

TREESHAPE

Created by TRACE BALLA

RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 8–14 YEARS OLD (UPPER PRIMARY / LOWER SECONDARY)

GENRE: Graphic Novel/Memoir

THEMES: graphic novel, community activism, protest, Jabiluka, artistic practice, environment, community, connecting with country, nature

CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:

- English: Literature, Literacy and Language
- HASS
- History, Geography, Civics and Citizenship
- The Arts: Visual Art
- Cross-curriculum Priority: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures - Country/Place
- Cross-curriculum Priority: Sustainability

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INTRODUCTION

Treeshape is an extraordinary, inspiring and hope-filled graphic novel memoir from multi-award-winning creator Trace Balla, whose previous works include *Rivertime*, *Rockhopping*, *Landing with Wings* and *Leaf-light*. This stunning memoir reveals her personal and life-changing experiences of place, her understanding of the natural world and her relationship to Country.

As a self-described 'story catcher', Trace finds inspiration in nature and incorporates local plant and animal species into her detailed, cartoon-style drawings. This graphic memoir continues her commitment to creating stories about connecting with Country and community, offering readers an intimate glimpse into her personal journey of environmental awareness, responsibility and deep connection to place.

PLOT SUMMARY

Treeshape is a personal memoir that follows Trace Balla's life-changing experiences with place and the natural world. Through her distinctive graphic novel style, Trace explores her relationship to Country, weaving together personal narrative, observations of nature, and reflections on environmental connection. The memoir chronicles significant moments in her life that shaped her understanding of place, belonging, and the importance of caring for the land. Drawing on her experiences living on Djaara Country in South Eastern Australia, Trace shares how the natural world has influenced her perspective and way of being.

Q&A WITH TRACE BALLA

Tell us about your inspiration to write *Treeshape*.

'I wanted to share my love of the earth, and raise greater awareness of the destruction of the environment and the impacts of colonisation. It's so important to me to provide insight into some of the challenges First Nations People are currently facing, such as systemic racism, deaths in police custody, as well as positive things such as working towards Treaty for all Australians. These subjects are now becoming more known in the media – my book offers another, artistic avenue of awareness and inspiration.

'The book has taken three years to create, during which time many historical and personal events unfolded that I felt inspired to record. For this reason, it started at 80 pages and has expanded to over 130. For example, Australian citizens' right to protest is under threat, so I want to raise awareness of how we can be active to support our environment and communities. Raising awareness is a crucial step to standing up for ecosystems under threat.

'When my son and I were living in the city, I managed to save a bunch of trees that were going to be cut down to redesign the playground at his school. I included this in my book as I want people to see the great power of speaking up about things of all sizes that are important. There are photos throughout the book including one of the trees I helped save, which is still healthy and a popular spot for climbers!'

Can you describe your creative practice?

'As well as drawing and making stories and songs, I have always been a maker – anything from illustration to making clothes, clay, baskets, animation, furniture, dolls... I am an early bird and usually walk in the bush at dawn when the light is so beautiful – sometimes it inspires poems and songwriting! Then I work in my garden studio. But my work is not all inside. I sketch in nature, and find that the more you sketch, the more you slow down and have a really good look and start to appreciate what's around you so much more.

What do you see as the major themes of this book?

'The book is a memoir, framed around the trees of my life, and my growing understanding of belonging to place. A crucial aspect of this is my growing awareness of the ongoing relationship of First Nations Peoples to Country – and raising and honouring their voices.

'Ever since I went to the Jabiluka protest all those years ago, I've known the importance of allies being led by First Nations Peoples. All over the world people are rising up, many of them First Nations, calling for self-determination and for governments to learn and work with communities to help look after the planet and its inhabitants. At the same time as Original Peoples are sharing so much Culture, wisdom and skill, people are relearning old ways from multicultures and creating amazing inventions to help us all live with a lighter footprint. From my own experience of becoming more connected to the earth, it helped me to understand what we were really working towards at Jabiluka: the protection and care for Country.'

Do you have any special ideas for using your book in classrooms?

I'd love to see teachers replicate the activity lead by John Seed and Joanna Macy shown on pp 42-43. "The council of all beings" activity outlined here is brilliant for students.

<https://workthatreconnects.org/resources/council-of-all-beings/>

Another simple but very important activity would be for students to read pp 102-103 and undertake their own seasonal observations of their environment.

ASSESSABLE CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

Most of the discussions and learning activities in this teacher resource cover the cross-curriculum priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Sustainability.

Prior to, during or after discussions and activities, consider inviting community Elders and cultural knowledge holders to share stories and information about places, histories and cultures, caring for Country, sustainability and the environment.

BEFORE READING

Explain to students that they will use their prior knowledge and clues from the book to make predictions. Predictions are smart guesses about what might happen in a story. Good readers make predictions before and during reading to help them understand the text better.

PREDICT: EXPLORING THE TITLE AND FRONT COVER

Display the front cover of *Treeshape*. Give students time to observe all the details.

Ask students:

- When you look at the front cover image, what does it make you think about?
- What do you notice about the illustrations?
- What does the title tell us?
- Who is in the story?
- What feelings or mood do the colours and images create?

Model looking at the front cover and thinking about what you can see.

Ask students to turn to a partner and discuss:

- What are your predictions about the events in the story?
- What vocabulary might we find in this story?

Ask students to share their responses.

Guiding questions:

- What makes you think that?
- What clues from the cover support your prediction?
- Has anyone read another story that might be similar?
- Look at the characters' faces/body language. What might they be feeling?
- How might trees shape our lives, landscapes, or understanding of the world?
- What role do trees play in the environment?

TEACHER NOTE: READING GRAPHIC NOVELS/MEMOIRS

Reading a graphic novel as a whole class requires different teaching methods to reading regular novels. Reading in parts instead of all at once helps students understand and stay engaged.

Graphic novels mix pictures and words. Students need to:

- Understand images and visual symbols
- Read words and pictures together

Building Skills Step-by-Step

Reading in parts helps teachers teach visual reading skills slowly:

- Show students how to 'read' pictures by talking about faces, body language, colours, and how images are layered and placed

- Read with students and stop to ask questions about visual details students might miss
- Students can read in pairs or small groups

Choosing Good Stopping Points

Stop at natural breaks like:

- Changes in time or place
- Exciting moments
- Places where themes become clear

Responding to the Material

Think about what you read and record ideas (choose a quick activity):

- Research and find out the meaning of names, places, key vocabulary, historical events
- Set short writing tasks to summarise the section students have read
- Have students discuss in pairs or small groups
- Draw responses
- Track information

Move faster through easy parts and slower through hard or emotional parts.

For Serious Topics

When graphic novels deal with important social, political or environmental issues, reading in parts lets teachers:

- Explain background information before difficult content
- Give students time to process after hard sections
- Add related activities

Please note that when discussing events raised in the book, including on pages 17 and 69, it is important to ensure you are providing a culturally safe and inclusive space for everybody in your classroom. This may include undertaking cultural competency training and reading widely and proactively to self-educate. A useful resource on how to deal with texts sensitively in a culturally-safe manner is available in the blog post, [Culturally Sensitive Teaching](#), adapted from a presentation to the International Federation for the Teaching of English in 2020.

Benefits

This method helps teachers:

- Watch how students participate
- Check written work
- See how visual reading skills grow
- Find students who need extra support early, including cultural sensitivity.

It also builds class community because students share the reading experience together, no matter how fast they read or how well they understand.

