

Session III : introduction

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SESSION III — INTRODUCTION

David BRAMWELL

The session was, in the programme, called Education and visitor's management but from the list of speakers and the titles of their contributions to the session it was, obviously, much more concerned with education than with general visitor's management.

In this session, apart from this brief introduction there were papers from Julia Willison who is the education officer for BGCI (Botanical Gardens Conservation International) who gave an overview of the future role of Botanical Gardens, Mrs. Gingins, director of the centre of the Swiss league for the Protection of Nature at Champ-Pittet who had as his subject Nature centres and botanical gardens pedagogical utilities at the service of nature conservation, Gail Bromley manager of education and marketing at the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew posed an interesting question about at which level gardens should be working with the public and finally Terry Keller who shared her experiences of community outreach in New York.

As an introduction to the session the meeting held in May 1993 in Las Palmas on Environmental education and the role of botanical gardens was mentioned, not least because three of the four speakers were present there and it was a meeting which brought together about 100 people all associated in some way with education in botanical gardens, a wide diversity of people with different programmes, different methods, widely varying ideas and concepts but all enthusiastically working towards the goal of environmental education. They were people from many different countries, different gardens, different cultures all demonstrating in their own way the value and absolute necessity for environmental education and at the same time the value of the botanical gardens network as a means of cooperation and collaboration and as a means of making botanical gardens an important force and voice not only in the field of environmental education but also in other conservation forums as well. A large number of gardens are now actively working in the education field and both Gail Bromley and Terry Keller showed what can be done, and Julia Willison showed how to plan for the future. For international cooperation in botanical gardens, the education network should be the model and it's important that it is active, well-oiled and up and running and for BGCI, as the principal and certainly the most active world botanical garden network, an education programme should be one of its first priorities, one of its flagship activities.

Returning to the meeting in Las Palmas — apart from the very practical workshops in which the participants shared and exchanged experiences, one of the principal themes with which they

were involved with was the Botanical Gardens Education Strategy document which is now in the process of publication. Probably when staff from North American or Western European gardens look at the education Strategy or the Guidelines for Germplasm Conservation in botanical gardens, they feel that much of the content is obvious, it's what they are already doing or trying to do and this sort of document may not even have a high priority on their reading list. It should, however, always be remembered that there are a large number of gardens in the world in very important places from the plant conservation point of view. The ones where we need to make a special effort to bring them into the garden network or help them to be able to apply even small fragments of the strategies, to them these guidelines and strategies are extremely important, they are the corporate plan, the policy document to help with their own internal organization, to educate staff in the role of a modern botanical garden, and to demonstrate to the powers that be, to the people who control the purse-strings, that botanical gardens can be and indeed are important centres for environmental conservation. These strategies and guidelines are, within the gardens network, one very important way of transferring ideas and techniques from developed and active gardens to those at a much earlier stage of development or reform, and they can, of course, be basic policy documents for the creation or new botanic gardens.

So the draft strategy on Environmental education in botanical gardens should be welcomed. The section on education in the Botanical Gardens Conservation Strategy was a little disappointing and it is obvious that a subject as important to botanical gardens, to the conservation cause and to the BGCI network should have its own strategy and its own policy document.

Not everyone may agree with, or find useful every word and certainly in the everyday application of the strategy it will have to be adapted to individual circumstances and to suit staff availability and capacity, finance, local culture and attitudes etc., but it does, and this is its main objective, give each garden a sound basis for formulating its own education policy, whilst at the same time demonstrating for fundraising purposes, for example, that environmental education is an important topic on an international scale and that each garden can actively and effectively participate in a world network (that "think globally but act locally" again) so that its own action is being multiplied through the network and, therefore, its impact can be much greater than that of one single garden acting alone.

Finally, the point should be made that the education programmes of Botanical Gardens should not be confined or constrained by the limits of the garden fence or wall. The importance and value of going outside the garden into society, into schools and local neighbourhoods has already been demonstrated by various projects as can be seen in this session from the excellent example of Terry Keller's work in New York. This in situ sociological role of gardens, not only from an education point of view but also in demonstrating the value and importance of botanical gardens in conservation and obtaining public support for them using outreach programmes to get more people to visit the garden, to make people more aware of what botanical gardens do and could do with more adequate resources is vital for the future and something which should be taken very seriously for the 21st century, only a few years away...