

# A Sustainability Learning Alliance around a Storytelling Learning and Friendship Network<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract:**

This paper seeks to explore a sustainability learning alliance project that supports local communities' efforts in creating sustainable futures. It is intended as a place to start a conversation about whether a regional community storytelling learning and friendship network is a worthwhile social enterprise to partner. This storytelling project is seen as an opportunity for exchanging news and social learning about building sustainable communities and futures. The focus would initially be across the Pacific and Australasian regions. This network could promote transformational stories about how communities are adaptively co-managing their place habitats and land-seascapes, undertaking peacemaking, reconstruction and are healing and regenerating themselves. It seeks to enhance and deepen the interconnections between existing community, conservation and Elder networks and would focus more on what is working where and why (or why not) in growing sustainable communities.

The aims of this storytelling learning network are seen as firstly supporting local communities' capability to develop adaptive and innovative responses and enhanced foresight around the threats of climate change and globalisation. A second aim is to build friendship groups and assist forums amongst youth to identify, appraise, initiate and elicit support for new enterprises and conservation projects that provide work and sustainable community livelihoods. This paper asks how such a network would work and be collaboratively managed, what could it look like and how could it utilize existing communication networks like the 'coconut wireless' as well as the Internet. Other questions include what is needed to support communities to produce and tell their stories; and what protocols are needed around storytelling and for protecting traditional knowledge.

## **1. Introduction:**

Peter Lape (2006: 293-4) tells the story of the discovery of fortified settlements in East Timor and how these coincided with the appearance of similar fortified villages through island South-East Asia and Oceania. This phenomenon, from Okinawa to New Zealand and the Tropical Pacific, occurred during the Little Ice Age in times of reduced rainfall associated with an on-going El Nino – Southern Oscillation. It was a period of climate change between 1100 and 1700. The East Timorese of the Tutuala region describe this time as one of 'brotherly war' (Lape, 2006:293).

We are now facing another time of climate change but this time we have the possibility of learning from the past and each other, and we have the opportunity to construct new alliances for building sustainable futures. This conference represents an opening and a new alternative pathway to that of past times of climate change.

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<sup>1</sup> The ideas presented in this paper are a collaborative effort having first arisen in discussions with my colleagues in *Evolveris* with Dr Jeannet van der Lee, Manuela Taboada, Leo Dutra, Dr. Bert Jenkins, Lindsay Teychenne and now with Dr. Rebecca Spence and Dr. Randolph Bowers in CRAMS UNE.

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## 2. Listening, Hearing and Learning From Each Other's Stories

Ribeta Abeta, working on climate change for the Government of Kirabati, tells the story of getting a group of their Elders together in 2004 to identify how their habitats were changing (Galvin, 2007). They spoke of rising temperatures, disturbance to the growth patterns of key crops like taro (impacted by seawater), breadfruit and bananas while the coral reefs were also showing signs of disturbance; all clear indicators of climate change.

There is rich learning about how communities across the Pacific Rim are adapting and evolving in response to both climate change and the impacts of globalisation. But how can we engage, listen, hear and learn from each other's experience?

Writing about complex systems, Lewin and Regine (1999, 2000) re-affirm what we already know, that through nurturing conversations and through storytelling, we can open up spaces for re-thinking, make new connections, spread creativity and create opportunities for novel enterprises and future pathways. Storytelling is a powerful, traditional way of passing on our learning. CRAMS at UNE also sees it as an important way of facilitating a social learning network and building friendships.

