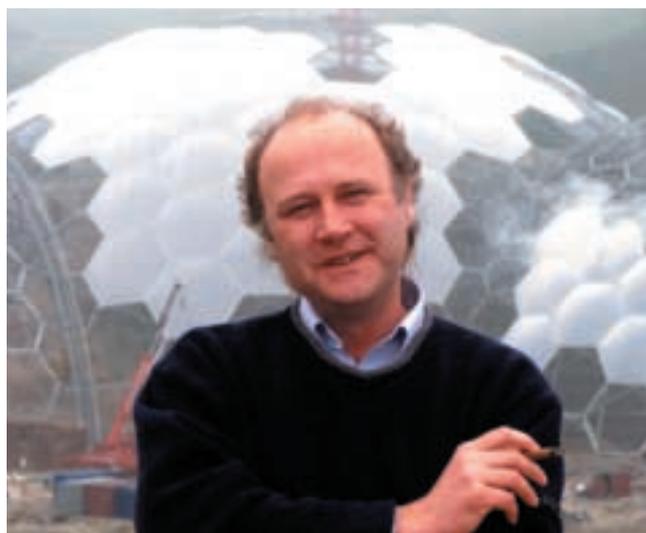

Tim Smit

The Pied Piper of Eden



Within its first year, the Eden Project has become the third most popular pay-to-enter attraction in the UK with 1.95 million visitors. Yet its leader is far from satisfied. He demands improvement in what engages the visitor. He is looking to fund further expansion of Eden's facilities. Above all, he foresees a journey beyond the success of a visitor attraction. Locum non-executive director [Tony Hodges](#) meets the remarkable [Tim Smit](#) and begins to understand why Eden is Britain's true millennium project.

The outsider

You do not have to be Albert Camus to recognise the importance of being an outsider. All the way to Thatcher, the outsider dominated politics in twentieth-century Europe. With Gates and Branson, commerce enters the twenty-first century still in thrall to this individual. In Tim Smit, we encounter another remarkable example of the breed.

Born in Scheveningen and brought up between Holland and England, Smit would have fitted the bill even before suffering the privations of English boarding schools. 'Nothing to do with the schools but I loathed the experience with a vengeance. I hated that stench of privilege without merit. I hated the way that a lot of people learn far too young to accommodate views they don't agree with in order to have an easy life.' Strong stuff, but five minutes into our interview and the connection is made.

Hearing of when he arrived in Cornwall as an itinerant rock and roller, albeit with solid back catalogue, you understand the suspicion with which locals viewed him and his plans to reveal the Lost Gardens of Heligan. Converting the Cornish will have given Tim Smit great satisfaction after those early debates and throughout the story of the Eden Project you can see the effects and lessons of the Heligan experience. There is no county, even Yorkshire, which lives outside the rest of the country quite like Cornwall and no county that makes the outsider feel more at home. Cornwall and Tim were made for each other.

Our subject does not demur. Rather he rejoices in the observation. 'I've always felt an outsider. I've rather revelled in being an outsider. I think outsiders are actually incredibly useful because they often give voice to what many people are thinking but don't feel happy to phrase. I think outsiders can be incredibly healing things.'

This is the first of many explanations that embrace 'touchy-feely' values way beyond conventional businessmen. 'I'm told by everybody who I work with that I have a female mind. I'm not sure what that is but I get the sense that what they mean by it is that unlike most men I enjoy seeing dozens of plates spinning at once and seeing the shapes being described, rather than being tunnel-visioned. You'll never hear me using the word "focus" I think there's a hell of a lot to liberate in people ... feelings are difficult things for them ... people don't see that the act of generosity can liberate massive commercial potential.'

This particular outsider can espouse as many unconventional notions as he likes and the outsiders of Cornwall will clasp him to their collective bosom until the cream clots. This, after all, is the man behind not one but two groundbreaking projects that the outsider county can proudly boast. In the year before Eden opened, the Lost Gardens of Heligan attracted over 300,000 visitors and won the *Which? Guide's* 5 star award for Best Outdoor Attractions. In the first six months after Eden opened, £111 million of benefits to the Cornish economy were attributed to this truly millennial project. Perhaps the Millennium Commission should have backed more outsiders.



Heligan Gardens © David Hastflow



'The road to the Lost Gardens of Heligan (above) is Tim Smit's road to Damascus and anyone who thinks they are just rather lovely horticultural displays probably believes the Eden Project (right) is a pair of fancy greenhouses'

The storyteller (part 1)

If a visit to Heligan or Eden had not informed you of Tim Smit's predilection for storytelling, if you had not chanced upon one of his many books or tapes, then ten minutes with the man would leave you under no illusion.

