

THE NATURE OF STRENGTHS



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innovative
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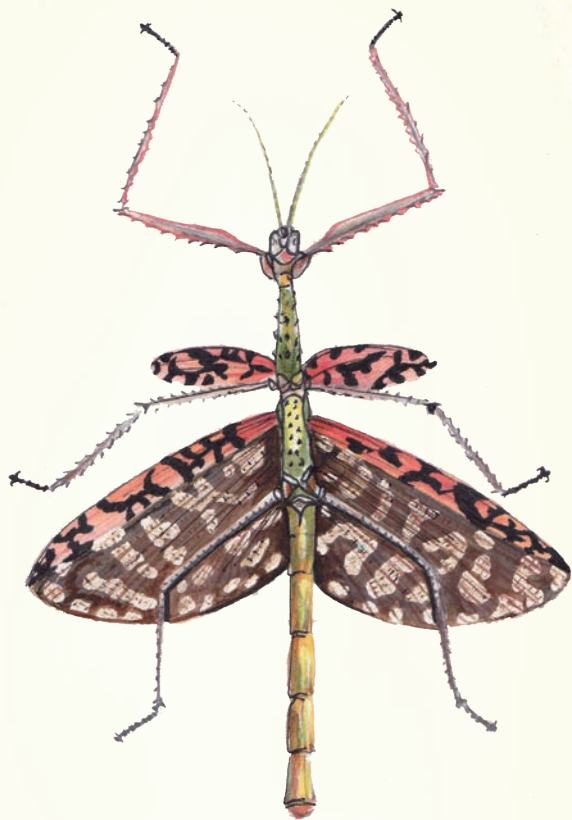
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Innovative Resources acknowledges the Jaara people of Dja Dja Wurrung country, the traditional custodians of the land upon which our premises are located and where our resources are developed and published. We pay our respects to the elders—past, present and future—for they hold the memories, traditions, cultures and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and other First Nations peoples. We must remember that underneath this earth, upon which we so firmly stand, this is, was and always will be, the traditional land of First Nations peoples.



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Mantis religiosa

Praying Mantis

PUBLISHER'S PREFACE: THE STRENGTHS OF NATURE

Nature and the natural world have provided humans with rich sources of storytelling since prehistoric times. Many examples of human art going back over 40,000 years depict animals in particular.

The earliest humans apparently interwove their understanding of animal behaviour, their knowledge of the properties of plants and their lived canvasses of surrounding landscapes into their cosmologies. In the 'Dreaming' of Aboriginal Australian peoples, animals are actors alongside humans in complex narratives played out on a stage that blurs the boundaries of human, animal, plant, mountain, stream, rock, desert and coast.

For Aboriginal Australians nature was a source of key storytelling elements that provided identity for nations, clans, tribes and families. It provided totems to regulate marriage, amongst other customs. It provided artefacts for rituals, signposts for songlines and inspiration for music and dance. Humans were seen as related to animals, and animals were imbued with human characteristics.

Many non-Indigenous Australians count it a privilege to know a little about these traditions and stories.

As cultures around the world began to record their stories, nature was always present. Weather events were described in terms of human behaviour and cultures such as the Ancient Egyptians and Greeks meshed human and animal forms with the gods who established and ruled the world.

The Nature of Strengths card set honours this rich storytelling tradition in a simple contemporary way. We have not attempted to anthropomorphise any of the plants or animals by inferring human characteristics. Rather we have taken some examples of plants and animals whose survival has depended on the evolution of particular characteristics and behaviours. We are not implying that these plants and animals mirror human behaviour, but that these evolved characteristics may have useful and inspiring messages for us humans.

There is a rapidly growing (but age-old) science called ‘biodesign’ or ‘biomimicry’ which analyses characteristics of the natural world to discover solutions to many of the different challenges we face. The genius of nature has been an endless source of solutions to a huge array of technical problems.

Our cards have a much simpler objective—that is, to identify some characteristic survival strengths of plants and animals, and to name those using a simple phrase that suggests possible strengths people may employ to tackle the challenges in their lives.

This focus on strengths is natural territory for Innovative Resources—the publisher of *The Nature of Strengths*. Starting life as the publishing arm of St Luke’s Anglicare, Innovative Resources is now a part of Anglicare Victoria and continues to create and publish ‘strengths-based’ card sets and books.

A strengths-based approach to human service delivery highly values the strengths of every person, family, organisation or community. It focuses on what works, rather than on problems and deficits. Strengths-based practice is based on the understanding that through our strengths we can grow and learn; and that it is particularly useful to look to our strengths in times of trouble or challenge.

The Nature of Strengths joins over 60 original, strengths-based card sets published by Innovative Resources and used world-wide. Not only can we learn strengths from other people, but we can also learn them from the natural world. Nothing is more natural than to learn from nature! Since humans first evolved, animals and plants have been teaching us about who we are and about some of the strengths that we too can have at our disposal. While we have chosen just a few to highlight and celebrate in *The Nature of Strengths* cards, any insect, bird, mammal, reptile, shrub, grass, tree, bacteria and virus—if observed closely and objectively enough—is sure to have characteristics that cause the human jaw to drop in admiration.

We hope these cards will play a part in inspiring each of us to take the time to notice, appreciate and draw strengths from the natural world in a myriad of ways.

Russell Deal

Creative Director (at the time of first publication)

St Luke's Innovative Resources



Litoria gracilentia

Dainty Green Tree Frog



Dacelo novaeguineae

Kookaburra

INTRODUCTION: THE GENIUS OF NATURE

'Biomimicry is the conscious emulation of life's genius.

How has nature done what we want to do?'

Janine Benyus

The world of flora and fauna sustains humans on every level from food to spiritual nourishment, from resilience in times of trouble to healing in times of sickness. It is a source of sheer delight and wonderment to countless people on a daily basis.

Many of us are nourished and inspired by the qualities we perceive in nature, even as nature herself seemingly has no intention to impress. We look up at the vastness of the sky, down at a tiny insect, out over a desert plain or deep into the oceans ... and discover a world of extraordinary variety and activity. The processes of life in all their different forms are taking place—some in less than the blink of an eye and others over eons of geological time.

We humans are part of this process. Truly speaking, we are not separate from nature, and perhaps it is because of this affinity that we may be moved by qualities we perceive in nature such as the poised and patient way that one season moves into the next, or day gives way to dusk and then night. Or perhaps we are inspired by the majesty of mountains, the lushness of a valley or the inexorable flow of a river that may sometimes inspire us to refresh and move on in our lives as well.

