

HOW CAN BOTANIC GARDENS GROW THEIR SOCIAL ROLE?

Lessons from the *Communities in Nature* programme



CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN
FOUNDATION

UK BRANCH

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Preface

Over the last five years, we have been working with Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) to support botanic gardens to 'grow their social role', addressing the needs of communities and plant conservation in a mutually beneficial approach.

Why botanic gardens? Why a more social role?

The purpose of the UK Branch of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is to bring about long-term improvements in wellbeing, particularly for the most vulnerable, by creating connections across boundaries (national borders, communities, disciplines and sectors) which deliver social, cultural and environmental value.

Across our programmes, we seek to pilot ideas with potential to create and scale positive change, transforming sectors and the communities they serve. Often, this may be through the collaboration of unexpected partners, each with something significant to offer the other, and the exploration of learning developed in one context applied elsewhere.

If the pressing environmental issues of our time have been caused by people, not plants, then people, not plants, must provide the solutions; a challenge when more than half the world's population lives in cities where there is too little contact with nature, understanding of its value or motivation to protect it.

Botanic gardens are predominantly located in urban areas. They provide oases of beauty and expertise, and are committed in their DNA to the preservation of biodiversity. Yet so often in the past they have attracted visitors only from narrow

and elite sections of society. A world that understands the relevance of their work is one in which botanic gardens will prosper.

Understanding the transformation that has occurred in museums and galleries in the UK over the last twenty years as the sector has learned how to engage with communities beyond the usual suspects, we recognised a need – and an opportunity – for botanic gardens and the biodiversity they protect to flourish alongside their local communities. We had a hunch that developing a more socially engaged role could be as good for botanic gardens as for the communities they seek to engage in their work, and help to foster the long-term health of the environment, which underpins the wellbeing of us all.

And, as the findings of the following report show, so it has proved. Growing a more social role has had an impact on the communities engaged, but it has also been inspirational for the botanic garden staff involved. It has developed the breadth of skills and understanding of both. It can provide access to new government and other funding streams. It can provide new relevance to the social and political context in which the gardens operate with the potential to put them at the centre of vibrant, successful local communities.

But developing a more social role is not just about setting up innovative projects with local communities, it's about thinking through the implications of putting people at the very heart of a garden's mission and purpose. Organisational change is never easy; it is still early days for the sector, and there are real challenges to overcome for BGCI, for the gardens and for the funding community in supporting long-term change, but the results so far suggest that the impact of doing so will be transformational.

Andrew Barnett
Director, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation
UK Branch

Front cover: Nature Play: Nature Conservation research explored the impact of unstructured play in the Demonstration Garden, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. Photo: RBGE.

Left: The 'Evergreen Gardeners' project for older people with high support needs at The Geffrye, Museum of the Home. Photo: Em Fitzgerald/ Geffrye Museum.

How can botanic gardens grow their social role?
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Foreword

Botanic gardens exist in a world that is increasingly precarious for us all. The collision of social and environmental concerns is pressing in behind gardens' walls. Whole cultures are being lost through climate change. A colleague from the Flagstaff Arboretum, Arizona, describes being on the frontline, with very real loss of species and livelihoods.

Faced with a troubled world they can no longer avoid, botanic gardens are at a crossroads, under growing pressure to put social and environmental responsibility at the heart of their mission. This means not only conserving plants – which they have traditionally done so well – but engaging people.

The shift is towards creating opportunities for people to *do* something, to work with botanic gardens – in towns, cities, countryside – and help make change happen. There is much to celebrate as gardens take up this challenge in new and exciting ways in the UK and across the world.

But we need more.

It was within this context that *Communities in Nature* was conceived. The programme was never about disconnected short-term 'pilot' projects. It was about gardens embracing their social role, working with more diverse communities and establishing standards for a community of practice.

Such a shift has huge implications for botanic gardens.

A few have already taken a powerful step in that direction, leading the way with dynamic social programming, working in a broad range of partnerships, positioning botanic gardens right at the heart of both global debates and actions for change. These gardens have understood that moving ahead

on social relevance means facing up to a renewal of purpose, one that places the social role not on the periphery but at the heart of botanic gardens.

There is much agreement on the importance of botanic gardens actively assuming this social role. And yet, as a senior staff member of a large garden remarked: "There is still a reluctance at senior level to see it as a priority."

For me, this dichotomy is all too familiar. I come from the professional museum sector. It is no surprise to find museums and botanic gardens sharing a great deal in their DNA, including a certain reluctance to change, even while change is happening all around them. But, it seems, change they must!

Such a reconsideration may mean some gardens easing the grip of defensive and anxious definitions of their intrinsic *value*. It means taking inspiration from those leading the way. It means embracing a renewal of purpose that runs right through the organisation.

Like the message in a stick of rock, inspiring engagement becomes the responsibility of all in the garden. No member of staff is exempt, it's in everyone's job description.

This is indeed a 'small revolution in thinking' for botanic gardens, to the benefit of us all. I hope *Communities in Nature* will open up discussion on the opportunities – and challenges – that lie ahead. The interest is there – it now needs significant nurturing, based on strong, clear-sighted leadership and support, for it to grow roots and flourish. In this sense, it is only the beginning of *Communities in Nature*.

Dr Bernadette Lynch

Summary

Botanic gardens are under growing pressure to put social and environmental responsibility at the heart of their mission. *Communities in Nature* tested whether gardens could embrace this social role by working with more diverse communities.

Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) ran the programme between 2010 and 2015, with support from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (CGF). The programme developed as it progressed but its broad aims were to:

- Increase awareness and wider understanding among botanic gardens about their potential to play a more social role and their motivation and capacity to do so.
- Provide a model for botanic gardens worldwide to develop their social role.
- Develop a community of practice to support botanic gardens in such work.
- Foster institutional change in a number of gardens.
- Increase engagement between botanic gardens and their local communities.
- Increase participation in environmental issues by different sectors of society.
- Set up an initiative that would thrive beyond CGF support.

The programme supported and evaluated pilot projects in six UK botanic gardens. BCGI also produced guidance, began building a community of practice and reviewed its activities so as to offer greater support to gardens growing their social role.



WHAT POSITIVE IMPACT DID THE PROGRAMME HAVE?

Participating gardens engaged with new audiences, including faith groups, ethnic minority communities, disabled people, people living with dementia, vulnerable young adults, people with substance dependence, and those living in disadvantaged communities. Many gardens found this a revelation. For a number, opening up discussion on organisational and attitudinal change was the main impact. Some now recruit from a more diverse pool of volunteers and engage with a broader range of visitors. Some have set up partnerships with other organisations.

Community participants cited personal benefits ranging from increased self-confidence, to greater connection with nature, to practical skills and learning.

Staff and volunteers welcomed acquiring new skills, including: project management, communication and teaching, flexibility, and working with particular groups. For some, participation marked a personal breakthrough, changing their perceptions.

WHAT CHALLENGES DID THE PROJECTS FACE?

Despite this success, discussion about the social role of a botanic garden is still in its infancy and interviewees identified some important problems.

Foremost was the lack of integration of the social role into gardens' mission, vision and strategy. In the main, gardens have added new groups to their audience profile, but have not fundamentally changed as organisations. Many felt there was still much to be done to engage senior management in the social role. Some felt all staff roles need comprehensive review.

Most projects focused on social inclusion, not environmental issues. They tended to avoid directly tackling 'problematic' environmental issues, such as climate change. Bringing together social and environmental concerns remains a challenge.

Lack of evidence has been cited as one factor stopping botanic gardens from assuming greater social responsibility. Projects had excellent anecdotal feedback from participants, but evaluating longer term impact remains much harder.



Members of the Stroud Macular Disease Society at Westonbirt, The National Arboretum, display their handmade bird boxes. Photo: The Forestry Commission.

“Attitudinal change is the single biggest benefit and starting to build bridges ...”

Ben Oliver, Learning and Participation Manager, Westonbirt, The National Arboretum

Some projects have gained follow-up support but ‘lack of funding’ was the most common reason for projects not continuing after the programme ended.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN LESSONS FROM THE PROJECTS?

