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JOIN, ACT, IMPACT: Renew's branches making a difference

WORDS Jodie Lea Martire



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Renew Sydney West Branch convener Jenny Dibley recognises the importance of attracting people to branch displays at public events. Guessing where the water comes from in their solar powered 'magic tap' gives members the opportunity to engage with the public. Image: Jenny Dibley

Renew's network of volunteer branches – 14 of them around the country – provides an avenue for people to take practical action in their local community to address the global climate emergency. We chat to a handful of members doing exactly that.

Sanctuary's publisher Renew has been inspiring, enabling and advocating for people to live sustainably in their homes and communities for over 40 years, and its branches have always been a vital part of that mission. Each local branch models the idea that a small group of thoughtful, committed

citizens can change the world. Branch members demonstrate sustainable building techniques, advocate for legislative and policy changes, and provide unbiased information on how we can all live greener, cleaner and more equitable lives on our finite planet. Working in their local communities, branch participants take practical action in many small and larger ways and are at the frontline of the slow, vital work of social change. As Tim Williams from the Tassie South Branch says, "If we, as a group, can offer assistance to help make positive changes in people's lives, then all the better."

Renew's branches have been changing people's lives since 1976. That year, its founding group – known as the Alternative Technology Co-operative – was born in

Melbourne, the brainchild of participants in a Friends of the Earth anti-uranium campaign. Forty-five years later, the Melbourne Branch is still going strong: running webinars on electric vehicles, hosting field trips to sustainable properties and battery storage systems, and sharing expert presentations on Australia's energy market and sustainable economies. (We're saddened by the tragic fire at CERES Community Environment Park in August last year, which destroyed Renew's very first structure – the bluestone solar workshop built in the early 1980s – and its valuable Renew memorabilia. Our best thoughts for renewal are with you, Melbourne Branch!)

Melbourne is just one of many branches across the country. At any one time, Renew benefits from the knowledge and enthusiasm of between 10 and 14 branches: "People are often approaching us to start one in their area," says Alli Burness, Renew's Partnership Manager, noting that groups in Broome, Bendigo and the Gold Coast are currently coming together. At other times, branches go into recess or reconfigure with new participants; as many of us understand, it's hard to work, raise children and volunteer at the same time. Each branch has between one and 10 active members, with regular events drawing up to 50 people and sometimes far more. Rather than being directly managed by the Renew Hub – the head office – in Melbourne, branches are increasingly integrated across all aspects of the organisation's work. Branches can coordinate with the editors of *Sanctuary* and *Renew* magazines to prepare an article, get advice from the Renew policy team, or create local events that reflect Renew-wide campaigns.

"Branch members bring an incredible depth of expertise in the various areas of sustainability," says Alli. By drawing on the variety, knowledge and connections of members, Renew branches provide relationships and knowledge that drive successful change. One great example of this was Renew's role in streamlining the grid connection of domestic solar systems for all Australians. Back in 2005, Renew (then operating as the Alternative Technology Association or ATA) acquired funding to draft Australia's first set of grid connection guidelines for solar PV. Through its branches, the ATA tapped into the experiences of its early-adopter members – who had been trying for many years to connect their PV systems to the grid – to inform how the grid connection guidelines should be put together and what customer issues needed to be solved.

The ATA then worked with government, industry bodies and energy retailers to implement those guidelines through the energy market rules, to simplify and standardise the grid-connection process. Currently, 2.9 million households – or some 30 per cent of Australian homes – benefit from domestic solar systems, in part thanks to the work of Renew and its branches.

Someone with long experience in Renew branches is Jenny Dibley, prize-winning environmental educator and current convenor of the Sydney West Branch. Jenny came to Renew in the early 1990s, having heard that the organisation could help with her plans to teach children about sustainable

energy. She joined Sydney West and developed New South Wales' first sustainable energy school program, which included the installation of a solar tracker, a rooftop photovoltaic system, solar water pumps and a range of hands-on activities for students. "I couldn't have done it without Renew," she says. Jenny saw the branch through its move to what is now the Hawkesbury EarthCare Centre within Western Sydney University; the mudbrick EarthCare building was built by volunteers, including branch members, and has been the branch's home for over 25 years. She also helped re-establish the Sydney Central Branch in the early 2000s, which is still going strong.

"Renew is quite an unusual organisation because there's no private business interest in it," Jenny says. "People really appreciate the advice that is given by Renew – and they trust it, it's honest and evidence-based. I often say that *Renew* magazine is like the *Choice* magazine of sustainable living." The Sydney West branch has a focus on educating the public, which is just up Jenny's alley: "One of the reasons I'm an active member is that I love educating people. People go away positive and they feel they have increased their knowledge and skills, and they're confident to use the information they have gained from us." Jenny loves to meet like-minded people, learn what they know, and share ideas with them at stalls, events and workshops. Since face-to-face education is the most effective method (impacted recently by Covid, of course), Sydney West invites experts to share their knowledge at EarthCare, and leaves ample time for participants to socialise with the speaker



↑ Site visits are popular and a great chance to get practical information in a social setting. The Melbourne Branch organised a day trip to coastal Cape Paterson during a break in Covid lockdowns in 2021, for a tour of the community gardens and some of the sustainable homes at The Cape eco-development.



