

Strategically managing sustainable and innovative business development in uncertain times: An exploratory study of Botanic Gardens.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the provision, experiences and perceptions of 3 similar Botanic Gardens (BGs) across the UK; to explore and inform their heritage marketing and management efforts. Botanic Gardens (BGs) are faced with a range of challenges regarding sustainability and innovation due to funding cuts, changing roles and the need for strategic management approaches. Online resources directly linked to these 3 BGs (company websites, Trip Advisor, Facebook and Twitter), and transcripts of free-flowing discussion with stakeholders (representatives of international and UK national BGs; staff and volunteers of these 3 BGs) form the data sources. Content analysis of such data sources follows qualitative methodology techniques utilising a combination of manual and automatic text analysis; to highlight strengths and areas for development. It is hoped that this study will extend across the broader BG industry at both a national and international level, and contribute to sustainable heritage tourism and visitor attractions management paradigms.

Introduction

Botanic Gardens (BGs) are important places and spaces of heritage, and for economic, environmental and socio-cultural outcomes. Most BGs are commercial operations open as visitor attractions, where profits assist in sustaining their existence. However many have suffered over the years due to a lack of strategic leadership and management. There is particular attention to the importance of understanding strategic marketing and management to develop visitor experience economies, and sustainable and innovative business (Connell & Meyer 2004; Connell, 2005; BGCI, 2009; Brown & Williams, 2009; Dodd & Jones, 2010; Urry & Larsen, 2011; Moskwa & Crilley, 2012; Nex, 2012; Benfield, 2013; Richardson, 2015).

There is a dearth of literature on BGs tourism marketing and visitor attractions management, especially linked to UK BGs (Garrod, Pickering & Willis, 1993; Connell, 2005; Fox & Edwards, 2008; Leask, 2010; Benfield, 2013). Benfield (2013) makes reference to a limited knowledge on the subject highlighting a considerable gap in academic study despite the popularity and phenomenon of garden tourism. Various news articles over recent years have highlighted the challenges BGs face due to funding cuts, changing roles and the need for a strategic approach to management change in uncertain times (Jones, 2010; Tighe, 2012; Lean, 2015; Misstear, 2015; Richardson, 2015; Catahan & Woodruffe-Burton, 2017); Standing down from her post, Dr. Rosie Plummer, Director of National BGs Wales stated: *'the gardens have to be more commercial'* (Sample, 2015). Dr. Paul Smith, Secretary General of the BGCI states: *'the lack of knowledge of strengths and weaknesses leads to poor decision making'*; making reference to Kew BGs' current challenges (Richardson, 2015).

These aspects frame the context of this paper. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge on UK BGs as heritage and visitor attractions. It is expected that a model of good practice will be developed to inform strategic heritage marketing and management of 3 BGs; with a view to extending research across other UK BGs and the international BG industry.

Literature review

Botanic Gardens (BGs) as businesses who market and manage heritage, and enhance visitor experience seem to be conducive to: an ever-increasing visitor experience economy; the neo-liberal, global world economy; notions of sustainable development and efficacy; greater flexibility in adapting to new deals, challenges, markets and outputs (Garrod, Pickering & Willis, 1993; Connell, 2005; Jones, 2010; Drea, 2011; Nex, 2012; Tighe, 2012; Benfield, 2013; Michaels, 2013; Catahan & Woodruffe-Burton, 2017).

BGs were once the preserve of the elite, and mainly for botanical research and colonial government's economic agendas (Benfield, 2013). Roles of BGs are changing and there is a need for strategic heritage marketing and management, informed decision-making, innovation, entrepreneurship and diversification (Misstear, 2015; Richardson, 2015; Catahan & Woodruffe-Burton).

