

The Eden Project – making a connection

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Abstract

The Eden Project is a major tourist attraction and learning environment. Three quarters of its visitors are on holiday travelling to Cornwall from beyond the South West region. The informal learning experiences fashioned for them are intended to offer pleasure, meaning and ecological significance. It strives to reach people by connecting and resonating with their everyday lives in a range of complementary and experimental ways. It is an exercise in edutainment. This paper examines the intentions, perceptions and expectations of the education and design team at Eden whose work since 2000 has informed the physical, cultural and 'educational' context of the visitors' 'learning experience'. It is based on an analysis of semi-structured interviews with key members of Eden, on site observation of visitor behaviour and review of secondary material from the broad field of cultural, education and museum studies.

Key Words: Eden Project, interpretation, learning, sustainability.

Introduction

The Eden Project is both a major tourist attraction and striking learning environment articulating a modulated series of pro-sustainability messages. Three quarters of its visitors are on holiday travelling to Cornwall from beyond the South West region (Jasper, 2002) so the largely informal learning experiences fashioned for them are intended to offer pleasure, meaning and ecological significance. It does this by attempting to combine what Greenblatt has termed 'resonance' and 'wonder'. If Eden makes a difference to visitors' attitudes, values and behaviour then what is seen or otherwise experienced must have the power 'to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand' Greenblatt (1991: 42). Eden also engenders 'wonder' stopping the viewer 'in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness'. Eden is unique. It is not a theme park like Disneyland, an open air museum like Beamish or a botanical garden like Kew. It strives to reach people by connecting them to the natural world. The Project's two major income streams, regeneration funding from the European Union and public money from the Millennium Commission, inform the arc of Eden's educational activities and its wider economic purpose.

This paper, following Clandinin and Connelly (2000), is a narrative inquiry into the intentions, perceptions and expectations of the education and design staff at Eden whose work since 2000 has informed the physical, cultural and educational context of the visitors' learning experience. My aim is to analyze the Project's public educational aims and the strategies developed to realize its stated commitment to learning and sustainability. Conceptual and theoretical issues are integrated with the empirical findings which are largely based on a series of semi-structured interviews with key members of the Eden team, on-site observation of visitor and guide behaviour and a review of secondary material from the broad field of cultural, education and museum studies. In mid 2003 senior staff at the Eden Project agreed that I would become an Eden Associate having full access to the site and to those who work there. Staff were asked to express their own views to me as Eden's managers made plain their desire to learn from rather than constrain my research.

My specific interest in adult informal learning and sustainability complemented the evaluation research being undertaken by Eden with formal groups of school age children. Some interviews, particularly those with senior members were held in the main Foundation Building and those with guides and performers were held on site often following a song, a conducted tour or casual interaction with visitors. Some interviews were recorded on mini disc and later transcribed and from others hand written notes were made. As an Eden Associate I wore a little badge bearing the Eden logo and visitors would often stop to ask questions like, where are the loos or how many birds nest in the Biomes? Employees would invariably greet me with a smile. During interviews or informal conversations I would more fully explain my role and status as a university researcher and this, inevitably resulted in free, frank and open expressions of feelings, thoughts and other reflections. The full names of the key Eden staff are used and all quotations are direct transcriptions. Pseudonymous forenames are used to preserve the anonymity of less identifiable staff members. This paper frequently uses the term *museum* to include a wide range of cultural heritage, botanic gardens, entertainment, leisure and other institutions (Roberts, 1997).

The Eden project

The Eden Project opened fully on 17 March 2001. It was partly funded by a £43 million grant from the Millennium Commission and its total cost was £86 million. It was the brainchild of Tim Smit, former music producer and founder of the highly successful Lost Gardens of Heligan. In *Eden*, Smit (2001) writes of the immense effort, perseverance, collaborative work, idealism, luck and sheer determination that enabled a disused china clay quarry in an economically depressed part of Cornwall, Bodelva near St Austell, to be transformed into what tourist agencies call the 'Eighth Wonder of the World'. In its first year of operation it attracted nearly two million visitors and during the second just over one and half million. By August 2003 *The Eden Guide* was third in *The Daily Telegraph's* non-fiction bestseller list and by the end of that year it had brought an estimated £430 million of additional income to the Cornish economy. Its iconic structures, two huge interrelated clusters of modified geodesic conservatories or 'Biomes', have generated a global fascination whose architecture and engineering is a magnificent achievement (Pearman and Whalley, 2003). One Biome nurtures plants and tells stories of the humid tropics region and the other of the warm temperate zone. Both, together with the outside planting are, to quote Eden's Foundation Director, Tony Kendle, 'used as a lens to focus in on the amazing worlds that each one represents; how the politics of the world, for example, lie within a cup of sweet tea' (*Eden Project Guide* 2002: 2). The construction of a new Education Resource Centre and Waste Neutral Recycling Compound along with facilities to help move visitors around the site started in 2003/4 thanks to further grants of £10m from the Millennium Commission, £10m from the South West Regional Development Agency and £13m from the European Union's Objective One programme. Funding is still being sought for the final Biome, which will tell the story of the dry tropics. The design of the Biomes, the Foundation Building and the new Education Centre with their spirals and curves echo natural forms and are constructed in accordance with sound environmental principles. Eden's Waste Neutral programme will also involve an on-site recycling facility and dedicated public areas for workshops and exhibitions. The ability of its associated public education and awareness raising activities to transform conduct has been identified by the team as a key criterion for judging its effectiveness (Vaughan, 2004).

