

East of EDEN

New pretenders to the eco crown

Earlier in 2002, *Locum Destination Review* carried a major feature examining the growing phenomenon of ecotourism, including an interview with the founder of Eden, Tim Smit, who declared his intention for the project to become 'the UN of the environment'. With the UN-designated International Year of Ecotourism drawing to a close, Jane Fletcher of Locum Destination Consulting assesses some of the new generation of attractions emerging to challenge Eden's dominant position.

Eden has won a place in the hearts and minds of millions, not just in the UK but further afield. Anyone who previously thought that it was just a pair of fancy greenhouses has now been convinced that it is something quite different. Something unique. Something to be applauded and held up as a role model not simply for attractions of an ecological persuasion but indeed all new visitor projects.

But the fact of the matter is that Eden *is* an eco destination. It does set out to educate the world about ecological sustainability and how mankind must nurture its relationship with its natural environment. And while you could be forgiven for thinking that Eden is the UK's only major 'green' destination, you would be wrong. It happens to be the biggest, the best publicised and the most visited, but Eden is only one of several such attractions, focused on a range of ecological or environmental themes.

Green and pleasant land

Among them is the Norman Foster-designed National Botanic Garden of Wales, set in the former eighteenth-century regency park

of Middleton Hall in Carmarthenshire, a 568-acre estate on the edge of the Towy Valley. Another, which opened in August 2000, is the Millennium Seed Bank at Wakehurst Place in Sussex, an outpost of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. A new arm of the existing Wakehurst Place facility, the Seed Bank was developed primarily for the storage of seeds of endangered plant species, but also incorporates a compact visitor exhibition area. Then there is the little-known National Wildflower Centre in Knowsley, Merseyside. With a modest annual visitor target of 25,000, its mission is to educate visitors in the ways of wildflower conservation and promote the creation of new wildflower landscapes nationwide.

And, of course, who can forget the Earth Centre in Doncaster, the first Landmark Millennium Project, opened in April 1999? Although 'Earth' has always struggled to achieve visitor number targets, it nonetheless is resolute in achieving its overall mission 'to become the centre of first choice for the understanding and application of sustainable development in everyday life'.

This glut of green projects, including Eden, all received considerable financial assistance from the Millennium Commission. And who could begrudge funding for such destinations, guaranteed to help lift the spirits of a population worn down by millennial gloom? But this, along with their green themes, is where the similarities end. While Eden has gone on to become a major international attraction the others have largely remained hidden secrets. Eden has proved that being an attraction doesn't mean you can't be 'sexy', brilliantly commercial and above all controversial. And at the same time achieve ecological objectives. Why not be the set of a James Bond film? Or the venue for a series of summer pop concerts? These are precisely the types of innovation that have catapulted Eden to the top of the tree, if you'll excuse the pun. And Tim Smit is still hungry for more. Planning for a third biome is already underway. Eden has shown the way for the new breed of eco



Eden



National Botanic Garden of Wales



Data Panel: Wildwalk@Bristol

Set-up costs (@Bristol)

Millennium Commission	£44.3m
South West Regional Development Agency	£17.1m
Bristol City Council	£15.7m
Private sector and other contributions	£19.9m

TOTAL £96.5m

Opened July 2000

Visitors to date (@Bristol) 1.5 million

Cost of entry (Wildwalk only)	Adult	£6.50
	Child	£4.50
	Concessions	£5.50

Awards

Good Britain Guide, Family Attraction of the Year 2001
 England in Excellence, Large Attraction of the Year 2001
 England in Excellence, Tourism for All Award 2001
 RIBA Award for Architecture



destinations. And some major UK and European projects are keen to follow.

At-Bristol is another of the UK's Landmark Millennium Projects, bringing together three separate visitor experiences linked by a series of public squares and open spaces: 'Explore' (a hands-on science centre), an IMAX Theatre, and 'Wildwalk', a state-of-the-art 'living rainforest in the heart of the city'. Wildwalk tells the story of the tiny creatures upon whose existence the earth's biodiversity depends. Live animals, plants, models, graphics, electronic images and interactive displays are all incorporated into the storytelling process. As well as engaging the visitors through its broad range of exhibits and features, Wildwalk includes a news gallery, making available to visitors the most recent information on wildlife and environmental events.

Wildwalk also includes the headquarters of 'ARKive', a new globally accessible digital library of wildlife film footage, photographs and sound recordings drawn from the collection built up by the BBC's Natural History Unit, itself based in Bristol. ARKive is being developed as a major educational resource for schools, the general public, researchers and the media. Getting the BBC involved from the outset was an excellent move. Not only has Wildwalk been able to draw upon its unique reservoir of footage, it has been able to collect ringing endorsements from world-renowned broadcasters such as Sir David Attenborough.