There is a lack of peer reviewed literature on UK BGs in particular, and a need to document a range of perceptions and developments, theoretical and methodological frameworks, good practice and other impacts linked to the BG industry, heritage and visitor attractions management, and enhancing visitor experiences of BGs. Seemingly there are only the following peer reviewed, academic publications that investigate the UK BG industry in a heritage tourism visitor attraction capacity:

Author(s)/Year	Title	Publication/publisher details
Garrod, G., Pickering, A. & Willis, K. (1993).	<i>The economic value of botanic gardens: a recreational perspective.</i>	<i>Geoforum</i> , 24 (2), 215–224.
Connell, J. (2004).	<i>The purest of human pleasures: the characteristics and motivations of garden visitors in Great Britain.</i>	<i>Tourism Management</i> , 25(2), 229-247.
Connell, J. & Meyer, D. (2004).	<i>Modelling the Visitor Experience in the Gardens of Great Britain</i> ’.	<i>Current Issues in Tourism</i> , 7 (3), 183-216.
Connell, J. (2005).	<i>Managing gardens for visitors in Great Britain, a story of continuity and change</i> ’.	<i>Tourism Management</i> , 26 (2), 185-201.
Fox, D. & Edwards, J. (2008)	<i>Managing Gardens.</i>	In: Fyall, A. Garrod, B., Leask A. & Wanhill, S. (Eds.). (2008). <i>Managing visitor attractions</i> . (2nd Ed.) Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann, 213-267.
Benfield, R. (2013).	<i>Garden Tourism.</i>	Wallingford: CABI.

An important aspect is the development of a critical understanding of marketing and management of BGs yet also linking with sustainable heritage tourism development and strategic visitor attractions management, and interdisciplinarity of such important heritage; very little can be found on the BG industry across the UK regarding these key themes. How and why botanic garden (BG) organisations have and are changed, led, managed and organised, is a complex subject, especially with regard to uniqueness, scale, division, role, vision, mission, aims, objectives, transparency, relatedness of activities and practice (Garrod, Pickering & Willis, 1993; Connell, 2004 & 2005; Connell & Meyer, 2004; Fox & Edwards,

2008; Jones, 2010; Drea, 2011; Nex, 2012; Tighe, 2012; Benfield, 2013). Marketing and management elements across the 3 BGs shall be analysed to explore similarities and differences highlighting experiences, perceptions and provision. Therefore a review of the extant literature shall act as a point of reference to relate findings of this study to other contexts, themes, concepts, theories and practice across multiple disciplines; particularly across arts, events, heritage, non-profit, social marketing and tourism elements. This study is ultimately based upon developing good practice in the UK BG industry with regard to heritage marketing and management.

There is a need to pursue such research, due to various heritage spaces and places, and other enterprises which are failing and declining, or indeed ceasing to exist (Jones, 2010; Tighe, 2012; Benfield, 2013; Lean, 2015; Misstear, 2015, 2016). It seems UK BGs are faced with new challenges and business management implications, especially in regard to their marketing outputs, and also enhancing and managing visitor experience with limited resource allocation. Most of these BGs now rely on attracting visitors and membership in order to survive. Many have ceased to run as effective commercial ventures and have suffered as a result of not diversifying and strategically managing core and potential visitor experience economies. There is a need for BGs to improve efficacy as visitor attractions by developing innovative models of good practice in strategic marketing and management; to ensure sustainable business planning is in place for those BGs lacking such provision and resources.

Marketing and management of heritage visitor attractions can be approached in a well-informed, sustainable way that embraces an holistic, multi-dimensional/ interdisciplinarity, collaborative and community based approach (Misiura, 2006; Chhabra, 2009, 2010; Fullerton, McGettigan & Stephens, 2010; Donohoe, 2012; Gough & Accordino, 2013); enhancing a mindful sense of place and space (Moscardo, 1996; Ballantyne, Packer & Hughes, 2008; Moscardo & Ballantyne, 2008; Moscardo, 2010), and incorporating the environmental, economic and sociocultural aspects which can be transformational (Garrod & Fyall, 2000; Timothy & Boyd, 2003; Fyall, Garrod, Leask & Wanhill, 2008; Ward, Parker & Shackleton, 2010; Phau, Lee & Quintal, 2013; Chung, Marcketti & Fiore, 2014; Kotler, 2014; Park, 2014; Wassenberg, Goldenberg & Soule, 2015).

