

This is Art Speaking: Finding New Audiences for Nature Conservation

Stephenie Cahalan
Tasmanian Land Conservancy ~ scahalan@tasland.org.au

Abstract

The Tasmanian Land Conservancy (TLC) is a not-for-profit conservation group that buys land with outstanding natural values, which are then protected in private reserves. The TLC, funded by donors and supporters, is now among the five largest private landholders in the state, influencing the protection of approximately 65,000 hectares of high conservation value land and hosting habitat for natural icons, such as the endangered Tasmanian devil (*Sarcophilus harrisii*).

For over fifty years, the Australian island state of Tasmania has been defined by social and economic conflict over environmental issues, ranging from the flooding of rivers for hydro-electricity, to the logging of old-growth forests.

Communicating environmental issues has become increasingly difficult as both the manufacturers and consumers of news struggle to manage the volume of content. Shrinking newsrooms and demands on journalists to deliver content across multiple platforms has, paradoxically, both increased and reduced the capacity for news coverage of environmental issues. Stories featuring environmental subject matter without contest fight to be seen in the news or media other than the organisation's own channels.

Despite the growing influence of the TLC, news coverage of the science and conservation outcomes achieved is limited by its 'good news' content, and the absence of pitted conflict. Social media partly ameliorates this problem, but the effort to reach an audience outside of the supporter silo remains a challenge. Expanding the audience is critical to growing the TLC's capacity for conservation.

To overcome this impasse, the TLC has entered into targeted partnerships with curators and artists to raise the profile of positive conservation, both within the conflict-weary state and nationally. The Skullbone Experiment (2013-14) and Poets and Painters (2016-17) are collaborations in which high profile artists have attended supported residencies on TLC reserves, then produced art that communicates nature to an audience not traditionally conversant in conservation issues. The associated exhibitions tap into new pools of support, garner national media, and many of the works are sold to major galleries, all the while raising the profile of the TLC.

This paper examines the TLC's goals and strategies in fostering an expanded philanthropic support base, and examines the success of the art retreats in harnessing the energy and resources of a new and powerful audience.

Art Speaks for Nature

Tasmania is an island that both capitalises on, and struggles with, its wealth of nature. For many decades, it has been defined by social and economic conflict over environmental issues, ranging from flooding of rivers for hydro-electricity to the logging of old growth forests (Buckman, 2008; Lester, 2007), and more recently, the intrusive drive of tourist infrastructure into public protected areas.

The Tasmanian Land Conservancy (TLC) is a not-for-profit conservation group that buys land with outstanding natural values which are protected in private reserves. The TLC, funded by donors and supporters, is now among the five largest private landholders in the state, influencing the protection of approximately 65,000 hectares of high conservation value land and hosting habitat for natural icons such as the endangered Tasmanian devil (*Sarcophilus harrisi*), the Tasmanian wedge-tailed eagle (*Aquila audax fleayi*), and Eastern quoll (*Dasyurus viverrinus*). (Tasmanian Land Conservancy, 2016)

As well as threatened fauna, the TLC protects rare and endangered plant species such as the grassland paperdaisy (*Leucochrysum albicans*), and the rare mountain purplepea (*Hovea montana*). It manages in private reserves places that form important parts of protected landscapes, such as the Gordonvale Reserve, a tiny pocket of private land within the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area that was made available for sale following the death of the long-time owner and iconic bushman, Ernie Bond (Tasmanian Land Conservancy, 2015).

In Tasmania, where for decades, environmental issues have featured in newspapers and bulletins on a near-daily basis, trying to engage new audiences in environmental subjects that do not require choosing a side has not been easy. Added to that, with the emergence of more environmental groups locally and nationally, standing out from the crowd is no small task. The most high profile and long-standing organisation – the Tasmanian Wilderness Society – tends to lead the way in brand recognition, and organisations such as the Tasmanian Land Conservancy can be confused with the Tasmanian Conservation Trust, Environment Tasmania, the Tasmanian Greens, Sustainable Living Tasmania, Landcare, Greening Australia and other similarly badged groups.

In addition to the competitive field for visibility, communicating environmental issues has become increasingly difficult as both the manufacturers and consumers of news struggle with a high volume of information. Shrinking newsrooms and rising demands on journalists to deliver content across multiple platforms has, paradoxically, both increased and reduced the capacity for news coverage of environmental issues (Konstantinos and Dickinson, 2008; Pew, 2008).

