Developing a methodology to assess children's perceptions of the tropical environment


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Abstract

Australia holds some of the most unique, diverse and vulnerable ecosystems in the world, ranging from marine, coral reefs, to the arid and semi-arid outback, to tropical rainforests. Young children's perceptions of, and attitudes to their environment carry with them into adulthood, determining their capacity to learn about and interact with their world. To sustain Australia's unique landscapes it is essential that these future adults have an informed knowledge of the role, value and function of the country's environment. To ensure that we are helping the youth of today understand the natural environment we must first determine their current perceptions of it. This research describes an Arts/Science nexus; while traditional data collection methods, such as surveys, interviews and focus groups are often used to determine children's understandings, these methods are limited by their reliance on words. Children, particularly young children, do not always have the words to describe what they see, think or feel. The Arts, however, can be used as tools to help children express their ideas and feelings. So our research question was: how can we use an arts-based methodology to determine children's perceptions of their environment? To answer this question, five arts-based strategies were trialled, tested and refined. This article elucidates these different strategies, including the methods used and the impact of these methods on children's expression of their environmental understandings. It concludes with a description of the researchers' key learnings relating to arts-based data collection methods to determine children's environmental perceptions.

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Environmental Assessment has been increasingly used by decision-makers to examine the ecological and related health, social, economic and cultural implications of proposed human activities. A significant change which has, or is occurring within environmental assessment, is the clear recognition that the assessment of human health effects is an important component of environmental assessment. As a result health professionals are being called upon, at a much greater frequency to participate in the environmental assessment process. The recently released International Study on the Effectiveness of