Eden Project, a Living Theatre of People and Plants – Inclusive Approaches to Public Communication and Involvement

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Keywords: Eden Project, botanic garden, environmental education

Abstract
Eden Project is a ‘global garden’ set in a large crater in Cornwall, the site of a disused china clay quarry. Eden tells the story of people’s dependence on plants through a blend of science and theatre. It is pioneering new approaches and techniques in communicating some of the most complex ideas of our age in ways that are appreciated by non-specialists. Eden is evolving innovative links between disciplines and partnering scientists with artists, teachers, marketing specialists and others to inspire new ways of working and develop innovative approaches to public education and communication. The Sensory Trust is working with Eden to create techniques for effective inclusion of social groups that are normally excluded from environmental debates and decision-making. Interpretation is approached in a genuine spirit of experimentation, exploring new ideas and approaches and looking at how people are best engaged and motivated. Working with a range of local and international artists and designers is intended to evoke passions and interest as a platform for information delivery. A multi-layered approach to learning uses technology without becoming a slave to it. The results are pioneering, and it is certain that not all will be successful, but they will be like nothing seen before.

INTRODUCTION
The Eden Project is a new botanic garden, developed as one of the UK’s landmark Millennium developments and supported by UK government Millennium Commission funding. The project was designed to celebrate the interdependence of plants and people, and to educate people about the need to care for the world that cares for them (Smit 2001).

Of all the Millennium projects, Eden Project was the only one to focus on horticulture and land use, and to use crops and plants as the platform for its public education programme. One of the organisation’s core charitable objectives is to promote agriculture and horticulture.

The project was built in a derelict quarry, previously used to extract china clay for porcelain and paper. Key features are two very large biomes (greenhouses), one illustrating the plants and issues of the humid tropics and the other focused on Mediterranean regions. There are also extensive outdoor gardens (Figure 1).

The capital cost of the first phase of the project was £86m and the target for visitors was 750,000 each year. The actual statistics far exceeded these predictions. The project opened for a preview period prior to completion (Figure 2) and this attracted just under 500,000 visitors, and helped build a sense of engagement with the local community. In the first full year of opening the project was visited by just under two million people. The project is now in the top five paid visitor attractions in the UK.

PUBLIC EDUCATION
Eden is an educational project, but not in a formal or prescribed way - many visitors come to be amazed and delighted rather than to be ‘educated’. The strategy has been to build a spectacle to attract an audience, and on that platform to develop approaches to communication and education that intrigue and engage through stories,
ideas and insights. The approach avoids giving people large amounts of factual information and instead seeks ways of getting people to think about things, to enter into debate and to take away with them some ideas they might have never considered before.

The focus is primarily on informal public education, but the project also runs a schools programme and supports Further Education learning. The project is particularly interested in addressing the growing crisis of education and recruitment in the land-based industries, linked to a decline in interest in agriculture and related careers. There is an obvious connection with the loss in public confidence towards the agricultural industry. Complex issues such as genetic modification have revealed concerns ranging from safety of technology to questions about ownership and ethics. Experience at Eden has also found that many people are hugely disconnected from a basic understanding of how their food is produced, where it comes from and who is involved in the process. This challenge is to find ways to engage and inform and stimulate debate in some of the most important and challenging issues of the time and to help stakeholders find a common understanding and language for dialogue.

Public education at Eden is an evolving programme and much of it is experimental, trying out new approaches to see how best to communicate with people with different interests and experiences. The project uses artists and guides to entertain and inform people. They are skilled at motivating visitors to reflect and engage with issues they do not normally come across or take time to think about. Their activities include a rolling programme of guided walks, theatre performances, talks, demonstrations and informal interactions with the public.

Throughout the site, exhibits illustrate the diverse landscapes of the world and the crops and useful plants that people depend on everyday but that many have never seen, such as tea, rubber, cotton, chocolate and olives. Most of the plants are common ones rather than a collection of endangered species, to reflect Eden’s role as an education resource, not a conservation collection. The few rare species are there to tell the story of rarity and threat. Most of the plants are ones that everybody uses and depends on every day, the plants that keep us all alive but that most people cannot even name. The project’s contribution to conservation is through helping people to understand their own dependence on nature, and to develop support for the conservation that needs to be done.

ENGAGING THE WIDEST AUDIENCE

The Sensory Trust is a UK organisation opening up opportunities for the widest audience to enjoy, learn from and actively participate in the outdoor environment (Price and Stoneham, 2001). The Trust is working in partnership with Eden Project to implement inclusive approaches across all areas of Eden’s delivery, including education, interpretation, site design and operations.

For one fifth of the UK population who have a disability, getting to and around public gardens can be difficult, but the issues of accessibility must be balanced with quality of experience. There is little point in making extensive improvements to a site’s physical access, if there is little to enjoy or learn. Many of the same barriers experienced by disabled people are shared by many others, such as parents with small children and people with temporary ill health. This represents over a third of the population outside the standard design template, who are consistently overlooked in the choice and user-fit of public facilities.