The overall site design exploits the Biomes' spectacular impact by locking the tourists' gaze and focusing attention on a compelling image. Thanks to effective marketing and promotion many visitors viewed the Project while still being built – awe, wonder and interest were generated from the beginning. As Jo Readman, Eden's Director of Education and Messaging says,

At Eden we (...) use a quite theatrical approach to engage the emotions straight away. (...) In the first year there was this curiosity of the public who wanted to see what we were doing, why we were trying to build the biggest greenhouse in the world in a hole full of water. They'd come to the site. People didn't see anything until they came right close and all of a sudden - bang! It's a very

theatrical approach to ... we put it in a hole deliberately because it was exciting. And that was using film and theatre techniques to lead people along ... dramatic suspense.

Messaging and communication

Eden's evolving education, interpretation and communication strategies have been influenced by Smit's experience in restoring the "lost gardens of Heligan" (Samuel, 1998), by advertising, design, theatre, cinema and popular television narratives – *Eastenders*, *Harry Potter*, *The Simpsons*, Natural History programmes, TV commercials. Their importance for the Eden team is that 'they all connect' with large audiences in an entertaining and accessible manner. This view is reinforced by the media experience of the Project's key staff whose previous professional lives involved influencing audience attitudes, values and behaviour predisposing them to conceptualize learning as a form of public communication. Consequently the hope, intention and expectation are that Eden, through its messaging, communication and informal learning environments, can change people. Jo Readman,

So the message we are trying to put across is, 'you can make a difference. It is about celebrating and enjoying the environment you live in. Be positive about the future – you can do something'. A lot of other places, in their education policies, say 'look everything is going wrong and it's all our fault. We've got climate change. We've got war and we've got famine and we've got poverty. Yes we have and they are all dreadful things but there is something you can do about it. So we look at what other people are doing and we look at what the individual can do by starting way, way, way back down the line by connecting to their environment, by connecting them to the rest of the world. Unless we connect people to that we can't take it forward.

The Director of Communications, Bryher Scudamore, former editor of BBC's consumer rights programme *That's Life* and of BBC Online, clearly exemplifies an approach that suggests conveying information in a moral way motivates an audience to action.

That's Life was a television programme that changed people's behaviour. *That's Life* assumed the audience had maximum intelligence and minimum information. We were able to help people understand all sorts of things in their lives and take actions that could help them. Not just about consumer stuff, about being defrauded by clever double glazing salesmen but about being an organ donor – the gift of life. The figures on how people decide to be organ donors changed dramatically after we did our Ben Hardwicke story and many thousands of people are alive now because of the information they were given. So at the heart of what I believe in is in informing the largest possible number of people so they can then make choices, informed choices. One of the reasons I love Eden is because it has exactly the same philosophy – giving people information so they can make informed choices.

Many public communication campaigns, television and radio dramas have certainly succeeded in doing just this (Singhal et al., 2004). In taking some of its cues from the mass media and popular culture, Eden is some conceptual and temporal distance from the moment when curatorial scholarship defined the cultural and educational purpose of a museum. However, the tradition of informal 'public education' and social improvement clearly informs the Project rationale and the desire to reach more than the environmentally committed individual determines much of the development work on learning, communication and interpretation. Tony Kendle explains the need to capture the interest of the general public.

We're interested in trying to get the other fifty million. We know that an awful lot of visitors come just because we have built a big spectacular thing but that is exactly right, that's the strategy. That's why they are there. We are very conscious that ... a lot of other environmental, sustainability projects don't have that

audience. They tend to be talking to the [environmentally] literate. What we are trying to do with the majority of our visitors, we are working very far down the scale for some of them, about beginning to explore for them, make them reflect on, issues particularly of connectedness that they may not have ever thought much about. So we feel as though we are starting to foster the seeds of engagement or something so that a proportion of those people might later on start to think about joining Greenpeace or WWF or whatever. It's very much fostering the seeds.

Learning, interpretation and *edutainment*

Constructivist theories of learning and the “new museology” (Vergo, 1989) eschew the didactic and its somewhat intimidating approach to learning from exhibitions. Times have changed. Foley and McPherson (2000) suggest that commercial imperatives, funding conditions and managerialist pressures have rendered visitors, rather than exhibits or collections, the primary purpose of a museum's existence leading them ‘to be reconceptualized as leisure resources and tourist attractions’. For Roberts (1997), a former manager of public programming at the Chicago Botanic Garden, the purpose of museums should be education *and* entertainment. People use museums, she writes, for many purposes - relaxation, leisure, socializing, discussion and learning. Museum educators now see objects as eliciting multiple meanings and stories and the task of museum education is to nurture reflexivity by empowering visitors to interpret objects, engage in critical dialogue with the messages presented to construct meaning.

