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Foreword

Pursuing your passion and what gives you the greatest satisfaction in life is never an easy journey.

In *Billabong Boy*, Arron and his father, Richard, give us a behind-the-scenes look at what problems, personal and business, they have encountered in developing the successful Kids Teaching Kids program. Arron has chosen the vital task of teaching environmental management to the new generations who will have to deal with the effects of climate change, biodiversity loss and invasive species.

He employs the Kids Teaching Kids model to ensure his attendees are equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to keep spreading the message once they leave the conference venue. There is more wisdom in a primary school classroom than in the nation's Cabinet Room when it comes to environmental issues. Arron's program ensures children are empowered by a good base of scientific information when they give voice to their concerns.

He has also undertaken to build bridges between scientific knowledge and the mainstream community through his appearances on popular

radio and television programs.

But behind every success story there are often darker moments that don't get publicly aired. Arron displays great bravery in talking about the depression and anxiety attacks that resulted from the intense pressure of getting a business off the ground while being in the glare of the public eye.

For many years I was also racked with nerves every time I had to speak in front of a crowd or camera. It's something that a lot of people have to work at and it's refreshing that Arron has been so honest about the difficulties he's faced—speaking from the heart is a great advantage.

It's to Arron's credit that he has come through the experience stronger and wiser, and with this stirring story to share.

Senator Bob Brown

The Greens

Introduction

I'm swimming deeper. The water is so cold down here as no light penetrates the muddy water. I stop somewhere between a deeper dive and a need to return to the surface. It's a peaceful, seductive place. Somewhere later in life I will recreate this feeling through my passion for scuba diving, but for now I'm in my place—Kings Billabong. I am eight years old and the year is 1983.

I became involved in the environmental movement truly by immersion. When I was seven my parents bought a bush block beside the billabong and I spent every single minute in and below the brown, beautiful, turbid waters sourced from the Murray River.

My parents built their billabong dream home near Mildura. Mildura sits precariously on the edge of the outback in Northern Victoria. A fine city built on a thirst for irrigation water.

On one occasion after a morning plunge I emerged with searing eyes and a bright red rash across my body. It was the product of a blue-green algae bloom caused by warm weather, still water and the use of phosphate fertilisers in irrigated agriculture.

I was angry that the need for fertilisers was cramping my enjoyment of my billabong. It came as quite a shock when my Dad said, ‘You know, Arron, choosing to live this close to the water we are also part of the problem. Where do you think our wastewater ends up?’ From then on I began to more fully understand the impact that humans have on the environment and I believe my current life path was formed that day.

I’m now 34 years old and my commitment to a more sustainable environment has not diminished, even though the more idealistic view of my eight-year-old self of some day saving the world has suffered a fair beating. Ultimately politics will be the answer, as I think we already have all the solutions to make our world a better one for all concerned. We know how to save water and how to save energy, so why aren’t we more vigorously pursuing these ends?

Country life, and especially the billabong, are constants in my story. While they help keep me grounded, the peace and quiet of the billabong is not the typical background for the boardroom and the necessary big business, media and politics associated with the business of the environment. The move to environmental change agent has led me further and further from the billabong. Is this story a metaphor for all of us who have increasingly become detached from our environment?

After a childhood on the banks of the Murray River in Mildura, I moved to the city to study forest science at Melbourne University and won a fourth-year scholarship to complete a degree at Chiang Mai University in the forests of Thailand. Since then, I have worked with Water Authorities, Local Government and as a Flood Plain Manager for the Mallee Catchment Management Authority and was fortunate to be picked by the Prime Minister to receive the much-lauded Banksia Foundation Environmentalist of the Year Award.