

Marketing Mostly Intangible Goods: The Case of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta

by

Jorge A. Santiago-Blay

Department of Paleobiology

National Museum of Natural History

Smithsonian Institution



Angie and Suzie are staff members at a major botanical garden. While they enjoy their jobs very much, they are concerned about recent developments in the garden. While sitting on an old bench overlooking a breathtaking vista, the two women talk about the problems they are facing.

“How many times do we have to remind the Board about the values of gardens,” sighed Angie. “Aesthetics, a place for solace and spirituality, botanical and conservation education, research, in the case of many endangered and threatened species, the last place where some of them survive, are all just some of the reasons we know that botanical gardens are important.”

“Sure, Angie, all of that is true and we value it,” replied Suzie, “but it brings in little money. The Board cares about the bottom line. We need to increase our visitation rate and do things that ultimately generate money. I feel so sad! I love this place and have worked here all my life. Now what can we do? Last year we got fewer funds from the state and we had to raise money for our own salaries. Several staff members were even laid off.”

Like many not-for-profit organizations, numerous botanical gardens and arboreta are experiencing economic difficulties. Built from the late 1800s onwards in what were then rural areas relatively close to cities, North American botanical gardens and arboreta are now prime real estate, often worth millions of dollars. In addition, the many lures of modern life that compete with botanical gardens and arboreta together with the economic quandaries of their parent institutions (e.g., universities, cities or state governments, etc.) have forced many of them to ponder their mission and existence. The dialogue you just read reflects a real case of a major botanical garden in the United States going through financial difficulties.

Questions

1. Discuss why botanical gardens and arboreta are (or are not) worth keeping.
2. Explain at least five aspects of the mission and operation of botanical gardens and arboreta.
3. Assuming that one believes that botanical gardens and arboreta are worth keeping, form groups of four to five, choose a botanical garden or an arboretum, and prepare an oral presentation as well as a written proposal outline explaining how you would alleviate the economic problems that many botanical gardens and arboreta are experiencing. Your instructor will provide additional details and materials for all of these activities.

