

Assisi Nature Council

International Conference:

Gardens for the Third Millennium: From the Garden of Eden to Urban Paradise

Assisi 15/18 October 1998

First European Conference on the protection of urban green spaces and their promotion as assets for human well-being and for the conservation of cultural and biological diversity

MANIFESTO

On Gardens for the Third Millennium

Introduction

The Conference was held from the 15th to the 18th October 1998 in the Sala Romanica of the Basilica of St Francis in Assisi (Italy). It was hosted by the Franciscan Orders of the Frati Minori Conventuali and organised by the Assisi Nature Council in co-operation with the University of Perugia's Faculty of Agrarian Studies.

The theme of the Conference was The Future of Gardens in Europe and the aim was to generate awareness of the importance of urban green spaces, including parks, botanic gardens, historic gardens, commons and vacant city plots. Such gardens draw on an ancient tradition which goes back to the Garden of Eden, an archetype shared by many civilisations, a crossroads for different cultures and an inspiration for all future gardens.

Participants included experts in the field of garden history, botany, ethnobotany, biodiversity, landscape planning and design, and environmental education. They met with the aim of making a contribution to the quality of life in the 21st century, and agreed to issue the following

Statement:

The bond with the plant world is an ongoing feature of our humanity, and includes material and economic sustenance as well as spiritual and mythical associations. This primitive ancestral bond has existed since the first humble gardens were cultivated at the dawn of civilisation, but is in danger of being severed by the progressive diminishing of global and local biological diversity and of economic, scientific, educational, cultural,

recreational and aesthetic values (Convention on Biological Diversity, 1992), due to unsustainable human activities.

The last twenty years have, however, seen a change of perception by city dwellers regarding their relationship with nature, due to the increased stress of urban living coupled with population growth and the consequent pressure exercised on the remaining vestiges of European countryside. This change is bound to bring a proportional increase in the demand for green spaces among the mainly urban and urbanised population, who, it is predicted, will constitute in the future a considerable proportion of the inhabitants of the planet. Acknowledgement of this phenomenon will have political implications in that it will require and inspire new legislation for the protection of existing gardens and the creation of new green spaces as a refuge for nature in cities.

The Garden of Eden (which in the unconscious mind serves as a model for the "good life") gave priority to the beautiful over the merely useful. Genesis (2 v.9) says that trees should be "pleasant to the sight and good for food", thus recognising the importance of non-material needs. Therefore, the ideal garden should be a harmonious blend of both these requisites.

At the dawn of the Third Millennium we must celebrate this ideal, remembering that most of the meaningful events in Christianity have a connection with a garden and that this space is charged with a symbolism which has endured in European culture up to our secular times. The expression of European cultural identity and diversity was initiated in enclosed sacred spaces, formed around the idea of a spiritual presence in a place. This grew into our historic gardens and parks, places for pleasure and leisure, through which we can trace the development of the history of Western art and civilisation and its debt to Arab and Middle Eastern influence.

Gardens have a role to perform in maintaining the distinctiveness of different localities, and it is our duty to concentrate our collective efforts to restore and renew this heritage for future generations. They provide a complete experience involving all the senses, and time and space. At the same time they provide for various needs, which include leisure, tourism and areas for social interaction .

Gardens also act as a seed bank and a source of technical and horticultural information and therefore can play an important role in the conservation of biodiversity for future generations, including genetic resources relevant for food and agriculture.

Gardens bring together so many different worlds and interests that they represent the best means of bridging the gap between the sciences and the humanities.

Following these considerations, the participants focused on three main areas of concern with regard to a Plan of Action for the Millennium:

1. Botanic Gardens
2. Existing Heritage or Historic Gardens
3. New Gardens

Botanic Gardens

1a. Government and local authorities should sustain Botanic Gardens as centres of excellence important for scientific advance and education for their own region because their original scientific function as an encyclopaedic collection of plant diversity and information is enhanced by ex-situ conservation.

1b. Botanic Gardens should try and find means, publicising educational events, to enhance their image and attract the broadest public. In particular they should maximise their educational opportunities by aiming programmes at different age groups each with its specific needs and capacities of comprehension.

1c. An important role of educational programmes is to celebrate the relationship between plants, people and the land, and provide a sense of spiritual connection with nature that the purely scientific approach does not provide.

1d. Programmes aimed at children and young people should include activities which can encourage a sense of wonder and exploration. Initiatives in school grounds are recommended as examples of the above, because they strengthen children's sense of belonging and of responsibility towards their environment.

2. Historic Gardens and Parks

2a. European Historic Gardens and Parks are so diverse in their aesthetic and thematic appeal that they represent a strong opportunity for enhancing Europe's regional and local uniqueness. They also reflect a real Western art form. Therefore we should cherish in them the achievements

of past generations and make every effort to ensure that their original character is preserved.

2b Their potential as tourist attractions should be balanced with the concept of "sustainable tourism" and this broad theme should be defined in terms of numbers, timetables and pricing policy for visitors, to give the maximum access and enjoyment compatible with minimum impact.

