



Evoking a public dialogue on soil: The Art in Soil Initiative

John Bennett (1,2), Carol Schwarzman (3), and Renata Buziak (4)

(1) Soil Science Australia, Federal Office, PO Box 737, Prospect East, SA 5082, Australia (President@SoilScienceAustralia.org.au), (2) University of Southern Queensland, West St, Toowoomba, QLD 4350, Australia (John.Bennett@USQ.edu.au), (3) Independent Scholar, 90 Brook St, Windsor QLD 4030, Australia, (4) Queensland College of Art, Griffith University 226 Grey St, South Bank, QLD 4101, Australia

The importance of soils to the existence of humanity — historical and ongoing — is a concept well understood within the scientific community. However, the direct influence of soil in our day-to-day lives, and the extent of the ecosystem services that soil supports, is less well understood by the general public. Soil is synonymous with dirt in the general public lexicon, which holds negative connotations and is generally associated with a simple substance that must be swept from our floors and washed from our hands. The actual role of soils is abstract to the majority of the general public leading to an underappreciation of the complexity of management and the fact that soil security underpins food and fibre security, amongst other key societal issues. We hypothesise that urbanisation and the rise of broad-acre agriculture have led to a gradual disconnect with the land that supports us, but that innately this connection exists and simply needs to be rebuilt. The Art in Soil Initiative of Soil Science Australia integrated the arts and scientific communities to evoke an emotive/ affective public dialogue on the importance of soils to humankind as the catalyst to reimagining this connection with our soils.

The Art in Soil Initiative engaged 6 artists, or artist groups, through a competitive expression of interest process. Projects were selected on the basis of potential to elucidate critical and/or conceptual thought, the likelihood of the project to create ongoing discussion beyond the life of the project, and the medium of the work. The 6 projects included: visual, conceptual, sound, landscape, architectural, and sculptural media. The initiative commenced with a public launch, followed by a 6-month residency whereby artists worked with soil scientists to discuss concepts in a two-way learning process, and culminated with a public exhibition in December 2017. The process was implemented by a working group consisting of 6 artists and 3 soil scientists. Initial impact of this project has led to numerous radio interviews, a television documentary, the production of a book, and valuable discussions on the longevity of the initiative as an annual event. A formally organised discussion between artists and soil scientists with the general public, but unstructured in implementation, revealed valuable insights into the process of public engagement, a passion for continuation, and several important future directions. Our presentation will discuss how art and soil science communities, which both seek to convey complex issues to society in their own way, can work together to foster and maintain the momentum of a public dialogue on soils, using the Art in Soil Initiative as a demonstration framework to broader implementation.