The first sign that young Tim showed was between school and university when, laid low by illness, he spent 'four or five months doing something very odd in the bowels of the National Library in The Hague, reading the records of the Dutch East India Company I made a complete catalogue of all the ships that the Company lost.' So here is a man who has always been interested in history. He understands why the French, with apt linguistic economy, have one word, the same word, for story and history: *l'histoire*.

Armed with this interest, he went up to Durham - partly to read archaeology and anthropology, partly to party and make music - and then kept scratching the itch in his first job, as Deputy County Archaeologist based at the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle: 'a perfect replica of a French chateau, perfectly ludicrous ... its prize exhibit is a most extraordinary silver Regency swan that moves ... a delight ... other than the Sir John Soane Museum, I have never been to one so idiosyncratic.'

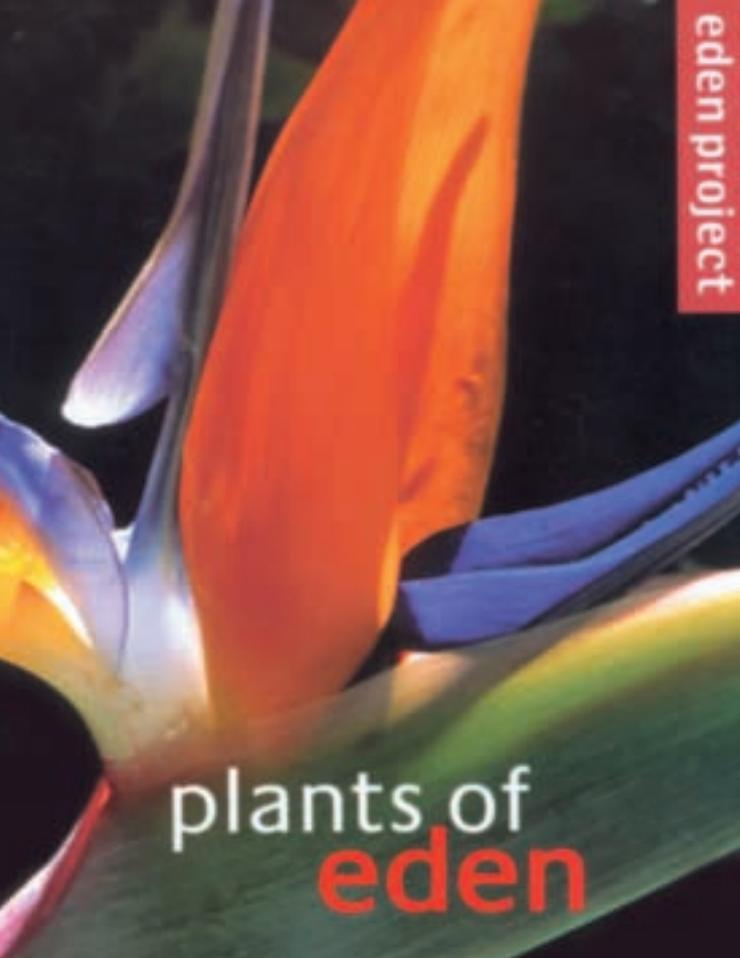
The young Smit's interest in stories and the idiosyncratic informed his approach to hobbies and eventually business. He preferred projects, rather than their completion. 'I used to collect stamps but drive people crazy because I didn't collect them like other people ... I

wasn't interested in collections that were complete ... for me the joy was the mystery, of wondering what that missing stamp was like.'

You sense that Tim is weaving another story here, that for many years he moved on, from place to place and project to project, with many a stamp unstuck, until he found his destination in Cornwall. Indeed he was more than an ordinary storyteller on the road, he was a troubadour. He graduated, with his guitarist partner, from college band to London-based club performer to, eventually, successful songwriter and producer. His greatest success? With Louise Tucker and the Midnight Blue Project. (Yes, always the project, only this one 'went to number one in 13 countries, sold seven million copies and had two big albums off the back of it.') It was during this success that he realised there would need to be more to life than making money in the ever-messy music business. He found himself on the Champs Elysées, 'records at number one and number two, Princess Suite at the Plaza Athenée and Tour d'Argent for dinner ... and I felt really miserable ... like that Dorothy Parker aphorism: "the trouble with getting there is that when you get there, there's no *there* there". It felt absolutely worthless.'