Building on the pioneering work of Tilden (1957) and more recently Falk and Dierking (1992) Hein (1998) Hooper-Greenhill (2000) and Sachatello-Sawyer et al, (2002) interpretation is conceived by Eden as a dynamic relationship in which good stories find themselves repeated in various forms, like ripples in a pond, through planting, art installations, live guides, books and pamphlets, workshops, lectures, retail consumption, performances, signage and music. The meaning of these stories, following the constructivist perspectives are understood to be relational, plural, contingent and open to challenge, being negotiated through visitors' cognitive frameworks, interpretative communities and strategies. Knowledge is situated and provisional. Many planting stories and associated images, particularly those redolent with controversy like coffee, hemp, tobacco, cotton, plants for fuel and perfume, are polysemic. What the visitor brings to the story completes the narrative giving meaning and making things meaningful. As a former guide remarked the hemp and cannabis story always attracts ‘a certain kind of person’ affirming Bruner's (1990) understanding of narrative as the primary way we organize, interpret and culturally articulate our lived experience. Thus the hope that visitors connect what they see with what they already know and feel is located in what Falk and Dierking (2000: 13; 2002) call a ‘free-choice learning’ environment involving ‘considerable choice on the part of the learner as to when, where, and what to learn’. This notion underpins much of Eden's interpretation strategy although unlike other cultural heritage organizations where interpretation is used to make sense of the displays or collections, at Eden, as the Evaluation Manager Andrew Jasper told me, ‘the plants are there to interpret the message’. The free choice learning consequently takes place within a broad pro-sustainability context.

Eden is more than a botanic garden or a good day out. The Project's interpretative and educative practice emphasizes intentionality, shaping conduct, altering cultural values and ways of thinking. It adapts the narrative template stressing the interrelationships between plants and human cultures offered by Anna Lewington's *Plants for the People* (2003) a book used by guides staffing the interpretation stations as source material for their extemporized interactions. Sue Minter, the Director of Living Collections highlights the distinctiveness of Eden,

Most botanic gardens would not address the social issues and the economic issues. Frequently they'd look at the history of the crop, cocoa, in the empire but they wouldn't so much look at issues to do with *Fairtrade*, pesticide abuse. And that is the type of thing you can do with performance and all those sort of

interactive things. On the one hand we are trying to grow cocoa brilliantly and cocoa actually flowers and fruits better here than in virtually any other botanic garden. So, people are just engaged by seeing it. We can use that as a jumping off point for talking about the issues.

For Jo Readman, *education* is at the Project's core but there is some unease with the instructive connotations of the word so education is combined with entertainment to make the learning environment creative, accessible, stimulating and enjoyable. Eden's media promotion, visitor experience, restaurant and retail consumption are all designed to reinforce and reproduce informal learning opportunities which support connectivity and encourage people to reflect on their relationships with plants and each other. This leads Readman, well aware of the negative connotations of the term, to apply the concept "edutainment" to characterize Eden's purpose. In an internal evaluation document, *Planting Stories*, Eden's Research Manager, Andrew Jasper (2002: 5) wrote, 'in a straightforward manner the interpretation presents stories relating to each plant collection in a showmanship manner'. And, although it is difficult to find exact comparators for Eden its *edutainment* mission relates in some way to that of Sea World (Davis, 1997), attempts to democratize high art at MOMA (Goldfarb, 2002), popularize science at London's Science Museum (MacDonald, 2002) and earlier approaches marrying amusement with edification in the world fairs of a century ago (Bennett, 1995).

Education Manager, Sue Hill, refers to a dynamic tension emanating from Eden's evolving education, education and interpretative practice.

We have this huge amount of material, ideas, information, facts. We have this stuff. You want to transmit it. We have guides who have learnt the telephone directory about humid tropics. We want to tell people but part of the tension in the Project is actually restraining them from doing that and actually encouraging guides to enter into conversation with people where you are inviting the public to express their hopes and fears and questions about the future and their relationship to the natural world, about their relationship to their food, medicine, health... It's about engaging people in a participatory discussion rather than dolloping them with a load of stuff.

The training of Guides has progressed over time and views differ as to how they should interact with visitors and visitors with the Project. Initial training in presentation, delivered by a member of Cornwall's Knee High Theatre Group, have led guides staffing the mobile interpretation stations, to call those plant specimens designed to engage visitor attention, 'props', thus suggesting their work is a form of performance. Gill, a former guide and trained teacher, suggested that tight schedules and scripted interactions favoured when Eden first opened limited opportunities for spontaneity, authenticity and creative participation. Guides now have more autonomy and scope for extemporization. They are possibly more like adult educators, Rogerian facilitators, who pursue a policy of 'kissing' – interacting with visitors casually as they walk around the site. Gill,

Yes you do engage with people because they are interested or you catch them looking at something but I think people learn just as much, if they are wandering past and if they hear you shout that you are going to do a talk, out of curiosity they'll stand and listen. They have their visit enhanced. If I do a guided tour, the one thing I always used to say to them at the end of the tour, 'I haven't told you everything because I don't know everything but I hope you've gone away with your head splitting with questions'. (...) I don't try to indoctrinate them but what I think is if you are showing someone that a product that they use is destroying the rainforest then you owe it to them to show them an alternative. If we are talking about recycling, it's no point telling them recycling is good if you are not then going to tell them where the value is or what the problems are and why some areas don't do it. We all know constraints of it, the cost and whether it is really worth it or not. Fair trade is another one. It's opening people's eyes to choice.