Methodology

A case study approach acts as a spotlight on 3 similar UK Botanic Gardens (BGs) to develop a profile of antenarrative, drawn from online resources such as websites, review sites and social media, and free-flowing discussion with stakeholders of BGs. Antenarrative being '*the fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted and pre-narrative speculation...*' (Boje, 2001, p. 1; See also Skinner, 2016, p. 253); where antenarrative focuses on sense making out of flows of lived experience, in this case experiences of BGs. Analysis of such content follows qualitative methodology techniques utilising a combination of manual and automatic text analysis; to highlight strengths and areas for development of heritage marketing from the perspectives of stakeholders but also via linking key information across BG websites (BG visitor attraction information) and linked social media online information such as Trip Advisor, Facebook and Twitter reviews and comments. Content is manually reviewed then automatically coded across analytical software (Sotiriadous, Brouwers and Le, 2014; Neuendorf, 2016).

The conceptualisation of this study was born out of experiences and pondering on articles regarding gaps in provision and decline across the so-called industry or sector of BGs since 2011 but more so 2014 to present day; as more articles highlighting threats to the so-called BG and heritage industries have become apparent (Catahan & Woodruffe-Burton, 2017).

Initial searches were made using manual content analysis approaches across paper-based literature and Google searches for electronic or digital literature; for more information on such challenges but also searching those institutions and networks of BGs to establish potential collaborative research participants. Speculative emails, and comments via social media resulted in a snowballing effect regarding interest in this research, and resultant dialogue and correspondence with stakeholders via email and Skype (a software application and VoIP service). It was clear from contact with a broad range of BG stakeholders that there were gaps in data, and there were also questions regarding visitor attractions marketing and management raised via literature review and dialogue with stakeholders. Therefore the clear lack of research into this phenomenon means this study is, by definition, exploratory (Veal, 2011).

A range of resources are used to collect and frame the content, such as Colwiz (2017) a web browser extension used to facilitate searching, reviewing, writing, saving papers online, to annotate interactive PDFs directly via Chrome and cite papers on Google docs. NCapture, another extension app for web browsers is also used to capture BG related content from websites, online pdfs and social media to then import into NVivo 11 Pro for deeper analyses and manipulation of data sets captured (QSR, 2017a). NVivo 11 Pro a qualitative data analysis software is used to collect the vast amounts of content from such online resources. NVivo 11 Pro is a tool to focus on semantics and to connect with a broad and rich set of content, linking various concepts and potential influences. This in turn will assist managers in their key strategic decision making (QSR, 2017b). Leximancer (2017) may also be used to analyse text relating to BGs, identifying high level concepts, links between concepts, and offering key concepts and insights which can be further actioned by managers of BGs with the use of interactive visualisations to aid strategic decision making. Strengths and areas for development regarding this research, content and also methodology are being highlighted to inform both academic and industry practice for analysing large amounts of data. Overall a critical review of 3 BGs online marketing efforts, online reviews and comments (company websites, Trip Advisor, Facebook and Twitter), and transcripts of free-flowing discussion with stakeholders (representatives of international and UK national BGs; staff and volunteers of these 3 BGs) form the data sources. Content analysis of these data sources follows qualitative methodology techniques utilising a combination of manual and automatic text analysis; to highlight strengths and areas for development to explore and inform heritage marketing and management for each of the 3 BGs.

Discussion/Conclusions

Provision, experiences and perceptions of Botanic Gardens (BGs) have never been fully documented and this exploratory study contributes to the body of literature on BG heritage and visitor attraction marketing and management. The purpose of the study is to support Botanic Gardens (BGs) and other visitor attractions faced with a range of challenges regarding sustainability and innovation.

A critical review of the extant literature has situated this research and is further developing research questions to frame the study stemming from the guiding research question 'what are the strengths and areas for development?'; to explore and inform marketing and management for each of the 3 BGs partners. Key economic, environmental and socio-cultural factors impacting on BGs are becoming more apparent as the study progresses. Existing models, processes and theories are continually being examined for their relevance and applicability to a more sustainable and innovative business development practice of BGs. Elements of secondary and primary research are enabling a mapping exercise of current challenges facing BGs (amongst other places and spaces of heritage), and marketing and management practice across three similar BGs in the UK. Such research is assisting in highlighting strengths and areas for development to inform marketing and management. A

range of contemporary and appropriate tools to undertake qualitative analysis is proving insightful, and creating opportunities to formulate new study approaches, and development of conceptual and theoretical models of strategic marketing and management for BGs; contributing to sustainable heritage tourism and visitor attractions management paradigms. This study is part of an ongoing research project with BGs across the UK, and it is hoped that collaborative partnerships across academia and the UK and international BG industry will grow.

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