



Fresh and Salty – it's all about water

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project coordinator



Fresh and Salty comprises five major new artworks in different parts of regional Victoria. And yes, as the name implies, the theme is water. The idea first came about because we wanted something that would bring together our regional arts development officers (RADOs) and provide some training along the way. This is the first time we've had this team. For quite a long while there were only two or three RADOs and now there are seven.

For each of the five projects, the RADO sourced the local artists and community partners and worked with them on the design of the project and how they might want to express that theme. In some cases they're very experienced artists, in others they're people who might not have been involved in a big project like this. So there's a lot of diversity in the approaches. For example in Horsham, there was an animation project to educate people, particularly young people, about salinity. Three artists (an animator and two puppet-makers) worked with the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority. In south west Victoria, two established artists collaborated on a large-scale stone

sculpture that refers to traditional Indigenous and European farming methods. They led a small team of Indigenous young people who were trained in creating some of the stone walls.

We started *Fresh and Salty* at the end of 2006 but we didn't find out about our funding until July or August. It was really hard, that starting part of it, because there was so much that was uncertain and the RADOs still had to get out there and try to generate interest and encourage involvement.

This network of linked projects was a very new working model and the most interesting part for me was how to get that balance of encouraging individual responses while still ending up with something that's cohesive enough to manage and promote. How to allow the individual projects to take up local opportunities and do what is logical for a local place, but maintain the things that connect all the projects to the whole?

You have to learn to trust people and trust their way of doing things. I learnt that. I'm a RADO too, so I'm used to doing things very hands on and having all those conversations with artists and stakeholders that give you first-hand knowledge of what's happening. It was quite tricky for me to sort of leave all that to the people on the ground and trust their decisions. It wasn't that I didn't think they'd do a great job – it's more that when you're

not connected directly to it, you don't have your usual internal gauge. You don't have your gut working for you... your intuition.

Our hoped for outcomes were not just about making art and raising the profiles of local artists but also about making useful connections in the community and capitalising on the resources each community has. Developing trust between the players is a big part of that, especially in exploring relationships with non-arts organisations. The RADOs are employed through partnerships with local government so I guess we had a bit to prove there. We wanted to show that it's a really valuable thing to have a RADO in your area and we wanted to leave no doubt about all the wonderful stuff they can generate.

The main aim of a big project like this is to show that artists aren't just people who paint pictures and put them on a wall in a gallery. But that art can be used in different ways to assist communities with understanding and responding to local issues. And artists can be employed in all sorts of organisations – you can have an artist engaged with anything from spreading a message to do with water, to working in a school, to producing something totally ephemeral.

The DVD project is an eight-minute animation about the rising salinity of the Wimmera River and it was a dynamic collaboration between some local artists and what we might think of as a boring old catchment authority. It worked so well that some of the characters have been adapted to use on television advertisements. There's a river gum and little water bugs and fish and they're beautiful.

Fresh and Salty demonstrates that art isn't just a rarefied thing but can and should be integrated into everyday life. And projects can involve people who have never thought of themselves as 'arty' before. It might take a little while for them to get warmed up, especially when you're just at the talking stage but as soon as you start getting some stuff on paper, people can suddenly see and understand what you're trying for and what the results will be and then it's like everyone comes on board with a rush. And it's on its way.



Fresh and Salty artists Vicki Couzens and Carmel Wallace
PHOTOS: BINDI COLE