The emotional labour expended by guides does not seem to exact the discernable emotional cost reported and discussed by Hochschild (1983) in other contexts. There is no evidence of estrangement from those aspects of the self *used* to undertake their work except in so far as any 'people job' requires a certain degree distancing and performance. As one guide noted, 'it is a job – better than some but just like any other'. Others, who fully identify with the Project, seem to be what they appear– dedicated, enthusiastic promoters of Eden and a more sustainable environment.

Planting stories

The plant stories and displays integrate signage, art, sculpture, performance, cultural association and memory. Their design and execution has been based on instinct and feel as well as rational internal evaluations and critical reviews of successes and failures elsewhere. The aim is frequently to engage the visitor cognitively, emotionally and sensually serially and simultaneously. Internal staff development exercises have revealed that when Eden employees visit other museums, heritage sites or botanic gardens they relate to beauty, smell, colour, sound – a whole constellation of sensory experiences. I witnessed a group of adults with learning difficulties interacting with a guide in the Mediterranean Biome. They explored natural and synthetic fibres through touch, smell and sight and apprehended their difference with little verbal explanation. I, like visitors who followed, did so too, although for us the guide's verbal messaging was more discursive and explanatory. So the message is touch a cocoa pod, smell it, recognize it as the origin of a bar of chocolate and if you can speak to a grower, talk to her about her life, work and income. Look her in the eye. Make a connection. Sue Hill, shows how Third World development issues may emerge.

For me the challenge is, if you look at the workshops we do in Eden Live, the most powerful moments have been when we've brought over a coffee grower from Ghana, or a banana grower or cocoa grower and they look the audience in the eye and they talk to them about their lives and what an impact Fair Trade or sustainable farming or whatever has on them. And it is those moments that the audience finally connect and it's an emotional reaction. 'Oh, there's the woman that grows our chocolate' and though intellectually people realise there are people growing the food that they eat and the clothes they wear, when they actually get to look at them face to face and hear their story and personally identify with them, that's when they go 'wow, so when I go and buy Fair Trade chocolate, it actually makes a difference to you, someone else'. And it is trying to present that kind of authentic experience day in, day out ...that is really hard to do.

Short exhibitions, publicity campaigns or events are regularly held to raise awareness of globalization and development – Send a Cow, World Water Day, WOMAD and so on.

The Eden team attempts to fashion an experiential understanding that is as emotional, visual, kinetic and spiritual as it is linguistic or intellectual. When engaged in conversation by guides or performers, visitors sometimes use Eden as a means of retrieving their own memories, of telling their own life stories or narrating critical incidents from their personal life. Certain spaces within and outside the domes offer opportunities for reflection, which occasionally find a more material manifestation through such activities as 'The Wishing Line' on which visitors are invited to hang written notes of their feelings, desires and hopes. Some of those recorded have been deeply personal suggesting the Project offers to some a sense of spiritual security akin to that of a sacred or contemplative garden. Occasionally some experiences or visitor stories reach an almost apocryphal status among the staff. A World War Two veteran remembering the horror of war broke down in tears at the sight of the Malay House in the Humid Tropics Biome serving as testimony, certainly in the eyes of the staff, to Eden's power to touch people. For some guides a 'good interaction' elicits a critique of our contemporary wasteful or environmentally degrading culture. Those adept at facilitating such conversations draw from the visitor connections they may not otherwise make. For example, in the outside planting Myth and Folklore area, a group of middle aged and elderly women started talking about plastic shopping bags with the guide Geoff, a trained actor, who was

dressed as a mythic man of the woods. Geoff steered the conversation onto waste minimization, taxation, story telling, new technology, urbanization, the values of young people and the need to retrieve valued older or create new ways of living and being. The visitors were reluctant to move on relishing the opportunity and space to reflect suggesting that reflexivity and some degree of self-refashioning (Sweetman, 2003) were clearly on the agenda, which for Geoff is a pivotal aspect of the Eden experience. Any failure to facilitate reflection is Geoff's, or the Project's, failure rather than the visitor bringing to mind Carr's view of museum learning requiring 'a moment when people redefine themselves and their roles ... [when] they become individuals in the process of transforming experiences' (Carr, 1990: 11).

People do not evaluate stories in isolation. To be memorable they need to resonate with the worldviews, emotions and cultural contexts of self and others. To be compelling they need to have a (moral) point as well. Indeed, cultural anthropologists like Bird (2003: 40) affirm that, 'from an audience point of view, the best stories are those that leave room for speculation, for debate, and for a degree of audience "participation"'. Eden requires engagement so exhibition makers must be sensitive to the nature of their audiences and of popular culture. Adjacent to the citrus plants are displays of consumer products – tinned fruit, throat lozenges, juices, marmalades, etc. Karp (1991: 22-3) writes,

Almost by definition, audiences do not bring to exhibitions the full range of cultural resources necessary for comprehending them; otherwise there would be no point to exhibiting. Audiences are left with two choices: either they define their experience of the exhibition to fit with their existing categories of knowledge, or they reorganise their categories of knowledge, to fit better with their experience. Ideally, it is the shock of non-recognition that enables the audiences to choose the latter alternative. The challenge for exhibition makers is to provide within exhibitions the contexts and resources that enable audiences to choose to reorganize their knowledge.

