

Young people from the More Choices More Chances school group gaining horticultural experience at Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh.

PHOTO CREDIT: ROYAL BOTANIC GARDEN, EDINBURGH



GROWING OUR SOCIAL ROLE

KATE WHITTINGTON, ASIMINA VERGOU, AND JULIA WILLISON

Safeguarding the future of plants is one of the main roles one can associate with modern botanic gardens. Even though poverty, obesity, youth unemployment, anxiety disorders, and an aging population are very real and prominent social problems, globally, they probably don't sound like matters that concern a botanic garden.

Social and environmental issues are intrinsically linked—environmental degradation can lead to a multitude of socio-economic problems, and vice-versa (Pelow 2000; Taylor 2000). It is, therefore, impossible to address one set of problems without tackling the other. Could botanic gardens have a role to play in tackling such monumental issues?

The role of botanic gardens is ever-evolving—from the Italian physic gardens of the sixteenth century, to present-day centers of plant conservation and education. Now, botanic gardens face both a new challenge, and a new opportunity to widen their outreach—by developing a social role.

With more than half the world's population living in urban areas, we have

never been so detached from the natural world, but botanic gardens are ideally placed to combat this. Being located at the intersection of society and nature, and engaging with more than two hundred fifty million visitors annually, botanic gardens play a pivotal role in reconnecting people with nature (Dodd and Jones 2010).

In the face of economic downturn and threatening funding cuts, now more than ever botanic gardens must prove their relevance to society. It is widely accepted that contact with “nature” contributes to a range of societal goals including health, education, social cohesion, and urban regeneration. By reaching out to marginalized or disadvantaged sectors of the community, botanic gardens can extend these benefits to everyone. By running programs with unemployed youth or adults with physical or learning difficulties, for example, gardens can help to provide them with new skills, an increased appreciation for nature, and a greater sense of self-worth.

For most botanic gardens, plant conservation is approached from a

scientific perspective rather than a social one. But given that environmental and social issues are so closely intertwined, growing a social role is vital in order for botanic gardens, as well as other scientific and educational institutions, to prove their modern-day relevance by engaging with their local communities on issues of mutual concern.

Naming and Framing: Growing a Garden's Social Role for Plant Conservation

So, what exactly does growing a social role mean?

Botanic gardens developing their commitment to working with their local and global communities on common issues of social and environmental importance, for the enduring benefit of those communities, the gardens themselves, and towards a sustainable future for our planet.

Public outreach is an important aspect of any botanic garden's work, but some community groups are much more difficult to engage with than others. Botanic gardens attract a mainly white, middle-class, older demographic/