Reading in supported sections makes sure all students can access rich, complex texts that need careful attention. This connects to themes of community and working together that often appear in graphic memoirs. It creates shared class knowledge that continues in classroom discussions and learning.

READ THE TEXT

Read the text in sections. For example, section 1 (pp1–19), section 2 (pp 20–41), section 3 (pp42–57), section 4 (pp58–79), section 5 (pp80–96), section 6 (pp97–111), section 7 (pp112–132).

It is at the teacher’s discretion to read sections to best suit their students’ learning.

Note themes/events and vocabulary/interesting sentences after you read each section/part. Create an anchor chart to display in the classroom. For example:

Section	Pages	Themes/Events	Vocabulary
<p>I</p> <p>Teacher models: reading, summarising and highlighting themes, key events, vocabulary, visuals and language, meaning, historical content/figures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ histories and culture, influences on Trace Balla</p>	1–19	<p>Family history, mother, father, WWII, fleeing Europe, Maralinga, uranium, Vietnam War, relationships with family, relationships and connection with trees, animals, people and nature, racism (p14), Jewish culture, ‘Aunty’ fig trees, the weeing tree, school life, understanding the scars of this land (p18), growing up, leaving home, travelling the world</p>	<p>Wurundjeri Country, Naarm, Kulin Nation, red bush apple, Gunditjmara Country, ancestry, massacres</p> <p><i>Somehow the spirit of that place seeped into my bones and connected me to this great country . . . p13</i></p> <p>Rhetorical questions (p13)</p> <p><i>Like a bird leaving the nest, a tree growing branches...(p19)</i></p>

The bank of questions below can be used to help students to think deeply about the story and support their understanding, after reading each section.

QUESTIONS AFTER READING A SECTION OF THE TEXT:

- What were the most important events or ideas in this section? What do you think the author wants us to understand from this section?
- What did we learn that we didn’t know before?
- Which visual elements did you notice help communicate the themes and meaning?

- How did this section make you feel? Why?
- Did anything challenge your thinking or make you see something differently?
- What do you think will happen next?
- What themes or issues do you expect will continue to be important?
- What's becoming easier about reading graphic novels? What's still challenging?
- Are there vocabulary words or concepts we need to clarify?
- What environmental problem or concern is being addressed? What actions are being taken and by whom?

QUESTIONS AT THE END OF THE TEXT:

- How is reading a graphic memoir different from reading other types of texts?
- What should we research or learn more about?
- What gives you hope in this section? What concerns you?
- What effect does this have on you as a reader?

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1 – GRAPHIC NOVEL MEMOIRS AS A GENRE AND THEMES FROM THE TEXT

Curriculum Learning Areas & Codes: English Literature

Year 5: AC9E5LE01 – identify aspects of literary texts that represent details or information about historical, social and cultural contexts in literature by First Nations Australian, and wide-ranging Australian and world authors

Year 6: AC9E6LE01 – Identify responses to characters and events in literary texts, drawn from historical, social or cultural contexts, by First Nations Australian, and wide-ranging Australian and world authors

Year 7: AC9E7LE01 – Identify and explore ideas, points of view, characters, events and issues in literary texts

Year 8: AC9E8LE01 – Analyse how ideas, characterisation and viewpoints are shaped in literary texts

Resources: *Treeshape* by Trace Balla, *Treeshape Themes* template

Discussion Questions:

- What is a graphic memoir? How is it different from other types of books? (**Graphic** = Using pictures/illustrations **Memoir** = True story from someone's life)
- Is *Treeshape* fiction or non-fiction? How do you know?
- Why write about personal experiences with nature?

- What does Trace want readers to understand about the environment? What inspires her?
- What can we learn from someone else's life story?
- What are some of the important messages in this book?

Choose the appropriate question/s to ask students. Discuss ideas as a class. Brainstorm ideas.

Activity: Create a *Treeshape* Themes template showing the main themes from the text.

Teacher shows (I Do):

1. Pick one of the main themes from the book (for example, connection to place, caring for the environment)
2. Talk out loud while writing that theme onto the branch of the *Treeshape* Themes template
3. Show how the theme connects to parts of the book

Partners talk (We Do):

1. Students brainstorm and share ideas about themes in pairs
2. Students discuss what messages Trace Balla wants readers to understand
3. Ask students to share their ideas and transfer these onto an anchor chart

Independent learning (You Do):

- Students complete their own tree themes map using the worksheet on the next page.

For students who need support:

- Students orally share their ideas with someone who writes them down

For students ready for more:

- Students write about how themes connect to their own lives



Treeshape Themes



ACTIVITY 2 – TRACE BALLA'S UNIQUE ILLUSTRATION TECHNIQUES AND STYLE

Curriculum Learning Areas & Codes: Visual Arts

Years 5 & 6: AC9AVA6E01 – explore ways that visual conventions, visual arts processes and materials are combined to communicate ideas, perspectives and/or meaning in visual arts across cultures, times, places and/or other contexts

Years 5 & 6: AC9AVA6C01 – Use visual conventions, materials, techniques and processes to create artworks that communicate ideas, perspectives and/or meaning

Years 7 & 8: AC9AVA8E01 – Investigate ways that visual conventions, visual arts processes and materials are manipulated to represent ideas, perspectives and/or meaning in artworks created across cultures, times, places and/or other contexts

Years 7 & 8: AC9AVA8C02 – Select and manipulate visual conventions, visual arts processes and/or materials to create artworks that represent ideas, perspectives and/or meaning

Resources: *Treeshape* by Trace Balla, sketch books, pencils, natural items for students to sketch (gumnuts, leaves, branches, flowers, etc.)

Discussion Questions:

- What do you notice about how Trace Balla draws people, plants, and places?
- What techniques does she use (line work, shading, detail, composition, sketches, photographs, cartoon figures)? Explain the meaning of 'composition' and any other unknown words.
- How does Trace's unique style suit the memoir?
- Why might she have chosen this style?
- How do illustrations work with words to tell her story?

Choose the appropriate question/s to ask students. Discuss ideas as a class. Brainstorm ideas.

Activity: Explore Trace's drawing style, study her techniques, practise observational drawing of natural objects (in and around your school).

Teacher shows (I Do):

1. Display pp80–81 from *Treeshape*
2. Think out loud about the techniques used (panels, line work, shading, detail, movement, composition, sketches, photographs, cartoon figures)
3. Note line quality (thick/thin), shading, composition
4. Model observational drawing of a natural object, such as a real leaf or flower
5. Draw in Trace's style: start with outline, add details from observation

Partners learning (We Do):

1. Display pp82–83 of Trace Balla's illustrations

2. Student pairs record observations about techniques (panels, line work, shading, detail, movement, composition, sketches, photographs, cartoon figures) and discuss with their partner
3. Students compare observations with another pair
4. Student pairs practise observational drawing together
5. Each student selects a natural object to observe and draw in Trace's style
6. Pair share and feedback

Independent learning (You Do):

1. Students create nature sketchbooks over 3–4 weeks (this can be assigned as a home learning activity)
2. Include 15–20 observational drawings
3. Vary subjects (plants, insects, landscapes)
4. Experiment with different tools (pen, pencil, ink, collage, drawing on photographs)
5. Include brief annotations

For students who need support:

- Provide viewfinders or magnifying glasses
- Work from photographs if needed
- Use simple objects

For students ready for more:

- Write an artist statement about Trace's illustration techniques
- Compare with other illustrators

ACTIVITY 3 – EXPLORE HOW TRACE BALLA USES COLOURS TO CREATE MOOD AND MEANING**Curriculum Learning Areas & Codes: Visual Arts**

Years 5 & 6: AC9AVA6C01 – Use visual conventions, materials, techniques and processes to create artworks that communicate ideas

Years 5 & 6: AC9AVA2D01 – experiment and play with visual conventions, visual arts processes and materials

Years 7 & 8: AC9AVA8D01 – Experiment with visual conventions, visual arts processes and materials to develop skills

Years 7 & 8: AC9AVA8E01 – Investigate ways that visual conventions, visual arts processes and materials are manipulated to represent ideas, perspectives and/or meaning in artworks

Resources: *Treeshape* by Trace Balla, art supplies

Discussion Questions:

- How does Trace Balla use colour to create atmosphere and emotion?
- What patterns do you notice in her colour choices?
- How do warm vs cool colours, bright vs muted tones work?
- How do colour choices guide your emotional response?

