

# Gould League's History of Environmental Education in Victorian Schools

The Gould League is recorded as Australia's oldest environmental education organisation, established in 1909 and honoured by having the Australian Prime Minister of the day Sir Alfred Deakin, as its first President. It was devoted to bird protection, prevention of egg theft, promoting education about birds, and campaigning for the formation of bird sanctuaries.

## Gould League's Successful Model

Since its inception in 1909, the Gould League has blazed a trail for environmental education in Australia.

During the formative years of the organisation, the **Gould League developed an effective and successful model of changing behaviours in children and their families** through its bird conservation program. This program was so effective that by the 1940's bird and nature study was a part of every school curriculum, and attitudes and actions towards birds had changed profoundly. This pedagogy or approach to teaching has been so successful, it remains the foundation of our work, more than 100 years later.

Summarised below are the key phases in our educational development:-

## 1909-1940: Bird Protection & Conservation

The Gould League of Bird Lovers was established to protect Australian birds and to prevent the unnecessary collection of wild birds' eggs. It also sought to disseminate knowledge regarding birds, to help children and adults to identify them, to cultivate a more positive attitude towards birds by fostering an interest in them and their habits, and to encourage the formation of bird sanctuaries. The league had considerable success during this period, particularly in publishing educational material and in activities including field days to introduce the public to birdlife.

By the 1940s, the study of birds and nature (Nature Study) was part of every school curriculum, with Laws passed to protect birds. Competitions and field days continued and grew in popularity. We also produced and sponsored several publications, the most famous of which was *Cayley's What Bird is that?*

## 1960 –1990: Environmental and Sustainability Education

As people began to see the connection between environment, wildlife and humans after the publication of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson in 1962, the Gould League changed its name from Gould League of Bird Lovers to simply Gould League. It once again blazed a trail, this time focusing on the broader theme of **Environmental Education**. Supported by the Department of Education, it went on to produce highly original and innovative curriculum materials. Over 100 publications, including guides, posters, animal stickers and fact sheets were produced. These resources, along with support from our in-school and excursion educators ensured environmental education become part of the school curriculum in the 1970s.

**Hundreds of thousands of children entered competitions, joined the Gould League and signed the pledge; with new generations of Australians introduced to the concept of conservation through the Gould League.**

Many of the colourful and informative posters featuring Australian flora and fauna were distributed nationally via the various state chapters. Some were issued in the local newspapers, others made available as part of a membership package or sold independently. Without a doubt, these are sweet childhood memories for many as they learnt the names of the birds, fish or other species from these posters. There is currently a resurgence of popularity for these posters with all of these reprinted and available from the Gould League [online shop](#) which helps to support the day to day operations of the organisation.

Gould League also started to run marine excursion programs at Ricketts Point and the Morning Peninsula.

Gould League then developed its first **sustainability education** programs with litter reduction and recycling programs in schools and the **mobile Waste Wise caravan in 1986** which was supported by the Department of Employment and Education in Canberra. The travelling Waste Wise toured schools in country areas of Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales.

## 1990 – 2010: Gould League births Australia's first Recycling Centre, WasteWise Schools, Multicultural Gardens & Sustainable Schools

Gould League continued to produce a wealth of materials for schools, including materials on waste reduction along with natural resource management, biodiversity, energy use and water savings.

In 1990, the Gould League of Victoria extended their travelling Waste Wise Schools program with **the creation and opening of Australia's first Recycling Education Centre in Melbourne at Moorabbin**. It was one of the first initiatives in Australia to address education for sustainability on the key issue of waste, and was funded by the Commonwealth government, Department of Education Victoria and New South Wales, Visy and an array of minor sponsors. Its key message was: Reduce, Recycle and Reuse. Although it's now been expanded on, it remains a prominent feature in all sustainability messaging to schools.

Gould League then obtained additional funding support for the Waste Wise Schools program in 1998 from EcoRecycle Victoria to help **grow the program into schools and provide professional development for teachers**.

**Over 60,000 school children per year on average were visiting the Moorabbin centre** participating in the range of popular waste and sustainability education programs until December 2005 when the Victorian government funding for school participation in external based activities part of Waste Wise Schools program was changed to the in-school approach for major education-related projects.

Gould League continued to produce programs that emphasise organisational and systemic change in sustainability. As our cultural behaviour change approach was proven to create more permanent and effective individual behaviour change within schools in waste issues, Gould League then identified other sustainability issues in schools such as water, energy and biodiversity and was supported by independent evaluation reports and case studies of Waste Wise Schools.