2c. In view of what was discussed during the Conference about the difficulties inherent in the administration and maintenance of such gardens and parks when they are state-owned, privately owned and managed gardens should be considered national assets. It was suggested that a scheme be introduced by which owners (including charities, NGOs and other institutions) should be recompensed through some form of tax-exemption.

2d. Because the problems associated with old Botanic Gardens are, in many cases, similar to those of Historic Gardens, it is imperative to ensure their protection from negligence, encroachment and development.

2e. Reconstructed antique, medieval and renaissance gardens, based on painstaking historic and botanic research, have a special status as ethnobotanic gardens because they illustrate the economic and social role of plants in the past within their historical contextual landscaping.

3. New Gardens

3a. The Third Millennium should provide an opportunity for increasing the quality of urban living through the creation of new gardens as part of a European Strategy for Sustainable Cities, living cities that are pleasant to live in. This could be called "Greening of the Cities".

3b. A new *raison d'être* for gardens is emerging: that of bringing Nature into the city, diminishing the pressure on the countryside and creating an urban revival through man-made nature (urban ecology). It requires the provision of habitats suitable for wildlife and maintaining and protecting biological diversity in towns and cities in accordance with chapter 15 of Agenda 21, the guideline document for sustainable development.

It will, therefore, be necessary to create ecological Greenways and Green Routes for walking and cycling, integrated in a network of green spaces linking the countryside with urban gardens.

3c. Conflicting interests might be accommodated by devoting different gardens to different purposes or by divisions within them for those different purposes, enhancing their multifunctional features (school gardens, business parks, community allotments, wildlife habitat, family parks, etc.)

3d. The dramatic loss of European Biological diversity and the expansion of the cities will bring about the necessity for self-sufficiency, with the added benefit of enhancing the neglected aspect of gardens as providers of food. The best way to activate sustainable preservation is through community gardens, family plots and kitchen gardens, especially for the cultivation of old varieties of fruits and vegetables.

3e. Garden design should be informed by a new aesthetic, which can be expressed as "design with nature": less tame, based not only on the specific genius loci, but also on the "genius of the times" in empathy with the physical landscape and in harmony with today's ecological concerns. This implies beauty, in variety and richness of forms and vegetation, a combination of artefact and nature (e.g. the EcoPark at Greenwich and semi-natural ecosystems like the Swiss municipal woodlands). Peace should be incorporated into garden design, as an essential liberating element of healing of both the human soul and of nature.

3f. It is recommended that communication between planning authorities and citizens should be established, to encourage grassroots action and participation in the creation and maintenance of gardens which must reflect the real interests of the community. Competitions to create gardens should be promoted by local authorities, companies and charities.

It was decided to support and recommend the following:

A. General

1. We call on all governments to respect Agenda 21 for the promotion of biodiversity, and on NGOs to promote it through local action and national awareness campaigns, lobbying for greener cities.

2. We call for concrete support from DGXI of the European Commission to recognise the value of gardens in the promotion of sustainability in cities and to make provisions in LIFE funding for the conservation of the European plant heritage as embodied in gardens.

3 .We recommend greater communication between European Botanic Gardens by the establishment of an Internet Forum to create a synergy of co-operation and link up with existing channels, such as the European Botanic Gardens Consortium of Botanic Gardens Conservation International / International Association Botanic Gardens (BGCI/IABG) and the Historic Gardens Foundation.

4 .The protection, by the ministries in each country dealing with culture and natural heritage, of gardens and parks as examples of an art form and a finite resource which we must pass on intact to future generations.

5 .The establishment of a complete inventory , survey and assessment of parks and,gardens in Europe, including classification of old and particularly beautiful trees and hedges as national assets, as vital information to assist funding policy.

6. The role of Botanic Gardens in cataloguing and conserving old useful species of plants , and the creation in Europe of a Network of Gene Banks for ethnobotanic research.

B Specific

1 The initiative announced by Father Nicola Giandomenico, of the Franciscan Friars of the Basilica of St Francis, to create for the Third Millennium an ecumenical Sacred Grove (Ara Viridis or Green Altar) which will contain 45 plants sacred to world religions, a reminder of the religious origins of gardens and the spiritual meanings of plants.

2 .The preservation of the Botanical Garden of Padua, under threat from an apparent connivance between local Government and commercial interests. This demands the most urgent action. It might otherwise appear as if the Italian authorities are , for whatever reason, indifferent to the destruction of this ancient and famous item of our European heritage.

The. creation of a Centre of Research on Ancient and Medieval Botany which follows the study of the Simple remedies started in the twelfth century by the Medical School of Salerno (considered the first modern University and the first Botanic Garden), on an experimental basis comparing different Mediterranean cultures, for the production and reintroduction of old varieties of trees, flowers and vegetables.

3.Improved specialist horticultural training in the maintenance and restoration of historic parks and gardens , in order to harmonise landscaping competence and botanical expertise.