The most successful projects were flexible, adapting to what participants wanted, and developed partnerships with organisations and community groups. Building good community relationships meant allocating sufficient time, staff and resources.

Learning from related sectors, like museums, also has great potential benefit, for example, sharing understanding of working with diversity and public engagement.

There is a need for better communication not only between gardens but also between each garden and its stakeholders and, crucially, *within* gardens.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN NEXT?

A programme review has recommended next steps for the sector, led by BGCI:

- Establish a community of practice. There is clearly a great deal of interest in this, not just in the UK but internationally.
- Identify and support ‘hub gardens’. A ‘vanguard’ group of gardens already strong in their social role could offer other gardens inspiration and guidance.
- Set up good practice standards. Establishing principles to which the sector adheres could raise the profile of such work, attract funders and guide training.
- Develop skills and capacities. Staff and other participants need support to develop the necessary individual skills and build a sense of common mission.
- Incorporate the ‘social role’ in gardens’ mission. Its exclusion was frequently cited as a primary roadblock. But there is also concern that gardens should not be diverted from their original mission. A social role must also be developed from a garden’s *existing* expertise and purpose.

- Develop different funding approaches. Short-term funding underlies many of these challenges. Networking with funders is plainly worth fostering but the sector would also benefit from a shared vision and cohesive strategy.

FIND OUT MORE

This summary draws on a programme review by Dr Bernadette Lynch, *Botanic Gardens taking action for a better world: Communities in Nature Five Year Review*, available online at www.gulbenkian.org.uk.

For more details about the programme, contact: Louisa Hooper, Programme Manager, Environment at CGF or the Education Department at BGCI.

Introduction

The *Communities in Nature* programme was run by Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) between 2010 and 2015, with the support of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (CGF). The purpose of the programme was to:

- Promote the 'social role' of botanic gardens in and beyond the UK.
- Encourage gardens to examine their philosophy, values, goals and practices.
- Realise gardens' potential to contribute toward positive social change and broad environmental awareness.

The CGF and BGCI have now commissioned a review of the programme to:

- Assess its impact and outcomes so far.
- Make recommendations for BGCI, the botanic garden community and potential funders on how such work can develop.

This review of the programme's lessons was carried out by Dr Bernadette Lynch. It draws on individual project evaluations, interim and final programme evaluations, interviews with participants and stakeholders, an online survey of participating staff, a peer review forum, and a presentation and workshop at the 2015 BGCI conference in St Louis, USA.

Bernadette Lynch speaking at the 2015 BGCI International Congress on Education in Botanic Gardens, Missouri. Photo: BGCI.



Overview of the programme

In 2009, with CGF support, BGCI commissioned original research from the University of Leicester Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) into the potential for botanic gardens to develop a more socially engaged role.

Their report, *Towards a New Social Purpose: Redefining the Role of Botanic Gardens* (Dodd and Jones, 2010), identified significant potential and some pioneering work but also real barriers to change. The report identified seven key areas that concerned organisations:

- Broadening audiences (audience development).
- Enhancing relevance to communities (meeting the needs of communities).
- Education.
- Research that has socio-economic impact locally and globally.
- Contributing to public (and political) debates on the environment.
- Modelling sustainable behaviour.
- Actively changing attitudes and behaviour.

In 2010, CGF supported BGCI to set up the *Communities in Nature* programme. The programme was conceived and led by BGCI. Its highly regarded Education Programme plays a significant role in supporting botanic gardens to engage with their public. The work was not initially launched as a five-year programme, but developed organically, based on the lessons learned from each phase. Originally the programme intended to:

- Increase awareness and wider understanding among botanic gardens about their potential to play a more social role in society.
- Provide a model for botanic gardens worldwide to develop their social role.



Broughton High School's 'More Choices, More Chances' students learning how to grow their own food through the Edible Gardening project at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. Photo: BGCI.

- Increase gardens' motivation and capacity to develop their social role.
- Develop a community of practice to support botanic gardens in such work.
- Foster institutional change in a number of gardens.
- Increase engagement between botanic gardens and their local communities.
- Increase participation in environmental issues by different sectors of society.
- Set up an initiative that would thrive and grow beyond 2014, and CGF support.

“How easy it is to begin removing barriers to participation and how rewarding!”

Sharon Willoughby, Manager Public Programmes, Royal Botanic Gardens, Victoria

CGF support enabled BGCi to:

- Fund, support and evaluate pilot projects in six botanic gardens in the UK (see below).
- Produce guidance and promotional materials, including online media, advice manuals, and peer-reviewed articles to raise academic credibility.
- Start building a community of practice, supported by new policies and approaches.
- Spread and embed the work in gardens beyond the UK.
- Review its general activities, helping facilitate a new five-year plan in 2013, which includes an objective to support gardens in growing their social role.

Participating gardens

Winterbourne House and Garden ran Urban Veg, a community-based vegetable garden designed as a two-way exchange between the garden and Birmingham's Islamic communities. Workshops addressed water conservation, sustainable growing media, chemical pollution, wildlife awareness and reducing food miles and carbon footprints.

Ness Botanic Gardens, University of Liverpool, was keen to engage with students from disadvantaged backgrounds and ran science-focused workshops for Years 7 and 10. Students grew vegetables and learnt about scientific concepts, such as photosynthesis and climate change.

Westonbirt, The National Arboretum, worked with three groups under-represented among existing visitors through its Hidden Voices project: adults facing substance dependence, South Asian women who have faced domestic abuse, and older people with Macular Disease. Groups carried out practical conservation, contributed to an audio trail for visually impaired visitors, and produced a recipe book and photography exhibition.

University of Leicester Botanic Garden wanted to increase their capacity for working with disabled people. Their Feel Green project worked in partnership with Mosaic, which coordinates services for disabled adults. Mosaic trained staff and helped plan activities and select community groups to work with. The garden has increased accessibility by improving paths, toilets and information displays.

Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE) was keen to reach young people and neighbouring deprived communities. Its Edible Gardening project focused on growing, preparing and sharing healthy, sustainable food. Participants maintained their own plots and attended sessions on topics such as water conservation, peat-free gardening, food security and biodiversity. Each group designed its own programme from a series of options.

Bristol Community Plant Collection, Bristol Zoo Gardens (BZG) wanted to involve new audiences in plant conservation and break down barriers by bringing people together. Recruits from primary schools in deprived areas, a community gardening group, sheltered housing and a care home for people with dementia grew calendula plants at their own sites and collected seed. As a result, BZG was able to establish the UK's first ever dispersed national collection.

These gardens ran pilot projects. Other gardens contributed to BGCi's manuals for gardens: *Communities in Nature* (2013) and *Caring for your Community* (2015).

CGF also supported the **The Geffrye, Museum of the Home** 'Evergreen Gardeners' project for isolated and vulnerable older adults and their carers, and 'Nature Play', an action research project for young children at the **Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh**. These projects were not formally part of the *Communities in Nature* programme, but explored the same issues and provide valuable lessons. The **National Botanic Garden of Wales** was also involved in programme discussions.



Left: Urban Veg at Winterbourne House and Garden, University of Birmingham. Photo: Winterbourne House and Garden.

Below: Year 7 pupils going pond dipping at Ness Botanic Garden, University of Liverpool. Photo: NBG.



What positive impact did the programme have?

Overall, those participating were very positive about the programme as an attempt to develop a cohesive strategy for botanic gardens' social role. The pilot projects have learned how to:

- Approach, develop and maintain relationships with different community groups.
- Support staff to deliver their projects, develop new skills and start to embed this work within their mission.
- Begin to accommodate the needs of individual groups.

They have also been able to provide effective case studies for others to learn from and begin implementing at their sites.

Organisational change

A number of participants saw the primary benefit as opening up a discussion on organisational change. Some felt the programme was a breakthrough in providing test cases of social programmes of varying scope:

It was a catalyst for change.