Choose the appropriate question/s to ask students. Discuss ideas as a class.

Activity: Examine Trace's colour choices, identify how colour creates moods, experiment with colour, create artwork

Teacher shows (I Do):

1. Display pp76–77
2. Think out loud about colour choices on each page and the theme on each page, e.g. 'Nature scene uses soft greens and warm earth tones; this creates a feeling of happiness, growth and connection.'
3. Draw or display the same tree twice using different colours to create opposite moods
4. Explain choices throughout and ask student to share their observations
5. Compare pp76–77 with pp6–7 and discuss the different themes and colour choices.

Partners learning (We Do):

1. Students explore pp12–13 and 66–67 and record the themes and colour observations.
2. Students compare the pages and colours used
3. Each student selects one mood to create
4. Students discuss which colours might create that feeling and share their ideas

Independent learning (You Do):

1. Students create a nature scene illustration with themselves in the scene using colours that create a particular mood
2. Students share their piece and ask their partner what mood their image conveys.

For students who need support:

- Offer highlighted pages with clear examples

For students ready for more:

- Research colour theory and symbolism

ACTIVITY 4 – VISUAL AND TEXTUAL STORYTELLING

Curriculum Learning Areas & Codes: Visual Arts

Year 5: AC9E5LY05 – Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring and questioning to build literal and inferred meaning to evaluate information and ideas

Year 6: AC9E6LY05 – use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring and questioning to build literal and inferred meaning, and to connect and compare content from a variety of sources

Year 7: AC9E7LY05 – Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring, questioning and inferring to analyse and summarise information and ideas

Year 8: AC9E8LY05 – Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring, questioning and inferring to interpret and evaluate ideas in texts

Resources: *Treeshape* by Trace Balla, 'What Images Show' and 'What Words Tell' T-chart

Discussion Questions:

- What are the advantages of combining images and text?
- How does Trace use pictures to show emotion, setting and meaning?
- What makes her perspective and style unique?

Choose the appropriate question/s to ask students. Discuss ideas as a class. Brainstorm ideas.

Activity: Choose 3–4 pages, analyse how images and text work together, and create a T-chart showing 'what images show' vs 'what words tell'

Teacher shows (I Do):

1. Display chosen pages from *Treeshape*
2. Think out loud while looking at the images only at first
3. Describe what the pictures show and then read the words
4. Note what text adds that images don't show
5. Create T-chart headed with What Images Show and What Words Tell
6. Model filling one example in each column

Partners learning (We Do):

1. Students work with a partner to explore pp62–63
2. Ask students to discuss what the illustrations alone tell you, then how the words add meaning.
3. Students discuss and brainstorm their observations
4. Ask students to look at pp34–35 and discuss what words would be appropriate to fit this image. Ask why the author did not need to add words.

Independent learning (You Do):

1. Students fill in their individual T-chart with several examples from *Treeshape*
2. Share with a partner.

For students who need support:

- Give sentence frames: 'I noticed that images show... while words tell...'
- Allow to draw simple sketches instead of describing in words

For students ready for more:

- Write paragraphs about 'what Images Show' and 'What Words Tell'



'What Images Show' and 'What Words Tell'

What Images Show	What Images Tell



ACTIVITY 5 – FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE TO CONNECT THE READER

Curriculum Learning Areas & Codes: English Language

Year 5: AC9E5LA03 – Describe how spoken, written and multimodal texts use language features and are typically organised into characteristic stages and phases, depending on purposes in texts

Year 6: AC9E6LA03 – Explain how texts across the curriculum are typically organised into characteristic stages and phases depending on purposes, recognising how authors often adapt text structures and language features

Year 7: AC9E7LA03 – Identify and describe how texts are structured differently depending on their purpose and how language features vary in texts

Year 8: AC9E8LA03 – Analyse how text structures and language features vary according to purpose, audience and context, and how they influence meaning

Resources: *Treeshape* by Trace Balla, Figurative Language' graphic organiser

Discussion Questions:

- What is figurative language? Explain to students that **figurative language** is when writers use words in a creative way to help readers picture ideas, feel emotions, or understand the meaning better.

<p><u>Simile</u> A comparison using like or as.</p>	<p><u>Metaphor</u> A comparison without using like or as.</p>	<p><u>Personification</u> Giving human qualities to non-human things.</p>	<p><u>Rhetorical Question</u> A question asked to make the reader think, not to get an answer.</p>
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- How does Trace use figurative language to describe the natural world? What is the effect on the reader?

Choose the appropriate question/s to ask students. Discuss ideas as a class. Brainstorm ideas.

Activity: Collect examples of figurative language and write our own descriptive sentences

Teacher note: it is important to highlight and discuss the difference between a literal statement and a figurative language comparison. For example, on p4, Trace explains, 'My mother was a tree, my father a dog.' This reflects her beautiful connection and relationship with the tree and her dog. It is not describing or comparing her biological mother and father. A topic for classroom discussion could be how different cultures have different ways with language. For example, many First Nations languages have the same word for tree branch as arm, for bark as skin, where there is more relationship between the non-human and human, than in more colonised languages like English. Notice how Trace Balla fits somewhere between the two. For older students they could research and discuss code switching.

Teacher shows (I Do):

1. Read one page from *Treeshape* closely
2. Search for figurative language.
3. Write up an example, such as *Like a bird leaving the nest, a tree growing branches, I went out into the world*, p19.
4. Label it as a simile on the figurative language graphic organiser
5. Model writing an original sentence using figurative language (steps 1–3)

Step 1: Choose your topic	Step 2: Choose your figurative language type	Step 3: Use these sentence frames:
<p>Pick something from nature shown in <i>Treeshape</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tree • river • wind • mountain • leaf • bird 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simile • Metaphor • Personification • Rhetorical question 	<p>Simile</p> <p>The ____ was like a ____ .</p> <p>Metaphor</p> <p>The ____ was a ____.</p> <p>Personification</p> <p>The ____ ____ (verb) like a ____.</p> <p>Rhetorical Q</p> <p>Who wouldn't _____?</p> <p>Why would someone _____?</p>

Partners learning (We Do):

1. Students identify examples of figurative language
2. Discuss what each example means and why Trace chose that language
3. Each pair writes one original sentence using figurative language together
4. Share with the class for feedback.

Some examples in the text:

I spent a lot of time deep in thought, held by the solid reliable arms of that tree.

How can anyone own a patch of the planet? And who did they buy it off in the first place?

There was a quiet calm like the eye of the storm.

