on display recently at Blackville Art Show, including a rock 'xylophone', wooden mobiles and recycled timber Christmas trees.

For artist Shona Wilson it was the first time she has worked with children and she enjoyed the process.

"The project has been an amazing experience for me," Shona said.

"The children were so easy to work with and their openness and wonderful behaviour were a joy.

"It was so much more than a creativity experience for the children. They are feeling physically stronger and more capable because of it."

Quirindi Preschool is among a number of early childhood facilities to embrace the idea of outdoor play and education for sustainability as an important part of its curriculum.

Through the project the preschool has also engaged with the wider community including linking with outdoor play groups such as NSW Early Childhood Environmental Education Network (ECEEN).

Alison Thompson added that the successful project quickly evolved from teaching children about sustainability into a new style of outdoor learning which offers a range of social, emotional, educational and health benefits.

"Our philosophy is to foster children to be aware of the environment they live in.

"This needs to be able to be transposed to any environment; city, metropolitan, rural and remote," Alison said.

"We live in such a plastic world that we are teaching the children to look around and see what is in their natural environment that they can use in their play."

Quirindi Preschool began working with the idea of ephemeral art, which they called "moveable art", about eight years ago.

What began as a quest to use more recyclable materials transformed into a focus on natural materials found in the local environment.

"We initially began using recyclable materials to create art and have moved onto whatever we can find on our walks; rocks, sticks and leaves."

Alison said the social side of play has become especially important during the excursions.

"During our time on the bushwalks the children are really learning to think about each other.

"They have realised that it's not a race to the bottom of a hill.

"They need to take care and look out for each other."

She said the educators have also seen a significant increase in both fitness and resilience.

"When we first began the children would want to stop after 10 minutes for a rest but now they get so involved in looking around the environment that they explore for a lot longer.

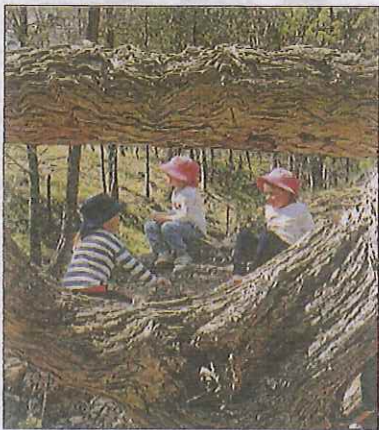
"It will be exciting to come back next year and see in what direction the children want to take the project."



Ephemeral artist Shona Wilson and Quirindi Preschool director Alison Thompson with the artwork at the Blackville Art Show.



ABOVE: Children play with the rock 'xylophone' at Blackville Art Show. RIGHT: Art appreciation starts at an early age as these children have a look at the bush creations.



Square log dramatic play - Children from Quirindi Preschool engage in dramatic play during a bushland excursion.