Stories featuring environmental subject matter without contest can struggle to be seen in the news or media other than the organisation's own channels. Despite the growing influence of the Tasmanian Land Conservancy, news coverage of the science and conservation outcomes achieved is limited by its 'good news' content, its non-advocacy approach, and the absence of pitted conflict. Social media partly ameliorates this problem, but the effort to reach an audience outside of the 'supporter silo' remains a challenge. Therefore, expanding the audience is critical to growing the TLC's capacity for conservation.

The Skullbone Experiment

The TLC, seeking to overcome this impasse, entered a targeted partnership with philanthropists, artists and other supporters to raise the profile of conservation, both within the conflict-weary state, and nationally. Supported by two philanthropists, siblings Robert and Sandy Purves, the TLC has hosted

two major arts and nature collaborations; the Skullbone Experiment (2013-14) and Poets and Painters (2016-17). In both of these exercises, high profile artists were invited to attend residencies on TLC reserves, and produce art to communicate nature to an audience not generally conversant in, but potentially sympathetic to, conservation issues.

This concept is not unique to the TLC – artists have conveyed their fears and concerns through their work in exhibitions across the world, while environment groups foster links with creatives to explain their issues in varied ways (Climarte, n.a.; Cahalan, 2013). The distinguishing feature of the TLC's retreats and exhibitions lies in that, by taking artists onto their own reserves, the TLC is facilitating work with which it can associate long into the future.

For the Skullbone Experiment, artist Philip Wolfhagen and curator Catherine Wolfhagen invited eleven artists to join the project. Most artists were well established in the Australian arts context, but all shared a thematic inclination towards landscape and environment (Tasmanian Land Conservancy, 2014). The group included major prize-winners Imants Tillers and John Wolseley, and internationally recognised Janet Laurence, whose work comprises the Australian War Memorial at Hyde Park Corner in London (Laurence, 2003). The art that was produced was contemporary in its form, ranging from painting to sculpture and installation.

For three days, artists were taken to the TLC's Skullbone Plains Reserve. This reserve is 1600 hectares of open valleys, old-growth forests, native grasslands, cushion plants and rare, endangered sphagnum moss beds, providing critical wild habitat for a species of nationally endangered fish, the Clarence galaxias, the previously mentioned endangered Tasmanian devil, spotted-tailed quoll and wedge-tailed eagle (Tasmanian Land Conservancy, 2014). Skullbone Plains Reserve was incorporated into the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area when UNESCO extended the boundaries in 2014 (UNESCO, 2014).

Whilst on the reserve, the artists camped for three nights, were given scientific interpretation by one of the TLC's ecologists, Matt Taylor, and guided on the reserve by Chief Executive Officer, Jane Hutchinson. They walked, swam in nearby Lake Ina, and worked in natural conditions made challenging by plague-like proportions of flies. Following the gathering of material at the retreat, the artists then returned to their studios to complete their work.

Clarissa McCoid is a philanthropy consultant who was, at that time, the TLC's Fundraising and Engagement Manager overseeing the Skullbone Experiment retreat in 2013 and exhibitions in 2014. McCoid coordinated the two exhibitions that took place at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery (QVMAG) in Launceston and UNSW Galleries in Sydney, which collectively ran for approximately ten weeks. The QVMAG exhibition reached local Tasmanians and visitors to the state, while the Sydney exhibition drew in a completely new audience.

Exhibitions were just one component of the communications strategy, providing the opportunity to host openings with the associated media. The elevated media profile was a valuable boost for the organisation, reinforcing the value of the work to existing supporters, as well as cementing the TLC's identity in the media consciousness. In an information landscape in which one is only as visible as the results of a Google search, the articles that appeared in arts journals, television, radio and online features run by the Australian national broadcaster (ABC) helped to consolidate the organisation's national presence beyond the home state of Tasmania. A short documentary made during the retreat and aired on the ABC gained national coverage of the reserve and its natural values.

Additionally, a series of fundraising events were held accompanied by floor talks by the artists and presentations by the engagement team in powerful relationship-building exercises.

According to McCoid, the benefits of the Skullbone Experiment were manifold. The retreat generated an impressive collection of visual art bearing the signatures of significant Australian artists, that were then adapted as fundraising materials and valuable assets in telling the TLC story. The exhibitions tapped into new pools of supporters, garnered national media attention, and many of the works have been sold to major galleries, all the while raising the profile of the TLC and conservation work on private land.