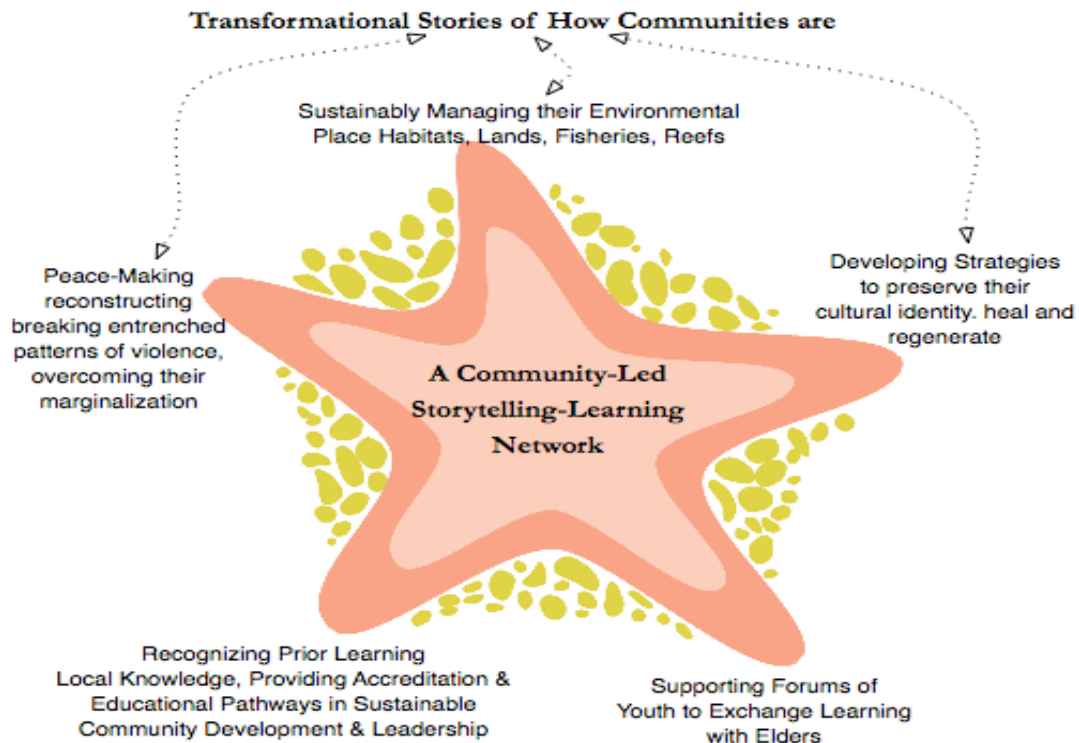
## 3. Exploring Possibilities

The core idea of this paper concerns initiating a storytelling - learning network across the Pacific Rim about building sustainable communities. We see this conference as a great place and gathering to start a conversation about whether a regional community storytelling learning and friendship network is a worthwhile social enterprise to partner together. I haven't come to impose an idea but instead to ask others what they think. My role is to raise the concept and listen, and to see what others here think. As you will see, we have as many questions as you may want to raise.

Our idea is that the network would support communities to tell their stories about what is changing and how they are adapting and evolving new responses. It would promote and seek to support *local* solutions rather than impose more outside 'expert' solutions and colonizing agendas. It could use multi-channel ways of communicating and rely on what works best where. This could include community stories being podcast or presented as short digital videos on the web or satellite, it could distribute printed stories or use the 'coconut wireless' or word of mouth in some other parts. We are wondering whether there are other partners to support and initially co-host what would hopefully become a self-organizing network of communities and community partnering research groups. We feel there is potential for supporting learning forums and exchanges particularly bringing youth and Elders together across the region.

We envisage three types of transformational stories around how communities are:

- sustainably managing, adapting and preserving the beauty of their environmental place habitats, the lands, reefs, and fisheries.
- developing strategies to preserve their cultural identity, to heal and regenerate community
- dealing with the complexity of peacemaking and breaking entrenched patterns of violence, reconstruction and identifying the source and power of marginalised communities' resilience. The following figure outlines what the network would constitute.



**Fig: 1 A Community-Led Storytelling Learning Network**

Our thinking is that the network could help foster a dialogue and social learning partnerships that outline what is working where and why, what isn't working and why not, in different communities' endeavors to build sustainable land-seascapes, communities and enterprises. The storytelling-learning network also represents opportunities for recognizing and validating local place knowledge and evidence of leadership. It is possible for the network to act as a channel of recognizing prior learning and offering pathways into certificate, diploma and degree programs across the region.

#### 4. More Questions than Answers

1. Is this idea of a storytelling-learning network useful and viable? If it is, how could we initiate, catalyze and build such a storytelling-learning and friendship network across such a vast region and honor the diversity of cultures and places?
2. How do we catalyze the principles, protocols and ethical guidelines to guide such a self-organizing network especially around protecting the ownership of traditional knowledge and issues like determining who can speak and tell the stories of different places.
3. What different ways can we share our learning around building sustainable communities, habitats and peace given we don't all have access to computers, the internet and the same communications technologies etc?
4. How can we support, enhance and possibly strengthen existing links across Indigenous Peoples communities and others seeking sustainable communities. How else can we help each other to build sustainable communities?
5. What are the key roles in catalyzing and co-managing this network e.g. co- hosts, guides to keep the network on course and Elders to oversee its development??

6. How do we support the emergence of an Elders Group to oversee the expansion and protocols of the network?
7. How can the network help support programs to build local community and leadership capabilities especially amongst the younger ones? How do we provide comfort and build trust across this network?
8. How can we validate this community leadership learning and provide recognition and articulation pathways together with other educational partners across the region?
9. How does this group of partnering communities and research organisations meet? Who else should this co-host group include?
10. How can we support the emergence of groups of young leaders to meet with the Elders of the region and exchange learning?

## 5. Some Final Thoughts

This paper raises questions about how alliances to build sustainable communities could disseminate social learning through a storytelling network. It seeks to explore practical strategies to promote local solutions and to capture the learning around what is working and what isn't across the region in the vein of writer-practitioners advocating local learning and solutions like Korten (1980), Scott & Gough (2003) and Easterly (2006). It asks is there another way to spread the news and learning of how some societies in the Pacific have co-managed sustainable place habitat communities for hundreds of years like those of Tikopia and the Highland Valleys of New Guinea as written about by writer-researchers like Jared Diamond (2005: 280-293). It starts to raise questions of how can we build a Pacific learning region, knowledge ecologies and communities of practice (Brown, 1999, Wenger, 2002).

Norgaard (1995:187-246) envisions a sustainable future of peace and justice based around 'a new great life story' built on a 'co-evolving patchwork quilt of different cultures' hearing and learning from each. This paper asks how could we do this?

## 6. An Invitation:

If you are interested in further discussing and partnering in an alliance around these proposals, please contact us. Dr Rebecca Spence, Director CRAMS UNE at [rspence1@une.edu.au](mailto:rspence1@une.edu.au) Michael O'Loughlin [molough2@une.edu.au](mailto:molough2@une.edu.au) and Dr Bert Jenkins UNE, in particular regarding the possibility of accreditation and pathways at [bjenkins@pobox.une.edu.au](mailto:bjenkins@pobox.une.edu.au)

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