My brain grew really hungry to know more...

While my friends fell in love with each other...I fell for the trees.

Independent learning (You Do):

1. Encourage students to have a go at writing an original sentence for each type of figurative language (at least one simile, one metaphor, one personification, one rhetorical question)

For students who need support:

- Give partially completed word bank with some examples filled in
- Highlight pages where figurative language is clearly used
- Provide definitions and examples on reference cards
- Use sentence frames for each: 'The ____ is like a ____ because...'
- Students can illustrate examples instead of writing

For students ready for more:

- Write a brief reflection (50–75 words) explaining how figurative language helps describe nature and connect the reader



Figurative Language Graphic Organiser

<p><u>Simile</u> A comparison using like or as.</p>	<p><u>Metaphor</u> A comparison without using like or as.</p>	<p><u>Personification</u> Giving human qualities to non-human things.</p>	<p><u>Rhetorical Question</u> A question asked to make the reader think, not to get an answer.</p>



ACTIVITY 6 – MAKING CONNECTIONS

Curriculum Learning Areas & Codes: English Literacy

Year 5: AC9E5LY05 – Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring and questioning to build literal and inferred meaning to evaluate information and ideas

Year 6: AC9E6LY05 – use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring and questioning to build literal and inferred meaning, and to connect and compare content from a variety of sources

Year 7: AC9E7LY05 – Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring, questioning and inferring to analyse and summarise information and ideas

Year 8: AC9E8LY05 – Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring, questioning and inferring to interpret and evaluate ideas in texts

Resources: *Treeshape* by Trace Balla, Making Connections Venn diagram

Discussion Questions:

- How do different texts show similar themes?
- What themes appear again and again?
- What are similarities and differences between the texts?

Choose the appropriate question/s to ask students. Discuss ideas as a class. Brainstorm ideas.

Activity: Compare *Treeshape* with another Trace Balla book, create a Venn diagram, present findings

Teacher shows (I Do):

1. Recap and summarise the key themes from *Treeshape* and read another text by Trace Balla
2. Think out loud about similarities (illustration style, themes about nature, use of graphic novel format)
3. Note differences (characters, settings, types of journeys, messages)
4. Create Venn diagram on chart paper
5. Model writing a similarity in the middle, and a difference between each text

Partners learning (We Do):

1. Students talk with their partner and find 3–4 more similarities (between the texts) and 3–4 further differences (about each text)
2. Student pairs complete the Venn diagram together (one Venn diagram for each student)
3. Share with another pair to get feedback

Independent learning (You Do):

1. Using their completed Venn diagram, students write a brief explanation (100–150 words) about the similarities and differences
2. Share with a partner
3. Participate in class discussion

For students who need support:

- Give sentence starters: 'Both books are similar because...' and 'The biggest difference is...'
- Work in small focus group with teacher

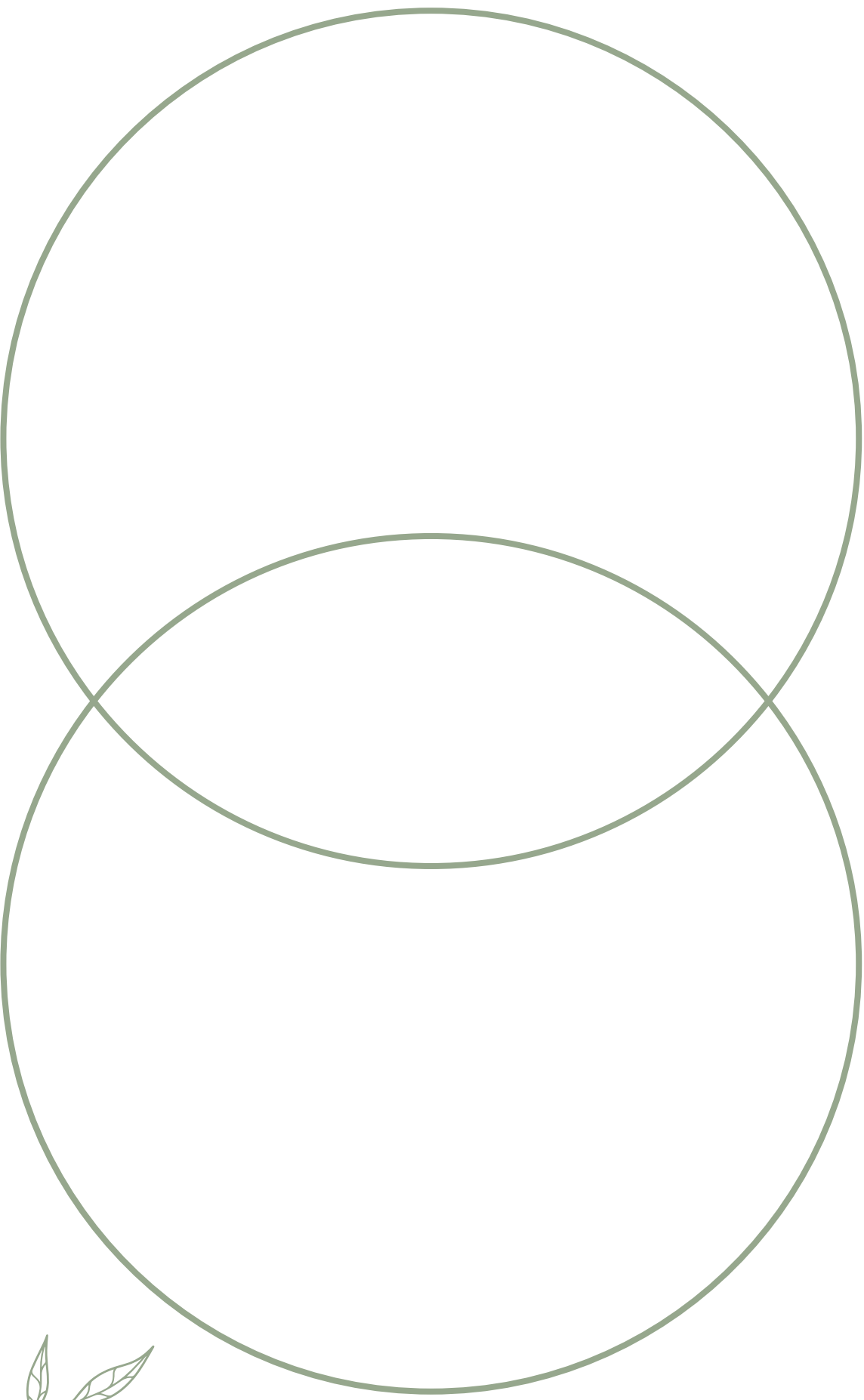
For students ready for more:

- Compare *Treeshape* with other books by Trace Balla
- Research how her work has changed over time



Making Connections Venn Diagram

Similarities



ACTIVITY 7 – 'WHAT IS COUNTRY?'

Curriculum Learning Areas & Codes: Cross-curriculum priority Sustainability

Years 5 & 6: AC9HS5S07/ AC9HS6S07 – Present descriptions and explanations, drawing ideas, findings and viewpoints from sources, and using relevant terms and conventions

A_TSICPI – First Nations communities of Australia maintain a deep connection to, and responsibility for, Country/Place and have holistic values and belief systems that are connected to the land, sea, sky and waterways.