Lee Hale, Head of Winterbourne House and Garden

For some gardens, the legacy of their project has been particularly positive:

Attitudinal change is the single biggest benefit and starting to build bridges with these communities ... I suppose it's giving up a level of control and I think that's very positive ... We are 100% committed ever since. We now have a community volunteer team that works specifically on these community programmes ... It has become a speciality of ours. The legacy is that we are still able to deliver. And it changed our mindset.

Ben Oliver, Learning and Participation Manager, Westonbirt, The National Arboretum



Bristol Drugs Project participants writing tree poems at Westonbirt, The National Arboretum. Photo: Forestry Commission.

Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh also reported changing attitudes:

It certainly helped to embed 'community' in the agenda for governance appearing in the corporate plan/strategic plan. It hasn't appeared formally before.

Ian Edwards, Head of Exhibitions, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

The impact at Bristol Zoo Gardens has been similarly positive:

The whole organisation has changed ... as evidenced by the fact that the organisation found some resources to continue to run the project (at a basic level) afterwards. ... It's strengthened our links with our partner organisations [Bristol in Bloom/Plant Heritage/BGCI], also a long list of community partners. ... The positive feedback from people involved amazed me. We got massive press coverage internationally. We had about 300 people attend the end-of-year get-together. We have maintained our community partners.

Edwin Mole, Head of Horticulture, Bristol Zoo Gardens

Working with new audiences and vulnerable groups

Most pilot projects chose to focus on the social inclusion element rather than environmental issues. Many found this a revelation. Those involved in projects included faith groups, people from ethnic minority communities, disabled people and people with special needs, people living with dementia, vulnerable young adults, people with drug and alcohol dependence, and those living in disadvantaged communities.

Overall, participating gardens felt they had engaged with new audiences, some very challenging for the gardens concerned. Some gardens were now recruiting new volunteers from more diverse groups. Some had established new partnerships with other organisations. For these gardens, *Communities in Nature* proved that 'social inclusion' work that offers activities to new audiences is do-able, with the right will and imagination. Julia Willison instigated the programme while based at BGCI. Now at Kew, she feels the programme:

... demonstrated to gardens themselves that they could engage more meaningfully with their local communities – that people [the project participants] were really interested in the work of botanic gardens.

Julia Willison, Head of Content and Learning, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (formerly Director of Education at BGCI)

All the pilot projects wanted to reach out to those who were not already regular visitors, in particular, disadvantaged groups.

Westonbirt is like a number of botanic gardens in its visitor profiles. It's improving but it has a way to go to engage with the broadest community. It struggles to attract diverse audiences.

Ben Oliver, Learning and Participation Manager, Westonbirt, The National Arboretum

The garden at Leicester worked with the Autism Outreach Service, using gardens for gardening allotments and hands-on work with teenagers from disadvantaged backgrounds. They still have the Autism Outreach group and plan to continue working with it:

It gave us the funding to work with special needs groups and ... a lever to get future funding for further work. The groups had a great time with very good reviews.

Ruth Godfrey, Education Officer, University of Leicester Botanic Garden

The Geffrye Museum had previously worked with older people, but:

... they tended to be quite active retired but not vulnerable and isolated older people. We are now expanding to include more isolated older people via 'Contact the Elderly'.

Laura Bedford, Access and Public Programmes Manager, The Geffrye, Museum of the Home

She adds that they are now interested in expanding to work with different audiences, for example, "local families who live in flats in terms of growing food and healthy eating".

"It demonstrated to gardens themselves that they could engage more meaningfully with their local communities ..."

Julia Willison, Head of Content and Learning, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Students from the Cabot Primary School growing calendula for the Bristol Community Plant Collection, Bristol Zoo Gardens. Photo: Jessica Johns.



“I like it when I’ve got mud on my hands, I want it to be real ... I don’t want it to be theory.”

Urban Veg participant, Winterbourne



Feel Green project horticulture workshops for people with disabilities at the University of Leicester Botanic Garden. Photo: Janet Clitheroe.

Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh has also seen its relationships expand:

We now have communities working with us who didn’t before, some regularly via volunteering or even in one case through taking up an apprenticeship.

Ian Edwards, Head of Exhibitions, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

In addition, the programme inspired other gardens, whose staff spoke about its impact on their practice:

How easy it is to begin removing barriers to participation and how rewarding!

Sharon Willoughby, Manager Public Programmes, Royal Botanic Gardens, Victoria

I think it’s a wonderful project and really important to highlight the different roles a botanic garden can play for different audiences.

Bronwen Richards, Schools Education Officer, Cambridge University Botanic Garden

Benefits for participants

The programme evaluation identified a range of personal benefits for those taking part (see Vergou and Willison, 2013). These included:

- Increased personal confidence; feeling trusted; the opportunity to interact with other visitors from different backgrounds; the chance to be involved in creative projects.
- New practical skills; the opportunity to fulfil important elements of their faith through practical work; a new and stimulating environment in which to learn; bringing people together in coordinated learning.
- Offering fresh air, green space and exercise; healthy eating and gardening.
- Connection to the seasons; awareness of nature; a greater global perspective through gardens’ collections.

I like it when I’ve got mud on my hands, I want it to be real ... I don’t want it to be theory.

Urban Veg participant, Winterbourne (quoted in BGC/RCMG, 2011)

The natural high from that day got me through the whole weekend [without using drugs], which I was worried about.

Bristol Drugs Project participant, Westonbirt (quoted in Vergou and Willison, 2013)

There were also practical impacts in terms of more inclusive access; for example, some gardens introduced labelling in different languages, others provided better facilities for disabled people.

Impact for staff and volunteers

BGCI offered staff training in project management and creative community engagement. Some participants also received training from their community partners, with projects then providing practical experience of community working (Vergou and Willison, 2013).

Many staff members commented on the impact *Communities in Nature* had on their own practice. For some, it marked a personal breakthrough:

It’s the best thing I’ve done in my horticultural career – I don’t think that I will ever do anything that will top it.

Edwin Mole, Head of Horticulture, Bristol Zoo Gardens

Others noted a change in their own attitudes and perceptions:

When I was working with the drug-users I was apprehensive but these were misconceptions. They’re people, just like me.

Volunteer, Westonbirt, The National Arboretum

Garden staff welcomed acquiring new skills. These included: project management (including time management and multitasking), evaluation, communication skills, public speaking, teaching skills, teamwork, being flexible, active listening, and skills for working with particular groups. Their existing ‘soft’ skills were also important; community participants commended the friendly and approachable staff (Vergou and Willison, 2013).

What challenges did the programme face?



Visitors from Pilton Community Health Project enjoy Edible Gardening at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. Photo: RBGE.

Despite the considerable success of these projects, discussion about the social role of a botanic garden is still in its infancy. Participants and other interviewees identified some important problem areas. Some may be due to misunderstandings about the 'pilot-project' nature of the programme. Others are more deep-seated. These include:

- Lack of integration of the social role into the mission, vision and strategy of the gardens as a whole.
- Limited involvement by directors and senior management and scientific/horticultural staff (with some notable exceptions).

- Avoidance of potentially 'problematic' environmental issues, such as climate change.
- Short-term nature of the projects, which were dependent upon external project funding.

In the main, gardens have successfully added new groups to their audience profile, but have not fundamentally changed as organisations.

Organisational and staff attitudes

Senior staff

Interviewees felt there was still much to be done to engage senior management in the garden's social role. As one put it: "At least half of the battle has been convincing people in management that it will bring benefit to them." Lacking clear leadership left some staff feeling adrift:

It felt like we needed a leadership programme. ... None of them saw it as being what they were about. Quite small-scale local projects – that's what they see as the 'legacy'. There's a lack of understanding. [Some directors] thought that it was just activities led by education... It's not embedded in the organisation.

Anonymous staff member

One said:

The fact is they thought they were doing some nice community engagement work and they found there were organisational implications.

Anonymous staff member

Another noted:

Director-level support is essential for systemic change. The shift and conversation needs to happen at multiple levels but the director is responsible for making sure all departments are involved and is key to ensuring support and communication.

Anonymous staff member

Many looked to BGCi to take the lead in addressing this lack of leadership (see Recommendations).

