

Australian Sustainable Cities Judge, Sean Rooney, interviewed by Keep Australia Beautiful National Publicity Manager, Lara Shannon, after returning from the judging tour.

Sean, can you tell us a little about yourself and how you came to be involved in sustainability and local communities

I am the sustainability program manager at Sinclair Knight Merz, a leading engineering and sciences professional services firm. Prior to this, I was at the CSIRO for seven years where I was responsible for pioneering the Sustainable Communities Initiative – an action research program bringing together governments, business, NGO's and communities to work together to develop and deliver solutions to local sustainability challenges and opportunities.

We have all heard of the Tidy Towns Awards. Are the Sustainable Cities Awards similar?

As with Tidy Towns, the Sustainable Cities Awards recognise efforts by residents, community groups, businesses and government agencies to protect and enhance their local environment to ensure its long term sustainability at all levels. Whereas Tidy Towns is focused on recognising the efforts of regional and rural communities, Sustainable Cities targets urban communities. Keep Australia Beautiful also runs the Clean Beaches Awards, which is open to coastal communities.

You have just returned from visiting the finalist in each state and territory. Do Australian's care about their local environments and are they active on sustainability issues?

Australian's have a strong and interdependent relationship with the natural environment. During my travels I was struck by the passion, commitment and achievements of communities working together on local environmental projects. Similarly, I was impressed by many approaches that, in addressing a local environmental issue, also contributed to wider social and economic outcomes.

Whilst we can't give away the result until the announcement in Canberra on Oct 23, can you mention some of the more memorable aspects of your visits?

Overall, it was great to see so many people coming together to help their local communities become more sustainable. Here are some of the highlights from my visits with each of the finalists.

ACT: Sourcing food from over 50 donors and delivering it free of charge to around 40 local charities, OzHarvest's food 'rescue' service delivers around 1,500kgs of food per week to people in need. This program not only reduces organic waste in landfill, but also supports people in need in the Canberra region, and frees up funds previously spent on food by community service groups for other vital activities.

WA: The Brunswick River Restoration Action Group's (BRRAG) grass roots community action model is a great initiative that is helping to restore and protect the Brunswick River, through both river restoration works and public environmental awareness.

NT: Palmerston's "Safe Communities Program" provides a wonderful example of an urban community working together. It has been recognised by the World Health Organisation by being designated as an International Safe Community in 2008.

QLD: Ipswich's recently opened Environment Education Centre provides a dedicated community resource that helps interpret sustainability in the local context. It also provides education and advice on local programs and actions for community members to get involved with.

TAS: The City of Launceston demonstrates strong leadership in managing, interpreting and celebrating the city's natural environment and cultural heritage. This is also evident in the the enthusiasm and passion of local volunteers who work tirelessly on local environmental projects and conservation works.

NSW: The City of Canada Bay's has an innovative approach to water management. This is particularly evident in the Cintra Hockey Park water recycling system, which recycles 4.5million litres of water per annum, and the Powell Creek Reserve Stormwater Harvesting project which saves 2 million litres per annum.

SA: Port Adelaide Enfield's inclusive and practical approach to public space is evidenced in the Mikawomma Reserve within the "Westwood" residential development. The Westwood Neighbourhood Development Group, in conjunction with the council, local Indigenous groups, and school children, worked together to create an open public space that serves many purposes. The reserve provides an innovative stormwater management system, public open space, community playground, and interpretation of local Indigenous culture and values.

VIC: The City of Hobsons Bay has been successful in bringing together a mix of partners from the council, state government, local business, and community groups to work on local sustainability projects. This includes the transformation of the abandoned power substation into a community arts centre; the development of a regional strategy to better manage the Kororoit Creek waterway; and working with local groups to create an active maritime village celebrating the role the precinct has played in the region's history.

We have a number of sponsors who are keen to uncover case studies. The Packaging Stewardship Forum is interested in beverage container recycling. Any examples from your trip?

The Queensland "What A Waste" school education program delivered by the local waste collection service provider provides a good example. This program educates primary school children on what happens to their rubbish and what and how to recycle.

How about water conservation? Our friends at Grundfos Pumps are always keen to find more examples.

Definitely the City of Canada Bay's innovative approach to water management. The best case studies are mentioned in my highlights above.

**And how about our young legends category sponsored by ToysRUs?
Did you see examples of kids getting involved?**

In South Australia, the City of Port Adelaide Enfield supports the work of the Portside Christian School in actively caring for Mangrove Cove. Mangrove Cove is a pocket of remnant vegetation that, through the work of the Portside Christian School, provides:

- Education - by being embedded in the School's environmental studies curriculum;
- Environmental learning opportunities for other local schools and Flinders University;
- Preserving local heritage by recording the history of the Cove. This includes compiling a book outlining the history of the area, and the school becoming the storehouse of archival records of Mangrove Cove;
- Demonstrable leadership in natural resource management in the community.

You were touring as the Sustainable Cities Judge, but you probably had your eyes open for engineering activities. Any projects that would be of interest to Sinclair Knight Merz?

Yes, some examples are provided below:

SA: Aquifer Storage and Re-use approaches to water management in Port Adelaide Enfield.

NSW: Water conservation measures in Canada Bay, including stormwater harvesting and smart irrigation & lighting project, saving 15% to 20% energy and water use at 17 sports fields. Also, the Concord library energy reduction features which include: carbon neutral carpet, natural ventilation incorporated into the air conditioning system which allows night purges and airflow reversal, solar panels to pre-heat water, T5 lamps, swipe card activated lighting, movement detector activated lighting in service areas, and water efficient toilets.

VIC: Hobsons Bay Council's approach to their Greenhouse Action Plan sees an energy efficiency engineer working with Council staff to implement the Energy Efficiency Program. Part of the program sees improvements in reducing the Council building's carbon footprint through better monitoring and programming of the building's heating/cooling system; trialling different computer screen settings; trialling different lighting conditions and technologies. To date, although Council staff numbers in the building have increased, the carbon footprint over this time has decreased.

Our Tidy Towns Judge has spent 13 years visiting regional and rural communities. He says it is almost impossible to avoid the Devonshire tea. Did you encounter some interesting forms of hospitality?

Lots of cups of tea, sandwiches, and home made cakes!!