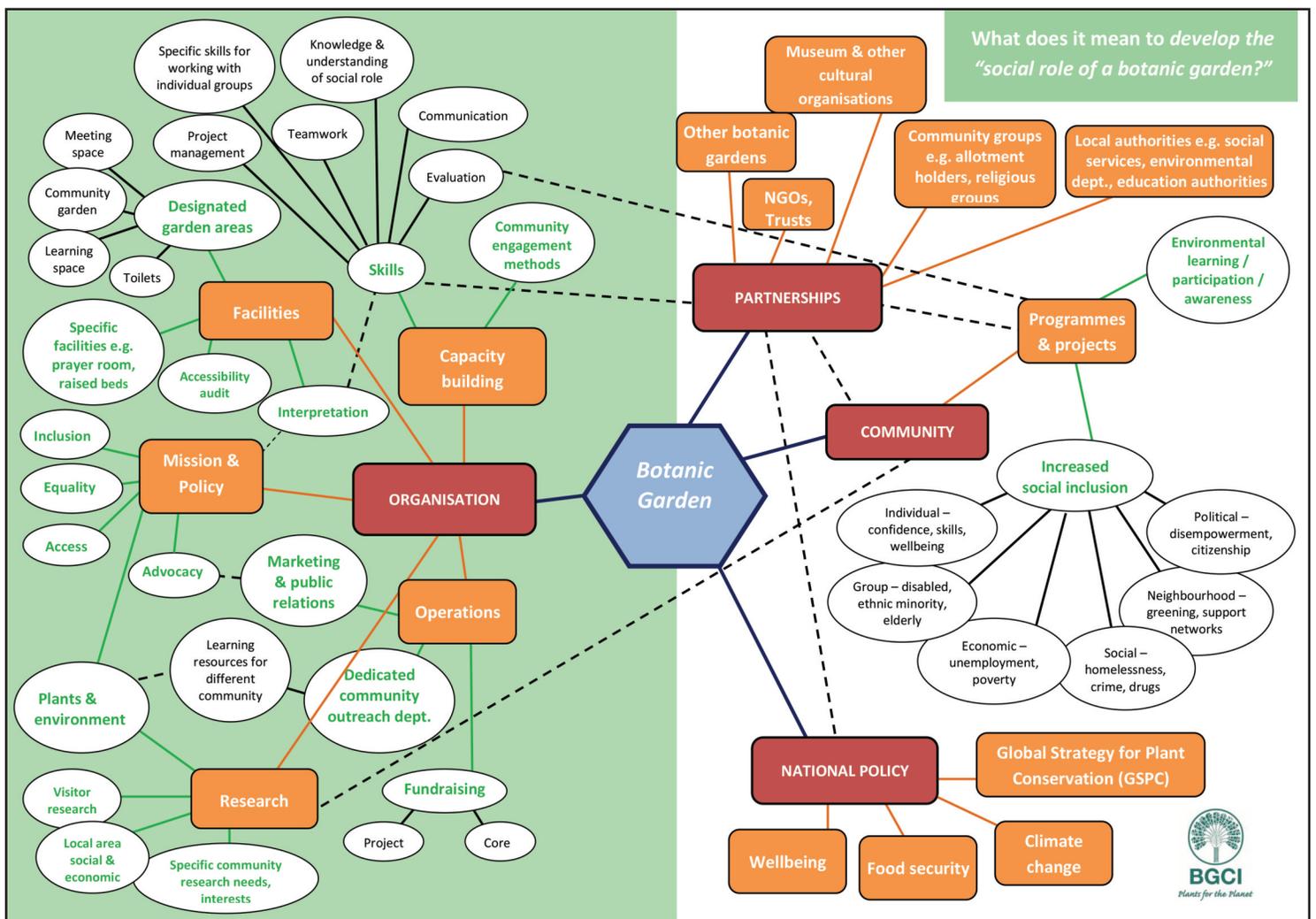


Figure 1: What it means to develop the social role of a botanic garden

audience, with some groups viewing them as exclusive and “not for them.” So, while many gardens already run education/community projects, significant gaps exist in the range of visitors they engage with.

Growing a social role is a pro-active process, requiring gardens to take the initiative to identify and reach out to under-represented or disenfranchised sectors of their local community, by engaging them in their sites, or by running activities in the community.

To do this, gardens can start by benchmarking. Audience research can provide data about the current visitor profile and who is not visiting the gardens along with their needs and interests. With these data available, the gardens can run small-scale projects with local and underrepresented community groups, which can be an effective

springboard to more ambitious programs. An essential part of this process is forming partnerships with community groups and the organizations that work with them, a process that requires patience, tact, and determination.

There exist different models for engaging communities including top-down and bottom-up approaches and different levels of engagement, ranging from providing information to working together. It is essential to identify what social exclusion issues¹ the community faces that could be addressed with a project and how these can be linked with addressing environmental issues, during the planning process, when engaging with the community. Engaging communities in plant conservation needs to be done in a way that is relevant to the participants’ lives, interests, expectations, and needs.

Evaluating the social and environmental impact of a community project is crucial for the sustainability of this sort of work in the garden.

Running a small-scale community project can only be the springboard for achieving long-term organizational change in a garden that aspires to grow its social role. Figure 1 illustrates all the internal and external factors and elements that influence and comprise a botanic garden’s social role. The Communities in Nature initiative provides examples of gardens that have already embarked on organizational change and the impact of their work, so far...

(Editor’s note: Expanded content available on the APGA website at <http://www.publicgardens.org/content/public-garden-growing-social-role-extra>. Descriptions of projects at Bristol Zoo Gardens (BZG), University of Leicester Botanic Garden (ULBG), The National Arboretum (Westonbirt), and the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE).)

