

Bantaba – a gathering place at the heart of Eden’s Rainforest Biome.

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Abstract

The Bantaba, or gathering place, is the traditional heart of a Gambian village; a place to meet, to rest, to welcome strangers and to discuss the issues of the day. At the heart of the Eden Project’s Rainforest Biome we have constructed a Bantaba of our own, to highlight the story of the Ballabu Conservation Project (BCP). With a conservation area incorporating 14 villages, the goal of BCP is to alleviate poverty for local people by making each village self-sustaining through local industries such as ecotourism and agriculture.

An educational charity, Eden provides a stage on which to celebrate our connections with, and dependence on, the natural world and each other. Our exhibits bring to life the stories we are illustrating. Eden’s Bantaba symbolises the people at the heart of the Ballabu project, the villagers and their way of life. It’s space for storytelling by our team of Pollinators; a visual tool to highlight issues such as water supply (village well), food security (chop farm), traditions (making palm wine); a direct link to Eden initiatives (Gardens for Life) and partnerships (Ballabu); an essential element of Eden’s mission to engage, entertain, inspire the imagination and linger in the memory.

Keywords

Storytelling–gathering place–landscape-education strategy-partnerships

Introduction

Imagine you’re in a Rainforest. It’s lush and green, but also very hot and humid. You’re tired, and you seem to have been walking on this path for a long time. Then, as the way slopes upwards to a bend in the road, a clearing opens up under the trees. Two benches sit invitingly in the shade of a large Gmelina. There’s a large pitcher of fresh water, covered with a cloth to keep it clean and cool, and a kettle filled with water for you to wash the dust from your hands and feet. You have arrived at a Bantaba – the traditional heart of a Gambian village; a place to gather, to rest, to welcome strangers and to discuss the issues of the day. This particular Bantaba, however, is not in the Gambia, but is instead to be found in the Rainforest Biome of the Eden Project. It has been carefully constructed at the heart of our West Africa exhibit, to give a focal point to the story we are telling about life in the Gambia. As one of a team of horticulturists working in the largest rainforest in captivity, my responsibilities include the West African exhibits, and I would like to use one of these exhibits, our Bantaba, to illustrate a little about the Eden ethos, and how our landscape shapes and informs our educational strategy.

The Eden Project

The Eden Project is a Millennium project conceived in 1994 and built in a former Cornish clay pit in the south-west of the United Kingdom. Eden opened to the public in March 2001 and is a not for-profit Charitable Trust. An educational charity, Eden provides a stage on which to celebrate our connections with, and dependence on, the natural world and each other. In a gentle and positive way, Eden invites people

to engage with these ideas, and to start recognising the power and responsibility we have to respect our resources and share them.

The site itself is a living example of what each of us can achieve when we work together and with nature. Built within a 60-metre deep, 15-hectare former china clay pit, Eden houses the largest ethnobotanical collection in the world, and is home to two of the largest conservatories (the Covered Biomes) in the world. The Rainforest Biome is 50 metres high, 110 meters wide, 240 metres long and houses plants from the Tropical Islands, Malaysia, West Africa and tropical South America. The Warm Temperate Biome, 35 metres high and 140 metres long, showcases the Mediterranean (citrus, olives, herbs and vines), the South African regions (proteas and aloes), Californian annuals (poppies and lupins) and shrubs of the Chaparral. In the 30 acre Outdoor Biome the crescent shaped terraces tell the story of plants that have changed the world and which could change the future. This landscape provides a display of plants, many of them productive crops that happily thrive in temperate climates around the world, including hemp, tea and sunflowers.

At Eden, our collection is showcased in unusual ways, and our planting schemes are realised in a way that's different from many other botanic gardens - we have the luxury of finding the stories first, and then painting a planted picture of those stories. Our belief is that, ultimately, education springs from emotion rather than information. So, rather than transmitting information, we aim to encourage discovery, to provoke curiosity, to have visitors make connections with their own lives. The tools we use to achieve this are many and varied, but are informed by simple principles; we want to generate awe and wonder, and encourage understanding, by engaging all the senses. Rather than covering the site with text, we experiment with poetry, dialogue, art, music and performance. At Eden, we engage people by telling stories, using narrative to connect people with each other and the world around them. The gathering places designed into our landscape, large and small, give us the space to engage in stories and conversations, and our exhibits bring these stories to life. That's one of the key functions the Bantaba fulfils in our Rainforest Biome. This gathering place gives us the perfect opportunity to tell some positive stories about the rainforest, and to highlight the fact that rainforest does not exist in isolation but is in fact filled with communities living and working there.

The Bantaba exhibit

Our Bantaba exhibit incorporates three areas, reflecting 3 different facets of village life. First is the 'Bantaba' or gathering place proper – literally, the “meeting-place under a tree” - where village elders gather to discuss the issues of the day pertinent to the villagers (Fig. 2a). Here also weddings, naming ceremonies and other celebrations are held. The nearby *Cola nitida* trees provide kola nuts for the elders to chew. The Bantaba is surrounded by other productive trees and herbs - cola, miracle berry, mango and banana - and forming a backdrop to all this is the chop farm, a communal cropping area which highlights the use of traditional leafy green vegetables in Africa (Fig. 2b).