'We are now four years down the track, using those materials on a monthly basis to talk about the project to donors. The art is of a very high standard so the catalogue is just brilliant for me, because it is an example of the innovation of the work of the TLC. Probably the high standard and the innovative nature of the product are the two things of most benefit,' (McCoid, 2017).

However, such ventures are major undertakings. Organising catering, accommodation, guides and scientific interpretation in remote locations is an expensive and time consuming exercise that draws staff away from other activities necessary to maintain and promote the fundraising-for-conservation goals of the TLC. It can be perceived as non-core business and there is a risk that the community of supporters might view such exercises as peripheral to the business of protecting biodiversity and threatened species. As Clarissa McCoid observed, 'I think a lot of not-for-profits struggle to step out of their core business because the money is just not there to do projects like this. That's obviously where the whole benefit of the Purves' gifts comes into it.'

Philanthropic Support for Art and Nature Collaborations

Sandy Purves and her brother Robert have had a life-long love of the Australian landscape. Their keen awareness of the fragility of nature was confirmed by the controversial flooding of the quartzite beaches of Lake Pedder in central Tasmania for a hydro-electricity impoundment in 1972, which they had visited in their youth.

Through Sandy's Purryburry Trust and Robert's Purves Environmental Fund, they have supported landscape art as a vehicle for engaging with a wider audience. The Sydney Ice Bear was brought to Australia by Robert Purves to coincide with World Environment Day 2011, as part of his support for the Australian Youth Climate Coalition. British sculptor Mark Coreth carved a life-sized polar bear in a busy public space that melted to reveal the bronze skeleton beneath, acquainting the general public with the urgency of climate change. Robert Purves first encountered this art when attending a climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009. For Purves, who practices his own style of environmental awareness raising as President of World Wide Fund for Nature, Australia and a founding member of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, facilitating arts-based inquiry into nature is a powerful and effective way to reach people who are otherwise resistant to messages about threats to the environment. 'Art is a voice for nature that speaks with creativity and conviction, with the capacity to unite, rather than divide,' (Purves, 2017). The support for the Skullbone Experiment furthers his efforts to employ art to speak for nature.

Poets and Painters – Celebrating The Big Punchbowl

In July 2017, another exercise in speaking to new audiences about conservation through art will culminate in the Poets and Painters exhibition in Hobart, Tasmania. Like the Skullbone Experiment,

Poets and Painters gathered eighteen visual and literary artists (some established, some emerging) and took them to spend three days at the TLC's Big Punchbowl Reserve on Tasmania's east coast.

The Big Punchbowl Reserve, protected in 2014, is 244 hectares of wetlands, heath and woodlands. It is habitat for threatened species, including the globally threatened Australasian bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*) and the green and gold bell frog (*Litoria raniformis*).

The Poets and Painters project began in the 1990s when Dick and Carol Bett of the Bett Gallery in Hobart, brought together writers and painters to collaborate in pairs. The aim was to unite artists of different genres, expose them to the same subject and observe the resulting collaboration. Paintings were exhibited while the poets read their work in the gallery space.

The 2016-17 Poets and Painters event has brought together talent from Tasmania and beyond in stimulating and expressive partnerships. Curated by gallery owner Carol Bett and Tasmanian poet Pete Hay, this year's company includes the 2016 Glover Prize winner David Keeling, Tasmanian Australian of the Year Local Hero Raymond Arnold, Archibald Prize finalist and Wynne Prize winner Imants Tillers, Tasmanian poets Lyn Reeves and Adrienne Eberhard, and Aboriginal academic and writer Greg Lehman (Tasmanian Land Conservancy, 2016).

Poets and Painters differs from the Skullbone Experiment in that this event will not be complemented by special engagement functions, which were an important element of the philanthropic reach of the previous project. However, the production of a finely designed publication to accompany the exhibition provides another opportunity to talk about the work of the TLC. *Poets and Painters – Celebrating The Big Punchbowl* will be launched in August 2017 at the Melbourne Writers Festival, allowing reference to the work of the TLC to be included in ten thousand hard copy festival programs. At the festival, a selection of poets will conduct readings and speak of their experience on the reserve, highlighting the importance of the protection of nature to an audience that is new, while also offering the opportunity to engage personally with supporters from around Melbourne who otherwise do not have face-to-face contact with the Tasmanian-based TLC staff. The production of this book also opens the way to coverage in literary-focused media that is inaccessible outside this genre. Avant Card's support for the TLC as an environment organisation will result in the distribution of ten thousand free postcards in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Tasmania advertising the exhibition.