Resources: AIATIS website, ABC website, *Treeshape* by Trace Balla, supportive texts about 'Country'

Discussion Questions:

- What is 'Country' in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures? How is it different from just 'land'?
- How do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples understand their connection to Country?
- What does Trace learn about Country? Where does she learn this from?
- How does understanding Country change how we think about where we live?
- What does 'we don't own Country, Country owns us' mean?

Choose the appropriate question/s to ask students. Discuss ideas as a class. Brainstorm ideas.

Activity: Research 'What is Country?'

Teacher shows (I Do):

1. Use approved websites to research Country
 - AIATIS [Welcome to Country | AIATIS corporate website](#) 41 seconds
 - ABC [Special: Connection to Country – Behind The News](#) 22 minutes
2. Think out loud: 'Country isn't just land, it includes water, sky, animals, plants, stories, songs, and spiritual connections'
3. Write key ideas on chart paper

Partners learning (We Do):

1. Read teacher-provided resources about Country (reread pp13, 42–43, 96–97 & 110–111)
2. Discuss and write 4–5 key understandings

Independent learning (You Do):

1. Make a poster explaining 'What is Country?' referencing examples from *Treeshape*

For students who need support:

- Give simplified explanations with pictures
- Provide pre-researched information about local Traditional Owners

- Use sentence frames: 'Country means...' and 'The Traditional Owners are...'

For students ready for more:

- Research and explore how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples land management practices show care for Country
- Research Eddie Mabo and *terra nullius*

ACTIVITY 8 – CONNECTION TO COUNTRY**Curriculum Learning Areas & Codes: Cross-curriculum priority Sustainability**

Years 5 & 6: AC9AVA6C01 – Use visual conventions, visual arts processes and materials to plan and create artworks that communicate ideas, perspectives and/or meaning

Years 7 & 8: AC9AVA8C01 – Generate, document and develop ideas for artworks

A_TSICPI – First Nations communities of Australia maintain a deep connection to, and responsibility for, Country/Place and have holistic values and belief systems that are connected to the land, sea, sky and waterways.

Resources: 'My meaningful places map' template, *Treeshape* by Trace Balla.

Discussion Questions:

- What does it mean to care for Country?
- What personal experiences shaped Trace Balla's connection to Country?
- How does she express belonging to the land?
- Why does the author think that caring for the environment is important?

Choose the appropriate question/s to ask students. Discuss ideas as a class. Brainstorm ideas.

Activity: Create a personal map of meaningful places in your life

Teacher shows (I Do):

1. Model drawing a meaningful or inspirational place on the map (childhood home, special tree, grandmother's house, a local river, the park, beach, school)
2. Add pictures or symbols for each place
3. Write notes explaining why each place matters

Example: 'This park is where I learned to ride my bike, so it means independence'

Partners learning (We Do):

1. Students think about 4–6 places that have significant connection and meaning to them
2. Students share with their partner and explain why these places matter the most
3. Discuss patterns (nature places, family places, learning places)

Independent learning (You Do):

1. Students create drawings on their maps on A3 paper
2. Students write 2–3 sentences for each place explaining why these places are important
3. Teacher checks in and asks questions

For students who need support:

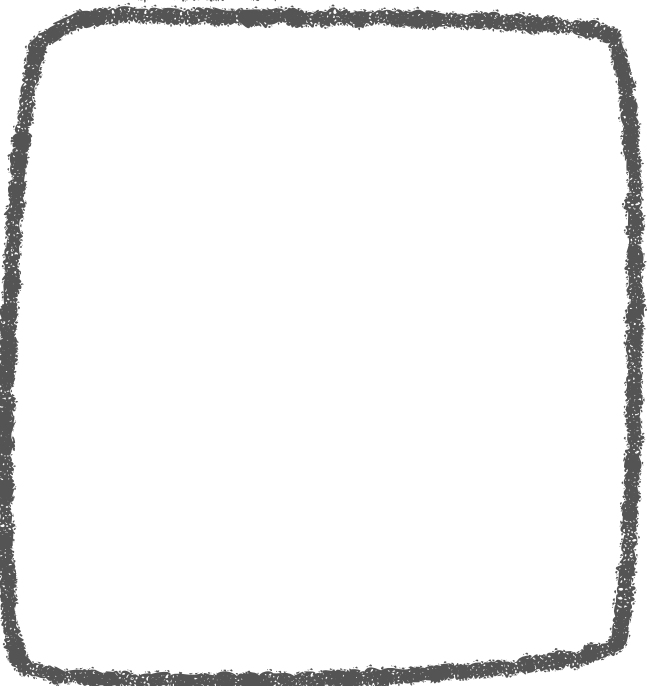
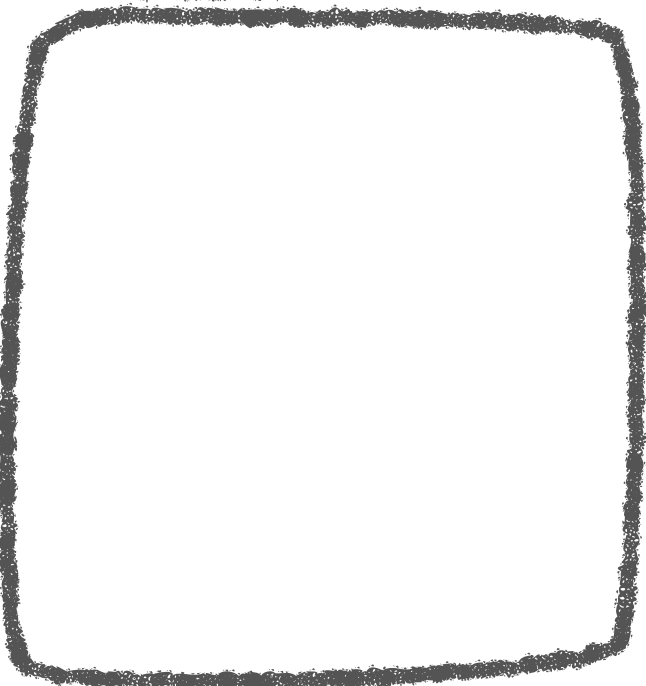
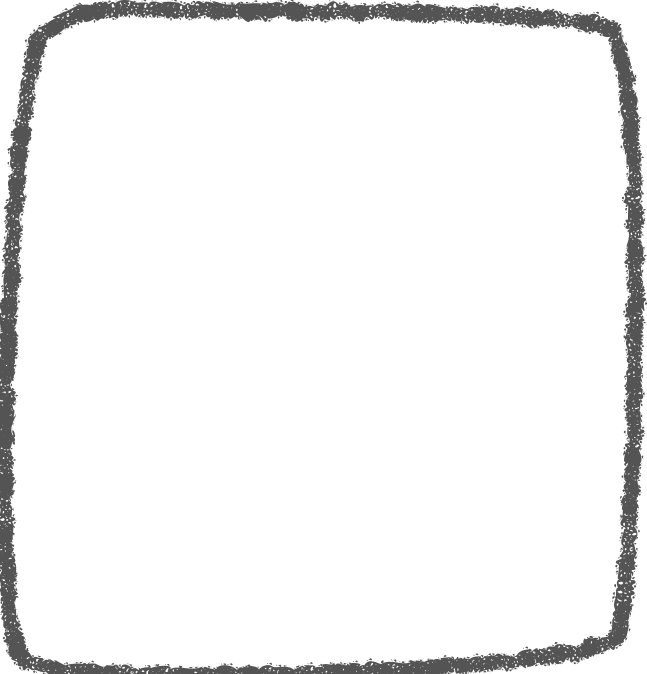
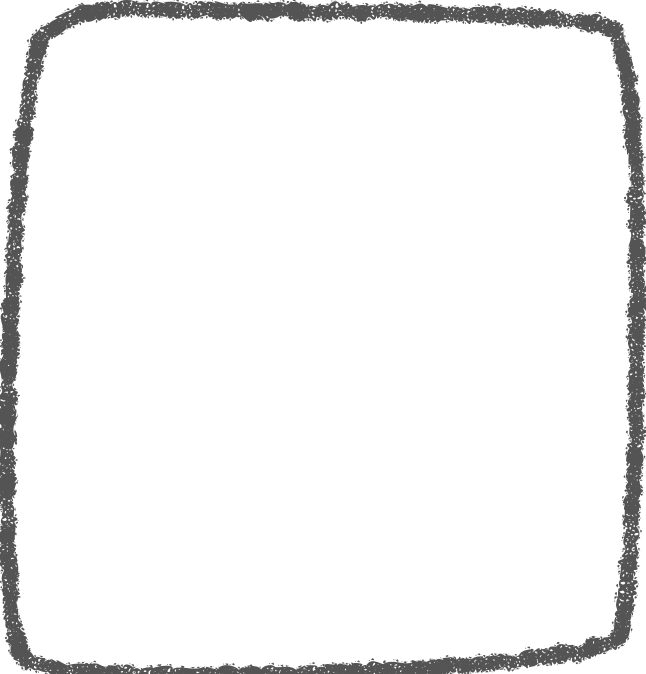
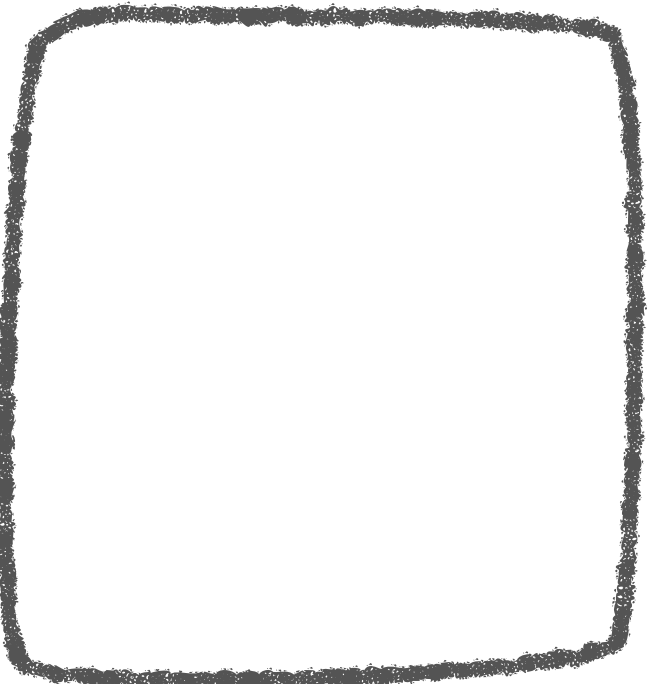
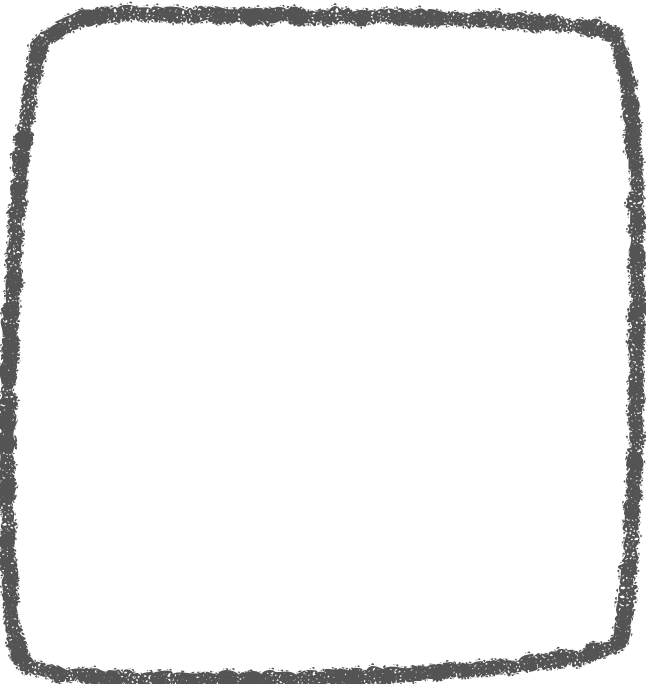
- Give template with boxes for 3–4 places
- Provide sentence starters: 'This place is special because...'
- Allow to use photos instead of drawings
- Use simple symbols instead of intricate drawings

For students ready for more:

- Show how places connect through journeys
- Include a timeline showing how relationship with places has changed



My Meaningful Places Map



ACTIVITY 9 – HUMAN AND ENVIRONMENT INTERACTIONS

Curriculum Learning Areas & Codes: Cross-curriculum priority Sustainability

Year 5: AC9HS5K04 – *The influence of people, including First Nations Australians and people in other countries, on the characteristics of a place*

Year 6: AC9HS6S06 – *Propose actions or responses to issues or challenges and use criteria to assess possible effects*

Year 7: AC9HG7S05 – *Identify a strategy for action in relation to environmental, economic, social or other factors, and explain potential impacts*

Year 8: AC9HG8S05 – *Identify a strategy for action in relation to environmental, economic, social or other factors, and explain potential impacts*

Years 7 & 8: AC9HC7S04/ AC9HC8S04 – *Explain the methods or strategies related to making decisions about civic participation*

(SF1) *Sustainable futures are achieved through informed individual, community, business and political action that values local, national and global equity and fairness across generations into the future.*

Resources: *Treeshape* by Trace Balla

Discussion Questions:

- How do humans impact environments?
- What does 'sustainability' mean? Unpack and brainstorm
- What do our sustainable interactions with the environment look like?
- What can we learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about caring for Country?

Choose the appropriate question/s to ask students. Discuss ideas as a class. Brainstorm ideas.

Activity: Explore how Trace Balla shows human impact on nature, researching one environmental issue from the book

Teacher shows (I Do):

1. Select a page showing environmental change (trees being cut, mining threat, or restoration)
2. Think out loud while identifying negative impacts (habitat loss, species threat, pollution)
3. Identify positive actions (planting trees, protecting areas, community organising) from *Treeshape*
4. Make two columns: Negative Human Impacts and Positive Human Actions
5. Find key facts, who was involved, what actions were taken, what was the outcome

Partners learning (We Do):

1. In pairs, students identify key pages showing human–environment interactions

2. Have students record these examples of 'negative human impacts' and 'positive human actions'
3. Explore what motivates people to protect environments and discuss as a class

Independent learning (You Do):

1. Students research an environmental issue from the memoir, such as uranium mining at Jabiluka
2. Record key facts, people involved, actions taken, outcomes
3. Discuss how individual actions connect to collective care
4. Share findings with the class

For students who need support:

- Give pre-selected pages with clear examples
- Offer simplified research templates with sentence starters

For students ready for more:

- Brainstorm ways to take action on a similar issue locally

ACTIVITY 10 – SUSTAINABILITY IN OUR COMMUNITY**Curriculum Learning Areas & Codes: HASS**

Year 5: AC9HS5K04 – The influence of people, including First Nations Australians and people in other countries, on the characteristics of a place

Year 5: AC9HS5S06 – Propose actions or responses to issues or challenges and use criteria to assess the possible effects

Year 6: AC9HS6S06 – Propose actions or responses to issues or challenges and use criteria to assess possible effects

Year 7: AC9HG7S05 – Identify a strategy for action in relation to environmental, economic, social or other factors, and explain potential impacts

Year 8: AC9HG8S05 – Identify a strategy for action in relation to environmental, economic, social or other factors, and explain potential impacts

(SF2) Sustainable futures require individuals to seek information, identify solutions, reflect on and evaluate past actions, and collaborate with and influence others as they work towards a desired change.

