

## Role models in botanic garden education networks

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### Abstract

Networking opportunities are the key to effective and efficient capacity building and support for botanic garden educators. Developing a solid infrastructure for any network - with aims, objectives and clear development processes is equally critical for effective network support and sustainability. The two networks discussed here, the Botanic Garden Education Network (BGEN) in the UK and the network of Argentinean botanic gardens (RAJB), provide case studies on how networks function and the impact networking can have on delivery of programmes.

### Key Words

Capacity building; communication methods; network; resource exchange; staff support;

### Case Study 1 - The Botanic Gardens Education Network (BGEN)

BGEN was started informally in 1994 by a small group of educators who wanted to share their working experiences and programme ideas. Initially targeted at botanic gardens education staff, and staffed by educators from a number of botanic gardens who volunteered their support, the network offered one annual training course and produced a regular newsletter for members. In 2002, the committee held a number of strategic development workshops and decided that it should operate on a more business-like footing and started the application process to become a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee, both of which were granted in 2003. The registered office for BGEN Ltd is currently hosted by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. A strategy for fundraising was also put in place, ensuring sufficient money for BGEN to employ a part-time coordinator. This post-holder administrates the day to day activities of the network and maintains an excellent, timely e-network service for all members.

With a new constitution and enlarged committee, BGEN redefined its mission statement: '*Supporting inspirational learning about plants and their importance*' and refined its objectives as:

BGEN will work with its members to:

- Foster a greater awareness of the importance of plants and plant diversity among people of all ages and cultures
- Encourage a responsible attitude towards the natural environment, conservation and sustainability
- Provide a bridge between visitors and the varied skills and expertise of the staff and volunteers of all member organisations
- Interpret the living plant collections and other resources on-site (and where appropriate, off-site)
- Promote awareness of and support for the aims and objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Global Strategy for Plant Conservation (GSPC), Millennium Development Goals and other relevant legislation

Recognising that the network had much to offer in the development of 'processes' within educational programme development and implementation, BGEN opened its doors to engage with a slightly broader range of organizations. Members now include staff from museums, environmental education organizations, zoos and country/heritage estates, as well as free-lance educators and interpreters. Several members of staff from western European countries such as Austria and Italy have also joined, and attend BGEN training days and conferences in the UK.

The main offer of the network is capacity building and training. A minimum of four training days are offered annually. These training days are usually process led, pragmatic and participatory and sessions across 2009-2010 included such topics as 'Natural Play', 'Low Cost Interpretation', 'Effective Storytelling', 'The Secondary Curriculum', 'Current Research in Education' and 'Developing and writing audio trails'. Some introductory training sessions are provided in repeated format across a number of regions, so as to minimize travel costs for members. These sessions, called 'Back to Basics', are primarily for new staff in organizations and are focused on strategies for developing education in botanic gardens or similar organisations. Besides the training days, BGEN provides a three day annual conference, focusing on a topic that is current to education, or on a topic selected by members during a canvassing exercise. The most recent conference (November 2009) focused on Education for Climate Change, whilst the forthcoming conference will feature basic application for 'Taxonomy, Horticulture and Communication' – three strands essential to those working in education for plant diversity management.

Maintaining good communication with members and offering resource material to support education delivery in member organizations is also critical to BGEN's success. A new website, [www.BGEN.org](http://www.BGEN.org), has recently been launched offering quick and easy access to a range of good published articles, programme ideas and useful contacts.

BGEN's broad networking strength recently attracted the attention of the Department for Education in the UK, resulting in an offer of funding to both support and build the network and to manage a project focused on enhancing teacher recognition of gardens and gardening as stimulating educational resources – the *Growing Schools Garden Site Award Scheme*. BGEN has similarly been invited to participate in support for BGCI's educational material development on 'Climate Change' and data/reports for Target 14 of GSPC. Directors of BGEN have also been invited to sit on a number of national steering committees such as the Ministry of Education's initiatives on 'Learning Outside the Classroom (LOtC)' and the BBC's recent 'Breathing Places Campaign'. The network also feeds into national and international surveys related to environmental education programmes

The network is managed by a board of 16 directors/charitable trustees drawn from a range of establishments and elected for a 3 year period. This steering committee meets four times annually and additionally attends an Annual General Meeting; venues change for each meeting, with one of the committee members hosting the day. Three working groups exist, made up of directors/trustees working alongside invited non-board members. These working groups meet on the morning prior to the general committee meetings for efficiency and effective programme development; where feasible, phone conferencing may be used to save on travel costs. The three groups focus on development programmes for fundraising, training and communication.