The original concept of **Sustainable Schools** in Australia came out of the carefully evaluated successes of the EcoRecycle Waste Wise Schools Program in Victoria. Gould League staff developed the concept, the intellectual property, generated funding along with tools, teacher training and the school accreditation system of Sustainable Schools in the 1990's.

Gould League continued to develop the Sustainable Schools initiative while undertaking numerous discussions with various Commonwealth government personnel over a lengthy period of time. In subsequent proposals, the Gould League recommended to the Department of Environment and Heritage (DEH) that the methods developed in the Waste Wise Schools Program could be extended to water, energy and biodiversity. This was the origin of the Sustainable Schools program.

DEH advised the Gould League that to create a national pilot it would need to involve at least two States via their state education departments. The Gould League targeted Victoria and New South Wales to develop this concept into a national program. Gould League was advised to submit this proposal to NEEN via the NSW representatives as a strategy to obtain endorsed support. Political processes required the proposal to be presented by a government official (the NEEN representative) rather than by Gould League as a non-government organisation.

This then facilitated the approval of DEH funding for this project which was channelled to the New South Wales and Victorian education departments to fund the respective state pilots. The Sustainable Schools pilot project went on to win the Eureka Award in 2005 and was also a finalist in the Banksia Awards that year.

Over the years, the Sustainable Schools Program has produced measurable changes in energy use, water use, school ground biodiversity and waste to landfill in schools throughout Australia.

Gould League then established new programs for schools under the name Masterplanning to help transform school grounds into healthy, green environments. Funding was secured from the Department of Education and the Helen MacPherson trust to evolve the program across Victoria.

Following four years of concept development on edible gardens, Gould League ran successful pilot programs at Sunshine North Primary Schools under the name Multicultural School Gardens. This program successfully secures government funding from the Community Support Fund and the Department of Education to run the program over the next three years for over 40 low socio economic schools with a high multicultural demographic.

The Gould League then underwent a restructure and name change to Gould Group Limited (still trading as Gould League) and developed a wide range of sustainability education programs for schools including:-

- Multicultural School Gardens - created, developed and managed by the Gould League
- Schoolgrounds for Learning (Masterplanning) - created, developed and managed by Gould League
- Enterprise Schools - created and piloted by the Gould League in Victorian Schools
- Sustainable Schools and Communities e.g Gippsland Sustainability Project created, developed and managed by Gould League
- Sustainable Cities - created, developed and piloted by Gould League
- Sustainability Wiz - created and developed by Gould League in partnership with Etech

The Multicultural School Gardens project went on to win the “National Multicultural Marketing Award”. Gould League also project managed “The Sustainables Challenge” for DSE.

*In recognition of the emerging elearning market for schools, Gould League developed its online sustainability education program "Sustainability Wiz" in 2006. It was trialled in schools in USA, UK, Asia and Australia before its global launch at BETT in January 2008. The program attracted a lot of interest particularly in schools and local councils in Great Britain, Scotland, Ireland, France, Scandanavia, Belguim, Holland, Asia and USA. This licensed program was available for schools to purchase and become a participant with schools around the world.*

## 2010 – Current Day: Gould League commences Forest Education programs, develops local & state government programs and supports Teacher Professional Development

Gould Group Limited was recognised as an environmental Charity with DGR tax deductibility status in December 2012. It reports to the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profit Commission.

The closing of the purpose built Forest Discovery Centre in Toolangi operated by the Department of Sustainability and Environment in 2012 was a massive blow to the community of Toolangi and to the schools who visited, however it didn't see the demise of Forest Education, as Gould League was invited to, and accepted, the opportunity to continue programs delivery. Programs originally developed by the Department of Sustainability and Environment were continued.

By the beginning of 2013 Gould League educators had been trained and were operating out of the Discovery Tree (opposite the Discovery Centre). Over the years as curriculum changed, so too have the programs. Today [Gould League](#) delivers over a dozen forest programs for schools students levels 3 to 12. All programs are linked to the Victoria Curriculum and cover a wide array of topics. These include: Forest Discovery, Adaptations and Changes in the Forest, Bush Biodiversity, Water, Bushfires and the Environment, Biomes and Food Security, Hazards and Disasters in the Forest, Wood as a Resource, Leadbeaters Possums and Relationships with Forests to mention but a few. Programs not

only give many young Victorians the opportunity to experience the forest environment for the first time, they also provide essential field work for VCE and University students.