Our Bantaba also includes a kitchen, or communal cooking area (Fig. 2c). A three-stone fire fills the centre of the kitchen. We can imagine that a young boy from the village keeps the stocks of firewood and kindling ready for the village cook and her apprentice. The various pots and pans each have a specific purpose – one for the rice or couscous, another for the sauce. The cook uses the large mortar and pestle for pounding the grains to make meal, closely watched by her apprentice, usually her daughter. This girl knows her place - her stool, mortar and pestle are all smaller than

those of the cook. She is also responsible for keeping all the cooking utensils clean, and will use sand to scour the pots after each meal.

At the far end of the Bantaba is the well, another village hub, where villagers get their drinking water, bring their livestock to drink from the adjacent trough, and do their laundry (Fig 2d). Many people in rural parts of Africa don't have access to safe water and rely on open, hand-dug wells for their water supply. Ours is a deluxe model, with a rim made from a converted oil drum to prevent young children and animals from accidentally falling in. It's overlooked by a large oil palm, traditionally valued as the source of palm wine, tapped from cut flower-stalks near the top of the tree. The tappers use climbing belts made from twisted palm fronds to reach the top. Also valuable, the palm fruits can be used to make laundry soap, while the stems are used for roofing or fencing.

One of the most important functions of the Bantaba is to highlight the story of the Ballabu Conservation Project (BCP). With a conservation area incorporating 14 villages, the goal of BCP is to alleviate poverty for local people by making each village self-sustaining through local industries such as ecotourism and agriculture. The concept of the Ballabu Conservation Project is to create an 85sq kilometre conservation area, incorporating 14 Gambian villages. Each village will have a community forest park established, as well as some form of industry such as eco-lodges, recycling plants, skill training centres, agriculture or livestock. The forest parks will also deliberately link up to create a wildlife corridor to allow the safe passage of animals through the villages.

The Eden Project will assist with the Ballabu Conservation Project through Gardens for Life, an Eden initiative, which links 20,000 pupils in schools across the UK, Africa, India and the USA, encouraging them to create gardens, grow food and share stories with others across the world. Gardens for Life is about growing healthy children, healthy plants and global citizenship.

The Bantaba is a good example of the way Eden works – we don't always have the resources or the expertise to put something together ourselves, but we do have the connections with people around the world who help us retain the authenticity of what we do. So, with Ballabu, we had people in Gambia who were able to tell us what we might need, source and buy at market authentic artefacts for us, and then come and tell us the correct way to use and display those artefacts. It's an important part of the Eden ethos that we get things right – to show respect, care, attention to detail. In September 2008, the Associate Director of the Makasutu Trust, Mr. Malang Jambang, visited Eden and showed us how each of these objects would be used in everyday village life. A favourite example is the stripy plastic kettle (Fig. 2a), which confuses many of our visitors – how useful is a plastic kettle? – but is immediately recognisable to anyone who has lived in Gambia for any length of time as an essential for hand-washing before eating or praying.

The signs within the exhibit echo the voices of the villagers in the Ballabu conservation area. They were compiled from a series of questionnaires collected by a UK media student during her interviews with the villagers about their lives and home, which she kindly shared with Eden. Once more, connecting with a friend made it possible to use quotes from the questionnaires to tell the story of the space, allowing the people of the area to speak for themselves.

This, then, is our Bantaba. While a useful illustration of Eden's principles in microcosm, it ultimately forms a unique and peaceful heart to our Rainforest Biome. For me, with my responsibility to care for the plants and crops of the West African

exhibits, the Bantaba and adjacent Chop Farm give a context to my daily work. Sweeping the Bantaba each morning, my mind wandering through plans for the day ahead, I'm conscious that in villages throughout the Gambia, other women are doing exactly the same, and Africa seems that bit closer.

Sources

"Eden-The Guide" (2010), Eden Project Books.