The story meanders awhile until the Smit family move to Cornwall, where he decides to build a studio and concentrate on film music. (He finished the studio only last year.) 'During the course of that I discovered Heligan. And literally within 45 minutes of walking into Heligan I knew I wanted to change my life.'

It is here, in the Lost Gardens of Heligan, that Tim Smit's story and his fascination with storytelling intertwine. As the guide book tells it,



Storytelling in the Warm Temperate Biome (above) and Tim Shaw's 'Dionysus feast' for the vine exhibit



he and a co-conspirator discover 'a tiny room, buried under fallen masonry in the corner of one of the walled gardens (and the) secret of their demise. A motto etched into the limestone walls in barely legible pencil still reads '*Don't come here to sleep or to slumber*' with the names of those who worked there signed under the date - August 1914. We were fired by a magnificent obsession to bring these once glorious gardens back to life in every sense and to tell, for the first time, not tales of lords and ladies but of those "ordinary" people who had made these gardens great, before departing for the Great War.'

The road to the Lost Gardens of Heligan is Tim Smit's road to Damascus and anyone who thinks they are just rather lovely horticultural displays probably believes the Eden Project is a pair of fancy greenhouses. The story is the point of it all and it continues to unfold, from Heligan's opening in 1992 to Eden's in 2001 and beyond.

Smit hands over the management of the Lost Gardens to a friend, 'a fantastic manager', so he can concentrate on Eden. Tim has learnt from this life-changing experience. 'I walked away from Heligan when I knew it couldn't improve with me there. Knowing that the skills necessary to turn Heligan into a really good *company* that could sustain the livelihoods of everybody working there and take it forward (were different) from those I had at the time.'

Is Heligan successful? 'Massively successful: 310,000 visitors last year, over 100 staff, turnover £3.5 million and £1 million profit. It is brilliantly run and we put all the money back as well.' On the early May morning of my visit, the queue had begun before its 10.00am opening, a dozen coaches had arrived by 11.00am and, as the proud store assistant declared: 'It's been busy since February. Busier than last year, because of Eden.' Full circle and virtuous circle too, because the Lost Gardens of Heligan is a beautifully crafted and managed destination. And the lessons learnt here, not least on the primacy of stories, inform the Eden Project and its success from the ground upwards.

The storyteller (part 2)

If the Lost Gardens of Heligan provides an object lesson in how destinations should enshrine the principle of continuous improvement - and it does - then just ask Tim Smit what he wants to improve in the Eden Project as it stands today. 'I'm interested in changing the way we tell the stories on site, across the lot ... as it stands, it's not complete ... at the moment it hints at something but it's not able to deliver it completely ... we need a lot more creative force in here, a lot more.'

Put it to Tim Smit that the Warm Temperate Biome is not as uplifting or engaging as the Humid Tropical Biome and - unlike most over-protective parents - he agrees. 'You're right. It doesn't achieve that. It has vastly more opportunities. I could talk to you for 20 minutes about why WTB is wrong and what we should do with it. It's a passive experience, not an involving experience. The whole experience there is about the brightness of the light and the reaction you have to it ... the most important thing is the contrast between light and shade ... and what we haven't got in there is we've no real dark to create the extreme of light which you can't get in Cornwall ... you actually need to make the irises retract to create that sense.'

Do the exhibits need more theatre? 'Yes, they do. On the one hand we wanted to harvest and grow things as should happen, *au naturel*, while at the same time creating exciting exhibits ... perhaps we took



our eye off the ball ... what we didn't do was have everything happening backstage, ready to come in, so that as soon as you'd harvested tobacco something else went in ... and as soon as you'd harvested oranges you showed, artistically, what you did with oranges ... (perhaps) turning the whole central space into a Moroccan market as soon as everything was harvested ... we need to be a lot more dynamic ... we need to integrate light and shade ... we need a lot bolder colour, to be more stark.'

And yet more. Tim is open to suggestion, confident in accepting criticism and new ideas alike. He, too, sees the need for a more powerful olfactory experience and is only two months away from its installation. Yet he still notes an opportunity to create sensory deprivation and so heighten nasal receptiveness. And always he returns to stories. 'I remember the excitement of having Philip, our horticulture director, finally explain to me, in a way I could understand, why leaves curl. As a scientist, you just do not understand how powerful a lot of what you observe is, if it could be turned into a language that is revelatory as opposed to cold, with its own jargon ... that could be true of almost any skill ... in the hands of a great storyteller, you can make the world come to life.'

