

ANIMALS ON COUNTRY

Let's look after the animals with Uncle Kuu

Written by VICTOR STEFFENSEN

Illustrated by SANDRA STEFFENSEN

RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 5–10 YEARS OLD (LOWER TO UPPER PRIMARY)

GENRE: Children's Non-Fiction Literature and Wildlife (Children's/Teenage)

THEMES: Australian animals, respect for Country, the environment, conservation, First Nations Australian histories and cultures, transferring knowledge and culture

CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:

- English: Literature, literacy and language
- Histories and Social Sciences (HaSS): Knowledge and Understanding – History and Geography/Skills
- Science: Science Understanding - Biological Sciences/Science as a Human Endeavour/Science Inquiry
- The Arts: Visual Arts/Music/Drama/Dance/Media Arts
- Cross-Curriculum Priority: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures/Sustainability

NOTES WRITTEN BY: Zoe O'Hara

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INTRODUCTION

This culturally rich, beautiful and insightful book by brother-and-sister team, Victor and Sandra Steffensen brings the vital message that ***we all have a responsibility to care for Country and that educating the next generation about how to do this correctly is key.***

This teacher resource provides many adaptable classroom discussion points and engaging activity ideas that can come from enjoying and learning from this book. These can be used across many age groups and levels of ability whilst aligning with multiple learning areas of the Australian Curriculum.

PLOT SUMMARY

This engaging picture book from award-winning brother-and-sister team Victor and Sandra Steffensen inspires children and adults alike to look after animals through Indigenous cultural practices.

'For thousands of years, Aboriginal people looked after the land to keep it healthy, so there was plenty of food for the animals to eat.'

But today, the animals are wondering what has happened to the people. Trees have been cut down, land has been cleared and rivers have been polluted.

Join Uncle Kuu as he takes children out on Country to learn about the First Peoples' traditions of caring for animals, and in turn, caring for Country.

By First Nations People and non-Indigenous Australians coming together, we can all be part of the animal world and help to look after the animals.

From the bestselling author of *Fire Country* comes this endearing picture book for children aged 5–10 years that celebrates the value of Indigenous knowledge in modern Australia.

A Q&A with Victor Steffenson

What inspired you to write this book?

'*Animals on Country* is another Uncle Kuu adventure I wanted to write to help people understand the way animals were respected and utilised through Indigenous ways. It is so important to understand that the animals in Australia have had an amazing relationship with people and even depended on them to care for the land. With the decline of our native animals through poor land management and development, this children's book is a way to inspire the next generations to have a greater connection of caring for them. For thousands of years, the animals have been culturally respected through totems, songs, dances and even special lores on hunting them as part of the natural food chain provided by Mother Nature. *Animals on Country* brings all of these important values together to help people understand that the animals are respectfully waiting for us to look after the land and waters once again.'

Who inspired you as a child?

'Through my childhood I loved camping and fishing down the river with my close friends. I was always interested in learning about the bush and the wealth of knowledge that comes from our Aboriginal culture. I would read books at school like the *Quinkins* by Percy Trezise and Dick Roughsey. The stories of being on Country and the illustrations always sent my imagination wild.'

'I had a couple of bush tucker books that I kept at home and I constantly looked through them for inspiration and knowledge. Learning from Aboriginal Elders was the greatest way of all as they taught me to read the Country like a book. I had a great love for music and filmmaking when I was growing up too, and I started writing songs and playing the guitar. I wanted to bring my love for culture, Country, film and music together in a way where I could combine them all.'

Why is this book vital now?

'We live at a time where people need to learn to look after the land like our Ancestors have done for thousands of years. With the problems of wildfires and threats to our environment, I feel it is important to bring hope to the next generations through the power of storytelling.'

Sandra Steffenson talks about her practice

'The illustrations in the book were created using pen, watercolour and acrylics on Rains watercolour paper. Much of my inspiration comes from the natural beauty of the landscapes surrounding my hometown of Kuranda, as well as the lush scenery across the Atherton Tablelands.'

The colours, textures and forms found in these environments often guide the mood and detail of my illustrations.'

ASSESSABLE CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITY: ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HISTORIES AND CULTURES/SUSTAINABILITY

GENERAL CAPABILITIES: Ethical Understanding

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 as well as the General Capability of Ethical Understanding.

