

Draw me the sea

Drawings can be used to identify and understand children's ecological knowledge, as well as their representations and emotions, and as a medium for dialogue between science and society.



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Drawing workshop in Yaté, New Caledonia.

In Fiji and New Caledonia, children aged between 9 and 14 living on the coast were asked to draw the sea, what they do there and what others do there, as part of classroom sessions in urban and rural settings. Nearly 300 drawings were made, then presented and discussed by the children in short interviews.

The drawings show how children perceive the land-sea continuum, with its ecological connections (such as the links between different marine species and their habitats) and social connections (for example, attachment to certain emblematic species). The children observe and experiment with these connections through their own fishing practices. In Fiji, 70% of the drawings show fishing practices, compared with around 30% in New Caledonia, where the drawings tend to depict the beach and the various associated recreational activities.

When children draw fishing practices, girls draw men and boys as well as women and girls, whereas boys tend to draw only male characters. Children learn at a very early age that men and women engage in various fishing activities, but in different ways. As the drawings show, women generally fish without a boat, close to the shore, and gather shellfish and other invertebrates more than men do. The absence of female characters in the boys' drawings reflects the fact that the role of women in onshore fishing is often less valued and therefore relatively "invisible" compared to that of men.

... Anthropologists and ethno-ecologists
are proposing to use drawings to help children express
their relationship with their maritime environment ...

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The interviews also provided a better understanding of the extent of the knowledge and skills that the children develop – and pass on – through their fishing practices. Particularly in rural areas, in both Fiji and New Caledonia, children are able to identify and name a large number of fish species, know the behaviour of marine animals and can describe different fishing techniques.

“In Fiji, we need to focus on raising students’ environmental awareness, as they are the leaders of the future and can play a crucial role as guardians and defenders of the environment. Using visual aids, such as drawings, is a creative approach that allows these students to express their understanding of the marine ecosystem and document their sociocultural values in order to bring about positive change.”

Ulamila Matairakula, Project Manager, Pacific Blue Foundation, Fiji

“These research projects enable primary school teachers to reflect on the challenges of sustainable development by involving the children in our schools. By opening up the class to scientific partners, pupils have the opportunity to talk to specialists, acquire knowledge as part of their project, find out about careers in research and develop vocations. These pupils can also raise awareness of climate change and its consequences among other schoolchildren.”

Vanessa Montagnat, New Caledonia Education Department



Drawings by a 10-year-old boy in Yaté, New Caledonia.

The drawings collected show that the children have detailed knowledge of the land-sea continuum. The exhibition of these drawings in the villages involved has created a sense of pride, as well as a forum for dialogue between the children, scientists, teachers, families, local authorities and, more broadly, the general public.

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Children fishing on a reef flat in Reao, French Polynesia. © IRD/S.Andréfouët

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