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Perth Branch volunteers chat with members of the public at the Perth Home Show in March 2021.

and ask questions about their particular situation. Everyone also gets to enjoy EarthCare’s lovely grounds: “It’s absolute time out and everyone feels relaxed and happy at the end of the day.”

At the other end of the membership spectrum is self-declared newbie Tim Williams. “I snuck across the ‘drawbridge’ to Tasmania in March 2020, just before Covid closed state borders, and was directed to Renew’s Tassie South Branch as a way of finding my tribe,” he says. A graduate architect and licensed building designer now specialising in eco-sensitive design, Tim is planning to give an introductory presentation to the branch on the Living Building Challenge (LBC). This is a rigorous, performance-based “philosophy, certification and advocacy tool” which requires a regenerative, integrated approach to designing the built environment. “The main reason I am part of the branch is to learn from the wisdom of the elders, the locals, the academics, the practitioners, the eccentrics, the creative thinkers and the philosophers, all of whom are members of this group,” says Tim. “So far, I have learned many incredibly pertinent and useful ideas without which I would still be in the dark.” These are influencing his professional practice and his own project to design and build an LBC-certified home for himself and his partner. Tim has inspired another new member to join the Tassie South Branch, an Indian-trained architect who – together with her brothers – has purchased 40 hectares of land and is aiming to develop homes that are both sustainable and reasonably priced. This ties in with the branch’s new sub-group, which is focusing on advocating for creative, affordable housing and alternative living solutions in Tasmania, especially in Hobart where homelessness is increasing. “Being part of the Renew branch gives me a sense of being part of a worthwhile and purposeful community,” Tim says.

Another member, Jodi Rashbrook, has been involved in the Perth Branch for six or seven years, having first heard about Renew through Sustainable House Day. Like Jenny, Jodi values Renew’s unbiased information: “There are not really many places where people can get information that’s independent and comes from others’ first-hand experience, rather than from a salesperson or a politician trying to tell them what to do.” Jodi

loves “talking to people, especially at places where they don’t expect you to be – like Hillarys,” she says, referring to Perth’s big marina where the branch holds information stalls. “It’s nice to be able to reach people who are a bit of a naysayer about sustainability. There’s normally a high-five shared if you convert them!” One of the biggest gains Jodi sees is “people being able to do small things to change lifestyles and houses to make them work better.” She loves that there are low-cost solutions that make a big difference, like changing curtains and pelmets to manage room temperature, which encourages people to do more: “When people see a small thing working, they’re inclined to do larger things. But if it’s \$10,000 or \$20,000 to start with ... it’s ‘Yeah, nah, see ya!’”

Alan Strickland, the long-term convenor of the Adelaide Branch, also prefers practical solutions. A branch member since 2002, Alan says, “It’s far more interesting to talk about the practicalities of climate change than wringing my hands and saying, ‘What are we going to do?’” With a background as an industrial technician in power generation, water and uranium mining (“for my sins,” he says), Alan has found that his long-term interests in energy efficiency, renewable energy, waste management and water management all fall under Renew’s broad umbrella. He sees that people are interested in the mechanics of solar and wind generation, for example, so “our branch adds value to its members via technical presentations by expert speakers and the odd site visit. Some of this information is only available to people via Renew.” The Adelaide Branch is also consulted by local organisations who value its knowledge, such as the Adelaide Botanic Gardens asking for advice on enhancing the energy efficiency of its 100-year-old buildings. Currently, the branch is seeing greater interest in improving grid stability through the bidirectional charging of electric vehicles and in the growth of energy storage and microgrids in remote areas.

As these members demonstrate, Renew branches vary widely and reflect the context and concerns of their members and geographical regions – which is exactly as it should be. This scope helps validate Renew as a nationally representative body. Through the strong collaboration of the Renew Hub and its many diverse branches, the organisation’s 11,000-odd members can help create the real changes we need to see in the world – where homes are more energy- and cost-efficient, energy systems are diverted from fossil fuels to renewable sources, and the economy we operate in is circular, sustainable and human-centred. “Our impact is working for the larger cause,” says Jenny, “providing the community with the knowledge, understanding and skills to adopt a sustainable lifestyle.” ⑤

MORE DETAILS

For more information about joining a Renew branch or starting your own, check out Renew’s website (www.renew.org.au/branches) or contact the Renew Hub on renewhub@renew.org.au.