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Sculpting messages

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Artists and students from USP who went to Naceva Village on Beqa Island to raise awareness on climate change and the negative effects of human activity to oceans. Picture: SUPPLIED

A group of students and artists were excited about the prospect of using their respective talents and trade to share eco-friendly knowledge with school children of Uluinakorovatu Primary School at Naceva Village on Beqa island.

Called the Beqa Eco Artists Workshop, a group of 13 artists and students from the University of the South Pacific and artists from its Oceania Centre, spoke to the children about the need to keep their environment clean as well as the topic of climate change.

The workshop is part of the University's Pacific Centre for Environment and Sustainable Development (PACE-SD) project, which is devoted to combining science and local knowledge to develop climate change action plans in more than 40 communities in 15 Pacific island nations.

The Oceania Centre's Visual Arts co-ordinator Johanna Beasley and PACE-SD's Dr Sarah Hemstock led the team on their Beqa sojourn.

"PACE is where Sarah works and she was keen to collaborate to get art and science together. We wanted to use art to put across a message. This was a good opportunity to mix art with politics or try to make a change, show art as an education tool," Ms Beasley said.

Harietta Vilsoni, an undergraduate student, was inspired by a tune her father had written to give life to a song that Sarah had written, and which the group shared with the students.

"We use art to inform them of what climate change is. You probably think they do not know climate change scientifically but through the pictures and what we wanted to portray it gave them a fair idea of what climate change is," Ms Vilsoni said.

Another undergraduate, Joana Taukei recalled her work with colours and the impression they may have made on the students.

"Through the methods that we used, especially in school, we upgraded their awareness about climate change. They understood it (climate change); at their age, I didn't know what climate change was, so I think we did a good job of introducing them to climate change with these methods," Ms Taukei said.

Oceania Centre artist Tomasi Domomate was impressed and quite happy that art was used to share useful knowledge to the children.

"The use of animation ...because at their age, —the primary school level — they are interested in watching cartoons so it's an easy way to send the message of climate change," Mr Domomate said.

One of the centre's resident artists, Ben Fong, said the children still do not understand the consequences of their actions and how it affects the environment like burning plastic or throwing rubbish into the sea.

"To me, these little actions mean they need constant reminders. One workshop is good, but a follow-up would be better and the language that we use to speak to them needs to come down — all the way down to their level," Mr Domomate said.

The giant sand sculptures on the beach by the artists near Lawaki Beach House drew the attention of the children.

"To demonstrate how the children did not understand and that they would need constant reminders, I got them to make an eye — pick something (from the rubbish) to make an eye for the shark — they chose bottle caps. One of them put a white bottle cap on the shark, but then he decided it was not good enough. The first thing that he did — he didn't put it back onto the bottle — he threw it into the water," he explained.

Doctor Hemstock says she hopes the workshop will add a new dimension to the artists forte and help them advocate ideas.

"I just think working with the children the whole week was the most rewarding experience, but that was not just the entire purpose, was it? Because we are also looking at practice for our artists and building the strengths of our artists at the Oceania Centre, by trying to teach them how to

communicate ideas. All in all, I think we simplified the message that we delivered and they responded well to the whole thing," she said.

Ms Beasley said the artists were breaking boundaries and coming out of their comfort zone, making them become advocates of causes which works towards the betterment of the community.

"The power of art to make change and educate —give them a sculptural experience, and to show them you can make art that can wash away out of found objects. You do not need expensive equipment. It goes beyond just painting. Stretch their boundaries and make them think differently using videos and photos and new mediums," she explained.

Apart from the essential working tools they took, the students and artists were encouraged to make use of resources readily available to them, like driftwood, existing trees and beaches to build artworks.

These included shaping huge sculptures from the sand, carving exquisite pieces of art on living trees, singing as well as painting and using animation to communicate the importance of climate change to the students of Uluikorovatu.

Ms Beasley hopes this workshop will be the first of its kind and is very appreciative of the funding from the USP-EU Global Climate Change Alliance and EU ECOPAS Project. She said the workshop was the first of many.

"We will do small workshops with local schools as part of this workshop. We will use some of the ideas we have used in Beqa," she added.



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