

# 2004 Biodiversity Educators Colloquium

*Post-meeting summary by David Galbraith*

## **Introduction**

The three days of the "Biodiversity Educators Colloquium" were important for the botanical gardens and arboreta community in Canada. This event was the largest meeting of representatives of botanical gardens and arboreta from across Canada in the last 30 years.

The theme of this meeting is universal for botanical gardens and arboreta. Some have larger or smaller collections, some have differing emphases on research, or greater or lesser overall institutional capacities. All of them, however, are intent on their educational mission. Socially, most of us share some element of the mission of conservation of plants in Canada, too. That common interest binds us all together. We want to reach the present generation, the next and future generations with the messages, passion and urgency we all feel about the world of plants.

This meeting was also very timely because of the *Investing in Nature: A Partnership for Plants in Canada* project, now mid-way in its planned four year term. Participant input provided very helpful guidance to most effectively support Canadian botanical gardens, arboreta and the professionals who are so passionate about the conservation and education work that they do.

## **Take Home Messages**

### **A. Education about conservation and sustainability is not a secondary reason for botanical gardens to exist. It's one of the most important.**

- We saw how large and small institutions cope with bringing in visitors and providing them with educational programming, and especially programming directed at changing attitudes and generating action in support of conservation goals.
- Around the world, botanical gardens and arboreta are shaping draft targets for conservation within our sector, as part of the "Global Strategy for Plant Conservation." Educational opportunities and activities, whether they are formal or informal, planned or incidental, are important components of these targets and of the conservation puzzle.

### **B. We must be realistic about the costs and the benefits of networking, and as a community of institutions, look toward developing larger joint projects and joint sources of funding**

- This meeting took place because the key obstacle, finding the travel funding, to such a meeting was removed. Our sector is strapped for cash. We are all scrambling to raise funds from a variety of sources, public and private, to get our work done. Each participant also invested a lot of time and energy in this meeting: together we contributed a substantial resource, about 200 person-days. The products of this meeting will be very important in setting the stage for our community in the immediate future.

**C. We should use and strengthen the networking tools linking our institutions across Canada in order to reinforce and support each other's work and avoid unnecessary duplication.**

- This meeting touched on all aspects of what a botanical garden is and does. We reach the public about the world of plant diversity, the importance of conserving and using that diversity in sustainable ways, and the urgent need to conserve that diversity for its own intrinsic value as well as for the utilitarian value to human society.
- Sharing what we are doing right now is extremely important. Separated by the vast geographic distances of Canada and by differences in language and culture, it's been hard to communicate about our efforts, resources, ideas and enthusiasm. We need to keep working at the communications and the networking. It doesn't just happen on its own.
- There have been previous attempts to build botanical gardens networks in Canada. In the 1970s a proposal went to the federal government for support to set up a national system of botanical gardens for Canada. That wasn't picked up. In the 1980s the Canadian Plant Conservation Program (CPCP) was established as a volunteer effort but was closed out in 1990 due to lack of funding. The Canadian Botanical Conservation Network was set up in 1995, achieved incorporation and charitable status in 1998, and continues to carry out its networking objectives. We also now have a strengthened membership in Botanic Gardens Conservation International in Canada, and now a large number of individuals and institutions interacting through the Canadian Botanical Gardens Educators Network.

**D. We need to get better at conveying what we do and why, both for the public and our stakeholders but also for our own staff, boards and direct supporters.**

- Each of our institutions has to function in the real world, and the life-blood of functioning in Canadian society is having enough money to do the work we all want to do, or stimulating volunteers and the general public to be involved, or some formula that combines these *modus operandi*.
- Our programmes and our institutions as a whole might benefit from adopting what's called triple-bottom line reporting. Increasingly, in addition to the single bottom line of fiscal health that is so ingrained into our institutions and society, organisations engaged in supporting the public good are adding two new lines to their annual report. First, they include an audit of the societal benefits they provide each year, which should include educational reach and effectiveness. Second is an audit of environmental performance and contributions. These three items form the basis of "Triple Bottom Line" reporting and could be considered as a way to express how botanical gardens and arboreta are performing in annual reports.

**E. We need keep evaluating and reporting the effectiveness of our education programmes at meeting our conservation objectives.**

- Our messaging takes many forms, from the marketing institutions do to draw in visitors, to the formal and informal educational programming to institutional choices about appropriate gardening practice, collections, priority areas for research, and even at the level of interacting with students in higher education. All of these elements are part of the overall message.

- Transmitting information alone isn't enough. Teaching, whether it's formal or informal, is more effective if it's hands-on, and it's more meaningful if it results in transformation and action. At the end of the day we have to evaluate our effectiveness by asking not how much more our guests and friends know now that they passed through our programs, but instead how much smaller are their individual and collective ecological footprints.
- Moving through these stages from marketing to in-house contact with education programs and interpretation through to professional practice and conservation actions BY our institutions is like a trophic pyramid. We lose at least 90% of the raw numbers at each stage. For every 1000 people who receive a marketing message, far fewer than 10% will act on that message. For every 100 people to visit an institution, a small proportion will participate in an education programme. If we can really reach 10% with a life-changing message, moving them a little of the way along the conservation continuum, we're doing very well. It takes time. We need patience and perseverance.

## **Conclusions:**

We have much to share, and much to learn; the differences among our institutions aren't ultimately important. Throughout the colloquium the participants reminded each other of some very important priorities for building stronger education programmes to support plant conservation, biodiversity and sustainability:

- The nature conservation community across Canada is stretched very thin indeed. If we are to *foster a new era of conservation* in Canada we need to be able to reach young people with interactive, sustained and personal contact with the wild, and with mentors.
- "Beware the simulacrum". Are our institutions like Noah's Ark? Or are we ambassadors for the wild? The model of Noah's Ark is protective, evocative of response to an emergency by hunkering down and safeguarding our treasures away from the tempest. We may need that, but we can't conserve our vital natural areas by putting them in a box. Being an ambassador means *walking abroad, spreading the word, and representing our passion* for that great foreign country, "The Public."
- Biodiversity, conservation and sustainable development are *central themes that provide our institutions with structure and social impact* for our education programs.
- Our institutions have relevance precisely because *our key strength is presenting the world of plants* to a public that may or may not be immediately aware of our biodiversity and conservation goals
- We always need to ask ourselves what it is that we are doing, and why, and *seek new ideas and new partners that can help us to succeed*. Related sectors like the zoo and aquarium world, natural history collections, nature centres and museums are all our colleagues. We have complimentary facilities, common goals and we have a lot we can share and learn from each other.
- Transmitting information alone isn't enough. In order for our educational programmes to be effective, we have to *inspire participants to actively engage in conservation*.