

LORD LLOYD OF KILGERRAN AWARD LECTURE

Mr Tim Smit CBE, Chief Executive, Eden Project

Held at The Royal Society on Tuesday 7th October 2003

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Southampton Oceanography Centre

In the Chair: The Rt Hon the Lord Jenkin of Roding

Mr Smit's lecture explained how he came to set up the Eden Project and conveyed something of the ideas behind it. It was not about plants: they were a canvas on which to tell stories. He described his management style and in particular the importance of members of the team playing samba drums, which taught the vital lesson that a group of people working together could achieve something that would be impossible for any of them individually.

In discussion Mr Smit was asked what his next project would be. It would be one to finish his life with, something really brave and bold. His aim was to create a culture in which it was OK to be idealistic. So many people had no conception of what was civilised, what was worth doing. He had, for example, brought the bosses of major enterprises in the South West together to be a conquering army for mid-Cornwall, with rules designed to stop negative thinking and remove self-interest. In eight weeks they had planned the regeneration of the area, for example making the railway lines of the English China Clay company serve new purposes and making compost out of waste. There was no conflict between idealism and commerce, so long as people thought big enough.

The question was raised how to engage children in learning new things, and how to get adults to carry on learning like children. Traditionally children were put off because education was identified with work. For Mr Smit education could not be linear. Learning something new was the most exciting thing, especially if it was forbidden. He fancied creating a place where people would be locked in and forced to master new things in order to get out, with a real threat. In that way science could be made relevant.

Asked about the shelf life of the project, Mr Smit hoped it was not on any shelf but was always evolving. Like a human body, after 7 years there should be hardly anything still the same as when it started. Equally, it could not be simply reproduced.

Other countries had asked the company to do Eden Projects for them, but they had to do it themselves using their own people. It was an attitude, not something that could be bought. He himself ought to move on soon. Anyone who had attracted good people had to bear in mind the danger of casting a long shadow over them. A project did not depend on any individual and should have a future after its initiator had moved on, provided people had bought in to where it was going.

In his lecture Mr Smit mentioned that the project had made the front pages of a wide range of newspapers in different countries but until recently not the local Cornish paper. A participant wondered whether this meant that Cornwall felt left out? Mr Smit thought not. The Cornish tended to be sceptical but had now embraced the project, which had massively changed attitudes to Cornwall and created employment. There was some anxiety about whether everyone wanted that kind of change. Cornwall tended to be seen as a place for people to grow old, and it was a disgrace that young people had to look outside the county for work. Now at least the project encouraged them to go back and see their families.

Why had the Eden Project been so successful in attracting visitors? In Mr Smit's view it was because it meant something and conveyed a sense of optimism. In the UK people did not understand that they had to dare to go for the best. Failed projects tended not to have champions. In the early stages Mr Smit had been asked what would be his exit strategy in case it went wrong, and his answer had been "Death".

Mr Jeff Gill