This has made some of the Eden team suspicious of popular media images of the environment. They perceive a certain clichéd redundancy in the *National Geographic* or television image of indigenous peoples, the natural world, plants and gardens. Their reality is the reality of the image. They are overly familiar, saccharine, and ineffective in stimulating or provoking that 'shock of non recognition'. Staff visits to other museums confirmed the need to offer authentic experiences. Sue Hill,

When we started thinking about the ideas we were going to communicate and how we were going to do it, we did look at the way a lot of other learning was being done. We did look at other visitor centres, science parks. We looked at what was out there and it was very interesting. What we saw was a quite assertive style of communication. So you might say the tone of voice generally in the Science Museum or the London Aquarium is, "This is how the world is. We know and you don't". (...) It is very fact, fact-based delivery. We saw a lot of interactive exhibits, which sometimes generate a huge amount of interesting energy but quite a lot don't seem to deliver their aims. We watched a fantastic example of a child in the Aquarium merrily bashing away at the buttons which were supposed to kind of make you think about (...) biodiversity and where things live in the world's oceans. The child was very consumed with the activity, it was great – hitting buttons – but it actually made no connections. The exhibit designer wanted you to do more than just hit the buttons. (...) In the same venue, we saw children of a similar age queuing up to for half an hour to touch a real Sting Ray, to touch a fish. A genuine experience. It's very interesting in the way a lot of these places use film. We saw some wonderful film in lots of places but film is now such a domestic experience. It doesn't have the same kind of potency as maybe the people who are making it believe that it might have. We watched people walking past beautifully produced text panels and fantastic bits of presentational technology but it didn't seem to be moving or touching people in a way some of the meaning and messages might seem to have demanded.

Genuine experiences do not yet extend to offering visitors the 'disorientating dilemmas' Mezirow (1991) considers essential for perspective transformation or the cognitive conflict that Ballantyne (1998) sees as necessary to develop 'environmental conceptions'. There is nothing comparable to the bushmeat stories informing the visitor experience of the higher primates at the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust in the English Channel Island of Jersey. Here visitors will encounter photographs of dismembered primates, severed heads, burnt bodies, extracts from newspaper reports detailing the gruesome nature of the trade before seeing the actual gorillas scratch, relax, eat and simply *be* in their own compound. The shock is palpable, contrived and deliberate. Similarly the Wildwalk @ Bristol tells the story of evolution but ends with a clear and forceful message about human culpability for the planet's ecological breakdown using a collage of sounds, artefacts and moving images. Eden's approach is less aggressive and as a result its environmental messaging sometimes seems muted. However, within the Project discussion on this issue continues with some staff believing Eden should provoke as well as stimulate.

Using art

The relationship with the creative artists commissioned to design exhibits is crucially important given the Project's reluctance to extensively use film, video and computer imaging. The art effectiveness of art works is seen as depending on how they resonate with the everyday life experiences, prior learning and cultural repertoire of the visitor. Peter Hempel, the Eden Brand Director, critiques the drift towards ICT in modern museums seeing art as a way of directly addressing people in a technologically unmediated way. He hopes to continue those stories suggested by a picture, a sculpture or a craft.

What we decided, very early on was that we didn't want to go the traditional, predictable approach to interpretation, which would be largely as in botanic gardens labels and signs. Most museums tend to focus on the touch screen, multimedia, audio-visual graphics led interpretation which we felt was wrong on a number of different levels really. It was about the transmission of information rather than the exploration of ideas or stories. The second reason was we thought it was dull - just asking people to read text or look at imagery or whatever. They're the kinds of media that they're used to. Taking information - it's not terribly powerful. It's not likely to really move people. Then moving on (...) what types of media really engage people, engage the senses as much as the ears and the eyes, the emotions but also understanding that if we have a site that has already been designed to deliver eighty five or so different stories around crops, natural habitats or around particular plants? (...) It's down to the role that Eden can usefully play in the broader educational and communication sphere which is about exciting, engaging, hooking people, awakening interest rather than delivering the whole story.

One of the most intriguing uses of artwork, and a good illustration of the creative process, focuses on wine production and consumption. The specific installation consists of grape vines and dancing mythical creatures (maenads) representing a scene of Dionysian pleasure whose full comprehension obviously requires a degree of cultural knowledge and visual literacy. There is little signage so without the help of a guide, who may or may not fully understand the cultural significations, the exhibit may remain opaque. As one member of a tour group casually noted 'you don't pick up so much just walking around on your own'. The guide 'transmitted' information and offered an interpretation of a relationship between love, wine and happiness but ignored the specific visual reference to the Greek myths. In classical times, he said, the Mediterranean was a pleasure garden. Little has changed except that today countless hotels and tourist complexes have industrialised these pleasure gardens. Peter Hempel,

The vines exhibit, for example, is where you had an artist [Tim Shaw] exploring the cultural significance of the association with mythology and human behaviour

related to the vine - intoxication in particular. The artist responding to that, who was particularly interested in that relationship, came back with a creative proposal about how best to integrate sculptural form with vine form to create a truly integrated exhibit. That's where I think it probably works best where you have the landscape, the horticulture and the artistic intervention working together (...). It was a very close working collaboration where the selection of the vines, the location of the vines and support was all done in collaboration with the artist. There is no text there at all. It's high interpretation.