¹ The role of a botanic garden in “tackling exclusion and promoting inclusion is understood in terms of its social impact in relation to disadvantage, discrimination and social inequality” (Sandell 2003, 45-46)



(Left) Pilton project group visit

(Bottom Left) Clients of the Bristol Drugs Project learn about woodland conservation management at Westonbirt, the National Arboretum in the United Kingdom.

PHOTO CREDIT: WESTONBIRT

A Call to Arms

Growing a garden's social role is not limited to working with particular groups and narrowing the audiences that the garden appeals to; it is a long-term process during which the organization learns how to diversify its audiences and reach and be relevant to a wider part of the society. As David Rae, director of horticulture at Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, put it:

There's no point in preaching about environmental sustainability to only 5 percent of the population, it has to be to 100 percent, and that means everybody... So, we've got to find new ways of reaching people who don't naturally come here. (August 10, 2012)

In addition to addressing issues of social exclusion, growing a garden's social role requires rethinking plant conservation as an activity that is supported by scientific research and encouraging public participation. Simon Toomer, Director of Westonbirt, England, UK, highlighted:

We have to be careful to make sure that what we're doing in these kinds of projects is using the real significance of, and the distinctive nature of, the botanic garden. When we're planning these activities, they do need to be part of the place, rather than simply using it as a venue. (September 25, 2012)



In its five-year life, Communities in Nature has been steadily supporting botanic gardens in becoming socially relevant. Research commissioned by BGCI in 2010 (Dodd and Jones 2010) documented the state of the social role of gardens worldwide. The coordination and evaluation of community projects in six botanic gardens showcased the impact of this work (Dodd and Jones 2011; Vergou and Willison 2013b) and the publication of a manual (Vergou and Willison 2013a) provided a step-by-step approach for growing an organization's social role. The initiative currently is expanding its remit and calls gardens to arms, at a global level, to share their best practice in this field of work and build partnerships to address social and environmental issues with their communities.

If you would like to know more about this initiative, visit: http://www.bgci.org/education/communities_in_nature. If you would like to be part of this initiative and also share a case study from your garden in our Community Projects World Map, please contact BGCI Education (asimina.vergou@bgci.org).

Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI), the world's largest network of botanic gardens, is currently leading the Communities in Nature program. This initiative aims to further develop the capacity of botanic gardens to realize their potential in contributing towards social change and public engagement with environmental issues.

BGCI is grateful to Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation for generously supporting the Communities in Nature Programme. BGCI would also like to thank our many colleagues from botanic gardens, community organizations, and project participants who were involved in the program. Last, we are indebted to the academics and other professionals and friends who contributed to the evaluation of the program.

Kate Whittington, an environmental sciences graduate, is currently pursuing an MSc in science communication at Imperial College, London.

Asimina Vergou is the head of education at Botanic Gardens Conservation International and is working on building the capacity of botanic gardens in public engagement.

Julia Willison is the head of participation for the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, where she is responsible for learning. Julia also leads the Grow Wild program which aims to reach thirty million people in the UK by inspiring them to grow native plants.

References

- Dodd, J. and C. Jones. 2010. *Redefining the role of botanic gardens – Towards a new social purpose*. Leicester, UK: Research Centre for Museum and Galleries (RCMG) and BGCI.
- Dodd, J. and C. Jones. 2011. *Growing the social role of botanic gardens: An internal evaluation for BGCI*. Leicester, UK: Research Centre for Museums and Galleries and BGCI.
- Pellow, David N. 2000. Environmental inequality formation: Toward a theory of environmental injustice. *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 (4): 581-601.
- Sandell, Richard. 2003. Social inclusion, the museum and the dynamics of sectoral change. *Museum and Society* 1 (1): 45-62.
- Taylor, Dorcelta E. 2000. The rise of the environmental justice paradigm: Injustice framing and the social construction of environmental discourses. *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 (4): 508-580.
- Vergou, Asimina and Julia Willison. 2013a. *Communities in nature: Growing the social role of botanic gardens: A manual for gardens*. Richmond, UK: BGCI.
- Vergou, Asimina and Julia Willison. 2013b. *Communities in nature evaluation report*. Richmond, UK: BGCI.

