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A BALANCED APPROACH TO LOCAL AND GLOBAL ACTION

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Abstract

The hosting of the Balance-Unbalance 2013 International Conference in a UNESCO designated Biosphere Reserve was seen as a strategic opportunity to align the objectives and activities of Biosphere Reserves to the aspirations of Balance-Unbalance.

At a time when the world is experiencing unprecedented ecological threats, the Balance-Unbalance International Conference is a global initiative designed to harness the talents of innovators working at the forefront of the arts, science and technology to explore transdisciplinary approaches to sustainability. The 2013 Balance-Unbalance Conference took place from 31 May to 2 June within the UNESCO Noosa Biosphere Reserve on the Sunshine Coast of Australia. The three-day event brought together a dynamic and diverse range of participants from 24 countries, including artists, scientists, activists, philosophers, sociologists, architects and engineers.

Balance-Unbalance was founded by Argentinean/Canadian artist and academic Ricardo Dal Farra in 2010 with the main goal to develop the role of the arts and artists in dealing with environmental challenges. After successful events in Montreal and South America, this was the first time the conference was hosted in the Asia-Pacific region. The program included over 120 presenters, three keynote panels, 12 Pecha Kucha presentations, 60 papers, 25 performances and installations and 30 panels and trans-disciplinary activities. The 2013 conference theme: "Future Nature, Future Culture[s]" aimed to challenge our expectations of Earth, provoke our understanding of nature and inspire our actions for a sustainable future. Balance-Unbalance asked us to consider what we want for ourselves, our families, our friends, and for the future of humankind.

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves had a presence at Balance-Unbalance 2011 where research was presented about green art activities in the Noosa Biosphere Reserve, including the internationally renowned Floating Land Festival. This sparked the beginnings of

a conversation to present the 2013 event in Noosa Biosphere Reserve in collaboration with Floating Land. The hosting of Balance-Unbalance within a UNESCO-endorsed Man and Biosphere Reserve (MaB) was seen as a synergetic opportunity, as the conference goals were seen to closely align to those of the global Biosphere Reserve network.

MaB was initiated by UNESCO in the 1970s as a practical tool to deal with some of the most important challenges of our time: "*How can we reconcile conservation of biodiversity and biological resources with their sustainable use*" [1]. Biosphere Reserves act as incubators for local sustainable development projects and to share this information and learning with other Biosphere Reserves. The concept can therefore be considered as a tool for enabling respectful dialogue and knowledge sharing.

There are three broad biosphere goals, which are: to promote the conservation and protection of the environment including landscapes, ecosystems, species, biological and cultural diversity; to encourage and advocate sustainable development, community resilience and promote community adaptation in response to climate change; and to engage in research, monitoring and learning activities related to conservation and sustainability and share knowledge, locally, nationally and internationally.

The Noosa Biosphere Reserve was recognised by UNESCO in 2007 under the MaB program. The Noosa Biosphere Reserve was the first to be recognised in the state of Queensland, Australia [2]. Since then Great Sandy Biosphere Reserve has been designated immediately to the north of Noosa Biosphere. The Noosa region is a special place because of its beautiful natural environment, but also the people who have worked to look after it. It is important to acknowledge the thousands of years of respect and harmonious interaction with the environment by the local Indigenous people prior to European settlement and the more recent history of respect for the environment that has been actively cultivated for over 50 years. The Biosphere Reserve designation was in part recognition for the ways that the Noosa community has been a leader in sustainable development practices for many decades through community action and local government policy, planning and decision making.

Over the past five years Noosa Biosphere Limited (NBL), the governance body for Noosa Biosphere Reserve, has

worked towards promoting a balanced relationship between human interaction and the environment through partnerships, community engagement, innovative projects, advocacy, research and learning. NBL saw the opportunity to host the Balance-Unbalance conference as an innovative tool for connecting the region's history of commitment to a sustainable future to broader national and global agendas.

Another key focus for NBL was the desire to promote ongoing knowledge-sharing and dialogue, both face to face and through digital platforms. Biosphere Reserves and interested artists, scientists and collaborators can all benefit from further engagement with the rich possibilities offered through technology and digital platforms.

Tools and frameworks that enable communities to share the features of their environmental and social ecologies, projects and experiences are going to be crucial at a time when communities around the world are experiencing more and more natural disasters; one of the most important tools will be the ability to creatively share advice, ideas and actions from other communities who had similar experiences. We saw a clear opportunity for technology to play a fundamental role in the future development of MaB Reserves and other similarly focused communities.

Balance-Unbalance 2013 explored how artists can participate in the challenges of our ecological crisis. The event inspired creative thinking and transdisciplinary action to initiate perceptual, intellectual and pragmatic changes. While the 2013 conference has been delivered, the virtual platforms and collaborative projects are currently expanding, and we hope this will extend to other international Biosphere Reserves. We believe Balance-Unbalance 2013 is a landmark event, not just for the local community of Noosa, but in potentially shaping the role of Biosphere Reserves in the future. Balance-Unbalance is not just a conference, but a catalyst for new ideas, collaborations and most importantly actions in shaping our collective futures.

References and Notes

* This article is based on a paper presented at the 3rd Balance-Unbalance International Conference, 31 May-2 June 2013, Noosa, Queensland, Australia.

1. UNESCO, *Biosphere Reserves: The Seville Strategy and the Statutory Framework of the World Network*. (Paris, France: UNESCO, 1995) p. 3.

2. Noosa Biosphere Limited (2013), "Noosa Biosphere Facts and Vision" <<http://blog.noosabiosphere.org.au>>.