Reading your greens

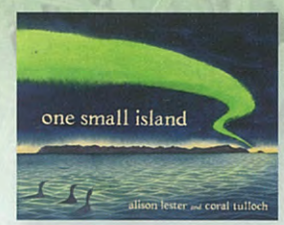
Mason Engelander explores how eco-friendly children's books have evolved with the rise of the green movement.

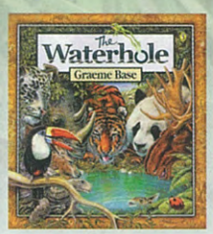
Some of the earliest 'green books' for kids did not carry an explicit environmental theme. Often set in fantastical worlds, books such as Dr Seuss' *The Lorax* (1971), Bill Peet's *The Wump World* (1970) and Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* (1964) employed allegories to convey messages that, to contemporary readers, are pro-environmental. For many years, these books were the only model for children's books exploring environmental themes.

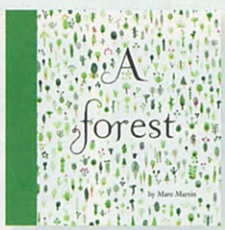
However, over subsequent decades this began to change. Around the early 1990s, environmentalism began to shift from a concern reserved for the far left to one whose responsibility was shared by all. For children's books, this meant that titles that simply drew attention to environments suffering from over-exploitation now began to share the shelves with those that offered solutions.

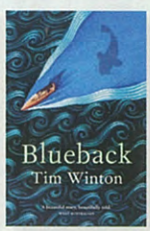
In 1994, two books in this model were published. The first, Melvin Berger's *Oil Spill!*, outlined the threat of oil spills and their effects on wildlife and the natural environment. The message, however, was not conveyed through analogy, but through Paul Mirocha's realistic illustrations. *Oil Spill!* assured readers that scientists were working on ways to better tackle spills, but also offered suggestions on how children could help.

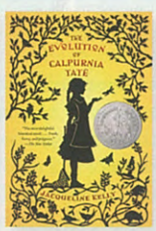
The second, Paul Showers' *Where Does the Garbage Go?*, depicted the ubiquitous issue of landfill. It showed how rubbish does not simply disappear and recommended children reduce, reuse and recycle to help tackle the problem.











Other examples of post-1990s children's titles leave little doubt as to their intent. *S is for Save the Planet: A How-To-Be Green Alphabet* (2009), *Eco Babies Wear Green* (2008) and *Michael Recycle* (2008) all place eco-friendly action at the heart of their narrative.

Taking action

Educating children about the environment and encouraging them to take action is now 'officially' recognised by the Australian government. According to the federal government's National Quality Framework, education providers are required to assist children in 'becoming environmentally aware and responsible', and state websites provide schools with suggested booklists, including titles such as *True Green Kids: 100 Things You Can Do to Help Fix the Planet* (2008).

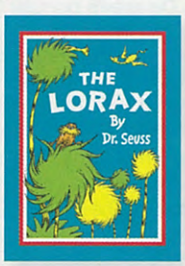
Environmental themes have also entered mainstream publishing. In 2008, Simon & Schuster launched its eco-friendly children's division Little Green Books, publishing such titles as *Don't Throw That Away!*, *The Polar Bears' Home* and *This Is Our World*. Each book concludes with educational messages from environmental agencies centred on the theme that 'a greener world starts with kids who care'.

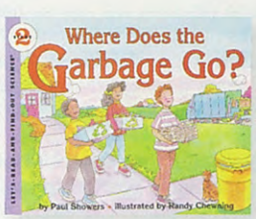
Popular children's book series 'Charlie and Lola', 'Ivy and Bean' and 'Peppa Pig' have also gone green with titles that explore environmental issues. *Ivy and Bean: What's the Big Idea?* (2011) even includes a Q&A on global warming in the appendix.

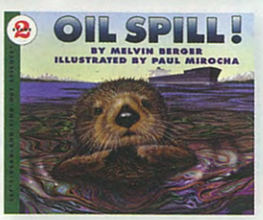
Popular today

Warren Bonnet, co-owner of 'art meets science' bookstore Embiggen Books, believes there is a 'very strong' market for environmental children's books today. 'A great many parents and grandparents want their children to have a broader and deeper appreciation of the environment than they may have experienced themselves,' he says.

The store's popular titles strike a balance between allegory and a more explicitly educational approach. Some of Bonnet's







favourites include *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate* (Jacqueline Kelly, Turtleback Books), *The Everything Kids' Environment Book* (Sheri Amsel, Adams Media), *The Squid, the Vibrio and the Moon* (Ailsa Wild, Aviva Reed & Gregory Crocetti—see box), *One Small Island* (Alison Lester & Coral Tulloch, Viking), *Uno's Garden* and *The Waterhole* (both Graeme Base, Penguin), *A Forest* (Marc Martin, Viking) and 'The Magic School Bus' series (Scholastic).

