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Issue 13

# Watermark

Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (NSW)

## Home is where the sustainability is: ideas and inspiration

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Welcome to another edition of Watermark! This month we are looking at ways you can make your own corner of the world a little, or a lot, more sustainable. Sometimes it can seem like environmental issues such as global warming, desertification and pollution are just too big and too far away to do much about...but nothing could be further from the truth! Rethinking some of what you do around your house or school can make a big difference to your local environment and, as a result, to the world we live in.

In the next few pages you will read about practical tips for sustainability and the sustainable living projects 'Gaia' and ErinEarth. These two projects were initiated by Religious who decided to put their eco-justice principles into action to create a space where people can reconnect with nature and their spirit, respect the environment and learn. 'Gaia', also called the 'Demonstration Water-Wise House', was set up by Dominican Sisters in a suburban house in the Maitland-Newcastle area; ErinEarth was the brainchild of Presentation Sisters and graces half a hectare of land in downtown Wagga Wagga. We hope that this edition's inspiring stories of sustainable living projects 'Gaia' and ErinEarth will provide some food for thought and, for those green thumbs out there, some food!

### Sustainability and Millennium Goal Number 7:

*"Goal 7 aims to improve the way we manage the environment so that natural resources people need to survive will be available to future generations. There is a strong link between poverty and the environment. When the air and water are polluted, forests cut down, or the amount of fish in the ocean is reduced, poor people are often the most severely affected. The achievement of Goals 1-6 is dependent on whether we use the earth's resources in ways that are sustainable over a long period of time"*

Source: 'United Nations Cyber School Bus' website:  
<http://cyberschoolbus.un.org/mdgs/goal7.asp#>

### The ErinEarth Project...it all started with a dream

The idea of ErinEarth was conceived ten years ago by Sisters Kaye Bryan and Carmel Wallis. They then hoped that *"the Centre be a place of hospitality, networking, educating and sharing of ideas, beliefs, values and resources concerned with ecological justice."*

[Left: picture of ErinEarth dam (source:Murrumbidgee LandCare Website)]



## What and Where is ErinEarth

The house and gardens are in part of the grounds of the old Mount Erin Convent that was established in 1874, hence the name ErinEarth. ErinEarth is a community education resource and the home of two Presentation Sisters in the heart of the city of Wagga Wagga on the southern slopes of New South Wales.

### **Award Winner**

ErinEarth was recently received a Highly Commended award in the 2006 Murrumbidgee LandCare Awards. Here is what LandCare had to say about it:

“The ErinEarth half hectare site consists of a solar passive house with water wise ornamental and vegetable gardens and poultry run, a dam and wetlands surrounded by signed local native plants, a conference room, offices and outdoor undercover gathering/work spaces. Together with local education bodies ErinEarth staff are in the process of developing education materials to enable the best use of the site. Located on the lower slopes of Willans Hill, ErinEarth is part of an urban ground water recharge area, where clearing, over-watering and former inadequate stormwater structures have contributed for many years to a rising water table and saline discharge in another part of the city. A small dam now captures storm water from the older adjacent convent building site. The water is released for mini-wetlands or irrigation of fruit trees. The dam banks and wetlands display signed local understorey plants and support increasing varieties of frogs, reptiles and birds – a sight that warms the heart and sustains the spirit.

[Source: LandCare Murrumbidgee Website [www.murrumbidgee.cma.nsw.gov.au](http://www.murrumbidgee.cma.nsw.gov.au) ; For more information check out the website!]

### **What does ErinEarth aim to do?**

- Educate for a sustainable and just lifestyle
- Be part of the community networks with similar goals
- Provide a place for the community that heals and sustains the spirit

### **Who gets involved?**

Most work on site has been carried out by volunteers as well as people from groups such as TAFE, Green Corps, school students, Riverina Permaculture, Society of Australian Plants, Corrective Service and Juvenile Justice Community Service Orders and Junee Gaol's Pre Release Works Program. Apart from being used as an education site ErinEarth is providing a significant support structure for men with Community Service Orders, particularly those who have difficulties carrying out their court orders. Some use the site as a safe and increasingly beautiful escape place in a stimulating and healing environment. [School students enjoy the dam and wetlands at Erin Earth. Source: Erin Earth Promotional Publication]

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## The Gaia Next Door

In 2005 the Dominican Sisters purchased 'an ordinary house in an ordinary suburb' where two Sisters, both pensioners, could live as self-sufficiently and sustainably as possible. Thus the 'Demonstration Water-Wise House' or 'Gaia' (after the Earth Goddess) was born. Sisters Diana Sentleben and Ann Walsh now call 'Gaia' home. Sister Diana, who has a background in permaculture, is also the coordinator of the project.

