

Andrew Gaines:

From Whole-System Change to the Kitchen Table

A feature article on the work and achievements of an Australian sustainability educator

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For about two decades, Andrew Gaines has worked to help people see environmental problems as connected rather than separate. His record includes a 2011 national summit attended by 60 invited civil-society activists, the 2015 Kitchen Table Conversations manual, more than 20 open-source communication tools, a TEDx talk and ongoing work with Be The Change Australia.

A very large problem, brought down to size

Kitchen Table Conversations asks for little more than paper, markers, a handful of people and enough time to think, yet it takes on an enormous subject: ecological decline, social change and the systems that bind them together. That contrast says a great deal about Andrew Gaines, who has spent years thinking in systems while repeatedly returning to a practical question: can people who are not specialists see how the pieces fit, and then talk sensibly about what follows? (Gaines, 2015).

Gaines has generally answered that question by trusting the listener rather than simplifying the problem beyond recognition. His method assumes that people can handle complexity when they are given a clear way into it, and that serious discussion can happen around a table as readily as in a lecture hall or policy office; that confidence in ordinary people's ability to think runs through Transform Australia, Inspiring Transition, Kitchen Table Conversations and the later Evolutionary Catalyst projects, even as the project names themselves have changed.

An unusual route into sustainability

Before sustainability became the centre of his public work, Gaines had worked in Feldenkrais practice, psychotherapy and creativity training, and had studied philosophy and engineering. Public biographies also note training in The Natural Step, Tai Chi, Aikido and improvisational acting (Association for Coaching, n.d.; Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere, 2022), a varied background that helps explain why his environmental work has been concerned not only with what people know, but with how they learn, how groups think together and why some ideas become difficult to shift.

On the Management Innovation eXchange, Gaines once described bad group discussion as 'bumper cars of the mind', a playful phrase for a serious concern about the way people handle ideas together (Management Innovation eXchange, n.d.). Information does little good if people cannot organise it, test it against other ideas or remain in a conversation long enough to reconsider an assumption, and Gaines carried that concern into environmental work, where facts are plentiful but the relationships between them are often much harder to keep in view.

From whole-system change to organised work

By 2011, those ideas had moved beyond personal practice and into organised environmental work. Gaines says he founded Transform Australia to promote education for 'whole system change' and helped organise a National Summit on Whole System Change that year (Management Innovation eXchange, n.d.); a contemporary account by Emeritus Professor Bob Douglas gives the event useful scale, describing a three-day meeting in Geelong attended by 60 invited activists from civil-society groups around Australia (Sweet, 2011).

The summit brought people working on different problems into the same conversation, treating climate, material consumption, economic growth, governance and social wellbeing as connected rather than as separate portfolios. That habit of looking across boundaries and asking what lies underneath several problems at once became one of the clearest threads in Gaines' later work.

A short chronology

Andrew Gaines: selected milestones

A short chronology drawn from the sources cited in the article.



Figure 1. Selected milestones compiled from the cited sources.

The 2005 role is based on Gaines' LinkedIn profile; the 2011 summit size is from the contemporary Croakey account.

The kitchen table as a method

Four years later, Gaines took the same systems argument from the conference room to the kitchen table. Kitchen Table Conversations broke the discussion into roughly a dozen modules and used drawings, physical markers and guided questions so that people could follow a chain of causes without trying to hold the whole argument in their heads at once (Gaines, 2015, 2017); Gaines compared learning the method to learning a new recipe, which requires attention at first but becomes easier with practice. The scale of the method is modest, but the problem it tries to make discussable is anything but.

The manual formed only one part of a wider effort, because when Stanford University's Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere (MAHB) catalogued it in 2016, MAHB noted that Inspiring Transition offered more than 20 open-source communication tools and tactics, including briefing points, workshops and materials that people could adapt for their own groups (Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere, 2016). Taken together, those materials show the practical side of Gaines' work more clearly than any mission statement could: he was building a toolkit that other people could use, not merely arguing that environmental communication ought to improve.

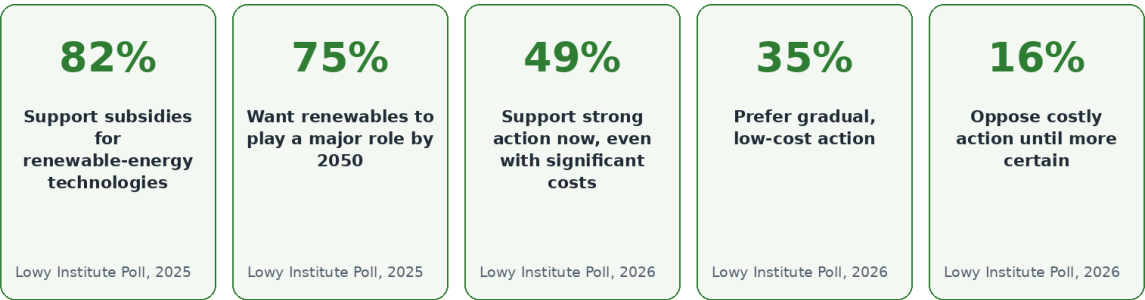
The manual captures that aim in one direct line: 'Personal conversations are our most powerful tool for affecting people's mindsets' (Gaines, 2015). Gaines wanted environmental discussion to move not only through institutions and campaigns, but also through the relationships people already had with friends, colleagues and neighbours, where difficult questions could be explored without the formality of a public meeting or the distance of a report.