High interpretation relies on visitors making meaning from what is seen, smelt and touched while assimilating aspects of the dominant Eden message of human-plant connectivity. The keynote message does offer visitors a rudimentary framework for interpretation that can be built on during a visit and after by activities, thoughts and reflections but still some of the symbolism as Foundation Director Tony Kendle acknowledges, 'just looks pretty despite all the thought that went into it'. The 'light of civilisation' installation in the warm temperate Biome tall pyramidal structure with a golden thread running down the centre and continuing on the walkways offers no clue as to what it signifies. Situated near an olive tree it is supposed to suggest a lamp illustrating the origin of western culture in the ancient world. As a visual metaphor it fails to give meaning or help structure our everyday experience. It is too oblique. Hempel recognizes the delicate balance artists need to strike between the popular forms easily accessible through our familiarity with media culture and those produced more provocatively by artists working creatively in wicker, cork, bronze or other natural or found materials.

The casting of artists has been quite considered in the sense that work, irrespective of whether you understand all of the thinking the artist has been through or would like to express, it is accessible on different levels whether you think, "Christ this is a mad raving party going on amongst the vines" or whether you are looking at the deeper symbolism of orgiastic or ritualistic behaviour or whatever. I think we cast the artist quite deliberately because we feel they do have a broad populist and accessible appeal. (...) The tone is quite important. It is not taking itself too seriously, it's not too worthy, it's not too preachy, it does not tend to transmit lots of information. We are trying hard not to compromise the sensory physical experience of somebody walking through a naturalistic environment as well. (...) If we think something is going straight over people's heads we can always refine things.

There is a considerable amount of evaluation work being undertaken at Eden on operational matters, conceptual learning but questions remain over the nature of non-cognitive learning and aesthetic understanding. Tony Kendle suggests the artworks probably function primarily to draw visitors' attention by providing signposts and additional visual interest to the plant displays. My initial observations and those of Sue Minter tend to confirm this,

Take the classic example of Robert Bradford's bee in the outdoor exhibit, which has ended up rather bigger than it was originally intended to be. There was supposed to have been other pollinating insects and they were supposed to connect with the flower. What people have tended to respond to is the size and the impressive nature of that ... So we are learning all the time. The interesting thing is that most botanic gardens have engaged with art frequently on the basis of art lands from Mars. It's decoration, it's in a nice green environment and it's not integrally integrated into the interpretation process. (...) We observed that people do appear to engage with different things and we are experimenting.

Contradictions and tensions

Eden offers a multiplicity of discourses, stories, exhibits and perspectives that are in large part, but not totally, complementary - tourism, commercialism, environmental management,

consumerism, enterprise, regeneration, globalisation, conservation, entertainment, sustainability, public relations, education. Each unit team – e.g. catering, horticulture, etc - will give a different inflection to the core message and the Project's newness, size and continuing expansion means a key management task is to ensure coherence without being autocratic or compromising the creative energies of its staff. The issue of car travel and parking has been seriously scrutinized and although 17.5% of visitors travel to the site by non-car modes many critics perceive an apparent contradiction in the acres of car parking space provided and Eden's commitment to sustainability. When questioned Bryher Scudmore rhetorically asked, what exactly is meant when someone says they are anti-car? Do they oppose pollution, congestion, fossil fuel consumption? Smit (2002) tackles the issue directly noting that cars are an inevitable and, for many, a positive aspect of everyday life. Without a degree of pragmatism the Eden Project, located as it is in a deeply rural part of England, would not have survived. Most tourists use cars because they are the most flexible and effective means of getting around Cornwall, but Eden staff say they use the issue to effect modest changes to the public transport infrastructure of the sub region. For some lobby groups, particularly cyclists, this approach simply indicates the dominance of commercial interests over environmental concerns.

Eden responds by reiterating its purpose as one of offering information, choices, stories and alternatives. Hot issues like transport and GM, are used in publicity and performances to stimulate reflection and reflexivity but as Barr (2003) notes changing people's behaviour is dependent on the existence of genuine, structural, possibilities. You cannot use trains or participate in Local Authority plastics recycling schemes if there aren't any. Additionally, Eden's dialogue with pressure groups, local government, suppliers, transport and planning authorities morphs into an emerging aim to be a model pro-environmental organization, with non-formal learning generated through example, demonstration, negotiation, reflection, formal training sessions, seminars and conferences. However, there are problems as Kendle explains,

One thing we often suffer from is what people project onto us – an expectation that something they have vaguely taken on board as a typically green message must be something that Eden believes. There is a widespread assumption that Eden must be anti GM crops. Now actually our position is we're not a lobby group, we're a project that is about debate and we want to give within Eden a chance to people, some of them highly honourable, a lifetime in science, who've got their own passion for saying why their work is important, a chance to express [themselves] that without us censoring it or saying right from the beginning we're not going to listen to that. (...) There are some things we are completely determined to say and carry on saying for example I would not for a minute shy away from saying that GM is wrapped around too many unresolved issues.

