

# Cool for school

Photographer Jason Kimberley's websites are helping students across Australia engage with environmental education.

by Cynthia Karna

## Briefly

- Cool Australia's websites provide educational resources for students and teachers.
- Activities are both state and year-level specific and linked to curriculum standards.
- In September Cool Australia hosts enviroweek for students when they undertake an environment-based challenge.

**H**auling a sled across the icy wilderness of Antarctica was a personal turning point for photographer Jason Kimberley. He was on an expedition in 2005 to research his book *Antarctica: A Different Adventure*. Living in pristine beauty for 18 days made him realise that the planet needed better care.

"I was compelled to do something, and the only way is through educating the next generation," he says.

"I thought I knew about environmental issues, but finding out

that krill [which is crucial for the ecosystem's food chain] is harvested in the Southern Ocean to feed cattle for our hamburgers – it's so wrong."

Kimberley established the not-for-profit organisation Cool Australia. Its website has environmental information and the latest stories on green issues, and promotes events and other volunteer organisations. Another website, called Our Cool School, provides environmental resources and activities free of charge to teachers and students in different grades.

More than 125,000 students used the website last year.

"Our main focus is environmental responsibility, through all subjects from Years 1 to 10," says Kimberley.

Our Cool School identifies the environmental challenges we all face, and topics include climate change, the greenhouse effect, water, forests, food, energy, waste, pollution, wildlife and, of course, Antarctica.

Learning activities and projects are state- and year-level specific and linked to curriculum standards relating to physical, personal and social learning.

"In maths, we look at units of measurement, energy and water, and compare household power bills in summer and winter," says Kimberley.

"We have lesson plans and activities for each state. We address each state's curriculum and have local environmental issues built in. For example, in Queensland we talk about the Great Barrier Reef and Murray-Darling Basin."

Our Cool School is currently adapting material for the Australian curriculum.

## Enviroweek challenges

This September, for the third year running, Cool Australia will host an



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Jason Kimberley  
Founder, Cool Australia



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event called Enviroweek in which students take on a 'green' challenge to incorporate into their lives. It could be riding a bike to school, eating only unpackaged 'nude food' or observing meat-free days.

Kimberley hopes that constant exposure to information around environmental issues will have an effect on even the most disinterested students.

"Or if you're a procurement officer, you may buy different paper because of what you've heard."

In future, such actions won't be labelled as green, he says. They will be considered normal behaviour. And students will become 'solutionaries', looking for solutions to solve environmental problems.

Kimberley also runs workshops for teachers with Greening Australia and Museum Victoria. One teacher told him he'd just learnt in 30 minutes what it would have taken him 50 hours to research.

"I get great letters from kids and

teachers saying how Cool Australia has changed their outlook and is now part of what they do."

## Trialling activities

Last year Kimberley spoke at Armadale Primary School, in Melbourne, about climate change and asked it to trial Our Cool School's new student activities. After discussing curriculum, Cool Australia suggested suitable activities and provided them in hard copy for teachers who found it easier than navigating online. The trial took place in the first semester this year.

"It worked well," says Year 3-4 teacher Malcolm Dow, who created a link for teachers on the school's intranet. "It's hard to find any single website or program to cater for all your needs, especially with the enquiry approach to learning. We didn't use the website exclusively, but it was our main source."

Rather than students Googling when researching a topic, its better to set a specific website for them, he says.

"My class did biodiversity, so they'd go to Our Cool School and look at endangered animals, habitat reduction or pollution, and do a defined activity."

Teachers at the younger levels didn't find as much that fitted in with their curriculum, but older grades used the website a lot, he says.

"It's also a good resource for other topics. It won't go unused until we do our next sustainability unit. We'll dip into it as needed."●

Cynthia Karna is a freelance writer.



## Resources

- <http://www.coolaustralia.org>
- <http://www.ourcoolschool.org>
- <http://www.enviroweek.org>