Funding for the network comes from a number of strands including:

- Membership (3 levels – individuals, medium sized organizations, large organizations)
- Fees for training days ( a target profit sum is set)
- Conference fees (a target profit sum is set)
- Donations
- Overheads for project work

The impacts that the network has had on UK plant based education and on capacity building within the field have been many and positive. Many botanic gardens, and similar organizations, have one individual who supports the education delivery on site, and they come from a range of backgrounds – horticulture, science and the formal education system. Having a good range of cheap and up-to-date training opportunities allows individuals to ‘pick and mix’ their own professional development and extends the range of teaching methodologies and content delivery that these individuals can offer in their own institution. It also offers a good benchmarking system.

A resource directory that can be accessed on-line provides an excellent way of keeping abreast of current research and knowledge in the field and the e-network provides opportunities for instant mentoring, advice or offers of resources. This helps reduce ‘re-inventing the wheel’ in programme development or production of written activities and materials.

BGEN is linked externally to a number of other networks, with whom there is regular contact. This broadens the reach of BGEN and also provides other contacts and training opportunities for members. The network is now recognized nationally and this has helped increase the profile of plant based education, raised the status of education within botanic gardens and offered lobbying opportunities for better plant based education with the Government and other education providers. It has also opened up the possibility for BGEN to bid for and be awarded funding for regional and national projects.

### **Case study 2 - The Argentine Network of Botanic Gardens (RAJB)**

The development of Argentine Botanic Gardens goes back to 1898, when the municipal garden of Buenos Aires, Jardín Botánico Carlos Thays, was opened. This was followed by the Lucien Hauman Botanic Garden (1910-22) and the Jardín Botánico Arturo Ragonese, (INTA) in Castellar, Buenos Aires in 1947. Many more have been opened since that time. The Argentine Network of Botanic Gardens (RAJB) originated in 1996 and was launched at the 25<sup>th</sup> Argentine Symposium of Botany when the first meeting of all the botanic gardens was hosted.

The objectives of RAJB are to:

- Co-ordinate activities and promote communication between botanic gardens using seminars, courses and publications
- Extend conservation programmes *in situ* to National Parks
- Promote the importance of natural resources to local communities through education programmes
- Organize environmental and research congresses, including the participation of invited national and international researchers
- Work together to obtain political recognition

Many of the network encounters were during national and international congresses, where members could share their experiences and look for potential joint collaborative projects. These ranged from participation in the BGCI International Congress in Ashville, USA (2000), the Australian Botanic Garden Congress (2001) and the Global Botanic Garden Congress in Barcelona (2004) to the Annual Meeting of the Botanical Society in Chile.

A huge boost was given to the network, when there was a collaborative project between BGCI and RAJB initiated in 2004 and sponsored by the Investing in Nature Programme. This provided funding to enhance and strengthen the network. A training programme was set up which has built capacity over the last few years, with seminars and workshops offered on Botanic Garden Management (2004), 'Environmental Education' (2005) and Conservation in Botanic Gardens (2006). Over these three years there has also been an additional annual workshop to explore 'Botanic Gardens in Argentina'. Since 2005, the network has managed and implemented the development of an annual 'World Botanic Garden Day' in Argentina, promoting the role and work of botanic gardens to the wider public.

These training sessions and regular network meetings supported the development of a national 'Action Plan for Botanic Gardens', where over 40 botanic gardens collaborated to build a strategic development plan for Argentina. Launched in 2006, this Action Plan has three elements – Conservation, Education and Research. The network has been able to monitor progress on the Action Plan and data has been collected on the work to date. 13 botanic gardens were surveyed to evaluate how internal and external issues had impacted on the delivery of the Action Plan and to what extent the objectives had been successfully completed. 77% of botanic gardens had fulfilled their Action Plan targets; however there were some weaknesses in the overall delivery of conservation initiatives into national parks, public education programmes and human resources development.

The evaluation did however show clear benefits of networking across the gardens including:

- The development of joint project activities
- Good collaboration on database and living collection information
- Development of joint protocols
- An enhancement of *in* and *ex situ* conservation work
- More sustainable use of resources.

Overall there was an improved efficiency in the work and development of the botanic gardens

In summary, networks offer exciting and effective possibilities for personnel working in botanic gardens; they are also highlighted as a target within the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation. In an economic climate of diminishing funds and loss of resources, it is even more important that we find efficient ways of working together to reach our ultimate goal of plant conservation and the sustainable use of our resources. Networks are a critical tool to accomplish this.