Resources: *Treeshape* by Trace Balla

Discussion Questions:

- What is our collective responsibility to care for Country?
- What role do individuals and communities play?
- What actions can citizens take to protect the environment?

Choose the appropriate question/s to ask students. Discuss ideas as a class. Brainstorm ideas.

Activity: Develop a school or class sustainability action plan

Teacher shows (I Do):

1. Reread pp86–87 focusing on the school garden
2. Look at your school's recycling program or community garden, as an example
3. Think out loud while making a T-chart: What We're Already Doing and What We Could Do Better on the class board.
4. Make simple action plan with specific goal (reduce paper waste by 30%), concrete actions (use both sides of paper, share digital documents), and timeline (next term)
5. Explain how to make goals realistic and measurable

Partners learning (We Do):

1. Students to walk around school or look at information about school environmental work
2. Record observations about current practices and list 3–5 potential improvements
3. Students share ideas with another pair for feedback

Groups work (You Do Together):

1. Students choose one current environmental focus (waste, water, biodiversity, energy) of school/community practices
2. Create action plan poster with current practices, any identified gaps, three actions students could take, resources needed, and a timeline of action
3. Present plan to the class

For students who need support:

- Give structured template with sentence starters
- Provide visual checklist of common actions
- Allow to work with partners
- Focus on single, simple actions

For students ready for more:

- Research local council strategies

ACTIVITY II – POSITIVE ACTIVISM, RIGHTS, AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Curriculum Learning Areas & Codes: HASS

Years 5 & 6: AC9HS5S05/AC9HS6S05 – Develop evidence-based conclusions

Years 5 & 6: AC9HS5S07/ AC9HS6S07 – Present descriptions and explanations, drawing ideas, findings and viewpoints from sources, and using relevant terms and conventions

Year 7: AC9HH7S07 – Explain historical interpretations about significant events, individuals and groups

Year 8: AC9HH8S07 – Explain historical interpretations about significant events, individuals and groups

Years 7 & 8: AC9HC7S04/ AC9HC8S04 – Explain the methods or strategies related to making decisions about civic participation

Resources: Vocabulary bank and definitions (for example, democracy, citizens, protest, activism, *Treeshape* by Trace Balla

Discussion Questions:

Choose the questions that best fit your class:

- What is activism, and how can it be positive?
- Why do people take action to protect the environment?
- What strategies do activists use in *Treeshape*?
- What values motivate people to take positive action?
- What challenges do activists face, and how do they overcome them?
- How can citizens participate in change beyond voting?
- How effective is collective action compared to individual action?

Choose the appropriate question/s to ask students. Discuss ideas as a class. Brainstorm ideas.

Activity: Research a positive activism campaign in *Treeshape*

Students will identify actions, outcomes, and the positive impact of activism

Teacher shows (I Do):

1. Model thinking aloud about a positive activism example in *Treeshape* (the Jabiluka campaign).
2. Identify motivations, actions and positive outcomes.
 - Complete an Activism Profile on the board (the issue, who took action, what actions were taken, what were the outcomes, why the campaign was successful)

Partners learning (We Do):

1. Student pairs find 2–3 examples of activism in *Treeshape*
2. Students discuss what actions were taken and what the outcomes were
3. Students note down the examples, the actions taken and outcomes

Group task (You Do Together):

1. Students choose a positive activism campaign from *Treeshape*
2. Have students research the campaign and divide tasks between group members.

3. Create a presentation (poster, slides or oral).
4. Include the following in the campaign presentation:
 - What was the issue?
 - Who took action?
 - What positive actions were taken?
 - What were the outcomes?
 - Why was the campaign successful?

Support for students who need help:

- Provide partially completed activist profiles
- Use sentence starters
- Provide word bank
- Allow pairs within groups

Extension for students ready for more:

- Compare multiple activism campaigns
- Analyse why the campaigns were successful
- Research legal frameworks around peaceful protest
- Write a longer report on positive activism and change

ACTIVITY 12 – COLLECTIVE ACTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL HOPE**Curriculum Learning Areas & Codes: HASS**

Year 5: AC9E5LY05 – Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring and questioning to build literal and inferred meaning to evaluate information and ideas

Year 6: AC9E6LY05 – Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring and questioning to build literal and inferred meaning, and to connect and compare content from a variety of sources

Year 7: AC9E7LY05 – Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring, questioning and inferring to analyse and summarise information and ideas

Year 8: AC9E8LY05 – Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring, questioning and inferring to interpret and evaluate ideas in texts

Resources: *Treeshape* by Trace Balla

Activity: Reflect on hope and action in *Treeshape*

Teacher shows (I Do):

1. Reread the campfire scene on (pp40-41) or Jabiluka victory section (p71) aloud.

2. Model reflective thinking out loud – for example, ‘When I read about the Jabiluka campaign, I feel hopeful because the Mirarr people and their supporters didn’t give up. This makes me realise that big changes take time and persistence. I used to think that individual actions could not make much of an impact. Now I understand that individual actions become collective action when many people work together. This gives me hope that we can protect important places if we care enough and keep working together.’
3. Write reflection on board
4. Show students how you transformed your thinking into written reflection:
 - Description (What happened): ‘The Mirarr people and supporters campaigned against the Jabiluka mine for 26 years. In 2024, the government said the mine will never be built.’
 - Reflection (Why it matters): ‘This story gives me hope because it shows that protecting Country is possible when communities work together over time. The Mirarr people never gave up on caring for their land. This makes me think about the places I care about and wonder what I could do to protect them. I used to feel powerless about big environmental problems, but this story taught me that sustained collective action really make a difference. It makes me want to be part of protecting the environment, even in small ways.’
5. Point out and write these reflective sentence starters on the class board:
 - This makes me think about...
 - I used to feel... but now...
 - This taught me that...
 - It makes me want to...

Partners learning (We Do):

1. Find hope moments. Partners explore *Treeshape* and find 2–3 moments that show:
 - People caring for the environment
 - Collective action
 - Environmental hope
 - Connection to place

Students write these headings and reference examples from *Treeshape*.

2. Discuss/talk about:
 - What makes these moments hopeful?
 - How do they make you feel?
 - What do they make you think about?
 - What connections can you make to your own life?
3. Write a reflection together. Partners choose ONE hope moment and write a reflection together answering:

- What happened? (Brief description)
- Why does this give you hope?
- What does this make you think about?
- How does this connect to your own feelings about the environment?
- What does this inspire you to do?

Use sentence starters:

- This moment gives me hope because...
- When I read this, I felt... because...
- This makes me think about...
- I used to think... but now I...
- This inspires me to...
- This connects to my life because...