Evaluating the Benefits of the Art and Nature Collaborations

In employing art to speak for nature, there is hope that the different visual and poetic languages offered will circumvent the anxious discourse that has dogged environmental issues in recent decades. At the outset, an assumption based largely on intuition was made that the audiences for art and nature conservation were potentially aligned, so these projects were aimed at either initiating or fostering that connection with art as a conversation starter. The TLC is the ideal environment group with which to partner, due to the ready access to reserves and the in-house capacity to manage the logistics of the retreats, while also providing scientific interpretation. Artists can interact with nature in ways that would not be permissible in national parks, as evidenced by the installations by John Wolseley and Janet Laurence that physically incorporate nature into their work.

Many of the long-term benefits of the Skullbone Experiment and Poets and Painters will take time to be realised. Given that these projects were aimed at increasing engagement to raise the profile of the TLC, the artists, and the work of protecting nature on private land, initial funding briefs articulated that the

outcome of the projects was not primarily to raise money. Yet, the first project succeeded in the aim of increasing visibility and, from that, has drawn in new and more support.

Unlike other arrangements between not-for-profit organisations and artists, the arts professional were not asked to donate their works to the TLC to raise funds. These exercises were a partnership in which an alliance was formed to engage new audiences and raise further funds for the TLC in a new way. The TLC aimed to avoid situations described by artists in which they felt used by groups frequently requesting works for a worthy cause, to which they donated art to their own detriment. At times the true value of the work was not realised in fundraising auctions or sales, undermining the professionalism of the artist. The mechanisms used in the arts and nature collaborations described in this paper were designed to honour the artists and provide them with the option to donate works or proceeds if they chose to. It is a unique arrangement based on respect for the artist, resulting in positive feedback and potential for ongoing partnerships from all involved.

Clarissa McCoid warns that the person running the project should be an addition to the fundraising personnel due to the risk of drawing staff away from their core work. According to McCoid, as was the case in other projects on which she had worked during her career in arts not-for-profit organisations, there was an underestimation of the amount of work such an exercise entailed. While the return on investment was positive and the effects long lasting, she advised that a separate coordinator should be employed to run similar projects. 'The return would be more valuable if it were not taking one key person away from core business. We were fortunate that it resulted in donations as well but you can't guarantee that, so it should not be a replacement for regular fundraising efforts,' (McCoid, 2017). The TLC, taking this advice into account, has a committed coordinator running the subsequent Poets and Painters collaboration project alongside the organisation's philanthropy team.

In addition to reaching a broader audience, new relationships were formed with the artists themselves through camping in remote areas, liaising for exhibitions, openings and media appearances that resulted in the establishment of significant connections. In some ways, these artists have become unofficial, yet compelling, ambassadors for the work of the TLC. Managing those relationships, both now and into the future, has become very important to the organisation, not least due to the friendships that have been built along the way.

Within the organisation, the staff also benefited from the exposure to a new way of viewing their conservation work. TLC Ecologist and Philanthropy Manager James Hattam described his fascination with how others view, observe, interact with, and interpret nature. His observation of the Skullbone Experiment and experience as a guide at the Poets and Painters highlighted this. 'The lens that an artist applies can often tell a scientific story better than a scientist can, in a way that is engaging, empowering and captivating. These two projects pave the way for TLC to communicate in such a way that increases nature's accessibility, evokes passion and inspires a commitment to nature conservation traditional modes of communication often lack,' (Hattam, 2017).

Conclusion

Embarking on art and nature collaborations have had overwhelmingly positive outcomes for the TLC. Taking into consideration the investment of time and labour by the organisation, and even with personnel pivoted away from regular fundraising duties, the benefits in the form of raised awareness of the TLC's nature conservation activities on private land and the establishment of new audiences were measurable. The newly-formed relationships with artists, curators and in-kind sponsors allowed the

TLC to showcase, not only the unique beauty and natural values of their reserves, but also the competence and efficiency of the staff facilitating the on-reserve experience.

It must be kept in mind that this approach is appropriate to the scale, capacity and demographic of the TLC, and would not suit every group. Without the support of the Purves Environmental Fund and the Purryburry Trust, the TLC could not have run these projects from existing budgets that are committed to conservation activities. Participating curators forged critical links to the eminent artists that were fundamental to the success of the projects. However, given that the projects are designed to generate content and materials to augment an existing communications strategy with new and traditional media elements, these arts and nature collaborations have, thus far, proved resoundingly successful.

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