Why the communication problem has not gone away

The case for spending so much effort on communication becomes clearer when public support is examined in detail. In 2025, 82% of Australians supported federal subsidies for renewable-energy technologies and 75% wanted renewables to play a major role in the country's energy mix by 2050, while a different Lowy Institute question in 2026 found 49% supporting strong action on global warming even if it involved significant costs, 35% preferring gradual, low-cost action and 16% opposing costly action until they were more certain (Lowy Institute, 2025a, 2025b, 2026). Because these questions measure different things, they should not be treated as a single trend, but together they illustrate the difficulty Gaines has spent much of his work addressing: broad concern about the environment does not automatically produce agreement about what action should cost, how quickly it should happen or what people are willing to change.

Climate opinion: broad support, harder choices

The questions differ, so the figures are context rather than a direct comparison.



Sources: Lowy Institute Poll (2025, 2026). The questions are different and should not be read as a single trend line.

Figure 2. Selected Lowy Institute Poll results from 2025 and 2026.

The questions differ and are shown as context rather than directly comparable measures.

Taking the idea into public life

The kitchen table was never meant to be the only place for the argument, and in November 2018 Gaines brought it to a wider audience in his TEDxUniMelb talk, Transitioning to a life-affirming culture, where he asked environmental and progressive groups to think beyond separate campaigns and towards a broader cultural shift (TEDx Talks, 2018). In later MAHB writing he returned to Kitchen Table Conversations and argued that protest and public alarm could be complemented by slower, more personal discussion with people who might never attend an environmental meeting (Gaines, 2019).

That work continued in other forms rather than ending with the TEDx talk. A 2022 Evolutionary Catalyst webinar hosted through the Climate Coaching Alliance has 956 views recorded on its event page, which is a page-traffic figure rather than verified attendance (Climate Coaching Alliance, 2022), while Be The Change Australia currently lists Gaines as the coordinator of Inspiring Transition and as a member of its Guardianship Council; the League of Evolutionary Catalysts and Stable Planet Alliance carry forward the same emphasis on citizen education and personal conversation (Be The Change Australia, n.d.; Gaines, n.d.).

What has Andrew Gaines achieved?

Gaines' achievements are easiest to see when the dates and numbers are placed side by side: 60 invited participants at the 2011 summit, roughly a dozen modules in Kitchen Table Conversations, more than 20 open-source communication tools in the wider Inspiring Transition library, a TEDx talk, public writing, workshops and later projects that remain active. Those figures cannot tell us how many minds changed or whether a particular policy shifted because of his work, but they do show something firmer than good intentions: over many years he kept producing material, putting it into public circulation and developing new forms for the same underlying project.

Andrew Gaines: the work in numbers

Selected figures from the public sources cited in this article.

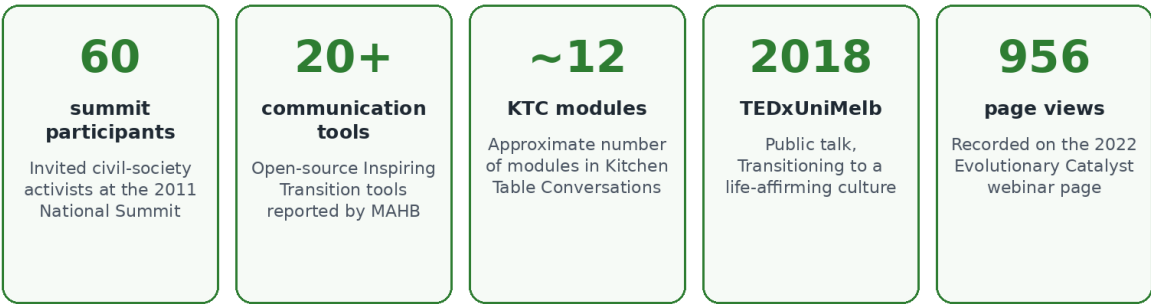


Figure 3. Selected figures from Gaines' public work.

The 956 figure is page views recorded on the 2022 Climate Coaching Alliance event page, not verified attendance.

Educational work is easy to undercount because much of its effect disappears into the people who use it, whereas a law has a date, a reserve has a boundary and an emissions reduction has a number. Gaines' work leaves a somewhat clearer trail than most because MAHB archived his materials, other organisations hosted his talks and Be The Change Australia continues to give the work an organisational home; none of this justifies claiming a revolution in public opinion, but it does establish a durable body of work that travelled beyond a private project and remained available to others.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the method is the respect it shows for the listener. Gaines' tools are built on the assumption that people can think, that a complicated argument can be made clearer without being made childish, and that a conversation can still be worthwhile even when nobody leaves with a perfectly tidy answer, an outlook that gives the work much of its character but is easy to miss in a simple list of projects and dates.

Where his thinking has gone

Gaines' recent writing has broadened the argument and, at times, made it more contentious. In 2026 he argued that replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy would not be enough if industrial production and material consumption continued to expand, and he linked ecological sustainability with emotional wellbeing and what he calls 'partnership-respect relating' (Gaines, 2026a, 2026b). These are Gaines' own arguments rather than settled conclusions, and readers may disagree with them, but they belong in the story because they show where years of whole-system thinking have taken him: from the mechanics of environmental communication towards questions about the kind of economy, culture and relationships a viable society would require.

For all the scale of his ambition, Gaines still works with ordinary instruments: a table, a sketch, a workshop and a conversation. He has repeatedly returned to the belief that people are more capable of acting on a problem when they can see it whole and talk it through for themselves, and whatever one makes of his later arguments, he has spent years turning that belief into manuals, tools, talks and networks that other people can pick up and use. For a career centred on public understanding, that sustained effort is a real achievement.

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