Some also felt that there needs to be a wider discussion on the role of botanic gardens today:

BGCi needs to have a much bigger conversation at director level, not just about projects but what botanic gardens *are*, as well as a series of debates and lectures, to link with leadership programmes and change management ... to work with directors and specialist staff to shake up notions of gardens and what science is in the 21st century.

Anonymous staff member

An evaluation of the earlier projects found that "... the values and aspirations emerged mostly from staff on the ground, a bottom-up rather than top-down, phenomenon" (BGCi/RCMG, 2011). However, things did shift. The later evaluation found directors



recognising the benefits of being part of a wider programme on social inclusion and acknowledging the positive impact of BGCi's organisational workshops (Vergou and Willison, 2013).

The evaluation of the Evergreen Gardeners project found that some participants' physical dexterity had improved as well as their emotional wellbeing. Photo: Em Fitzgerald/Geffrey Museum.



Other staff

The evaluation of the first projects noted that these did not tend to involve education or learning staff, even though they were likely to have the relevant skills (BGCI/RCMG, 2011). Where education staff were involved, however, there was a danger that the projects were seen as their sole responsibility.

Often the discussions are not at Director level, they're only at education level.

Paul Cook, formerly at Ness Botanic Gardens, University of Liverpool

Some education staff are on part-time or temporary contracts. Small workforces also remain an issue. This was picked up by the initial 2010 review (Dodd and Jones, 2010) and reinforced in the 2015 interviews:

We are in an ideal location with a massive possible audience. What we don't have is the staff.

Lee Hale, Head of Winterbourne House and Garden

Participating staff and other interviewees noted that (again with some noticeable exceptions) 'specialist' (scientific and horticultural) staff had tended not to get involved with the programme. Feedback showed these staff were often the most concerned about whether new and more diverse community groups coming into the gardens would disrupt their 'regular' work. Many not directly involved remained largely unaware of and disconnected from the projects.

Some felt a more comprehensive review of staff roles in botanic gardens is necessary, if gardens are to meet their social role. One felt the priority should be to:

... ensure that every department/staff member relates some form of social importance to their work, be they finance/ horticulture/ engagement. Ideally everyone should have some form of contact with the garden's social provision.

Anonymous staff member

The peer review forum's world café discussion noted a need to break away from traditional training pathways; for example, horticulturalists tend to be trained in a way that doesn't always translate to socially engaged work.

Many staff were very open and honest about the insecurity they experienced in diversifying their audience. They said they

"BGCI needs to have a much bigger conversation at director level ... as well as a series of debates and lectures, to link with leadership programmes and change management."

Anonymous staff member

frequently felt under-skilled in the areas of diversity, community engagement and participation, having had little previous experience of this type of work. Even discussing such concerns was often new to their traditional ways of working.

Some also expressed concern about rushing into working with more diverse and hard-to-reach audiences without adequate discussion and preparation, ideally from others more experienced, both in and out of the sector. A commentator interviewed as part of this evaluation also stressed this point:

... there needs to be more open, engaged discussion about this work in gardens. Before grabbing a group to work with, gardens need to re-frame how to do this work and work powerfully with academics, activist groups etc.

Dawn Sanders, academic specialist in botanic gardens, University of Gothenburg

There is evidently scope for discussion about leadership and a new role for specialist staff (see Recommendations). Nevertheless, there is a great deal of potential on which to build, especially with younger staff:

There's a new generation coming through who are hiring people not scientists; they are botanists but with people skills.

Ian Edwards, Head of Exhibitions, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

... these advocates in embryo are already to be found among young botanic garden staff, in the early stages of their careers. So their involvement is essential.

BGCI/RCMG, 2011

“It’s the first time I have not thought about heroin in the day.”

Bristol Drug User Project, participant, Westonbirt

Volunteers

To be open to developing social relations, gardens need to reflect on these perceptions with staff *and* volunteers. Volunteers could also be apprehensive about the programme. One director spoke of:

Overcoming the nervousness of volunteers that working with the Drugs Project was not going to mean syringes all over the place ... [seeing] the transformation from scepticism and nervousness ...

Simon Toomer, Director, Westonbirt, The National Arboretum

Like many institutions with a long history, botanic gardens have a long standing issue of diversity in recruiting staff and volunteers. As one staff member said, there is a need to “break the mould of who is volunteering!” One recurring suggestion was to diversify the volunteer base through strategic partnerships:

What’s not needed are vast quantities of money, just a different way of thinking, for example [gardens] use volunteers anyway, but the question is, which volunteers and could strategic partnerships help with this?

Jocelyn Dodd, Director, Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, University of Leicester

Many highlighted the need to carry on building on success:

The role of volunteering is a *big* priority for us. We now have 270 volunteers. Many of them would be in danger of exclusion. ... [We are] diversifying our volunteering base to provide work experience for young people to help them decide what they want to do in life.

Simon Toomer, Director, Westonbirt, The National Arboretum

Combining environmental concerns and social engagement

Bringing together both the social and environmental aims of the programme also remains a challenge. Addressing tough issues of environmental concern was not foremost on the agenda for all the projects:

I think creating opportunities for people to continue to garden creates a sense of wellbeing. We did to a certain degree look at the environment but it was very secondary. [We are now interested in] how the environmental impact could be stronger – but not ignoring the wellbeing aspect, which is very high on the agenda everywhere, with more knowledge and opportunities to measure its impact.

Laura Bedford, Access and Public Programmes Manager, The Geffrye, Museum of the Home

To address this, BGCi’s manual, *Caring for your Community*, explicitly highlights projects which have a focus on the environment as well as those which encompassed social issues (Derewnicka et al., 2015).

There was some fear of raising difficult environmental subject matter with the public. Many staff felt the public want to come to botanic gardens for a ‘nice day out’. They don’t want to be disturbed by talk of environmental crises. But others challenged this:

Gardens can underestimate the appetite for engagement on environmental issues ... Community groups want knowledge. They enjoy developing expertise and through this can learn about environmental issues. Embed ideas by ‘stealth’, i.e. once people are engaged through doing things that interest them.

Julia Willison, Head of Content and Learning, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

There was much agreement that environmental issues emerge ‘organically’ when you engage people practically:

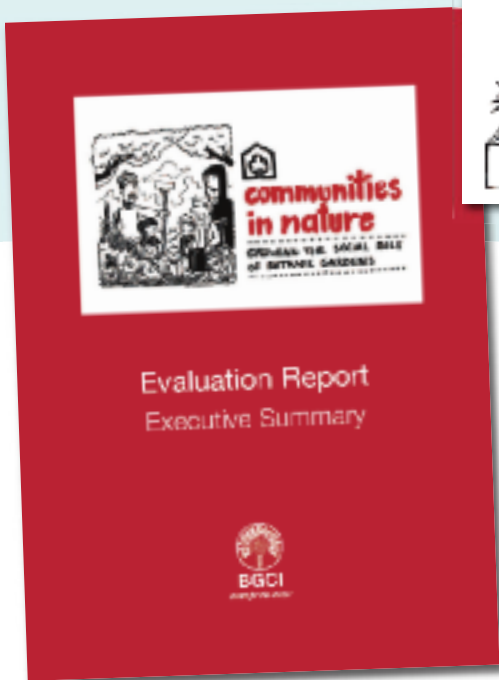
Reconnecting people with nature is the first step. It’s hard to engage people on environmental issues if you only have a one-off event, but more feasible over longer-term engagement. Giving people hope and empowering them to make change and giving them opportunities to do so are key. But botanic gardens have to reach out, go to where people are, work out how to take the learning into a new place!

Anonymous staff member

Staff members had many tips on introducing environmental themes from partnering with organisations already successfully engaging on environmental issues, for example, The Conservation Volunteers and the Wildlife Trusts in the UK, to framing the issues in terms of things people already care about and are interested in. One example is the Bristol Zoo Gardens calendula project: calendula grows wild in Africa, so a conversation about climate change in Africa arose naturally.