With Victoria experiencing increased extreme climatic events, it's no surprise that one of the most popular programs is Hazards and Disasters in the Forest which explores the magnificent forest ecosystems of the Victorian Central Highlands, and investigates the hydro-meteorological hazards and disasters that characterise the region. We visit sites with contrasting ecological functions and response to bushfire, and that are at varying stages of recovery from such disaster. We also discuss human responses to the region's bushfire hazards and disasters, including prediction of risk and vulnerability, planning protection and mitigation, recovery and reconstruction.

Gould League also encourages business and community groups to visit the forest for team building activities and excursions. Gould League also runs professional development programs annually in Toolangi State forest for Geography Teachers.

### **Sustainability Education Centre moves to Cheltenham**

Due to the age and deterioration of our building at Moorabbin, Gould League moved our Sustainability Education Centre into shared facilities with Le Page Primary School at Cheltenham in 2018. We are currently bursting at the seams due to the growth of Le Page Primary School, so we are currently working with the Department of Education to establish a new site at the back of Le Page Primary School that will secure the next iteration of our Sustainability Education Centre for the next 20 years. We are currently conducting stakeholder engagement with the sector to see how we can best represent current waste management systems and processes. If you would like an invitation to participate in discussions, a morning tea will be held Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> November. Email for details. Our Special Guest is former Gould League Member The Hon Mark Dreyfus KC, Federal Member for Isaacs.

### **4 Diverse Sites**

Gould League runs 35 excursions programs for K to Level 12 across 4 sites - [Sustainability Education Centre in Cheltenham](#), [Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary](#), [Toolangi State Forest](#) and [Beaconsfield Flora and Fauna Reserve and Wetlands](#). We also conduct incursion programs at local schools and in community facilities. All programs are linked to the Victorian Curriculum and cover topics such as Science, Geography, Economics, Biodiversity, Water, Waste, the Circular Economy and Sustainability. We share tools, innovation, stories, know-how and inspiration so the next generation can manage and not be overwhelmed by the multiple crisis they have inherited.

One of the ways we do this is by providing Teachers a range of resources and delivering Professional Development days. We currently run 4 per year and also speak at a range of other Teacher Training Events such as [EASL](#) – the Eastern Alliance for Sustainability Learning and GTAV – the Geography Teachers Association of Victoria.

### **Membership**

Gould League was launched on the inaugural “Bird Day” October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1909. A Council, with the Hon Alfred Deakin, Prime Minister of the Commonwealth as President, and J.A. Leach (M.Sc.) organising inspector of nature study in schools as honorary secretary was appointed to carry out a plan to enrol children into a society that would fully recognise the economic as well as the aesthetic value of birds; and would voluntarily protect them. Membership was open to all (children and adults) who paid the nominal fee of one penny and signed the ‘bird lovers pledge’

- 1) I hereby promise that I will protect native birds and will not collect their eggs:
- 2) I also promise that I will endeavour to prevent others from injuring native birds and destroying their eggs.



Teachers and Children receive the League with such enthusiasm, that in the first year 25,000 members enrolled with membership reaching 216,555 by the end of 1947 – a marvel considering we had just been through two world wars.

Our programs were so popular, that during the 1950s and 60's, 50% of all school children in Victoria and NSW i.e. 1 in every 2 students, signed up, paid their 1 penny membership to become members of the Gould League – pledging to protect the environment. That's 50% of all baby boomers in Victoria and NSW today!

Each member received a monochrome membership style certificate on which they signed the 'bird lovers pledge'. This certificate was changed in 1921 for a three-colour one. They may have changed the species they feature, but one thing remains – the annual pledge with individuals, families, schools and companies making a commitment to care for all native flora and fauna, prevent waste and preserve natural resources, and to show others how to do the same.



Since 2019, we have produced an annual membership certificate that features a species associated with the UN Year of activities. All certificates include Gould League's Conservation Code.



In 2026, our membership emblem will be a Wedge-Tail Eagle. This not only aligns with the UN Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists where we aim to bridge a knowledge gap about sustainability in pastoralism and rangelands where the [wedge-tail eagle](#), an apex predator plays an important role in helping to control invasive species and maintain environmental health, but also in recognition of Bunjil. Bunjil, also spelled Bundjil, is a significant creator spirit and ancestral being, often depicted as a wedge-tailed eagle. He is revered by the Kulin National as the creator of the land, its features, and its inhabitants, including people. Bunjil is also considered a protector of the natural world and a symbol of wisdom and guidance.

**Will you help to continue the important work of Gould League?**

**Make a donation today or speak with our General Manager about a partnership or bequest with Gould League to support our important work. Call 03 9585 7860 or email [gould@gould.org.au](mailto:gould@gould.org.au).**