Designs found in nature have not only been the inspiration for paintings, fabrics, ceramics, architecture, sculpture and poetry, but they have aided in the development of innovations that may seem at first glance to belong only to the human world. For example, velcro was invented in 1941 by George de Mestral, a Swiss engineer who used

a microscope to study the burrs that clung to the fur of his dog. He noticed tiny hooks at the end of each spine that easily caught on looped or curled fibres such as hair or clothing.

Other examples of humans drawing on nature's genius for design abound:

- ≈ The shape and movement of the wings of the bumble bee gave important clues for helicopter flight.
- ≈ Studies on the reflection and scattering of light by the scales on wings of swallowtail butterflies have led to greater efficiencies in light-emitting diodes.
- ≈ While many children and adults are entranced and delighted by the graceful movement of jellyfish, studies of the way jellyfish move are contributing to designs that use wave and wind propulsion to create clean energy sources, and even to move medical instruments around the bloodstream.
- ≈ The schooling of fish is also inspiring research into how small wind turbines grouped together might be more efficient and less visually intrusive in harnessing wind power than large, individually-spaced turbines.

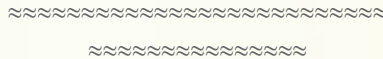
A term has been coined to refer to the human imitation of nature's designs—'biomimicry'. Janine Benyus, who founded the Biomimicry Institute in 2005, said: 'Biomimicry is the conscious emulation of life's genius. How has nature done what we want to do?'

Practitioners of biomimicry include designers, scientists and engineers who study the complex structures found in nature, but also kids, adults, hobbyists and everyday backyard or kitchen table inventors and tinkerers who apply their observations of nature to something that they want to achieve.

Of course, many of the extraordinary goings-on of the natural world take place beyond the gaze of human beings and without the slightest regard for a human audience. And yet, because of the interconnectedness of every element of life, we humans are affected by everything that occurs in the natural world whether we observe it or not. And in turn, our actions, decisions (and some would even say, our thoughts) affect the cycles and systems in which we live.

While innovation can arise out of observing nature, so too can strengths, virtues, goals, plans and steps forward. One of the most enduring metaphors for human transformation is that of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. From the process of a tiny wriggling insect emerging as a brilliantly coloured creature that can fly, many humans have gathered a message: 'Things unfold in their own time—and sometimes from patiently waiting in the dark, great beauty can emerge.'

In *The Nature of Strengths* cards we turn to nature for examples of strengths that we humans can draw on. By looking carefully at a few striking behaviours of animal, insects and plants, we think about how we might apply that strength in our own lives, and make it our own.



Danaus plexippus

Monarch Butterfly



Passiflora edulis

Passionfruit

THE POWER OF THE PRESENT

One of the key aspects of strengths-based practice is the understanding that strengths are not only qualities we possess such as patience, determination, creativity and curiosity. Strengths are also things we do. For example, we demonstrate or enact curiosity by *doing* things such as asking questions, listening with attention, reflecting on something, and taking the time to find out, observe and notice.

American architect and engineer, R Buckminster Fuller (1895 - 1983), once famously said, 'God is a verb, not a noun'. Whether or not you are comfortable with the word 'God', the point is a good one when it comes to practising strengths. The understanding of strengths as actions—or verbs—challenges the idea that strengths are qualities or things—nouns—we either have or don't have. It challenges the idea that strengths are passive by emphasising the 'doing' of strengths as opposed to the 'having' of strengths.

This is a very empowering understanding because it reinforces that we do not have to miss out forever if we weren't born with a natural propensity towards a particular strength. Nor do we have to wait passively for a strength to appear. Rather, we can take the initiative and begin practising a strength whenever we choose.

To emphasise the active nature of strengths you will notice that each *Nature of Strengths* card uses the present participle (the '-ing') on the end of the first word. Hence we have 'Changing Direction', 'Taking Time', 'Finding Shelter' and so on. The strengths featured in *The Nature of Strengths* cards derive from behaviours, actions and activities that we humans can use as inspirations for practising our own resilient and adaptive behaviours.

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WHO ARE THE CARDS FOR?

The Nature of Strengths cards can be used in many different settings and with people of any age. Teachers, trainers, counsellors, psychologists, social workers, health educators, facilitators, human resource professionals, sustainability educators, managers, supervisors and artists will be among those who find uses for the cards.

The cards can be used for nature and environmental studies, for group work, team-building, creative writing and journalling. They can be used for goal-setting, planning, evaluation and as a quick conversation-starter at celebrations or even job interviews. Imagine doing a 'skills audit' of your organisation or team using the cards!

As well as a tool for use with others, the cards can also be a rich prompt for personal reflection.

There are a variety of elements on each card:

- ≈ a painting of a plant, bird, insect, mammal or sea creature
- ≈ the relevant scientific name
- ≈ a paragraph that describes a particular characteristic of that creature or plant, and
- ≈ the title of the card naming the strength in focus.

Young children or people with literacy or language challenges may relate primarily to the images. Older children, young people and adults may also relate to the other elements on the card.

In the section entitled 'Ideas for Using the Cards' (see page 34), you will find a wide range of suggestions for using the cards with children and adults.

THE ILLUSTRATIVE STYLE

(This section by Caitlyn Lehmann)

Long before colour photography was invented, naturalistic illustration brought nature's most distant wonders close into our homes and communities. Hurried sketches, delicate watercolours—images flooded in from the frontiers to the academies, carried in the satchels of artists and adventurers.

The Nature of Strengths pays homage to the art of natural history illustration and the quest for knowledge that lies behind it. It is a style that emerged in the earliest days of modern science, beginning with artists like Leonardo da Vinci (1452 - 1519), Basilius Besler (1561 - 1629) and Maria Sibylla Merian (1647 - 1717), who used their virtuosic skills to record nature's intimate structures and the surging energy of living beings.

Getting to know nature takes special strengths of its own like patience, perseverance, and, above all, curiosity. For natural history artists, it also involves taking a special type of care. It requires continually seeing the world through fresh eyes, even while recording the minutest details like the colours of feathers, the arrangement of petals or the shape of a fin. The art of natural history is all about getting to the essence of what makes that plant or creature what it is.

Not that natural history has always been about a respectful relationship with nature. In the Age of Discovery, the recording of newly-discovered fauna and flora went hand-in-hand with documenting resources for future exploitation.

Helianthus annuus



Sunflower

When Joseph Banks sailed to Australia with Captain James Cook in 1763, he led a scientific expedition that included artist Sydney Parkinson. Parkinson's exquisite botanical illustrations made Banks famous. It was Banks and the British authorities who decided how the fruits of expedition would be used.