The 'Demonstration Water-Wise House' project will be completed over four phases:

**1. To make the house accessible, safe and comfortable for aged and disabled people.**

Modifications have been undertaken in lighting, telephones, captioned television, access ramp, grab rails and raised garden beds designed to be accessible to the elderly.

**2. To initiate Water-Wise and Energy-Efficient modifications**

This is a ten year old brick veneer home facing west that previously relied on air conditioning for cooling and had an immaculate lawn and five palm trees. The annual electricity and water use was enormous- the Blue Gum Hills region is reported as the highest energy consumer per household in Newcastle. To date canvas blinds have been installed on the west-facing windows, two whirley bird vents in the roof, all windows now have pelmets and thermal curtains, additional insulation has been installed in the roof cavity, water-saving taps in the kitchen and bathroom installed as well as a 5A rated washing machine. The access ramp was designed to also improve thermal mass to warm it in winter and shading to keep the house cool in summer. All palm trees and the lawns have gone. In their place are wide areas of mulch covered garden where dozens of local native trees and shrubs have been planted. Fertiliser is provided from the worm farm and chook yard. To date seven fruit trees have been planted (with many more to come) and the district has been fed from the choko vine.

**3. To install major water saving fixtures**

The house will shortly have two rainwater tanks installed with a combined capacity of 8,000 Litres and a greywater treatment system with the capacity to purify bath, shower and laundry discharges. Toilets (with 4A rated cisterns) and laundry as well as garden use will thus be met without need to access town water. Swales and ponds will harvest stormwater runoff.

**4. To prepare educational materials so as to promote the house as a 'Demonstration Water-Wise' House**

By the end of 2006 all the physical adjustments should be completed so we can provide signage, open days, workshops and promotional materials.

**What are the benefits?**

- Raising community awareness and, in the long run, dramatically reducing the Bluegum Hills District water consumption, reducing run-off into Hexham Wetlands and observing local households implementing their own water wise and energy efficient modifications.
- Promoting biodiversity by planting dozens of native plants and a variety of mulches and composting materials. The gardens are visited by a growing number of birds, frogs and lizards. [continued overleaf]

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You can read past  
issues of  
*Watermark*  
on our website.

## Take Action!

### Gaia continued...

- In the long term the sisters hope to be virtually self sufficient in growing their own fruit, vegetables and eggs. Thus they will contribute to reducing the environmental destruction caused by large scale commercial food production techniques.

[See the next edition of 'AURORA', the newsletter from the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle for more news about Gaia:

[www.mn.catholic.org.au/newsroom/auroraissues](http://www.mn.catholic.org.au/newsroom/auroraissues)]

### What can you do?

Promoting sustainability at home, work, school or anywhere else you may find yourself will be dependent on the kind of time, finances, resources and council approvals you may have. The important point is not to be discouraged if you can't turn your high-rise apartment block into a straw-bale, passive solar energy house in one fell swoop. Your efforts need to be sustainable too. Here are some ideas to start with:

- Install energy efficient light globes and other energy saving measures (No! That doesn't include the remote control!), for more ideas see the NSW Department of Energy, Utilities and Sustainability: <http://www.energysmart.com.au/>
- Plant some native plants to encourage low water consumption and increased biodiversity
- Buy local produce, or, if possible start your own veggie patch using permaculture principles- check out the Permaculture Institute of Australia's website for tips on composting, efficient garden design and building tips: [www.permaculture.org.au](http://www.permaculture.org.au)
- Look up the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation for tips on Sustainable Living, click on the icon 'Education and resources': <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/support/living.htm>

**Do you know about more exciting sustainability projects? If so, please let us know, so we can share it with Watermark readers. You can email or post us the contact details and a brief description to:**

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