A burning issue

Jason Kimberley on his trip to Antarctica
There were two images; one of a fruit and vegetable stall brimming with everything you could need for your weekly shop, and another image of the same stall in a world without bees.

All that was left on the second stall was an uninspiring selection of a few potatoes, bananas, pineapples, oranges and mushrooms.

The pupil looked up from the Cool Australia online module called ‘Love Food? Love Bees!’ and admitted that she had thought that bees only made honey.

“She had no idea about cross-pollination but that one simple real world lesson sparked a whole new area of interest and she went straight away to use it as a research focus,” says Lindy McManus, a teacher who leads sustainability teaching at Beaumaris Primary School and has used Cool Australia materials for eight years.

“Children are highly visual now - they need to see material that tunes them in. Rather than just talk about bleaching in the Great Barrier Reef, you can go onto the Cool Australia website and show them a clip.

“We had to work out how to embed sustainability into the curriculum without teachers seeing it as another add-on. The Cool Australia resources for teachers show, for example, how to build those links to sustainability into a maths lesson.

And it links in a fun way, so the teachers enjoy it, too.”

Cool Australia was conceived in an environment that was definitely not cool. It was freezing.

Jason Kimberley was on an Antarctic expedition with two mates at a latitude of 80 degrees south, where even lichen has thrown in the towel.

Research for a book about the trek brought Jason to the conclusion that the message of sustainability was not getting through to the people who matter the most - the next generation.

“I had always been interested in the relationship between people and land but the trip crystallised it for me,” he says.

“I discovered what a shithouse job we are all doing as stewards of our planet. We don’t stop to realise that this is our life support system and we are all shitting in our own nest.

“I thought that somebody must be doing something, but there didn’t seem to be a lot going on. Then I decided ‘I’m going to have a crack.’”

His first step was to talk to teachers - and the feedback was uninspiring.

“There was not much passion and enthusiasm,” he recalls. “If I was a kid at school I would want something that’s entertaining and engaging, not just 10 tips to save the planet.

“I wanted to know the real story and

IN A NUTSHELL

Inspiration
The recognition of the need to provide the next generations with relevant and engaging information about how our world works and what we risk with ‘business as usual’.

Model
To upskill educators to become designers of exceptional learning for all young Australians. All online resources are free to teachers and students, and teachers are charged a maximum of $39.95 for accredited online professional development courses. A fee-for-service is paid by partner organisations and the company is now 70% self-funding.

Impact
Research has revealed that, after using Cool Australia’s resources on environmental and social issues, 98% of teachers reported that the resources have had, to some extent, a positive social impact on them personally. And 88% of those teachers stated that their students’ awareness and knowledge of these issues improved.
TALKING SENSE

Don't take 'no' for an answer. One particular organisation has just started supporting us but I think six different people from that organisation said that they couldn’t see how it could work, over a period of eight years.

We kept going and going, weaving through the office to avoid all the others who had told us no, and eventually found the right person. So you have just got to persist and show whoever thinks it’s a ‘no’ why they are wrong, in the nicest possible way, and present it to them in a way that they have to say yes, ultimately.

Another example was that we were receiving some negative feedback from Catholic educators in the Bendigo region and it turned out that one very influential educator was a bit of a blocker.

So I thought ‘bugger this’ and rang him from Melbourne to say that I was in the Bendigo area that day and could drop by. I jumped in the car and drove there, sat in his office, and said: “I’m not leaving until you tell me the problem.” He thought there was a catch, because the Cool Australia offer was too good to be true. After I convinced him there was no catch, he took it to all his networks and has been one of our biggest advocates for the last six years.

Jason Kimberley – Founder and CEO, Cool Australia
“Ultimately it’s about the kids leaving school with important life skills they need to tackle jobs and work with people.”

apply my learning about what’s happening in the world around me. When you entertain you educate. “And, whether talking about social sustainability or economic sustainability, you’ve got to be able to relate it back to your audience. “If you are talking to young kids it needs to be stuff that’s not going to overwhelm them. And in language they can understand, not using long words to disenfranchise people. We use plain English, with a smile on our face.”

So the idea for Cool Australia was born in 2007, with a vision to become leaders in real world education. Jason was the main source of funds for the first five years, with the bank taking on that role for the next five years. It was not a sustainable model and, in 2013, the decision was taken to turn the organisation into a for-purpose business.

Access to student and teacher curriculum resources remained free of charge, but Cool Australia started to charge teachers for online professional development courses, the cost of which can be claimed back or offset against tax, in many instances. Cool Australia is also building fee-for-service partnerships with corporates or organisations that are keen to use the learning resources as a conduit to a younger audience.

“Our partners have to be aligned to our principles,” says Jason, a photographer, author and explorer. “And teachers have a very strong bullshit detector!”

There are plans to find partners to tackle topics as diverse as Indigenous history and culture, women in science, human rights, creative arts and mental health.

For example, Cool Australia recently partnered with the Australian Human Rights Commission, who wanted to expand the reach of their video Magna Carta: The Story of our Freedom, which explored the evolution of human rights on the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta, exploring issues such as justice, freedom and equality.

There have been other recent ground-breaking partnerships, such as with AFLW women’s football in exploring issues of adversity for women, or with Toyota, in a contest to design a dream car.

The model is working. More than 78,000 teachers, a figure growing at 2,000 a month, have engaged 1.9m students in 7,280 schools across the country in 2017 alone.

Zero turnover in the fee for service operations just four years ago has been transformed into an annual revenue of $850,000. With 32% of all teachers as Cool Australia members, the goal is to reach the remaining teachers in just three years.

The impact of Cool Australia begs the question: Shouldn’t these resources be provided as a matter of course? Perhaps this equation could form part of the answer.

220,000 CA lesson plans downloaded in 2017 x 5 hours prep per lesson = $32.2 million saved in teacher time.

A conservative, risk-averse approach to education is the major barrier, believes Jason.

“Ultimately it’s about the kids leaving school with important life skills they need to tackle jobs and work with people. But a lot of education teaches kids how to be machines.

“We need to get away from that antiquated system of supplying machines to run the British Empire. Our education system hasn’t changed in 250 years. We need kids to be identifying the problems, finding the solution, and then applying it.

“That’s when they go ‘I’ve seen the data - we are coming up short here! Our resources are going to run out quicker than we thought.’"

Now isn’t that just … cool?"