SUGGESTION: Prior to, during or after discussions and activities

Invite local cultural knowledge holders to share stories or information about animals and the environment in your local area.

This may include:

- Community Elders
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander rangers
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander family or community members
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander corporations
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander education centres

BEFORE READING

Here are some discussion ideas that can be talked about with the learners before reading *Animals on Country*:

- Can you think of any other stories you have read before that include stories, knowledge or artwork by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples? Elaborate.
- Do you know of any native animals that live around where we live? Or in Australia?
- Why do you think we should look after native animals?
- What do you think native animals need to live and be safe?
- What are some things that can make the environment unsafe for our native animals?
- Do you know some ways we can look after the native animals that live near us?

ENGLISH

LITERATURE/LITERACY/LANGUAGE

Discussion Ideas

- Do you think this story is fiction or non-fiction? Why? Discuss.
- What are some important messages that have come from this book?
- Why do you think the author thinks caring for the animals is so important?
- Why is sharing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and knowledge very important?

Activity Ideas

- Dissect the Bold Print
Discuss the coloured **bold words** in the text: The names/descriptions in the table below were highlighted in bold throughout the book. In pairs or small groups or with the whole class, ask the learners, why do they think the author felt it was important to make these words bold?

words in bold	survive	story places	caring for Country	helped
Uncle Kuu	healthy	roam free	songs	cool fires
softly	trees	breed	dances	caring
quiet	rivers	Mother Nature	cut down	protecting
fresh tracks	oceans	enough	cleared	safe place
kangaroo	fish	greedy	wrong season	animal totem
dingo	clean	certain seasons	rest	all creatures big and small
emu	big	share	pollution	
totem	small	spirit	poisonous	animal world

- Choose one of the words from the table above and find this word in the book. Read the text on this page and have a look at the illustrations. Then discuss why you think the author made this word bold in the book. Why is this name/description so important in this book?
- **Optional Extra:** *Animals on Country* Make a Word Search
Use some of the bold text names and descriptions to create a word search puzzle at end of this document.

Scenario Comparison

- Reflect on the Before Reading discussion about what animals need to live and be safe and what can be destructive for native animals as well as what you read in *Animals on Country*.
- In pairs or small groups or with the whole class, discuss the idea of looking after the environment to protect native animals. Ask learners to think about how habitats might change depending on many factors that might include:
 - overhunting or overfishing
 - clearing land to build roads, housing, factories, farms etc.
 - taking away things that might be food or shelter for animals such as plants, rocks, shells
 - poisoning the environment with chemicals in water, air or the ground
 - invasive species
- Now discuss what would happen with the habitats if they were cared for in a way designed to protect native animals.
- Compare what these two scenarios might look like in a habitat for native animals in the area where you live. These ideas can be written and/or illustrated on the worksheet *Animals on Country Scenario Comparison* at the end of this document.
- **Optional Extra:** Brainstorm ideas for places in the local area that would have a rich habitat for native animals. Areas might include:
 - national parks
 - backyards
 - school grounds
 - beaches
 - rivers
 - inlets

HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (HaSS)

Knowledge and Understanding; History/Skills

Discussion Ideas

- Can you think of a time when a family member has taught you something important? Would you like to share this information?
- Is there a special place that you like to visit with your family? What do you know about this place? Why is this place special?
- Are there any places that you know about near us that are important for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander People? Why are these places important?

Activity Ideas

SHARING KNOWLEDGE FROM THE PAST INTO THE FUTURE

- Ask learners to think about an important place or message that they would like to share with others in the future. This can be brainstormed in different ways. Some ideas to do this include:
 - on a whiteboard
 - butcher's paper
 - yarning circle
- Ask learners to discuss:
 - How they would share this knowledge.
 - Why this knowledge is important.
 - What they would tell others
- Use the discussion ideas to write a letter to future learners in their school to share the important message or information about an important place. If learners are not able to write a letter yet, they can illustrate instead.
- **Optional Extra:** If time allows, suggest learners ask the adults in their lives for a piece of important information that they would like to share with the younger generations and then the learners can share this information with their peers.