Martin's *A Forest*, along with Peter Brown's *The Curious Garden* (Little, Brown), are also popular at The Hill of Content Bookshop. 'For us, a successful environmental book is one that focuses on having strong narrative and illustrations with an environmental theme, rather than being purely educational,' says children's book buyer Meg Whelan.

Frances Atkinson, the children's book specialist at My Bookshop, says 'Rachel Tonkin's *Leaf Litter* [HarperCollins] does a great job explaining the natural world in a simple, accurate and creative way'. 'By focusing on a single patch of scattered leaf litter, she takes something most of us daily ignore and reveals the complex, fascinating world beneath our feet.' She also recommends Tim Winton's *Blueback* (Penguin)—'beautifully written and highlights both environmental sustainability and overfishing'—and Base's *The Waterhole*, with its 'strong environmental message that promotes discussion, especially about accountability'.

Bonnet observes that there are 'quite a few [local] authors tackling the area, such as Alison Lester, Jackie French, Marc Martin, Isobelle Carmody, Graeme Base and many others'. However, Whelan and Atkinson both say they would like to see more Australian titles with an environmental focus. 'The subject matter is huge and can be tackled in so many ways, especially in the Australian context—for example, coral bleaching in the Great Barrier Reef, WA mining, climate change and drought,' says Atkinson. JUNIOR

Environmental award-winners

Since 1994, the Wilderness Society in Australia has presented the Environment Award for Children's Literature.

The award is presented annually to fiction and nonfiction books that 'foster a love of wild places and wildlife in young Australians' and 'encourage a sense of responsibility for our natural world', and is judged by a panel of environmental educators and guest judges.

One of the inaugural winners was Tim Winton's *Lockie Leonard, Scumbuster* (Pan Macmillan), in which the 13-year-old Lockie learns about a factory polluting his hometown's bay and decides to challenge their right to do so by taking on the local council.

In 2014 the winners were *Bush Baby Rescue: Juliet Nearly a Vet Book 4* (Rebecca Johnson, illus by Kyla May, Puffin), *The Smallest Carbon Footprint in the Land and Other Eco-tales* (Anne Morgan, illus by Gay McKinnon, Interactive Publications) and *Welcome Home* (Christina Booth, Ford Street).

For more information about the awards, visit the website www.eacl.org.au.

Under the microscope

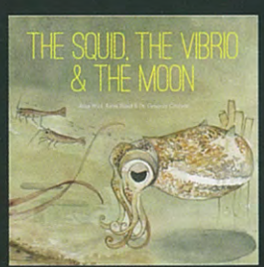
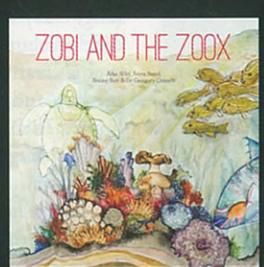
Scale Free Network is a new publisher whose books—aimed at 'primary-school children and science nerds of any age'—offers a sophisticated approach to environmental topics.

The publisher has just released its second illustrated science-adventure story *Zobi and the Zoox*, which explores the issue of coral bleaching on the Great Barrier Reef and features 'a cast of microbes, molecules and mucus' found within coral. The publisher's first book, *The Squid, the Vibrio & the Moon*, looks at the symbiotic relationship between a squid and its resident Vibrio bacteria.

Gregory Crocetti, one of the founders of Scale Free Network, told *Books+Publishing* that the publisher has sold approximately 1400 copies of *The Squid, the Vibrio & the Moon* and 550 copies of *Zobi and the Zoox* after running successful crowdfunding campaigns.

'Almost all of our sales have been to mums and dads through our online crowdfunding shop at Pozible—however, we are starting to see an increase in sales to schools through our distributor, INT Books,' says Crocetti. 'We're seeing our primary audience as parents who read with their children, but are confident this will also naturally extend to teachers reading our books with their students.'

Crocetti believes that embedding environmental values and science into children's books is an important way to spark the next generation's curiosity and increase their awareness of nature.

'Reaching young minds before attitudes and behaviours become fixed as adults is especially significant at this time, when the majority of children grow up in an urban environment and direct experience between children and the natural surroundings is in rapid decline. When children do hear environmental messages, it is often disheartening and in a highly politicised context, which can often feel overwhelming and disempowering,' says Crocetti.

'Our pro-environmental stance is about countering hysteria about hygiene, and addressing broad misunderstanding about the fundamental role of microorganisms in the health of our bodies and our planet.'