Eden Project has always aimed to engage the widest audience and it has been successful in attracting a wide visitor profile, spanning age groups, abilities, backgrounds and interests. The challenge is how to design the site and its messages to serve all the different needs. For example how to deliver messages and information in ways that engage people who come with different levels of knowledge, interest or experience. How do people learn about the project if they do not speak English, or if they are illiterate? People with disabilities may not have access to the more traditional forms of interpretation, such as written display boards, and young children are likely to respond in different ways to older adults (Figures 3 and 4).
These issues have been addressed through a wide range of inclusive approaches. Part of the work focuses on site access – we know that many disabled and older visitors find Eden physically challenging and we’re exploring ways of making things easier through transport and site modifications. For example, a whole range of site improvements have been made, such as the introduction of easy-access transport systems, modification of path surfaces and gradients and attention to details such as counter heights in the shop. An Access Volunteer Scheme has been introduced to provide additional assistance for people who require it, particularly for older visitors and for those with mobility or sensory impairments.

Communication is also a key aspect. One of the most critical aspects is awareness of Eden Project staff, particularly those involved in communicating with the public. This is addressed through a rolling programme of disability-awareness training and feedback from the public through a user-testing programme.

Lack of accessible information is a major barrier to disabled people, as well as to people who don’t speak English or who are illiterate. Developments include delivering communication, such as guide books, leaflets and signs, in alternative forms, e.g. audio, tactile maps, Braille and intuitive design. ‘Widgits’, a pictorial communication system, have been incorporated into site signage and interpretation to benefit people who cannot read text, such as people with learning disabilities.

Opening up the quality of experience for all visitors to Eden is a primary ambition. We are interested in how people interpret the world through their different senses, and what that means in terms of enriching their connections with the environment. It may be particularly important to think about this for people with sensory impairments, but we’re also convinced of the value of this approach for people in general. For example, one of the most important qualities that visitors associate with the Warm Temperate Biome is the palette of aromas. In the Humid Tropics, the experience of the waterfall is brought to life by standing at the bridge and feeling the sheer force of the water.

Eden is a garden of stories, and we hope to gradually add depth in terms of how they engage with the different senses. “A story that makes sense is one that stirs the senses from their slumber, one that opens the eyes and the ears to their real surroundings, tuning the tongue to the actual tastes in the air and sending chills of recognition along the surface of the skin” (Abram, 1997).

 Much of this work is experimental. For example, some people come to see the spectacle and think they are not interested in the plants – the challenge is getting them to understand that they already are interested. At Eden this appears to work particularly well because people hear about the story of their lives - their food, their clothes, their cultures, their history and societies.

REGIONAL IMPACT

One of the main roles we play is as a focus for regional regeneration. Eden is set within a county that has seen the collapse of nearly all traditional industries and has, hidden behind the scenic beauty, high levels of deprivation and poverty. We sit at the fringe of the last active mining in Cornwall, an industry that, even if it survives decades, is employing fewer and fewer people. Nearly all of the tourist provision in the county looks back into the past. Eden is one of a small group of initiatives that are about the possibilities of a positive future.

One very major thing that Eden has done is to demonstrate that gardens can be economic drivers. Eden seems to have inspired a new wave of interest in gardens in diverse governments around the world.

On the back of the 2 million visitors it has been independently calculated that, even leaving aside our direct employment of over 500 local people, Eden is generating indirect income for the region of over £150m per annum. Harder to measure, but of significant value, is the raising of expectations for the future amongst the local communities.
SYMBOL OF POSITIVE CHANGE
Perhaps the most important thing about Eden Project is that it stands as a symbol of positive change and possibilities. The project happened against the odds, and there were many reasons why it might not have succeeded. It is a result of determination and vision, but above all a testament that people and plants working together can do amazing things - that it is possible to bring life to dead places. This provides an inspirational hook to engage the public, and a stimulating platform on which to stage a multi-layered public education programme that has potential to reach across the widest spectrum of people, not just those who profess an interest in plant-related issues. At the heart of Eden’s educational messages, is the illustration that people need not always be destroyers of environments, that through respectful management of the power of nature, people can sometimes leave the world better than it was, rather than worse.

Literature Cited

Figures

Fig. 1. A view of the project soon after full opening.
Fig. 2. Nearly half a million people came to see the project during construction – it was an excellent chance for people to feel they were part of the process.

Fig. 3. This exhibit is designed to encourage hands-on exploration – more engaging for everyone and especially valuable for visually impaired visitors and children.
Fig. 4. Visitors explore through sense of smell at the multi-sensory perfume exhibit - accessible to all ages and abilities.