Additionally, Wildwalk is closely linked with the Wildscreen Trust, founded in 1982, which has since established itself as the world's leading international festival of moving images from the natural world. Such associations with established authorities in the field is an object lesson to all would-be mixed-use destinations, eco-themed or otherwise, in maximising public appeal and outreach. And this approach is already paying dividends. In addition to ongoing press coverage, Wildwalk and its fellow attractions within At-Bristol have garnered a host of awards. And while its visitor levels are not as expected, and certainly not on the same scale as Eden's (1.25 million in its first two years, compared with Eden's 1.91 million in its first year alone), it looks set for a bright future.

Two other points about Wildwalk and the wider At-Bristol destination are worth dwelling on briefly. The first is that, unlike Eden, the National Botanic Garden of Wales, the Millennium Seed Bank or the Earth Centre, the project as a whole forms the core of a major urban regeneration scheme, which is transforming the Bristol brand. Which makes the achievements of At-Bristol, and Wildwalk in particular, even more impressive. And secondly, it has embraced corporate hospitality and venue hire as an extra income stream. By

Data Panel: Rainforest House

Set-up costs	17 million euros	
Opened	March 2000	
Visitors to date	635,000	
Cost of entry	Adult	9 euros
	Child	4.5 euros
	Concessions	6 euros

allowing Wildwalk to be used as the setting for parties, location shoots and broadcasts, At-Bristol has been able to increase revenue and public exposure without compromising the ecological message it sends out. Like Tim Smit at Eden, the managers of At-Bristol have been quick to recognise the commercial value of innovative secondary uses of their prized asset.

Taking a raincheck

Another eco-destination located in an urban rather than rural setting is the Rainforest House, in Hanover. Unlike Wildwalk, however, the 'Regenwaldhaus' builds on the extraordinary legacy of an existing garden project, dating from the last century. Comprising the Grosser Garten, Europe's oldest original Baroque garden, the Goergengarten, laid out in the style of an English landscape garden, and the Berggarten botanical garden, containing one of the world's most comprehensive orchid collections, the Herrenhausen Gardens has historically been an internationally significant destination. The grounds of the Berggarten were destroyed in World War Two, and the site remained empty until plans emerged in the early 1990s to fill it with a new and futuristic green attraction.

The attraction that was eventually opened in March 2000 (by coincidence the same month as Eden), was the visually arresting Rainforest House, designed by Ray Hole and Gordon Wilson of Furneaux Stewart. Within this striking building, complete with an Eden-like curved roof structure, visitors are invited to 'travel' by space shuttle to experience the plant and animal life of the South American mountain rainforest, 'Mata Atlantica', as a member of a research expedition. Upon 'touching down', the explorers' mission is to track down the fictitious Professor Frank, whose bizarre experiment to enable communication between humans, plants and animals has failed due to a rebellious plant. While the pretext is a more than a little surreal, it sets up opportunities for visitors to explore the natural world through a series of experiences and experiments at 'research stations'. The adventure culminates in a return trip to Hanover via a glider in the grip of a storm. There is no denying the thought and planning that has gone into making the experience memorable, engaging and informative. But the long-term challenge of such an approach, of course, is being able to draw back visitors time after time to take the *same* 'voyage', however impressive it may be.

While the visitor experience on offer at the Rainforest House differs significantly from Eden, both destinations are united by an

excitingly commercial approach and their investment in ecologically sensitive architecture and operational techniques, including water recycling and natural ventilation. Like Eden, an innovative approach to the roof - which is covered by three-layered fluorine plastic cushions - has ensured serious media interest, as well as satisfying the demands for light and UV permeability.

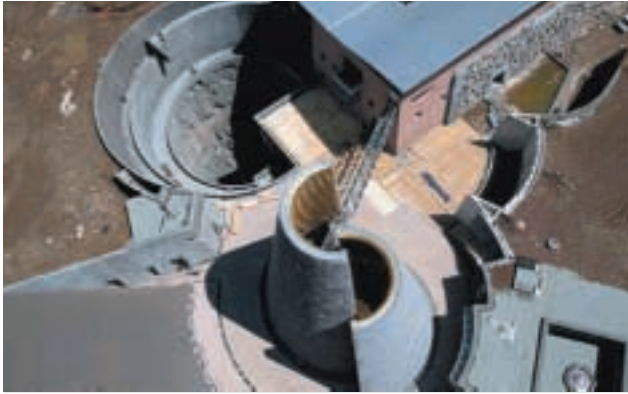
Thanks to the generosity of the city authorities, which donated the development site free of charge, the initial investment costs of the Rainforest House were low. But initial set-up costs of a visitor destination only account for a fraction of the total cost of the project over its lifespan. And a low initial cost could create a false sense of the ongoing investment levels needed to maintain and refresh the attraction. It is only to be hoped that the owners of the attraction, who include Volkswagen, are prepared for the cost implications of the longer haul.