The illustrative style used in *The Nature of Strengths* cards is inspired by the style for which Banks became famous. While the illustrations in the cards are clearly modern, the artist, Robyn Spicer, has suggested the illusion of aged pages from an eighteenth-century naturalist's notebook.

We liked the idea of linking the discovery and exploration of our own strengths with expeditions into the natural world. Journeys in the natural world have served to change how we see ourselves. Perhaps the cards too will serve to change our perception of ourselves and open up passages into the unexplored strengths that may lie hidden within.

THE ARRAY OF CARDS AND TEXT

In this section of the booklet you will find thumbnail reproductions of all twenty-eight cards and the text that appears on each on each card.

BEING GREEN

Dainty Green Tree Frog

Litoria gracilentia

Frogs are very effective 'pollution barometers'. They are vulnerable to pollutants both in water while in their egg and tadpole stages, and on land as adults because they breathe primarily through their sensitive, moist skin.



BEING ME

Platypus

Ornithorhynchus anatinus

This burrowing, swimming, egg-laying mammal with webbed feet, a rubbery snout, and venomous ankle spurs so baffled early European naturalists that many considered it an elaborate fraud. The unique features of the platypus make it a much-loved icon of Australia.



BLENDING IN

Australian Giant Cuttlefish

Sepia apama

Using spectacular reds, yellows, whites, and iridescent blues, the giant cuttlefish changes colour instantaneously to signal shifts in mood and blend in with background textures. Males can also mimic female characteristics to fool other males into letting them approach a female they are guarding.



CHANGING DIRECTION

Sunflower

Helianthus annuus

In a process called ‘heliotropism’, the leaves and buds of sunflowers turn to track the sun. The flower petals create patterns of interconnected spirals; typically thirty-four in one direction and fifty-five in the other—successive Fibonacci numbers, and a very efficient way to pack the seeds.



CHILLING OUT

Walrus

Odobenus rosmarus

By inflating two air sacs in its throat, a walrus can sleep while bobbing around in the water. Using its tusks, it can literally ‘hang out’ in the sea by suspending itself from the edges of ice floes, or haul itself onto land to rest and sunbathe.



CHOOSING WISELY

Flamingo

Phoenicopterus ruber

Using beaks that can separate out silt, flamingos filter-feed on brine shrimp and blue-green algae. The female chooses a suitable nesting spot and both parents produce crop milk and nurse their chick. Chicks join small groups which eventually merge to include thousands of juveniles.



FILLING UP

Boab Tree

Adansonia gregorii

Boab trees can store up to one hundred thousand litres of water within the soft wood of their swollen trunks. As well a source of moisture, Indigenous Australians also ate the seeds, carved the nuts, made nets from the fibres and used the trees for storage.



FINDING A WAY

Honeybee

Apis mellifera

Honeybees can locate food by interpreting the dance moves of bee scouts. If the food is nearby, the scout performs a 'round dance' with loops; if far away, it's a 'waggle dance' using their abdomen. The curves, straight lines, angles and speed of the movements indicate the direction, distance and quality of the food.



FINDING SHELTER

Hermit Crab

Pagurus bernhardus

Hermit crabs find suitable shelter by moving successively into empty shells as they grow. Several species use 'vacancy chains' where the largest crab moves into a new shell, the second biggest crab moves into the newly vacated shell, and so on.



GIVING GENEROUSLY

Passionfruit

Passiflora edulis

This vigorously growing vine produces beautiful flowers with cross-shaped stamens (named after the Passion of Christ). Its tangy fruit, with abundant small seeds, can be eaten alone or used in jams, juices, creams and liqueurs. Even the young vine shoots can be eaten in salads and curries.



HAVING FUN

Bottlenose Dolphin

Tursiops truncatus

Play is an important part of dolphin culture. They play with seaweed, play-fight with other dolphins and tease other creatures like sea birds and turtles. Dolphins are enthusiastic surfers of coastal swells and the bow waves of boats. They have also been observed blowing and playing with bubble rings.



HAVING HEART

Spotted Hyena

Crocuta crocuta

Hyenas are the endurance athletes of the animal kingdom. Their large hearts allow them to run at about ten kilometres per hour for more than three hours at a stretch and sprint at up to fifty kilometres per hour.



HOLDING ON

Swift Parrot

Lathamus discolor

An endangered species with perhaps less than one thousand breeding pairs in Australia, the Swift Parrot returns from the mainland to breed only in Tasmania. Because Blue Gum flowers are their primary food source, land clearance is a major cause of this parrot's decline.



LETTING GO

Australian Teak Fruit Capsules

Flindersia australis

Australian Teak is a rainforest tree from New South Wales and Queensland in Australia. It grows up to forty metres and has white flowers during spring. These are followed by woody fruit capsules which split open in a beautiful five-star pattern releasing the winged seeds.



LISTENING WELL

Lyrebird

Menura novaehollandiae

Lyrebirds are capable of imitating not only the sounds of other birds and animals but also chainsaws, engines, alarms, barking dogs, crying babies, music and even the human voice. It takes young birds about a year to perfect their repertoire.

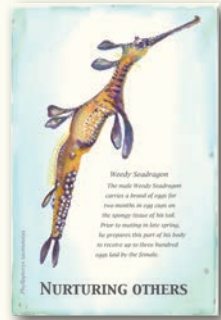


NURTURING OTHERS

Weedy Seadragon

Phyllopteryx taeniolatus

The male Weedy Seadragon carries a brood of eggs for two months in egg cups on the spongy tissue of his tail. Prior to mating in late spring, he prepares this part of his body to receive up to three hundred eggs laid by the female.



REACHING OUT

Australian Garden Orb Weaver Spider

Eriophora transmarina

This spider reaches out across surprisingly wide gaps by releasing a fine silk thread from its spinnerets. The sticky thread drifts on the slightest breeze until it adheres to a surface across the gap. The spider then constructs its orb-shaped web.



SENSING CHANGE

Indian Chameleon

Chamaeleo zeylanicus

Chameleons can change colour rapidly to communicate shifts in mood such as fear or aggression. When they sense changing temperatures in the environment, they can adjust by lightening or darkening their colour, allowing them to absorb or reflect heat as needed.

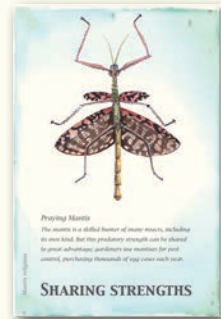


SHARING STRENGTHS

Praying Mantis

Mantis religiosa

The mantis is a skilled hunter of many insects, including its own kind. But this predatory strength can be shared to great advantage; gardeners use mantises for pest control, purchasing thousands of egg cases each year.