He tells of the aboriginals who exclaimed to a visitor on walkabout: 'You white people have no sense of self ... we are the sum of our stories.' And he concludes, with feeling: 'I know that to be right.'

Visitors delight in the Eden experience, especially the Humid Tropical Biome, but the driving force will not stop. Change is essential. 'The tone of voice, first of all. I'm very interested in people arriving here and feeling they have a muse on their shoulder who's having a private conversation.' Via an audioguide? 'I wanted to use it in a revolutionary way ... to get some of the world's greatest writers to tell their life story in terms of the Eden experience ... a lot of people have said they will ... there are some really serious players who would come and write stories with us ... I'm just very interested in the telling of stories.'

The team leader

Whenever you place someone in the role of interviewee, you demand use of the first person singular. Tim Smit is no exception. In fact his confidence and his desire to explore self mean that every other sentence seems to begin with that single letter. Just like every other auteur, you might think. By definition.

Yet, somehow, this is not the tic of the typical self-made man. Nor does it jar as arrogance can and does.

At first you wonder whether Tim is merely well-practised at managing your reactions to his self-driven persona. A qualification here, a modulation there. 'Some people say' followed by 'it's very difficult to say this without sounding glib.' He is careful to correct exaggerated impressions of his music success or his domination of the Eden Project. Has he been burnt? Does he worry about becoming another media casualty, another tall poppy (or tall tulip, in his case)?

Perhaps, but I doubt it. There is simply too much energy and passion and charisma and life-force, flowing unstoppably from this remarkable man, for our discussions to be an exercise in self-preservation. He simply cares too much, not about self-image, but about people, Eden people, his collaborators.

Here lies another secret of Eden's success - he would claim the primary reason for it - the team mentality. Tim Smit is a vivid demonstration that self-esteem is the source of effective team leadership, not its foe. As he puts it: 'I'm driven by the fact that I really like people.'

He quotes a lesson learnt in his songwriting days when he and his partner, Charlie Skarbek, learnt how to resolve some frictions over ownership. 'With your friends, you write the songs. With his friends he wrote the songs. In a partnership, it's always the same. Really childish. And so we talked it through.'



The closer you get to Eden, the more you feel the Eden Effect

The Eden Effect

In its first year, 1.95 million people visited the Eden Project. Amongst pay-to-enter destinations, only Alton Towers and the London Eye attracted more visits.

90 per cent of its 600 employees live locally, within a 20-mile radius.

61 per cent of goods purchased for Eden in 2001 were Cornish sourced.

25 per cent of businesses in the south west attributed increased turnover in 2001 to the Eden Project.

In its first eight months after opening, visitors spend over £16 millions at Eden but over £127 millions of holidaymakers' expenditures were influenced by Eden: the net Eden effect was therefore estimated at £111 million.



Clearly, Tim understands his ego and has learnt to share. 'One of the problems we all face, especially men, is vanity.' Did he learn to overcome this during the early days at Heligan? 'Definitely. The perception here is that I share amongst my team ... the problem in the outside world is that media always focus on the person. It would be a mistake to judge me as some kind of chief executive guru figure who's got absolute power. I'm not like that. I'm incredibly collegiate. No idea is ever 100 per cent right and you don't have to own them. The more self-confident you are, the less you need to claim credit for things.'

Eden literature tells you more about how this leader shares the excitement with his team than most of the outside publicity. The credits are exhaustive. The references to individuals' contributions are constant. The narrative is full of Christian names and people stories. I particularly like the moment when Eden is ready to open and the team celebrate this with no outsiders except a cleric for the blessing. Religious or no, you can imagine the tears cascading as everyone realises the enormity of their collective achievement. The incident reminds you of what true bonding means. More than a group photograph in the company report, you can be sure.

Again, the successful approach is more touchy-feely than MBA. 'The people around you need to know you are doing something special. It's no good talking about "the team" and then behaving as if you haven't got one. It's no good claiming that you believe in the people around you if you don't recognise half of the people who work for you and they don't know you.'