Although there is repeat messaging of underlying themes and assumptions the plurality of stories and messages perhaps offer too many possible meanings inviting the prospect of meaninglessness or suggesting a relativism that Eden does not necessarily endorse. The notion of a core message implies a defining principle and this is frequently articulated in the form of a *brand*, that is, something that will distinguish Eden and its "product offerings" from those of its competitors. In Cornwall this means other leisure sites, museums and tourist attractions and more widely its perception as a trusted and valued site for learning. However, some Eden team members question the assumed uniformity this 'corporate' approach implies, fearing it could compromise the aim of rendering concepts such as sustainability, biodiversity and cultural diversity personally and politically meaningful. For these internal critics coherence and distinction is embedded in the overall *gestalt* of the site that invites exploration, engagement and investigation. Sue Hill,

We don't have an exhibit style in a sense. You walk around the site and you might see a fantastic slickly produced signage but you might also see a hand made piece of stuff made by a local primary school and those things inhabit the same space. A lot of the interpretation is delivered by people, delivered by guides and storytellers, rather than necessarily big black boxes with television screens in.

The question as to the sharpness of the Project's core message is one that periodically evokes debate among the staff. Although there is no straightforward division into camps as Gable (1996) found in his research on Colonial Williamsburg there is certainly a spectrum of attitudes ranging from highly committed deep green environmentalism to matter-of-fact pragmatism. When asked what is the Eden Project all about one guide told me 'that is the question I find most difficult to answer' and another said simply, 'some guides push the core message more than others'. Their understanding and promotion of the greener messages vary in accordance to their own deep or shallow commitments, knowledge or interest. Eden's approach is both pragmatic and principled. For instance at the launch of the Waste Neutral programme in the spring of 2004 Tim Smit spoke of the need for cultural change, for the opportunity to learn from its suppliers, to be a model learning organization and to model sustainable change. The Project will not compel changes by flexing its sub-regional economic muscle or forcing pro-environmental changes through its contractual arrangements with local businesses even though it possibly could. Rather, it proffers information, inspiration and choice.

With a core message pervading the whole organization Eden aims to produce a 'total experience' for the visitor already familiar in the 'superstar museum' (Frey, 1998). Eden's retail outlet sells branded goods ranging from books on organic horticulture to locally caught 'Eden Project' tinned pilchards. The food in its restaurant is either locally sourced or organic. Its plant catalogue, launched in February 2004, sells plants 'with stories to tell' about global conservation and species protection. The Project has its own publishing house and many products sold in the shop display the Eden logo though the Project neither formally endorses nor certifies merchandise. Many goods are clearly linked to environmental issues. Jo Readman,

We can just educate – these products are good for social issues, are good for the environment. And the other categories we got are ones that are recycled and can be recycled. Ones that are produced without fossil fuels (...) so, by buying into any of those products, metaphorically, and in reality, you are actually helping to make a difference.

Meaning making and story telling frequently translates into visitor purchasing and there is a complementary story about Eden as a site for learning through sustainable consumption. Sue Hill,

We do know in terms of indicators, we have had it documented on site, that if we are telling an organic story, if we're telling a Fairtrade story, the sales go up in the retail shop on that particular product. So if we are doing Fair Trade, sales, or organic sales, will go up that particular week. When they get up to retail they have still got it on board but we don't know whether that's almost like a gimmick, the Eden shop, or whether they then go into a supermarket and still make that choice, decision. That's what we don't necessarily know.

Shopping is a form of play, a social activity, and malls are places 'to be with things' where visitors have an aesthetic relation to their environment, gain pleasure from new or exotic displays and experiences attempting to assimilate them into the known and the familiar (Lehtonen and Maenpaa, 1997). The Eden site plan and pathways through the Biomes are reminiscent of IKEA and visitors consume images of Eden on and off site - on television (from *Question Time* to *Three Non Blondes*), in the Bond movie *Die Another Day*, on posters, in holiday brochures, websites, garden magazines, newspapers, etc. Eden is a significant part of the environmental 'mediascape' (Appadurai, 1990) and a complex cultural symbol. It is a market place for ideas, experiences and commodities. Visitors buy things – entrance, pleasure, learning, food, pictures, souvenirs that extend their free-choice learning into the palpable realm of everyday living. This is very important if Eden is to go 'Beyond Bodelva' for the Eden Foundation commissions and undertakes research, acts as a hub for a growing network of organisations working for a sustainable future, co-ordinates a Friends organization, has established Global Centre for Post-Mining Regeneration and contributes significantly to sub regional economic development. Dave Meneer, the Marketing Director implicitly recognizes Eden is sometimes perceived as illustrating the Disneyization of learning and society (Bryman, 1999) but vigorously denies the superficiality this connotes.