International gardens were also seen as offering much inspiration. Interviewees often cited Chicago, in particular, for its partnerships and environmental activism with people in the city. Many staff members said they’d like more contact with international colleagues on this. The *Communities in Nature World Map* showcases case studies from gardens around the world and includes contact information. Through developing this further, BGCi hopes to facilitate this international dialogue.

BGCI has developed a range of resources to support gardens in 'growing their social role' and to provide evidence of the impact of this work.



Some staff were also confused about the role of evaluation. They saw it as a judgement rather than reflection that could lead to improvement (BGCI/RCMG, 2011). Others felt it excessive for the size of the project and the time they had available.

There was far more reporting than we were ever led to understand. It was summer term, which made it extra difficult in terms of capacity. Nobody had said how much reporting for so little money ... Didn't have time to do it properly.

Ruth Godfrey, Education Officer, University of Leicester Botanic Garden

Participants at the World Café backed this up:

The evidence-base is crucial – need to be able to prove your impact but often this can come out even more expensive than doing the actual work so it's a Catch-22.

World Café participant

Others highlighted the need for a more imaginative approach to evaluation:

We need to get off solely econometric measures! We need to learn how to better articulate cultural heritage values and inspiration.

Gail Bromley, independent consultant (formerly Head of Community Engagement and Volunteering, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew)

Evaluating impact

The original research identified lack of evidence of impact as a factor inhibiting botanic gardens from assuming greater social responsibility (Dodd and Jones, 2010). Projects did have excellent anecdotal feedback from participants:

It's the first time I have not thought about heroin in the day.

Bristol Drug User Project, participant, Westonbirt

But evaluating long-term impact remained hard. Difficulties included:

- Having different participants throughout.
- Issues around language and translation.
- Low literacy, making traditional methods like form-filling problematic.
- Groups not wanting to give critical feedback, as they were so grateful for being included.

But evaluation is crucial for attracting funding, promoting awareness and convincing senior management (who often have scientific backgrounds) of the validity of these projects. BGCI Education are very aware of this and have:

- Published results of pilot projects in peer-reviewed journals, such as *Environmental Education Research*.
- Compiled manuals (*Communities in Nature* and *Caring for your Community*), collecting evidence of the diversity of social inclusion work in botanic gardens around the world; this is currently being used for both dissemination and fundraising.
- Created the *Communities in Nature World Map* of community projects across the world, including case studies from the manuals.

Building a community of practice

Developing a community of practice on botanic gardens' social role was one of the programme's key objectives. But it had mixed success.

The initial network was inspiring but it was not followed through. The connection has not continued – that would be something very useful.

Ben Oliver, Learning and Participation Manager, Westonbirt, The National Arboretum

Staff participants interviewed called for a strengthened community of practice, led by gardens already strong in this area, with more dedicated conferences, seminars, training, mentoring, exchanges, and placements related to the garden's social role.

You can feel very isolated if you don't feel part of a community.

Paul Cook, formerly Ness Botanic Gardens, University of Liverpool

A community of practice also adds to evidence for funders:

I think a community of practice is very important as it gives us access to evidence and examples for when we are talking to organisations we may wish to work with. When we did the [Heritage Lottery Fund] Activity Plan, for example, we were able to say we have seen this work in other places.

Ben Oliver, Learning and Participation Manager, Westonbirt, The National Arboretum

Tight finances and time pressures, however, can make attending conferences and similar meetings difficult:

I did feel I benefited when I was [attending], but ... also too busy delivering. [A community of practice] has to be really useful.

Ruth Godfrey, Education Officer, University of Leicester Botanic Garden

Hillcrest Primary School pupils participated in the Bristol Community Plant Project, Bristol Zoo Gardens. Photo: BZG.

Funding and long-term sustainability

These projects were pilots, deliberately designed to test new ways of working. Funding was not intended to provide ongoing support. Some projects have successfully found funding to continue their work from other sources:

- Westonbirt has received Heritage Lottery Funding to expand the Drugs Project Partnership, and is extending the approach to other isolated groups.
- RGBE has also secured follow-up funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to further embed its work. It runs an outreach programme and several community groups now have plots at the garden.
- Bristol Zoo Gardens continues to grow its social role through conservation and education projects and involvement in city activities such as the Bristol Festival for Nature.
- The related Geffrye Museum project has also gained another three years' funding from the City Bridge Trust.

But 'lack of funding' was the most common reason for projects not continuing.

There can be a Catch-22: when the garden's social role depends on short-term, external project funding, work is guaranteed to remain peripheral, ending once funding stops. Thus, funding can inadvertently contribute to the marginalisation of such work.

Some respondents also felt a growing preoccupation with the marketplace risks removing gardens further from diverse audiences (who may not be able to afford entrance fees and commercial products and services). Other sectors are successfully confronting this:

There is a potential tension between commercial and community engagement but it doesn't have to be an issue. For example, zoos that do both are also attracting lower income groups.

Anonymous senior garden manager

For others, a social role is simply not an optional extra:

It's not an 'add-on' here, it's frankly the only way we keep going.

Rosie Plummer, Garden Director, National Botanic Garden of Wales

The Recommendations section looks at some ways of tackling funding challenges.



Lessons from the programme



Responding to communities

The first phase evaluation concluded that: “For social projects to work, you have to understand what the people you are trying to work with want to do and not just what you want to deliver to them” (BGCI/RCMG, 2011). Some staff clearly recognised this:

At times it is important to stand back and let the group leader manage part of the day. As gatekeepers for their organisation, they may be the best person to communicate aspects of the programme to the participants.
Chris Meakin, Education Supervisor, Westonbirt, The National Arboretum (quoted in Vergou and Willison, 2013)

Others, however, tried to second-guess or fit participants into existing projects and did not attempt to find out what people really wanted or needed. Again, senior management could misunderstand the

purpose: they “did not see their social role as a bilateral or consultative process” (BGCI/RCMG, 2011).

Bristol Drugs Project clients together with regular volunteers coppicing the laurel shelterbelt at Westonbirt, The National Arboretum. Photo: Forestry Commission.

Principles of community engagement

Capability building: Have participants /local communities identified the capabilities they need; has the botanic garden identified the capabilities it needs to meet these requirements?

Community agency: Is the community centrally involved in the development, implementation and review of programmes?

Rooted in local needs: Has the Community led the identification of issues and requirements?

Reflection: Is there continuous dialogue, debate and review of the dynamics of the relationship between the public and the organisation, as the relationship develops? Has the relationship developed to enable more effective partnership?

The most successful projects were those that were flexible and adapted to what participants wanted. At Westonbirt, staff's preconceptions about the project shifted as the project developed, directly influenced by the views and interests of the project participants:

We wanted to be able to talk about tree conservation and climate change but [it became clear] this is not necessarily what these groups want to talk about.

Ben Oliver, Learning and Participation Manager, Westonbirt, The National Arboretum

The Urban Veg project at Winterbourne House and Garden, University of Birmingham. Photo: Winterbourne House and Garden.

Through consultation, the project changed from a model of one-way 'teaching' to one of participatory learning, a shift from 'passive beneficiary' to 'active agent' for the individuals and groups involved:

Previously the model was quite passive – we designed a programme for the curriculum. But with the community side of things we went out into the community to find out what they were interested in. We trialled sessions, gave them taster sessions and they chose what they liked or not. We now build a programme with them.

Ben Oliver, Learning and Participation Manager, Westonbirt, The National Arboretum

Building trust and good relationships with communities meant taking time and allocating sufficient staff and resources, particularly in the planning phases (Vergou and Willison, 2013).

Another factor is running multiple sessions rather than one-off events:

The *Communities in Nature* project really allowed us to spend a lot of time to develop staff and volunteers over multi-visit sessions, breaking down barriers.

Ben Oliver, Learning and Participation Manager, Westonbirt, The National Arboretum

But this is another area that may require attitudes to change. Botanic gardens tend to offer one-off visits for their traditional audiences and are less accustomed to working on longer-term community projects (Vergou and Willison, 2013).

Participants also very much appreciated projects' attention to detail. For example, Winterbourne provided a prayer room for Muslim visitors as part of their project.