<http://www.accessgambia.com/information/ballabu-conservation-area.html>

<http://www.edenproject.com/gardens-for-life/>

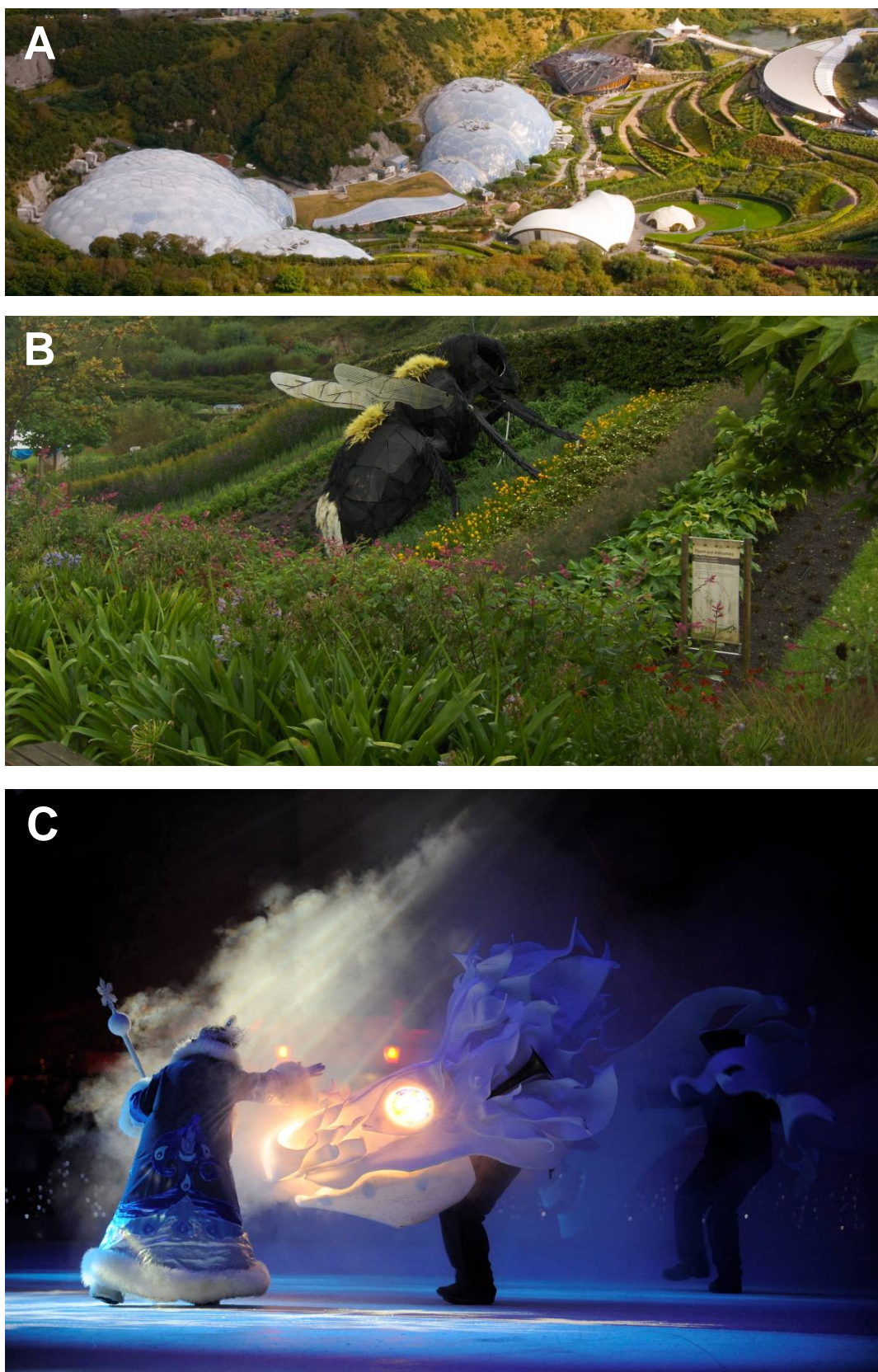


Fig. 1 Eden Project overview. (A) Aerial view of the site in 2009; (B) painting a planted picture of the pollination story; (C) integral role of performance, music and dance at Eden.

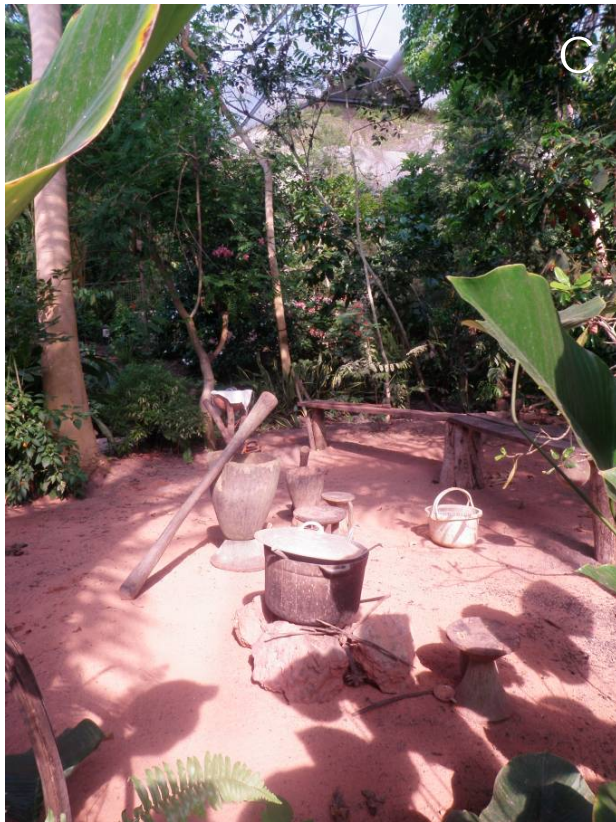


Fig 2. The Bantaba area in the Rainforest Biome, Eden Project, illustrating (A) overview of the seating area, with stripy kettle at bottom right; (B) adjacent chop farm; (C) the kitchen area; (D) the well, with descriptive signs from village voices.