

Knowing your visitors, responding to their needs

Alistair Griffiths and Andy Jasper

Eden Project, Bodelva, Cornwall PL24 2SG

Ways of listening and making change

The Eden Project has been described as ‘a global garden for the 21st century, a gateway to a sustainable future and a dramatic setting in which to tell the fascinating story of mankind’s dependence on plants. It is only six years old and has welcomed more than 8.5 million visitors since opening. It is already a top international visitor destination and the fifth most visited ‘paid-for’ attraction in the UK. However, Eden Project’s uniqueness comes not from its attractiveness to visitors but more from the way it engages the public with issues of sustainability, the environment and man’s interdependence with the natural world. This presentation will explore how Eden Project uses visitor research to ensure their experience is as good as it possibly can be as well as to explore methods that both engage and provide insight into what the visitors are taking home with them from their visit.

This presentation will briefly present the results of a number of studies to give an insight into the approach the Project has adopted to ensure Eden Project visitors have a voice within the organisation, and in doing so ensures it (the organisation) better understand its visitors. These studies have drawn on a variety of research methodologies observational studies, questionnaire surveys (both self complete and interviewer led), personal meaning mapping studies as well as profiling matrices. All studies (however small, focused or bespoke) have fed into an overarching agenda to understand whether Eden Project is making a difference to anyone. And although to date over 100,000 visitors have inputted into the research project over the six years of opening it is hoped that the importance of collecting robust, straight forward data that is simply presented is reinforced.

The presentation includes insight from Eden’s six year, 100,000+ visitor profiling study which informs almost every aspect of the Project as well as a brief overview of the approach toward, development of and findings from recent evaluation research studies. These include behaviour profiling matrix, an adaptation of Personal Meaning Mapping methodology which provides insight into children’s learning and the impacts of live interpretation at the Project.

A detailed case study is presented which evaluates the Eden Project’s visitors’ response to buying a hybrid created from a critically endangered endemic species from the Seychelles to support plant conservation. *Impatiens gordonii* Horne ex. Baker was used to create a hybrid cultivar called *Impatiens* ‘Ray of Hope’. Since June 2004 this cultivar has been sold through the Eden Project’s shop and in December 2006, 4,400 units had been sold with an overall profit of £9,440. Of this £4,720 has been directed to the conservation in the Seychelles on

I. gordonii and other endangered Seychelles plants. An evaluation of the motivation of customers who bought *Impatiens* ‘Ray of Hope’ was achieved through a questionnaire consisting of open-ended, closed-ended, multiple choice and dichotomous questions. One hundred and sixty questionnaires were posted and of these fifty four customers, or 34 % of the 160 buyers, responded. The findings from this questionnaire showed that sixty three percent of the customers/visitors purchasing *Impatiens* ‘Ray of Hope’ did so to support plant conservation; one hundred percent of the customers who purchased *Impatiens* ‘Ray of Hope’ felt satisfied about contributing towards conserving Seychelles endangered plants and thought it was a good idea to cultivate plants for sale from a parent of a rare and endangered species in order to help conserve it. In addition, ninety percent of the customers who bought *Impatiens* ‘Ray of Hope’ would buy a similar product produced ethically by the Eden Project. These positive responses demonstrate the value of listening to your visitors/customers and provide evidence that there is a market for using endangered plants to create new cultivars for sale to raise funds, whilst simultaneously providing a means to raise awareness of, and educate about, plant conservation issues in botanical gardens.

Collectively, these studies present insight into how visitors learn from the whole ‘Eden’ experience rather than of any one single element of the Eden Project experience. Recognising visitors and responding to their needs has been a key to Eden Project’s success.

Whilst allowing visitors to have a voice through straightforward, robust research Eden Project has confidence to be bold and take risks (live 8, Sexy Green Car Show, Ray of Hope), and develop a project which meets visitors needs whilst challenging them to engage with environmental issues.



Figure 1: Newly bred cultivar *Impatiens* ‘Ray of Hope’



Figure 2: Habit shot of *Impatiens* ‘Ray of Hope’

References:

- Falk, J.H., and Dierking, L. D., 1992, *The Museum Experience*, Washington, (DC: Whalesback)
- Falk, J.H. & Dierking, L.D., 2000, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning*, Walnut Creek, CA, AltaMira Press
- Falk, J.H., and Dierking, L.D., 2000, *Visitor experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press)
- Hergenhahn, B.R., 1988, *An Introduction to the Theories of Learning*, London, Prentice-Hall International
- Nisbet, J. & Shucksmith, J., 1991, *Learning Strategies*, New York, Routledge
- O'Connor, K., 1969, *Learning: An Introduction*, London, Macmillan
- Pope, M. and Gilbert, J., 1983, Personal Experience and the Construction of Knowledge in Science. *Science Education*, 67(2), 193-203.
- Solomon, J., 1987, Social Influences on the Construction of Pupils Understanding of Science. *Studies in Science Education*, 14.
- Peacock, A., Bowker, R., 2001, Thinking of Eden, *Teaching Thinking*, 5, 22-24.
- Bowker, R. 2002 Making the most out of Eden, *Primary Science Review*, 75, 4-7.
- Bowker, R., 2004, Evaluating teaching and learning strategies at the Eden Project, *Evaluation and Research in Education*, 16(3), 123-136.
- Bowker, R. and Jasper, A., 2007, 'Don't forget your leech socks'! Children's learning during an Eden Education Officer's Workshop, *Research in Science & Technological Education*, 25, 135-150
- Bowker, R., 2004, Children's perceptions of plants following their visit to the Eden Project. *Research in Science and Technological Education*, 22(2), 227-243