SCIENCE

Science Understanding – Biological Sciences/Science as a Human Endeavour/Science Inquiry

Discussion Ideas

- Ask learners to revisit the discussion about what animals need in their habitat to live and be safe.
- Do you think we have the right habitats for native animals in our local area?
- What animals do you think eat other animals in our local area? This might include native animals and invasive species or domestic animals.

Activity Ideas

HELP A HABITAT

- Choose a native animal that lives in the local area. This could be done individually, in pairs or small groups or even with the whole class. Research or brainstorm ideas about what this animal would need in its habitat to live and be safe.
- Design a habitat on paper or on a device that includes everything this animal needs to thrive. Some questions that the students can think about might include:
 - What shelter might it need?
 - Does it need clean air or clean water to breathe?
 - What food does it eat?
 - If it drinks water, where does it drink from?
 - Does it live alone or need to be with its family?
- Make the habitat that the learners have designed. This could be in many forms, depending on what your learners have access to. Some ideas/materials for the models are:
 - a diorama
 - a terrarium
 - Lego/building materials/figurines
 - recycled craft items
 - playdough
 - an area in the garden

- **Optional Extra:** Visit some habitats in the local area. Ideally, somewhere that has local Indigenous knowledge about the area and the environment.

THE ARTS

Visual Arts/Music/Drama/Dance/Media Arts

SPREAD THE WORD

Discussion Ideas

- Reflecting on the messages in the book from Uncle Kuu, discuss some important ideas about how native animal habitats could be protected and cared for in the local area.
- What are some key messages you would like to share with your local community?
- What are some different ways we could share these important messages? Potential ideas may include:
 - a play
 - a news report
 - a dance
 - a song
 - a video presentation
 - a poster
 - a mural

Activity Ideas

- Plan to make a poster/play/song/presentation/dance about Caring for Country and protecting native animals for many years to come. It may be one key idea/action that could be taken or a few ideas. This could be done individually, in pairs or small groups or even as a whole class effort!
- Create an artistic piece! When in the creation process, ask learners to think about the following:
 - The target audience. Will it be learners in your school? People in your local community?

- The key message they want to share. Is it something people can understand? Are there actions they can take after getting the important information? Can they get further information if they want to?
- What resources and knowledge are available. Is the creative process achievable and in a reasonable timeframe?
- Depending on what pieces the learners are creating, think about how these pieces will be shared. Some ideas for sharing include:
 - a performance
 - a sharing circle
 - newsletter
 - local newspaper
 - an assembly
 - a picnic
 - an exhibition
- **Optional Extra:** Learn the song, *The Animals* by Victor Steffensen and Mulong in the back of the *Animals on Country* book. The lyrics and music to play is located at the back of the book. To hear the melody, you can watch it on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xg_YDF88ITs

FURTHER LEARNING IDEAS

- Read the information about the Victor Steffensen - Author and Sandra Steffensen - Illustrator of *Animals on Country* and make a fact flyer about them. Choose something interesting about them on your flyer that you would like to share with others.
- Think of some questions you might like to ask Victor or Sandra about themselves or their work.
- Research cultural terms in the book together if the learners are not familiar with these yet. Examples that could be researched might include:
 - story places
 - animal totem
 - cool fires
- Uncle Kuu talks about certain seasons in this book. Does your school have access to a local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander seasonal calendar for your area? These can be researched at a few different websites including:

- BOM Bureau of Meteorology <https://beta.bom.gov.au/resources/indigenous-weather-knowledge/indigenous-seasonal-calendars>
- CSIRO Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation <https://www.csiro.au/en/research/indigenous-science/indigenous-knowledge/calendars>

Learners can research their local or a nearby Indigenous seasonal calendar and learn about the information on the calendar. If you are unsure about who your local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities are, you can have a look on this Map of Indigenous Australia together: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia>

- Read this news article and discuss how it aligns with Uncle Kuu's teachings. https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2025-08-10/great-desert-skinks-aboriginal-species-management-conservation/105426850?utm_source=abc_news_app&utm_medium=content_share&utm_campaign=abc_news_app&utm_content=other

Can you find other articles or books that reflect a similar message to others?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