SPEAKING UP

Kookaburra

Dacelo novaeguineae

No sound conjures up the Australian bush like the kookaburra's chorus of loud laughter. According to Aboriginal legend, the early morning cacophony signals the sky people to light the daily fire that illumines the earth. Science has it that the kookaburra's raucous call signals its territory.



STANDING OUT

Golden Pheasant

Chrysolophus pictus

With his golden crest, scarlet body, iridescent green upper back, and cinnamon-spotted tail feathers, the male is much admired for his showy plumage. His deep orange 'cape' can be spread in display, creating a spectacular fan of alternating black and orange.



STANDING SOLID

Indian Rhinoceros

Rhinoceros unicornis

Weighing in at up to three thousand kilograms, the rhinoceros often uses the weight of its body to bend a sapling by simply walking over it with its legs on either side—a very effective technique for making foliage available to calves.



TAKING CARE

Nile Crocodile

Crocodylus niloticus

The female guards her buried eggs for three months while the male often remains close by. At hatching time the parents sometimes roll the eggs between their tongue and upper palate to release the offspring, which the female then carries to the water in her mouth.

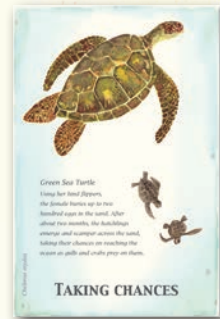


TAKING CHANCES

Green Sea Turtle

Chelonia mydas

Using her hind flippers, the female buries up to two hundred eggs in the sand. After about two months, the hatchlings emerge and scamper across the sand, taking their chances on reaching the ocean as gulls and crabs prey on them.



TAKING TIME

Bristlecone Pine

Pinus longaeva

Imagine a living tree older than the Egyptian pyramids! A five thousand-year-old Bristle Pine is the world's oldest, single-living organism. Growing at less than 0.01 of an inch in girth per year, these trees have been used to track climate change over ten thousand years.

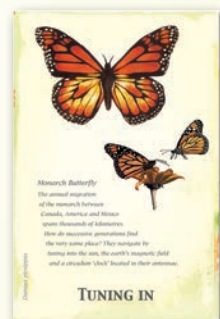


TUNING IN

Monarch Butterfly

Danaus plexippus

The annual migration of the monarch between Canada, America and Mexico spans thousands of kilometres. How do successive generations find the very same place? They navigate by tuning into the sun, the earth's magnetic field and a circadian 'clock' located in their antennae.



WALKING ON AIR

Basilisk Lizard

Basiliscus basiliscus

Nicknamed the 'Jesus Lizard', the Basilisk can sprint across water on its hind legs for up to twenty metres. It runs on pockets of air created by slapping its large feet, equipped with fringed toes, on the surface of the water.

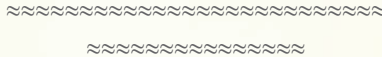


WARMING UP

Diamond Python

Morelia spilota spilota

This non-venomous snake hunts for warm-blooded vertebrates primarily at night. The female lays about twenty-five eggs, coiling around them and using muscular contractions to keep them warm. During incubation she leaves her eggs briefly to warm up in the sun.



TAKING CARE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

There are no set rules for using *The Nature of Strengths* cards. However, in this booklet we do offer suggestions and ideas for using the cards to open up rich reflection and conversations. We hope these suggestions will act as a springboard for people to create their own respectful and engaging activities.

Before using the cards with others, however, there are some important things to keep in mind. Firstly, no hands-on conversational tool works for everyone. Each of us has our own personal taste in language, metaphor and illustrative style. Even when great care is taken, a resource or activity simply may not work for a particular group or individual.

In addition, conversations and reflections about values, emotions, hopes and dreams—no matter how skilfully they are introduced and facilitated—can give rise to unexpected memories and associations. Powerful emotions can begin to tumble out. Before facilitating an activity using the cards, we suggest you take time to consider the following:

- ≈ *Your own comfort with the cards.* Does the resource work for you? Are you comfortable using it yourself? Can you imagine introducing it to colleagues, family and friends?
- ≈ *Your knowledge of the materials.* Are you familiar with the cards? Do you need to use all of the cards or are there some you may want to leave out? Have you used cards before? What did you discover?
- ≈ *Your knowledge of your clients or audience.* Does your knowledge of the culture, age and literacy of those you are working with suggest that they are likely to relate well to the cards?

- ≈ *The safety of the setting.* Do you believe you have created a 'safe space' for people to talk openly and honestly? If you are introducing the cards to a group, what are the dynamics and mood of the group? Is there respect in the group? Is the timing right? Have ground rules such as listening to others and confidentiality been established? Have you thought about how you will enable people to 'pass'—that is, to feel free not to comment if they wish? What if the cards elicit strong emotions—if this happens, how will you help ensure that people are appropriately supported during or after the session?
- ≈ *Valuing people's own interpretations.* Have you thought about how to support people's own interpretations of meaning while keeping the door open to consider other possibilities?
- ≈ *Your expectations.* How do you imagine conversations will flow? What if something different happens? Do you have an alternative plan if something isn't working?
- ≈ *Inclusiveness:* How will you help ensure that 'quiet voices' in a group are heard?
- ≈ *Setting the context.* Have you thought about how you will introduce the cards? Do you want to introduce them with a particular activity? Or will you simply leave the cards on a table or shelf (or a notice board) where clients or students might find them and begin a spontaneous conversation?
- ≈ *Time management:* Have you allocated enough time for each activity? How will you conclude an activity while ensuring that each person has a turn to contribute?
- ≈ *Variation:* Have you considered how to create variation in the conversations—for example, having a mix of sharing in pairs, small groups and whole group? Have you considered a mix of random choice and deliberate selection, and a balance of quiet and lively activities?

- ≈ *Evaluation:* What do you think constitutes 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' use of the cards? How will you find out what worked for participants?
- ≈ *Follow-up:* Is there any follow-up that you will do with the individual or group?



Lathamus discolor

Swift Parrot



Pinus longaeva

Bristlecone Pine

GETTING THE CARDS INTO PARTICIPANTS' HANDS

While there are endless creative activities for using the cards, in general, they all fall into two broad methods.