We have a desire both in terms of our effect of our messaging and our money making to go beyond Bodelva. If you don't go beyond Bodelva you've got a green theme park and so what really. (...) If you set yourself up as a theme park that's fine but we always had higher ambitions. There is an awful lot of people we employ here we wouldn't employ if we were just a green theme park. A green theme park would not have a huge research department. You wouldn't have various Foundation people. You wouldn't have people working with local farmers to grow things and sell them. (...) An ideal example of Beyond Bodelva at the moment would be books. We publish books that we sell in our shop and in W.H. Smith and elsewhere. They make us money and tell our story.

Conclusions

Jasper commented, 'I have never known an organization move so fast – too fast sometimes, and Eden is certainly a kaleidoscope of constantly evolving, constantly developing images, voices, stories, performances, smells, emotions, thoughts, transactions and activities. Its own story and core message offers an overall framework for visitor interpretation although there are tensions, recognised inconsistencies and apparent contradictions. It can be argued the failure to condemn GM rather than simply acknowledge the unresolved issues is incompatible with its support for sustainable and certainly organic agriculture but in July 2004 the Project announced it would celebrate national organic week by hosting a series of events and activities with the Soil Association. This reinforces the idea of Eden as an enabler, a facilitator, an educator and a forum for discussion. If Eden's core message articulates a notion of human dependency on plant life then its advocacy of environmental sustainability takes a form that is sometimes both complex and complicated. It is both the medium and the message. Peel off the outer layer and there is a world of contested facts, values and opinions that Eden attempts to influence by becoming a character in the wider story of lifelong learning and sustainability. Tony Kendle,

One of the things we didn't see coming in a lot of the planning of the Project was the degree of visitor interest in us and what we are doing as oppose to us being a window on all sorts of stuff. As time goes by and as the two things become less and less easily divisible and as we follow this policy of us becoming an aggressive supporter of local farming for example we have become part of the story and not just the teller of stories.

Eden then is perhaps most fruitfully conceptualized as being 'open minded' displaying as Bruner (1990: 30) says 'a willingness to construe knowledge and values from multiple perspectives without loss of commitment to one's own values'. This open mindedness is closely allied to the view that the Project is an 'open work' (Carr, 2001). Visitors are not treated as passive recipients for inevitably they have their own personal agendas and are, and for the Eden team must be, free to choose when, where and what to learn. There is no context setting A/V presentation in the Visitor Centre although an edited version of *The Gardening of Eden* video does play in the shop and the Plant Takeaway installation may partially serve as an 'advanced organizer'. The Project as a whole is its own organizer.

For the Eden team as for Falk and Dierking (2000: 2), 'learning is the reason people go to museums, and learning is the primary 'good' that visitors to museums derive from their experience'. Visitors generally come to learn **and** be entertained. It is not an *either-or* (Falk, Moussouri and Coulson, 1998). The museum experience is about *engaging* people 'in educationally enjoyable experiences *from which they can take their own personal meaning*' and when successful museums should 'go one step beyond experience and provide the ultimate offering, *transformation*' (Falk and Dierking 2000: 76). This is certainly the stated aim of the Eden Project but it is also a major leisure and tourist attraction and for Lefebvre (1991: 33) leisure and tourism are not necessarily consonant with having meaningful learning experiences.

Leisure must break with the everyday (or at least appear to do so) and not only

as far as work is concerned but also for day-to-day family life. Thus there is an increasing emphasis on leisure characterised as distraction: rather than bringing any new worries, obligations and necessities, leisure should offer liberation from worry and necessity. (...) [The public] mistrust anything which might appear to be educational and are more concerned with those aspects of leisure which might offer **distractions, entertainment and repose** and which might **compensate** for the difficulties of everyday life.

Many visitors are vacationers. Eden is a 'must-see' stop on the Cornish heritage trail, an alternative to the beach on an overcast day, a magnificent photo opportunity reinforcing Urry's (2002) view that tourist attractions mainly invite a visually orientated consumerist rather than critical engagement. But entertainment and education are by no means mutually exclusive and clear communication is often the key to initiating changes in attitudes, values and behaviour. So in attempting to assess what Eden is trying to achieve and what it may become it is important to retain some critical distance without falling into the trap of criticising it for being something it is not. As Kendle remarked wryly, critics are often suspicious of attempts to conjoin entertainment with education – 'a lot of people would be a lot more comfortable about the educational integrity of the Project if we covered it with stuff they didn't read'. It attempts to be simultaneously simple and complex and in some ways this is both its strength and weakness. As one Friend of Eden said, the site is covered with plants 'but you don't have to love plants to love Eden'. My on-going research aims to uncover the connections Eden actually makes with their adult visitors and whether the Eden Project's aims, claims and intentions are being realised. Eden managers wish to learn how the Project resonates with the everyday lifeworlds of their adult visitors and why in some cases it may not. My research offers an alternative approach to the educational evaluations that apply a personal meaning mapping methodology hitherto undertaken at the Project. Much attention has been applied to school age visitors particularly those on formal study visits and these tend to concentrate on cognitive learning thereby excluding the wider social, cultural, political and emotional contexts my ethnographic approach allows. Only when the full educative implications of Eden's multi faceted modes of address, that combination of simplicity and complexity, pro-environmental commitment with faith in people, adults as well as children, to change themselves are uncovered will a clearer understanding of the Eden Project emerge.

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