This indicates the importance of botanic gardens developing audience research skills if they are to grow their social role (Interim programme report, Jun 14, unpublished). A workshop on growing the social role at the European Gardens Consortium in Prague in 2013 concluded that gardens need models for audience research and to develop their staff skills in this area. BGCi is taking steps on this. BGCi Education published a special issue of its education review, *Roots*, on 'Putting the Audience First'. BGCi is also currently developing a proposal for a toolkit on staff skills and strategies for audience development for gardens worldwide (*Reach Out* project).



Above: Working with disabled visitors, the Feel Green project at the University of Leicester Botanic Garden focused on horticulture, plant uses, the environment and art. Photo: ULBG.

"I can see a shared apprenticeship scheme – two days a week in botanic gardens and two days with us."

Clare Joy, Organiclea



Working in partnerships

Building or strengthening partnerships with organisations and community groups was a key aspect in developing successful community projects (Derewnicka et al., 2015). Both interviewees and those attending the Peer Review Forum stressed the need for partnership:

We are very aware in the current economic climate that we all have to do cross-sectoral partnerships.

Diversity sector commentator

The Geffrye Museum project demonstrates the value of partnership in practice. They set in place an advisory panel that:

... meets on a quarterly basis and gives advice on the project and where to get transport/funding etc. It is made up of representatives from participating organisations and also project participants.

Laura Bedford, Access and Public Programmes Manager, The Geffrye, Museum of the Home

This is clearly a way to embed ongoing partnerships that plan, develop, deliver and evaluate collaboratively, sharing knowledge and experience.

Community-based environmental organisations at the Peer Review Forum also suggested immediate ways of collaborating with botanic gardens, for mutual benefit:

We've had a lot of support in urban food gardens – the profile has been raised over the last decade. We are now very keen to connect it to others in the horticulture sector ... I can see a shared apprenticeship scheme – two days a week in botanic gardens and two days with us.

Clare Joy, Organiclea

The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) expressed a keen interest in working with botanic gardens. They are already doing some work with the Botanic Gardens in Belfast.

Others highlighted the importance of working with existing networks with overlapping interests, such as Natural England's 'Outdoors for All' working group:

There are a range of organisations delivering comparable services and we are poor at talking to one another ... We need a common voice to get through to those responsible for policy and commissioning. If we have evidence we can show we can deliver on preventative strategies that save costs further downstream ... local social services and health care and botanic gardens could engage in a process of mutual exploration. And botanic gardens offer a physical facility that other organisations simply don't have.

Ian Egginton-Metters, Assistant Chief Executive, Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens



Watering calendula plants at Robinson House Care Home, for the Bristol Community Plant Collection, Bristol Zoo Gardens. Photo: BZG.

Learning from others

There is plainly a lot of knowledge and experience to draw on in other gardens, other sectors and community-based organisations. BGCi is putting considerable time and resources into disseminating this experience from within the botanic gardens sector.

Learning from other sectors has great potential benefit, for example, in sharing an understanding of working with diversity, and opening up ideas on active public engagement with both science and diversity in botanic gardens:

The diversity world has been very good at looking at arts and history, but not so good at including science and botany. The responsibility for doing that is for horticulturalists to step forward to use their intellect to marry these two worlds of diversity and science and understand what it means for diversity.

Diversity sector commentator

Museums, in particular, are further down the road of public participation. As well as learning positive lessons, botanic gardens can avoid some of the pitfalls experienced by that sector, notably the dangers of short-term funding that cannot be scaled up:

My advice to the botanic gardens sector is *not* to make the same mistakes as the museum sector – putting money into short-term projects. It is a waste of time.

Diversity sector commentator

The Peer Review Forum strongly encouraged gardens to learn from others, nationally and internationally, who are already strong in collaborative working with diversity. There is much valuable learning to be shared from other sectors. The meeting discussed how gardens might exchange knowledge with colleagues, including academics and community-based activist groups, with opportunities for workshops, conferences and training schemes with further help, advice and assistance from funders.

Sharing skills

As some pointed out, for projects to be truly inclusive and participative, it's not only *what* gardens are doing but *how* they go about it that matters:

It's one thing working with lots of groups, it's another thing for those groups to feel they have a sense of commitment and ownership.

Chandan Mahal, formerly Participation and Learning Manager, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Good practice exists both within and outside the sector that could be shared. For instance, Westonbirt employed two community officers in 2014. The recruitment process paid special attention to applicants' experience in community engagement and working with diverse groups. This was seen as significant progress made possible through the garden's experience with *Communities in Nature*.

It was suggested that colleagues both in other gardens and *within* gardens should begin to support each other more through peer mentoring and review, and the fostering of open and honest reflective practice:

It would be really beneficial to have shadowing opportunities in another organisation, for example, an expert mentor.

Ben Oliver, Learning and Participation Manager, Westonbirt, The National Arboretum

BGCi is currently assessing the potential for peer mentoring within and between gardens and how BGCi could support and facilitate this.

Learning from abroad

International respondents outlined a wide range of projects, including:

- Short-term projects, mostly educational and some experiential (mainly with children).
- Work with small groups from diverse, marginalised communities.
- A few outstanding examples of embedded work, in which whole institutions display a deeply rooted commitment to their social role. These gardens work hand-in-hand with their communities in partnership with community-based,

volunteer and environmental activist organisations and local government authorities (even if sometimes without, as yet, full cooperation from across their organisations). Examples include the botanic gardens in Sydney, Chicago and Brooklyn.

This very broad definition of ‘growing a social role’ raises the question of whether some form of standardisation would help evaluate such work (see Recommendations).

However, almost seventy per cent of the international respondents said they had been largely unaware of *Communities in*

Nature and regretted not knowing more. Many were interested in the idea of an international community of practice based on a scaled-up version of the programme.

Like the UK gardens, most of these respondents highlighted a seeming lack of commitment from leadership to their garden’s social role, making it difficult for the work to be supported across the organisation and to grow. They wanted to see BGCi go beyond a supportive role to act *as leader* for the sector, helping move the sector ahead with its increasingly important social role.

Inspirational gardens

International colleagues cited these gardens as inspiring in: their social role; their innovative and active work with people (volunteers, participants, co-producers) within their localities; working with a wide range of partnerships to make real change happen; working with communities on conservation and climate change:

- Australian Arid Lands Botanic Garden, Port Augusta
- Bristol Zoo Gardens
- Brooklyn Botanic Garden
- Chicago Botanic Garden
- Cleveland Botanical Garden (especially its Green Corps programme)
- Denver Botanic Gardens
- Eastwoodhill, National Arboretum of New Zealand
- Eden Project
- El Jardín Botánico Regional del Cicy, Yucatán
- Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, Miami
- The Geffrye, Museum of the Home, London
- Gullele Botanic Gardens, Addis Ababa
- Jardín Botánico de Puebla
- Jardín Botánico Regional de Cadereyta, Queretaro
- Jardín Etnobotánico de Oaxaca
- Makerere University Botanical Garden, Kampala
- Mexican Association of Botanic Gardens
- Minnesota Landscape Arboretum
- Missouri Botanical Garden Madagascar Program
- The Morton Arboretum, Chicago
- National Botanic Garden, Havana
- National Museums of Kenya, Nairobi Botanic Garden
- New England Wildflower Society
- New York Botanical Garden
- Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens, Pittsburgh
- Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh
- Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria
- Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (especially for its international work)
- Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney
- Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens, Hobart
- SANBI (South African National Biodiversity Institute)
- Singapore Botanic Garden
- State Botanical Garden of Georgia
- Warsaw University Botanic Garden
- Westonbirt, The National Arboretum
- Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden

Improve communication about social projects

There is a need for better communication not only between organisations but also between each organisation and its stakeholders and, crucially, *within* organisations (BGCI/RCMG, 2011). Communication within gardens was seen as a priority:

It's often hard to facilitate 'up' communication in strongly hierarchical organisations, especially as many botanic gardens are part of well-established and traditionally formed heritage/university sites. It therefore requires ongoing commitment and hard work to communicate 'up' or do successful 'in-reach'. There are greater challenges communicating work internally than externally. Systematic change is needed in order to keep the conversation going. It is important to know what your fellow colleagues are doing in different departments. Not only to be in touch with organisational mission but to encourage cross-departmental collaborations.