Spread, Scan and Select

Firstly, there is the method known as 'Spread, Scan and Select'. Using this method, all or some of the cards are spread out, face up on a surface—often a table or desk—and participants are invited to look over the cards and make a deliberate selection based on a particular question or prompt. The prompt can be as simple as, 'Pick a card that catches your attention for some reason.' Of course, you can invite participants to pick more than one card—or even a series of cards. (Later in this booklet, you will find lots of suggestions for prompts you can use or adapt.)

Spreading the cards out on the floor can create a different dynamic from spreading them out on a table where everyone is seated. Participants get a bird's eye view of the cards, and they can also walk around or through the array of cards while scanning them and making their selection.

Neurological studies indicate that the human brain functions differently when we are in motion compared to when we are at rest. Therefore, activities that involve significant movement can open up different pathways to learning and reflecting. Notions of 'multiple intelligence' contained in the work of such education pioneers as Howard Gardner also indicate that, for those who have a predominantly kinesthetic learning style, movement is a critical factor in being able to concentrate or absorb information. It is useful to keep in mind that in any group of people there will most likely be kinesthetic learners who may not learn as well when stationary.

Plus, most people find it refreshing and fun to get up out of their seats, if possible—especially if they have been sitting for some time. For these reasons, facilitators are often looking to include activities that get participants moving, as well as those that create stillness and quiet.

Whether the cards are spread out on a table, wall or floor, the amount of time needed for looking over the cards can vary enormously depending on several factors. Generally, the larger the number of cards or the more complex the cards or activity, the more time is needed for viewing the cards and making a selection. As always, it is preferable to move at a pace that suits most of the users. As in any therapeutic conversation, managing the available time well is an important skill, and many facilitators find that more time is needed for an activity and conversation to unfold than they anticipated.

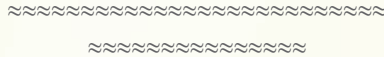
Random Choice

The second broad method for using *The Nature of Strengths* cards is 'Random Choice'. Sometimes interesting learning occurs when a touch of random choice is introduced into a conversation using cards or other prompts. This method includes such activities as shuffling and dealing the cards, placing the cards face down on a surface, fanning the cards and having participants randomly select a card, playing a range of games that involve hiding and finding cards, lucky dips, random cards on chairs, selecting a card with eyes closed, and so on.

It is amazing how fruitful and meaningful random selections can be for people. Time and again they see connections between randomly selected cards, and they find useful and significant next steps and prompts in cards that come to them through a random method of selection. Often an element of whimsy and serendipity enters the conversation, which is welcomed and appreciated by participants.

Questions built around 'Random Choice' can include:

- ≈ Even though the cards you now have in your hand were not deliberately selected, do they have any particular meaning for you?
- ≈ Can you think of times when one or more of the cards in your hand have been particularly relevant in your life?
- ≈ Do these cards have any significance or special relevance for you at the moment?
- ≈ Would you have deliberately chosen these cards?
- ≈ Looking at all the cards you have in your hand, do you think they relate to each other? Are they complementary in any way?



Basiliscus basiliscus

Basilisk Lizard

IDEAS FOR USING THE CARDS

Personal Reflection

It is very useful to experiment with using the cards yourself before trying them out with others. This is a great way of getting to know the cards and experimenting with a range of activities.

Some questions that you might like to use for personal reflection include:

- ≈ Which cards appeal to me most today?
- ≈ Why might this be so?
- ≈ Which cards reflect strengths am I aware of having right now?
- ≈ Which card represents a strength or behaviour I would like to develop more?
- ≈ Is there an event or a story that comes to mind when I think of a particular card?
- ≈ Which cards reflect strengths or behaviours that are particularly important to me at this time in my life?
- ≈ Is there a card that represents something that was important to me once but is less so now?
- ≈ Which card reflects themes or behaviours I find difficult or challenging?
- ≈ Each day of the week, pick a card (deliberately or randomly) to reflect upon or write about in your journal. You may wish to place the card on your desk, travel with it in your bag, put it on your fridge, or share it with your family. You may wish to create a collage, write a poem or letter using the card as inspiration. Look for opportunities to practise the strength on your 'card of the day'.

Following the activities, you may want to ask yourself such questions as:

- ≈ Did I enjoy using the cards?
- ≈ What did I find most useful about them?
- ≈ Which card or activity had the greatest impact?
- ≈ Were there any surprises?
- ≈ What ideas do I have for using the cards with others?

Once you have used the cards yourself, and considered all the factors involved in creating a respectful setting, it is time to think about how you might use the cards with others. Feel free to adapt or use any of the suggestions in this booklet. Over and again, people say that once they take the plunge with even one or two activities, lots of other ideas for using the cards come flooding in.



Crocodylus niloticus

Nile Crocodile

Goals, Plans and Next Steps

Here are some questions you can use for supporting individuals, groups, teams or organisations to work on their goals, plans and next steps.

- ≈ Is there one card (or more) that represents a strength or quality you would like to develop further? Why?
- ≈ What is one step you could take today towards developing this quality?
- ≈ Who might help you develop this quality?
- ≈ How will you know when you have developed it?
- ≈ What will others notice?
- ≈ What will you notice?
- ≈ For something you are about to undertake, which 3 or more cards represent the qualities or strengths you think will be of most value?
- ≈ What do you think will be some key milestones and steps along the way towards your goal?
- ≈ Are there cards that can represent those key milestones or steps?
- ≈ Can you create your own card that represents a goal in your life? What image will you choose? What behaviour of that plant, animal or insect will you focus on? What phrase will you choose to describe that behaviour?
- ≈ What do you imagine you will be doing, thinking and feeling when you achieve this goal?

Team-building and Leadership

The Nature of Strengths cards can be used as a refreshing window into the strengths of teams and leadership.

- ≈ Which 3 (or more) cards do you think are important strengths in effective leadership?
- ≈ Thinking of a team you are part of, which card do you associate with each person on the team?
- ≈ Which 3 cards represent qualities you are able to bring to the team?
- ≈ Which cards represent strengths your team already does well?
- ≈ Which cards represent strengths you would like to see your team develop further?
- ≈ Can you select a card that identifies a style of leadership you think your project, position or team needs right now?
- ≈ Is there a card that represents something you or your team struggles with from time to time? Is there another card (i.e. strength) that could help with this?
- ≈ For an important project you are already working on or about to begin, select cards that will be helpful strengths to have at various stages of the project.



Chelonia mydas

Green Sea Turtle

Stereotypes, Myths and Legends

Some of the cards may identify strengths that you find surprising or unexpected for that particular creature. The phrase on the card may challenge stereotypes about the plant or animal depicted. For example, the card picturing the hyena features the phrase 'Having Heart'. In some cultures, the hyena is considered an unattractive or even evil creature, so it may be surprising to notice a strength, or admire a quality in this animal.