VICTOR STEFFENSEN is an Indigenous writer, filmmaker, musician and consultant, applying traditional knowledge values in a contemporary context through workshops and artistic projects. He is a descendant of the Tagalaka people through his mother's connections from the Gulf Country of north Queensland. Much of Victor's work over the past 29 years has been based on the arts and reviving traditional knowledge values – particularly traditional burning – through mentoring, leadership, and on-ground training with Aboriginal communities and many non-Indigenous Australians. He is the co-founder of Firesticks, and has connected with First Nations communities in California and Canada, and the Sámi people of Scandinavia, sharing cultural knowledge practices related to caring for Country. This is Victor's third children's book following *Looking After Country with Fire* and *The Trees*.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

SANDRA STEFFENSEN grew up in the small, tropical rainforest village of Kuranda. After living in Sydney for 15 years, Sandra moved back to Far North Queensland, lured by her childhood memories and connections to the local landscape. Sandra's maternal grandmother is from the Tagalaka people from the Gulf Country of north Queensland. She teaches Visual Arts specialising in the practice of ceramics. Sandra uses the sgraffito technique to adorn her functional pieces with intricate illustrations of local landscapes and the wildlife inhabiting them to remind us of the beauty and the role they play in this world. This is Sandra's third children's book with her brother Victor following *Looking After Country with Fire* and *The Trees*.

ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE NOTES

Zoe O'Hara is grateful to have lived and worked with Indigenous Communities in Education and Curriculum for over 15 years. Zoe currently lives on stunning Bibulmun Menang Boodja (Country) of the Noongar Nation in South West of Western Australia and enjoys experiencing and caring for nature with her family.

CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

(In alphabetical order of authors)

The Trees by Victor Steffensen and Sandra Steffensen, Hardie Grant

Looking After Country with Fire by Victor Steffensen and Sandra Steffensen, Hardie Grant

The First Scientists by Corey Tutt and Blak Douglas, Hardie Grant

Caution! This Book Contains Deadly Reptiles by Corey Tutt and Ben Williams, Allen & Unwin

Australian Geographic DeadlyScience Book 1 Animal Adaptions edited by Corey Tutt, Hardie Grant

Australian Geographic DeadlyScience Book 3 Life Cycles edited by Corey Tutt, Hardie Grant

Australian Geographic DeadlyScience Book 6 Animal Survival edited by Corey Tutt, Hardie Grant

Australian Geographic DeadlyScience Book 8 Renewable Resources edited by Corey Tutt, Hardie Grant

Playground compiled by Nadia Wheatley and illustrated by Ken Searle, Allen & Unwin

ONLINE LINKS IN FULL

Animals on Country, Allen & Unwin:

<https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/book/Victor-Steffensen,-illustrated-by-Sandra-Steffensen-Animals-on-Country-9781761181566>

The Animals (song) by Mulong:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xg_YDF88ITs

Indigenous Seasonal Calendars:

- BOM Bureau of Meteorology
<https://beta.bom.gov.au/resources/indigenous-weather-knowledge/indigenous-seasonal-calendars>
- CSIRO Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
<https://www.csiro.au/en/research/indigenous-science/indigenous-knowledge/calendars>

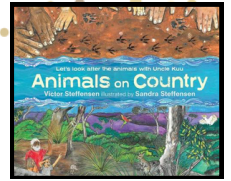
Map of Indigenous Australia:

<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia>

News article that reflects Uncle Kuu's guidance about letting animals replenish when they are at risk:

https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2025-08-10/great-desert-skinks-aboriginal-species-management-conservation/105426850?utm_source=abc_news_app&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_campaign=abc_news_app&utm_content=other

Animals on Country Make a Word Search



Directions: Choose six **bold** words from **Animals on Country** and create your own Word Search!

Hint - the words you choose should be no longer than six letters each!

| _____

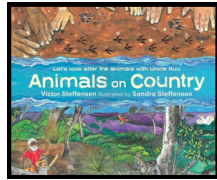
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| _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

Scenario Comparison



Directions: Describe and/or illustrate what might happen with a local habitat in the two different scenarios below. What might happen? What might this look like?

If we cared for native animals
and their environment

If we didn't care for native
animals and their environment

Name: _____

Date: _____