Anonymous education staff member

The World Café discussion concluded that it is particularly important to publicise the credibility of the department responsible for community outreach and show that public engagement is a core value and not a cost. Suggestions for doing this included:

- Create organisational ownership through internal PR, such as staff conferences, inviting staff to experience and recognise the importance of the work of staff specialising in different areas.
- Use external/public recognition for internal influence, for example sharing success stories through social media.
- Facilitate skills/training for volunteers, creating networks of 'friend' organisations in the community.
- Create social enterprise and self-supporting models that can generate revenue off the back of projects initially funded in the short term.

Issues with funding

Issues with short-term funding run through many of these challenges:

As someone new to the funding application process I am disappointed that hardly any funders give funds for staff wages. This is a real problem with a community project.

Anonymous staff member

The majority of funding is for short-term projects and so a whole organisation may be committed to the cause but they are then trapped in short-term goals if this is the only funding they can secure.

World Café participant

The programme evaluation noted that: "While short-term project funding may sow the seeds for change, strategic financing is essential to sustain change over the longer term" (Vergou and Willison, 2013). The World Café discussed how funders could best use their resources to support gardens to grow their social role. Funders were enthusiastic about becoming involved:

We would want to see a holistic approach that integrates outcomes for people with opportunities that these green spaces offer in urban spaces for diverse and under-represented communities in skills, education, volunteering. There could be an even bigger relationship with schools – there is wonderful potential. This is not to downplay [the gardens'] conservation role. We are always able to fund projects that further a knowledge-pursuing strategy and [we] try and fund biodiversity projects. ... Gardens could access government funding for an apprenticeship programme for under-represented communities. There is a strong business case for diversifying [audiences and funding sources].

Jo Reilly, Head of Participation and Learning, Heritage Lottery Fund

We are really interested in communicating with urban audiences about wider environmental issues, particularly because there's a disconnect with younger people.

Jenny Dadd, Grants Manager (Environment Lead), Esmée Fairbairn Foundation

Some, however, flagged that lack of vision can also be a problem:

Funding is a bit of an excuse for gardens who are not ready to embrace this type of work.
Julia Willison, Head of Content and Learning, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Funders also felt that the sector lacked a shared vision and a cohesive strategy built on partnerships with other organisations with overlapping missions:

Botanic gardens is not a movement but it could be – we don't hear from botanic gardens.
Jenny Dadd, Grants Manager (Environment Lead), Esmée Fairbairn Foundation

Botanic gardens should look at leveraging existing progress and resources involving sectors that may be further along in relation to 'social role' funding.

In turn, funders could consider:

- Backing flexible projects with broad outcomes that may be refined in collaboration with local communities during the extended planning phase (Vergou and Willison, 2013).
- Helping gardens focus on business planning, including examining the tension between 'commercial' and 'social role' mission development.

BGCI is already exploring some of this:

I am very interested in developing business models for botanic gardens, for how they can continue to develop this work on an ongoing basis.
Asimina Vergou, Head of Education, BGCI

Further networking and co-development conversations with funders are plainly worth fostering. See the Recommendations section for more on developing funding.

Recommendations for better practice



Perspectives, an exhibition of photos of Westonbirt, The National Arboretum, taken by Bristol Drugs Project participants. Photo: Westonbirt.

This section outlines a range of broad recommendations for transforming botanic gardens in order for them to meet their social role. It also includes suggestions for practical next steps, largely to be taken by BGCi in collaboration with others and gardens themselves.

Establish a 'community of practice'

There is clearly a great deal of interest in a community of practice, working not just in the UK but internationally. BGCi has a very important role in championing this. But there is first an internal conversation to be had within BGCi itself:

There is still work to do on understanding what we mean at BGCi in terms of growing gardens' 'social role'.

Asimina Vergou, Head of Education, BGCi

BGCi is already widely disseminating good practice via publications (see References). To move quickly on making best use of practice by leaders in the field, this review recommends promoting such gardens to act as a 'hub', leading, mentoring and sharing good practice with other gardens to help them develop their social role (see below).

Next steps for BGCi

- Nurture and develop a community of practice on gardens' social role.
- Explore learning from other sectors and linking with other institutions outside the sector, for example, sharing an understanding of working with diversity and active public engagement.

- Initiate a sector-wide discussion on a set of principles for gardens' social role in general, and *Communities in Nature* in particular, looking at:
 - Active citizenship
 - Capability development
 - Developing sustainable partnerships
 - Being locally informed
 - Supporting genuine, positive change
 - Building strong communities
 - Fostering 'critical friends'

Identify and support hub gardens

Lead gardens, already strong in their social role both in the UK and elsewhere, could form a 'vanguard' group, from which other gardens take inspiration and learn new skills and strategies.

Hubs can help significantly in both the development and dissemination of standards of good practice and also staff development. Hubs might establish virtual or live working groups comprising botanic garden staff and partner organisations. At the centre of their own networks, they could support the development of communities of practice and galvanise changes in practice:

We need some lead gardens ... to show everyone else it can be done ... the long-term benefits of taking it further.

Paul Cook, formerly at Ness Botanic Gardens, University of Liverpool

BGCI needs to identify, support and help find funding for 'hub' gardens. BGCI should work closely with the directors of these gardens to develop a network that can lead a community of practice, acting as mentors/trainers and supporting other gardens.

This would in turn have implications for funders in terms of their best, most effective, sustainable investment and their role in brokering relations with other funders and organisations.

Next steps for BGCI

- Identify lead ('hub') gardens, nationally and internationally, to help establish standards of 'social role' practice and a supportive 'community of practice' for gardens' social role.
- Investigate better ways to reflect collaboratively on practice through hub mentoring and peer review, helping to build a 'community of practice'.
- Set up a large consultation process with potential partners and establish a Community Partnership Advisory Board, to roll out local advisory boards in botanic gardens, which can later network across the sector.

Set up good practice standards

Those involved in workshop discussions at the 2015 International Congress recommended that BGCI help the botanic garden sector to identify standards and perhaps even a brand to which gardens might aspire. These would identify and advertise principles, standards and 'ways of working' with communities to which the botanic garden sector adheres. Models to build on are already available in the sector.

Such standards could raise profile, reach out to funders/donors and be part of induction processes for new garden staff.

Next steps for BGCI and funders

- Work with identified hubs to initiate sector-wide dialogue on standards.
- Engage with existing research consortia with overlapping interests (such as health and wellbeing, and climate change).
- Train garden staff in audience development and data collection, to inform strategic plans and support funding applications and local authority support.
- Establish standards and branding for botanic gardens' social role that can be regularly monitored and evaluated with community partners.



Sowing seeds for the Bristol Community Plant Collection, Bristol Zoo Gardens. Photo: BZG.



- Review staff roles, job descriptions and training; develop a (funded) action learning/seminar programme aimed at shifting the scientist/academic role within botanic gardens from a 'gatekeeper' model to a 'facilitator' and fellow participant model.
- Institute shared responsibility through cross-departmental programme management structures for planning and delivery.

Next steps for developing garden staff (led by BGCI with senior staff)

- Assess and address what skills staff need to support a 'social role'.
- Address staff's understanding of working with diversity and related audience development through training and mentoring. Establish a 'Diversity in Nature' professional support network.
- Establish a traineeship scheme in partnership with activist organisations already offering these, such as Organiclea.
- Raise individual gardens' social profile through leading local actions for positive environmental change.
- Establish 'critical friend' relations with community partners / participants.

Next steps around volunteers (led by BGCI with garden staff and community organisations)

- Review the social/cultural composition and recruitment of garden volunteers; work in partnership with volunteer agencies and funders to institute an accredited volunteering programme.
- Develop the capabilities of participants and local communities and those that the garden needs to deliver effectively.