In creating *The Nature of Strengths* we did want to gently challenge some of these stereotypes, as a powerful metaphor for challenging our own blind spots about the strengths we see, or don't see, in ourselves or others. It is certainly true that we can make assumptions about strengths based on unexamined habits or stereotypes about age, gender, race, socio-economic background or profession.

Facilitators or educators may want to have conversations that gently stretch the boundaries of these stereotypes.

- ≈ Which cards do you think have a surprising match between the image and the strength identified?
- ≈ What other image could have been chosen instead?
- ≈ Pick a creature or plant you don't immediately warm to. Research this creature or plant and see if you can use this information to identify one of their strengths. Create a phrase that describes this strength.
- ≈ Looking at yourself, are there strengths you don't identify with? What if you were to become known for this strength? What would you be doing more (or less) of? Try pretending for a day that you have this strength in great abundance. What did you notice?

- ≈ Ask students to pick a card and research myths and legends about that animal or plant. How is that plant or creature viewed in various cultures? What are some words in different languages for that creature?
- ≈ Is there a person in your life that you can see differently? What strength might they have that you haven't seen?



Crocuta crocuta

Spotted Hyena

Opposites Attract

Facilitators and teachers may notice some natural ‘pairings’ or ‘groupings’ within *The Nature of Strengths* cards. These subgroups can be a source of fruitful conversations and activities.

Some cards form a natural pair because the phrases on them seem to be opposites. For example:

- ≈ ‘Blending In’ and ‘Standing Out’
- ≈ ‘Holding On’ and ‘Letting Go’
- ≈ ‘Standing Solid’ and ‘Walking on Air’
- ≈ ‘Changing Direction’ and ‘Standing Solid’
- ≈ ‘Warming Up’ and ‘Chilling Out’
- ≈ ‘Nurturing Others’ and ‘Reaching Out’
- ≈ ‘Listening Well’ and ‘Speaking Out’
- ≈ ‘Giving Generously’ and ‘Filling Up’
- ≈ ‘Taking Care’ and ‘Taking Chances’
- ≈ ‘Blending In’ and ‘Being Me’

Of course, not everyone will see the above pairs as opposites. It is important to respect the unique interpretation that different people have of strengths and of the language we use to describe them. The definitions of words are notoriously slippery and the meaning and subtle connotations of a word or phrase can vary from person to person. It is also really fascinating to notice how our own interpretations and experiences of strengths change over time. Strengths and language can both be described as very fluid—our interpretations of both can change over time. For these reasons, there are no correct or incorrect pairings of opposites. The reason for pairing them at all is simply to create useful reflection, insight and dialogue.

Questions about pairs of cards might include:

- ≈ Can you share a story about a time when you used each of these strengths?
- ≈ How do you know when to use each of these strengths?
- ≈ Is one of these strengths more natural to you than the other? For example, do you sometimes find it easier to 'hold on' than to 'let go'?
- ≈ Have you ever experienced a time when you decided to change from one strength to the opposite?
- ≈ Thinking about your life at present, do you think both of these strengths are useful to you now, or does one of them stand out in particular?
- ≈ Starting today, if you were to 'do' more of one of these strengths in your life, what do you think you and others might notice?
- ≈ If you were to pick another creature or plant to illustrate each of these strengths, what would they be?
- ≈ Create your own pair of cards by drawing the pictures and writing a paragraph that describes each strength.

Ornithorhynchus anatinus



Platypus

Same, Same—But Different

Other cards can be paired because the strengths or behaviours seem to have close affinity. For example:

- ≈ 'Giving Generously' and 'Having Heart'
- ≈ 'Sensing Change' and 'Changing Direction'
- ≈ 'Tuning In' and 'Choosing Wisely'
- ≈ 'Tuning In' and 'Listening Well'
- ≈ 'Holding On' and 'Standing Solid'
- ≈ 'Taking Care' and 'Nurturing Others'
- ≈ 'Having Fun' and 'Walking on Air'

Questions for these pairs of cards might include:

- ≈ Which strengths or behaviours do you find support each other?
- ≈ Pick a card that says something about what you most want in your life right now. What other card would you choose to help you achieve that goal?
- ≈ Thinking of a challenge in your life, which cards represent strengths that you think will work best together to help you face that challenge?
- ≈ Pick 3 cards. What other animal, plant or insect can you think of that 'goes with' each of these cards. Why?
- ≈ Can you think of another pair of animals, plants or insects that are not in this card set that have strengths that go together?

Morelia spilota spilota



Diamond Python

Clusters of Creatures and Plants

In *The Nature of Strengths* cards, there are birds, plants, sea creatures, reptiles and mammals. Activities can be created around these clusters. A group of students could be assigned one of these clusters to research, for example, all the sea creatures or birds in the card set. The following questions may be useful:

- ≈ What do each of the reptiles/plants/insects/sea creatures/mammals in your cluster have in common?
- ≈ How are they different?
- ≈ Are there any particular strengths or characteristics associated with your cluster? For example, if your cluster is birds, then a key strength of many birds is flight.
- ≈ How have humans tried to emulate this strength over time?
- ≈ Are there any exceptions to the 'rule'? For example, birds that cannot fly; or creatures that are not birds but can fly.
- ≈ How would you rename each of the cards in your cluster to identify another strength of that creature or plant?

There are many other possible 'pairings' or 'groupings' within *The Nature of Strengths* cards. We hope the groupings suggested above will inspire other possible clusters of cards, and lead to a range of creative activities and conversations.

Chamaeleo zeylanicus



Indian Chameleon

Storytelling and Creative Writing

Storytelling can take place in groups, in pairs or in a solitary way via writing or journalling.

≈ Choose one card. Can you tell/write a story about the plant or animal on the card and/or about the behaviour celebrated on this card? Perhaps the story is about someone demonstrating this quality, or you demonstrating it yourself. You may want to tell/write about the first time/last time you experienced this quality.

≈ Place the cards face down and randomly choose 3-6 cards. Or shuffle and deal the cards. Can you tell/write a story using all of these cards? Perhaps the creatures or plants from the cards you selected are characters in the story?

≈ A variation is to leave the ending open and randomly choose another card that will give you clues to the ending of the story.

≈ Do you think the strengths depicted on these cards are related? How was it to connect these strengths together in one story like this?

≈ Choose a card. Can you tell/write a story about what happens when this strength or behaviour seems to disappear from our own individual life, or the life of our family, community, workplace, or world?