Explosive appeal

In France, meanwhile, a whole collection of eco attractions is currently taking shape. In February 2002, Vulcania, the European Park of Volcanism, opened for business. Situated near Clermont Ferrand in the Auvergne region, Vulcania has three self-proclaimed objectives: to spread knowledge about volcanism and earth sciences, to develop the economy and tourism in the Auvergne, and to protect natural sites and develop land in the region. Hardly a recipe, it would seem at first glance, for drawing in visitors by the thousand. But this is what Vulcania has succeeded in doing so far. By September, it had attracted 500,000 visitors, the target for the



Rainforest House



Vulcania: what new innovations will keep it fresh?

whole of its first season, which ends in November. How has it done this?

Like Eden, Vulcania's location and architectural development have been at the heart of interest in the project. While Eden was created by constructing a space-age structure in a china clay pit, Vulcania is sculpted out of the base of lava flows. Three quarters of the attraction are underground. It blends in rather than stands out. The architect, Hans Hollein, set out to achieve 'the perfect balance between countryside and building construction', and you have to agree that in this endeavour he has achieved his goal rather well. And his design has certainly struck a chord with the French media.

So what awaits visitors within the attraction? Much as you would expect: impressive displays of eruptive activity, interactive models and exhibits, all displayed along one central exploration trail. Supplementing this are two large film showrooms, one equipped with shuddering floors, the other showing the first 'relief film', which charts the evolution of the Massif Central. Photographic and slide collections, temporary exhibitions, shops and restaurants complete the picture. There is no doubting the quality of content. Additionally, experiments are made available to schoolchildren in special teaching areas, along with workshops run by geology and volcanology experts. A drop-in centre is also available to parents, allowing adults to explore by themselves while their younger children are supervised for a couple of hours. Vulcania has clearly set out to win over a wide range of audiences with its edutainment approach.

While Tim Smit has claimed that he wants Eden to become 'the UN of the environment', Vulcania wishes to become 'the European reference centre for information on volcanoes and their influence on human activity and earth dynamics'. To this end, Vulcania, like Eden, has set up an international network of partners, which include the Smithsonian Institution and ECSITE (European Collaborative for Science, Industry and Technology Exhibitions). But the challenge it faces in achieving this long-term ambition, of course, will be keeping the project going and keeping it fresh.

Bearing in mind the willingness of the French government to prop up commercially unviable yet massively popular destinations such as Futuroscope, finance may not be its main concern. But finding new ways of generating interest among visitors and the media will certainly be key. Vulcania has already stated publicly that it has

Data Panel: Vulcania

Set-up costs

State subsidy	4.19 million euros
EU subsidy	11.43 million euros
Auvergne Regional Council	32.40 million euros (grant) 38.11 million euros (loan)

TOTAL

86.13 million euros

Opened February 2002

Visitors to date 500,000

Cost of entry	Adult	18 euros
	Student	16 euros
	Child	12 euros

chosen not to go down the route that Eden is rumoured to be considering: creating its own on-site hotel. This decision, say the park's managers, 'is coherent with the park's concept of osmosis with nature and discovery of natural phenomena'. It will be interesting to see what new innovations Vulcania will be able to live with as time progresses.

A green future?

While Vulcania and the Rainforest House continue to establish themselves in the visitor market place, other major eco-themed destination projects are taking shape. In France, Naturascope in Loudunais, Bioscope in Haut-Rhin (one too many 'scopes', perchance?) and Le Parc du Vegetal in Anjou are under construction, and all scheduled to open by 2005. In the commercially pressured world of big-league visitor attractions, is there room for these attractions? As their number grows, will they each be able to take market share from the Disneys of the world?

Certainly, the public demand seems to be there. And there is no denying the early success of Eden, Wildwalk and others. Such attractions have proved that ecological theming need not be worthy or dull. With the right mix of products, the right experiences, strong branding and exciting business techniques, it is possible to educate, inform and entertain all at the same time. All of which demands a commitment to innovation and ongoing investment in its widest sense - core product renewal, new product offers, cutting-edge marketing and a real sense that, ultimately, these are businesses. And, like their subject, businesses are organic and need constant attention if they are to grow and remain sustainable. These are the lessons for all destinations, but particularly eco-themed projects, where the subject matter is so radically different to that of a 'traditional' visitor attraction. Simultaneously meeting commercial and ecological objectives need not stand in the way of progress. Eco edutainment as the basis of a destination can work extremely well, but only if it's done properly. And right now, Eden continues to set the standard.