Next steps around communities (led by BGCI with garden staff and community organisations)

- Develop capacities in partnership with community/environmental activist organisations for co-produced programmes *in and out of* gardens, based on what people can bring *to* gardens, as well as what they can learn from working *with* them.
- Ensure participants can make practical, positive change in their locality and /or garden, with a sense of joint achievement.

Develop skills and capacities in gardens and communities

This review has identified a number of areas where staff and other participants need support to develop skills and build a sense of common mission.

Next steps for senior staff (led by BGCI)

- Create a leadership programme for the sector.
- Create a professional development network for garden leaders.

“Gardens could access government funding for an apprenticeship programme for under-represented communities. There is a strong business case for diversifying [audiences and funding sources].”

Jo Reilly, Heritage Lottery Fund

Incorporate the ‘social role’ in gardens’ mission

Communities in Nature was concerned with increasing and diversifying audiences. But it also aimed to challenge the nature of a garden’s engagement with people, to shift the perspective from people being passive consumers to becoming active partners. A focus on ‘active citizenship’ and ‘capability’ development should be the basis of future funding applications for the programme. This may well mean working collaboratively with communities not just inside but also *outside* the garden. Some gardens around the world already do this.

There is a discussion to be had about whether the sector’s culture encourages this shift. Both UK and international participants frequently identified the exclusion of the social role from the missions of individual botanic gardens as a primary roadblock. But there is also concern that gardens should not be diverted from their original mission. In discussions around this review, Paul Smith (BGCI Secretary General) noted the importance of looking at how botanic gardens’ *existing* DNA and expertise can best be used to fulfil the garden’s social role. Others echoed this:

[A social role is] Huge. It’s core to our being – but it’s not our core mission and purpose.

Anonymous botanic garden director

Participants in this review identified two main ways to integrate the social role into the gardens’ mission:

- A programme to support the development of gardens’ visions/mission statements and strategic plans with the social role embedded through their work.
- The development of cross-departmental management structures in gardens for planning *and* delivering social role programmes.

Next steps for BGCI

- Launch its new vision/mission for botanic gardens.
- Position the social role at the heart of its new strategy, running throughout the organisational plan and supported by a revised communications strategy.
- Initiate a sector-wide review of mission for gardens’ social role; support integration of the ‘social role’ into the *renewed* mission, vision and strategy of each garden; roll-out the programme of gardens’ vision/mission and strategic plan development, with BGCI’s new policies as a model.
- Create a series of inter-disciplinary discussions leading to a funded development process across the sector and with other stakeholders.

Develop different funding approaches

Respondents felt strongly that there is a role here for BGCI.

Next steps for BGCI with funders

- Develop funding partnerships to support the next stage of *Communities in Nature*.
- Meet funders and existing networks to explore better strategies for potential funding collaborations; learn from funding in other sectors.
- Investigate strategies for brokering a wider range of sustainable funding opportunities.
- Focus on business-planning models for gardens.
- Develop a strong communications strategy.

- Create or expand a fundraising/development post to investigate new partnerships/areas of collaborative funding.
- Engage with existing social/environmental networks, environmental activist organisations focused on active change and organisations engaged in community-based urban conservation programmes to demonstrate a practical difference.
- Invite UK and international science and natural history museums to discuss overlapping concerns and strategies and potential collaboration and/or shared funding and programmes.

Afterword



Artwork inspired by calendula grown for the Bristol Community Plant Collection, Bristol Zoo Gardens. Photo: BZG.

Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) is very grateful to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation for funding and supporting the *Communities in Nature* project, which has been a tremendous learning experience for all involved. *Communities in Nature*, through publications, online content and innovative projects in six botanic gardens, has clearly shown that reaching out to, communicating with and valuing communities that would not normally visit a botanic garden is both worthwhile and rewarding. Comments from botanic garden staff such as 'It's the best thing I have done in my horticultural career – I don't think that I will ever do anything that will top it' together with sustained interactions with those communities long after the funding has gone, suggests that the *Communities in Nature* model has produced sustained benefits for all involved.

The programme has also highlighted the obstacles associated with bringing in new ideas that challenge the norm and which may be perceived by both visitors and botanic gardens staff as peripheral to their interests or mission. From the visitors we have learnt that engaging them on their own terms is an essential precursor to any discussions about plants or the environment. From the staff and volunteers within botanic gardens we have learnt that communicating the importance of our work can be difficult not only to external audiences but to each other as well. For example, botanic garden educators frequently struggled to get senior management or their peers in science or horticulture to understand the relevance of their outreach work, and vice versa.

To those of us who work in botanic gardens all of this rings true, and where *Communities in Nature* is particularly valuable is in its recommendations about how we can break down these barriers between people. Developing a community of practice with inspiring individuals and approaches; involving botanic garden management, horticulturalists, scientists, educators and community leaders from the outset, and exchanging ideas and experiences are all useful ways forward. Of the greatest importance, however, is the sure knowledge that botanic gardens need to go beyond their walls and take a leading role in engaging and empowering all communities to value, conserve and sustainably manage plants and their natural environment, in a way that has immediate benefits for them. At BGCI we are fully committed to achieving this, and we will do all we can to mainstream this approach across our botanic garden membership worldwide. Growing our social role should not be regarded as peripheral or extraordinary; it should be regarded as essential.

Dr Paul Smith, Secretary General, BGCI

ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper is based on a fuller evaluation by Dr Bernadette Lynch (Lynch, 2015). Her review draws on:

Initial review with *Communities in Nature* participants and stakeholders

A combination of online surveys sent to all gardens directly funded by *Communities in Nature*, in-depth telephone interviews with key staff from those gardens, and their participation in the peer review meeting in London.

Peer Review Forum

Participating gardens met peers, potential partner organisations, related sectors and funders in London. They presented on the impact of *Communities in Nature* on their organisation and provided a list of key questions about the future of the programme. These formed the basis for a World Café discussion made up of mixed groups of *Communities in Nature*-funded gardens, potential partners and funding agencies.

International perspectives

International members of BGCi were asked to complete an online survey, with 74 responses from gardens around the world. The preliminary findings of this review were presented to the *BGCi 2015 International Congress on Education in Botanic Gardens*, Missouri, with follow-up workshops providing feedback.

In total, 127 respondents/participants provided feedback, from the UK and internationally, and from within and outside of botanic gardens. We are immensely appreciative of the time and thought they gave to considering the impact and future opportunities for this initiative.

The review also draws on various published evaluations of the programme and individual projects (see References).

For more information

Further information about *Communities in Nature* can be found here:

http://www.bgci.org/public-engagement/communities_in_nature/ (last accessed 7 September 2015). This microsite includes key reports and short films from pilot projects, BGCi's training manuals for botanic gardens, and the applet mapping community projects around the world.

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ABOUT BOTANIC GARDENS CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL (BGCi)

BGCi is an independent charity whose mission is 'to mobilise botanic gardens and engage partners in securing plant diversity for the wellbeing of people and the planet'. BGCi links more than 2,500 botanic gardens in 120 countries, catalysing them to conserve threatened plant species and raise awareness of the importance of plants as the earth's greatest natural resources. At a policy level, BGCi has been instrumental in developing the *Global Strategy for Plant Conservation* under the auspices of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and has also developed several major reports that have influenced policy and decision making. www.bgci.org

ABOUT THE CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION (CGF)

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (CGF) is an international charitable foundation with cultural, educational, social and scientific interests, based in Lisbon with offices in London and Paris. The purpose of the UK Branch in London is to bring about long-term improvements in wellbeing, particularly for the most vulnerable, by creating connections across boundaries (national borders, communities, disciplines and sectors) which deliver social, cultural and environmental value. www.gulbenkian.org.uk

Dr Bernadette Lynch is an academic and museum professional with twenty-five years' experience in senior management in UK and Canadian museums. Formerly Deputy Director at the Manchester Museum, University of Manchester, she specialises in public engagement and participation, leading practice and influencing debate on the impact of public engagement. She is Honorary Research Associate at University College London. <https://ucl.academia.edu/BernadetteLynch>

Opposite: Watering the Urban Veg community garden at Winterbourne House and Garden, University of Birmingham. Photo: Winterbourne House and Garden.