ASSESSMENT: Environmental Stories of Hope – Graphic Memoir

Curriculum Learning Areas & Codes: HASS

English Literature, English Literacy, English Language, Visual Arts, Geography, Cross-Curriculum
Priority: Sustainability Futures

Task: Students create a short graphic memoir (2–4 pages) about a place that inspires and is meaningful to them and that they want to protect, combining graphic illustrations inspired by Trace Balla with reflective writing.

Time: 2–3 lessons (or can be completed over 1–2 weeks)

Resources: *Treeshape* by Trace Balla, Planning templates (Brainstorm Ideas for Writing Template, Figurative Language Planning Template, Sketch and Illustration Draft Template), Illustration supplies, prior learning notes and sketches

OVERVIEW

Students will create a graphic memoir that includes:

- Illustrated pages showing a meaningful place using Trace's illustration techniques
- Figurative language (similes, metaphors, personification, rhetorical questions)
- Reflective writing exploring why this place matters and what gives you hope

Students' memoirs will become part of a class collection of Environmental Hope Stories.

PLANNING STAGE

I. Choose your place

Students think about a place that:

- Matters to them personally
- Is part of nature or their local environment

- They want to protect or care for
- That gives them hope

2. **Brainstorm ideas for writing**

Model completing the writing planning template.

Students share their ideas with another student and complete their own template or write their ideas (based on the template structure) in their English book.

3. **Figurative language planning**

Model completing the figurative language planning template.

Students share their ideas with another student and complete their own template or write their ideas (based on the template structure) in their English book.

4. **Sketch and illustration draft template**

Plan 2–4 pages for your graphic memoir. Sketch rough layouts.

Page 1: **Introduction**

- Show the place
- Brief description
- Why you're connected to it

Page 2: **Why It Matters**

- Show yourself in the place
- Reflective writing about what it means to you
- Include figurative language

Page 3: **Threats and Hope**

- What could harm this place?
- What gives you hope?
- Include reflection on feelings

Page 4: **Action and Connection (Optional)**

- What will you do to protect it?
- Connection to bigger themes
- Message of hope

MY PLACE: Where is it?

DESCRIPTION (Using the senses):

Sights: _____

Sounds: _____

Smells: _____

Textures: _____

Colours: _____

REFLECTION:

- Why does this place matter to you?
-

- What threatens it or could harm it?
-

- What feelings does this place bring up?
-

- What does this place teach you?
-

- What gives you hope about protecting it?
-

- What action could you take to protect or care for it?
-

CONNECTIONS TO *TREESHAPES*:

- How does your experience connect to themes in *Treeshape*?
-

Create examples of figurative language to include in your memoir:

Simile (using 'like' or 'as'):

Example: 'The old tree stands like a guardian watching over the park.'

Metaphor (comparison **without** 'like' or 'as'):

Example: 'This creek is a ribbon of life through the suburbs.'

Personification (giving nature human qualities):

Example: 'The gum trees whisper secrets to each other in the wind.'

Rhetorical Question (a question asked to make the reader think, not to get an answer):

Example: 'Who wouldn't want to protect a place this beautiful?'

Sketch and Illustration Draft Template

Introduction

Hopes and Threats

Why this place matters

Action and Connection

TIME TO WRITE

1. Write the text for your memoir

Text 1: Brief description of your special place and why you're connected to it

- This place matters to me because...
- This place reminds me of...

Text 2: Reflective writing about what it means to you and why it matters; include figurative language examples.

- When I think about this, I feel... because...

Text 3: Describe things that could harm your place and include reflection on feelings

- I used to think... but now I...

Page 4: How I will protect this place, including a message of hope

- This makes me want to...
- This gives me hope because...

Deep Reflection Writing Points:

- Why this matters to you
- What feelings it brings up
- What it makes you think about
- What it teaches you
- What connections you see to *Treeshape*
- What action it inspires

2. Create illustrations

Using Trace Balla's techniques:

- Simple outlines for people and objects
- Detailed observation of nature (trees, plants, water, sky)
- Use of colour to create mood
- Clear composition that guides the reader's eye

Materials you can use:

- Pencil and pen/fine markers
- Coloured pencils or watercolours
- A3 or A4 paper
- Reference: Your planning sketches and *Treeshape* examples

Remember:

- Show, don't just tell, use images to convey meaning
- Include yourself in at least one page

- Illustrate facial expressions and body language
- Add details that show what makes this place special

3. Add text to pages

- Write neatly or type and paste text
- Decide where text goes (captions, speech bubbles, text boxes, integrated with images)
- Balance text and images – let pictures do some of the storytelling
- Include your figurative language examples

(Optional for Years 7–8) ARTIST STATEMENT

Write a brief artist statement (100–150 words) explaining:

- Why you chose this place
- What techniques you used from Trace Balla
- What message you want readers to understand
- What you learned creating this memoir

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Trace Balla is a much-loved Australian children's book author, illustrator and writer of song lyrics who lives on Dja Dja Wurrung Country. She has won the CBCA Book of the Year Award, the Readings Children's Book Prize, the Wilderness Society's Environment Award for Children's Literature, a Comic Arts Awards of Australia Bronze Ledger, and an Honour Award for the inaugural SCBWI Australian Picture Book Illustrator Awards. She has also been shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Literary Awards, Speech Pathology Book of the Year Awards (twice), Adelaide Festival Awards for Children's Literature, and ALIA Graphic's Notable Australian Graphic Novel Award.

Trace's stories explore themes of connection to Country and community, nature, friendship, gratitude, grief and human rights. She also loves to inspire others, of all ages and from all walks of life, through her talks and workshops, which explore creativity and caring for the planet. Trace does freelance illustration work, from logos to murals, and has a bookshelf ever filling with her nature journals and other reflections. Find out more about her at traceballa.com.

ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE NOTES

Lauren Wanstall is an educational professional with over a decade of experience in curriculum development, teaching and educational publishing. Her career has taken her from classrooms in Australia, New Zealand and South Korea to educational publishing houses and content development roles. She brings a uniquely global perspective to her work in education.

She specialises in creating curriculum-aligned literacy resources for Australian primary schools, currently working as a Curriculum Resource Developer. Her expertise extends to inclusive education, with particular focus on supporting EAL students, and diverse learners.

As an educational writer and co-author, Lauren Wanstall contributed to resources that support both students and educators, including culturally sensitive materials. Her work bridges educational theory and practical application, creating accessible, engaging and evidence-based resources that support student achievement.

Drawing on her diverse experience, from classroom teaching to educational publishing and content creation, she brings a holistic, practical approach to educational resource development.

CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

By Trace Balla:

Rivertime – A graphic novel about a canoe journey and connecting with nature

Rockhopping – Follow Clancy and Uncle Egg on a bushwalking adventure

Landing with Wings – Miri's nature diary and journey of discovery

Leaf-light – Miri helps a rescued baby emu (companion to *Landing with Wings*)

The Thank You Dish – About gratitude and community

ONLINE LINKS IN FULL

Trace Balla's website: <https://traceballa.com/>

Allen & Unwin Teacher Resources: www.allenandunwin.com/

AIATSIS website: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/first-peoples-australia>

Bush Heritage Australia educational resources: <https://www.bushheritage.org.au/>

Rainforest Information Centre: rainforestinformationcentre.org/

Nalderun (organisation that Trace Balla volunteers with): <https://nalderun.net.au/>

Karekarrme (a virtual exhibition and online archive documenting the resistance to uranium mining on Mirarr Country): <https://karekarrme.au/>

ORGANISATIONS

Local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Land Councils

Environmental education centres

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples ranger programs

Bush Heritage Australia educational resources