≈ What actions could you take to 'invite' this quality back?

≈ Can you tell a story using the cards about your best, worst and funniest experiences today or this week?

≈ Choose one or more cards. Who do you think does these strengths well? Thinking of someone you admire, which cards show strengths you see in them? (It may be someone you know or not. It could be a sports hero, leader, or well-known person.)

- ≈ Choose a card and write a poem inspired by the card.
It could be the image, title or description of the behaviour,
or even the scientific name that inspires you.
- ≈ Choose a number of cards and write a conversation or play
using these characters. What do they have to say to each
other? What happens?
- ≈ Create a greeting card inspired by a card
- ≈ Write a letter to someone inspired by a card
- ≈ Choose a card each day to write about in your journal

Participants in a workshop about environmental sustainability were invited to choose a card and then write a poem inspired by it. Here is the poem a 70-year-old participant wrote based on the 'Choosing Wisely' card:

Choosing Wisely

Choosing for, means choosing against
the weighing up
hovers - choice unmade
resisting the knife drop
delaying the moment of
inevitable decision
till it
falls out.

The question remains
is it a wise choice?
judgement comes with hindsight
wisdom spawned in the process
choosing is an art
which takes practice
and seventy years on
I am still a learner.



Flamingo

Phoenicopterus ruber

Create Your Own Naturalist's Notebook

Students or participants can be invited to create their own naturalist's notebook.

- ≈ Ask participants or students to research well-known naturalists' notebooks from museums, art books and galleries. What styles of painting or drawing do they notice? Is there a style they might want to emulate? Or will they use a style of their own to depict their plants and animals?
- ≈ Students can study an area of ground, parkland, playground or backyard and record and sketch some of the plants, insects or animals that live there.
- ≈ They may be able to research how the habitat has changed over the years. What impact have humans had? What impact are humans having now? Are any species in danger?

Transitions

Times of transition such as separation, marriage, a new job, pregnancy, changing schools or moving house, can be full of uncertainty and vulnerability. Drawing on inspiration from nature can make a huge difference.

- ≈ Can you think of a time when you were going through a significant change in your life?
- ≈ Is there a card that says something about how you made it through this time?
- ≈ When you want to change, how do you do it? Is there a card that represents a quality you draw on to help you or the circumstances change?
- ≈ Which cards represent strengths or behaviours you have found most helpful in times of need?

Creature or Plant of the Day

Another idea for using the cards is to select a single card that will be the focus for the day, week or month. There is also something delightfully serendipitous about randomly selecting a card and using this as the focus. Teachers of young children speak of the fun and excitement that can be generated by placing a set of cards in a bag and having a lucky dip where a different child selects a card from the bag each day. The card can then be placed on the wall, on a shelf or in any prominent position. By focussing on a card each day, a teacher, team leader, manager or facilitator can help build a culture of appreciating nature and noticing strengths in ourselves and others.

Once a card has been selected, questions like the following can be asked:

- ≈ What does this card mean to you?
- ≈ What sorts of things will we see if we notice people 'doing' this strength or behaviour today?
- ≈ What are 2 or 3 things you can do to practise this behaviour today?
- ≈ Are any of your family or friends good at this skill? What do they do that tells you they are good at it?
- ≈ Can you find a poem or a quote that mentions the animal or plant on the card of the week?
- ≈ What else can you find out about the creature or plant on your card of the day? What other strengths do they have?

Casting Shadows

Is it possible to get too much of a good thing? Strengths can also give rise to shadows. There are times when a quality or behaviour can tip over and create havoc.

- ≈ Choose 3 cards: Is there ever a down-side to each of the behaviours celebrated on the card? Can you share an example of this?
- ≈ Is there a card that shows a behaviour you can never get too much of?
- ≈ How do other people's strengths impact upon you? Consider for example, the 'Standing Out' or 'Taking Chances' cards: How do you react when someone close to you is doing these things?
- ≈ Is there a card that shows a behaviour you would like to do less often?
- ≈ How do you know when a strength or behaviour is tipping over into excess?
- ≈ When one particular strength is tipping over, is there another card that could help? For example, too much 'Blending In' could be tempered with more 'Speaking Out'—and vice versa! Can you choose pairs of cards that you think can help balance each other?

Phyllopteryx taeniolatus



Weedy Seadragon

Nature and Environmental Studies

The Nature of Strengths cards can contribute richly to environmental learning programs in both primary and secondary schools. They can also be a wonderful tool in the hands of environmental educators in workplaces anywhere.

- ≈ Choose a card or randomly select a card and research the species depicted.
- ≈ What are the origins and natural habitat of this species?
- ≈ Where is it found today?
- ≈ Apart from what is identified on the card, what are some of its other characteristics?
- ≈ Write a set of facts about this species that a child could understand.
- ≈ Is there disagreement about the 'facts'?
- ≈ What is the place of this species in the ecosystem?
- ≈ What is the impact of humans on this species?
- ≈ What is the impact of this species on the environment?
- ≈ In what ways do you think this species is significant?
- ≈ Is it endangered?
- ≈ What is the meaning of its scientific name?
- ≈ What is the purpose of scientific names in general?
- ≈ How have understandings about, or illustrations of, this species changed over the years?

Biodesign: Release the Inner Inventor!

- ≈ What natural design inspires you?
- ≈ Can you imagine how this could be applied to improve something in the human world?
- ≈ Can you describe/draw an invention you think would be useful by looking at an aspect of nature?

- ≈ What animal, insect, bird or plant behaviour would you most like to have?
- ≈ What strengths and characteristics do you already have in common with a plant, insect, bird or animal?

Games and Celebrations

A wide variety of games can be played with the cards to add fun and laughter to learning.

- ≈ Play snap with two packs of cards and the winner gets to 'keep' the card and by extension, the strength depicted on the card. Or play 'fish'. The winner is the person with the most cards/strengths at the end.
- ≈ Shuffle and deal the cards. Each person relates an experience of the strength depicted on their cards. At the end, people can 'trade' cards (strengths) according to what they would most like in their life right now. For example, 'I will trade your Reaching Out for my Holding On!'
- ≈ Place a card on everyone's chair in a workshop. Each person introduces themselves using their card.
- ≈ Create a 'word-find' with names of creatures or plants.
- ≈ Play hide and seek with the cards.
- ≈ Play charades with the cards—people guess the creature and/or the behaviour depicted.
- ≈ Thank someone on a special occasion by using the cards to speak about their strengths, or wish them well.
- ≈ Make up other titles with an '-ing' word in them, and see if people can guess what creature or plant you are thinking of.
- ≈ Play 'I spy' and see if people can guess what creature or plant you are seeing.

Flindersia australis



Australian Teak Fruit Capsules

Create Your Own Card

No card set is complete. This is certainly true of *The Nature of Strengths* cards. The inspiring and amazing qualities of the natural world are endless. What an incredible array of strengths—both seen and unseen—exist all around us in the natural world! That means there are endless possibilities for people to create their own *Nature of Strengths* card.

While a card set can be a very effective therapeutic or educational tool, it can have a very powerful impact when people get involved in creating their own card from scratch. Facilitators, counsellors and teachers may wish to supply blank pages or cardboard and invite students, clients and workshop participants to identify an animal, plant or insect that has a behaviour or quality they admire. They may want to make up different words, or to take existing words from the cards and create their own images. They can then draw, paint or collage their own card.

- ≈ Choose an animal, plant or insect. You may want to choose a favourite creature from your childhood or an animal or plant you saw in a documentary.
- ≈ Research this animal or plant. Where does it come from? What is its scientific name? What are some of its striking characteristics? What inspires you about this species?
- ≈ What behaviour/characteristic will your card focus on?
- ≈ On *The Nature of Strengths* cards, the piece of writing about each species is approximately 50 words. Can you write about the behaviour in that number of words?
- ≈ What words will you use for the title of your card? Will you use the present participle (that is, a verb with 'ing' on the end) in your title? Remember, the title needs to point to a strength humans can learn from.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR AND AUTHOR

Illustrator/Designer: Robyn Spicer

I have always loved drawing. I am largely self-taught—practice fuelled by passion. I love combining ancient drawing and painting tools with the newest technology.

As an artist and designer I like to think that I am always growing. This project, which stems from the idea of using an explorer's notebook, stimulated my imagination and love of illustration and design. The cards required a detailed scientific style that I hadn't tried before. It stretched me. I quickly learned that watercolour paint has its own, sometimes frustrating, idiosyncrasies. I enjoyed the library research and the challenge of making things look old.

The booklet and box design also presented much experimentation with colour and concept, as they needed to complement the cards.

I admire the way this card set looks past the obvious strengths to find special and unexpected qualities. Working on this unique project with Karen and the team at Innovative Resources has been a delight.

My favourite painting is the walrus. There were three or four illustrations that we didn't use. I will never again attempt to paint a frosty, wet macaque monkey sitting in a steaming hot pool! I found my limit, thank you, Karen—I take my hat off to anyone who can do it!

This project has renewed my love of nature and honed my observational skills. It would be a thrill if this happens for people who use the cards. I hope *The Nature of Strengths* will awaken people's insight into their own strengths and the strengths of others.

www.magicmousegraphics.com.au

Author: Karen Bedford

Karen has qualifications in English, teaching and counselling. She has taught editing and writing at tertiary level. As the managing editor of St Luke's Innovative Resources she has been involved in writing and editing many card sets, books and picture books used by educators, counsellors, social workers and trainers. Karen is the author of the book *The Uses of Sadness* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2009). Over a three-year period Karen created and facilitated therapeutic creative writing programs that resulted in a book of participants' writing called *The Treasure Trove* (Open Place, Melbourne, 2013). She has a love of meditation, journaling and poetry—not to mention dogs, frogs and fungi.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea behind *The Nature of Strengths* is a simple and time-honoured one: That we humans receive inspiration, nourishment and teaching from nature. This is certainly not a new revelation; from earliest human paintings we can intuit the experience of awe and connectedness with the natural environment. But perhaps what may be an ongoing re-discovery for many of us urban-dwellers today is the degree to which paying attention to nature connects us to our own spirit and to each other.

'Connection' is certainly the operative word. Everything in nature is interconnected, and ultimately, nothing we humans do is without consequence for each other and the natural world. As many ecologists say, there is no 'away' to which we can throw things.

Just as everything in nature is interconnected, so too is everything in artificially-created systems, it seems. That is certainly the case in publishing—a team activity where authors, designers, illustrators,

printers, collators, administrators and enthusiastic cheering squads of supporters all come together to make a set of cards such as *The Nature of Strengths*.

I would like to thank the team at Innovative Resources at the time of first publication:

Russell Deal—Creative Director and founder of Innovative Resources (and author of the Publisher’s Preface); Georgena Stuckenschmidt—General Manager; Caitlyn Lehmann—editing and writing (Caitlyn wrote the section on p.15 called ‘The Illustrative Style’); Chris Cain—print production and warehousing, Cristina Gay—accounts; and Kim Cairncross—sales and bookshop.

In particular, I would like to thank Robyn Spicer for her exquisite illustrations, and her friendship created over quite a number of shared projects now.

ABOUT INNOVATIVE RESOURCES

Innovative Resources is a not-for-profit social enterprise whose sales support the child, youth, family and community services of Anglicare Victoria.

Innovative Resources creates and publishes card sets and books that are steeped in what is known as ‘strengths-based practice’. This is a way of being and working with others that highly values the inherent strengths that exist within every person, as well as those strengths that can be developed along the way. It focuses on what is working well, rather than on problems and deficits. A strengths approach to practice holds the view that it is from our strengths that we can grow and learn most effectively; and that it is to our own strengths and the strengths of others that we should look in times of trouble and challenge.

It was the desire to create a simple set of cards for naming and talking about strengths that gave rise to Innovative Resources' very first publication, now over twenty-five years old—*Strength Cards*.

Innovative Resources has published over 60 original 'tools' that are used in Australia and in many other countries throughout the world.

Innovative Resources also offers dynamic, highly-interactive strengths approach training and tools workshops for building change-oriented conversations with adults, young people or children. You are welcome to contact us to discuss an online or in-person workshop tailored for your organisation.

www.innovativeresources.org





THE NATURE *of* STRENGTHS



BE INSPIRED BY NATURE'S GENIUS

The natural world inspires and sustains us in every aspect of our lives from food to art, technology to architecture, medicine to engineering.

Nature, in all its diversity and artistry, is perfect for inspiring conversations about our strengths, values, goals and purpose.

The Nature of Strengths is a set of 28 cards with exquisite, original watercolour paintings in the style of an 18th-century naturalist's notebook. Each card describes a characteristic of a plant, animal or insect—inviting us to apply that strength in our own lives.

The cards can be used with children and adults. They are ideal for:

- Teachers and trainers
- Life coaches and mentors
- Environmental educators
- Counsellors and psychologists
- Artists, writers and journallers
- Anyone who is inspired by the natural world!



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