Clearly Tim Smit starts by choosing well. 'People will say I'm weak for this but I will not work with people I don't like.' You push him to specify how often he makes the wrong choice. He nominates three in number, remarkably few. Then you consider how affected he was by his most publicised personnel problem, the typical start-up bust-up you see in so many destination ventures. 'The art of making a mark in life is choosing the right people to work with you in the first place.' He uses a music analogy. 'You can tell the quality of the stereo when you turn the volume up. I deliberately looked for people who would be contenders when we were as big as I hoped we would become.' Tim cites David Meneer (below, left), Eden's Marketing Director, and a talent I have seen blossom from his early days as an advertising executive for Sony. David has certainly exploited his own people skills at Eden but also grown in confidence; his statements have an incisiveness today that his charm does not cloak. To his boss, 'David is a star today. He had a hard time at the start while we were building but as soon as we were flying we had exactly the right guy.' Perhaps Tim underestimates the quality of his own judgement from the start. In Meneer he found a Cornishman who helped turn every Cornish stakeholder - hotelier, councillor, would-be employee, early visitor - into an Eden ambassador. (He was probably the only classically trained marketing man in Europe with a Cornish heritage and a mind to return home.)

Smit talks of the 'emotional or spiritual capital' at the heart of a successful organisation. 'That unwritten contract, between people who decide to collaborate, which recognises what we would love a day's work to represent.' We discuss the balance sheet concept of goodwill and he points out its limitation. 'The most powerful form of goodwill is the attachment of those who are collaborating with you in the venture you are engaged in ... and that's the one they (the accountants) don't recognise.'

He confesses to being 'an MBA's nightmare' because he hates distilling propositions down to one sentence and preaches against

'focus'. Doubtless he thrives on chaos and so creates havoc for his collaborators. (One day his admirable P.A. should write her story.) Yet you suspect they will follow him to the ends of the earth, where he may well be leading them. Why?

He looks to their responses before thinking about consumer research. 'People don't seem to realise that your collaborators are also consumers. Hold a mirror up and if you've done it right, you're the same person.'

He drives people hard but does not expect perfection. 'I've always been very open about my mistakes ... I've always stressed I have feet of clay and will mess it up, part of the fun is messing up ... the ridiculousness of thinking that you're perfect ... some of the best things only come out of daring to **** up ... one of the reasons people like working for us is our sense of humour ... (what) most people want, from life or work or people they admire, is a humanity - the sort that makes them smile.'

Disagree with Tim Smit at your peril, ye MBAs. Eden works. And he knows why. 'What am I good at? I can hold a tune on a piano but I probably couldn't make a living playing the piano as an entertainer. But the thing I'm the best at - and I've never met anyone even close to me - is I can make other people believe in themselves. Like Philip and Peter, our horticulture directors. They thought they were well past their sell-by date, but of their generation they were brilliant. And when suddenly it looked like Eden was coming off and they were having to fly to conferences for the first time in years, having come out of semi-retirement ... they suddenly had this new body language - "We'll do this, we'll do that" - and this new decisiveness. There is nothing more exciting than that. That is what turns me on.'

The visionary

The newspapers are running stories about Eden's further expansion. An academic foundation, student accommodation, a hotel on site, and, most capital intensive of all, a third biome, the so-called Desert Biome. The Eden team is looking to raise a further £40 million for the expansion, a major step when you consider the original funding was £86 million, half from the Millennium Commission.

The third biome was to have been built as part of the first phase of Eden construction but Smit and his collaborators downsized the initial plans when it became clear that they were at risk of spreading funds and efforts too thinly. Another good Eden lesson: aim high but never overreach. And never take short cuts.

'One thing I learnt and decided as a conscious thing to do at Heligan, and then here at Eden as well, was - having been a busker all my life - I wasn't going to take short cuts. I wanted to look someone in the eye, say it's ****ing good and there's no-one in the world could gainsay me. And no-one can look at Heligan and say we haven't done it properly ... that it isn't romantic, that it isn't beautifully restored, that the plant collections aren't fantastic or that there are weaknesses in the way we are getting the conservation going. I feel the same about Eden, that we must never take short cuts.'

Tim Smit may not expect perfection but nor does he stop pushing. Yet another Eden truth for budding destination makers: sustainability is a journey, and the road to a better place never ends. 'That's why Heligan and Eden are so important to me, because I don't ever have to complete them. Full stop is death to me.' He accepts that there are many destination projects that should not be



SMITBITES

Observations on the road towards destination success:

"The act of generosity can liberate massive commercial potential."

"I'm very interested in people arriving here and feeling they have a muse on their shoulder who's having a private conversation."

"In the hands of a great storyteller, you can make the world come to life."

"No idea is ever 100 per cent right and you don't have to own them."

"It's no good claiming that you believe in the people around you if you don't recognise half of the people who work for you and they don't know you."

"The art of making a mark in life is choosing the right people to work with you in the first place."

"The most powerful form of goodwill is the attachment of those who are collaborating with you in the venture."

"People don't seem to realise that your collaborators are also consumers."

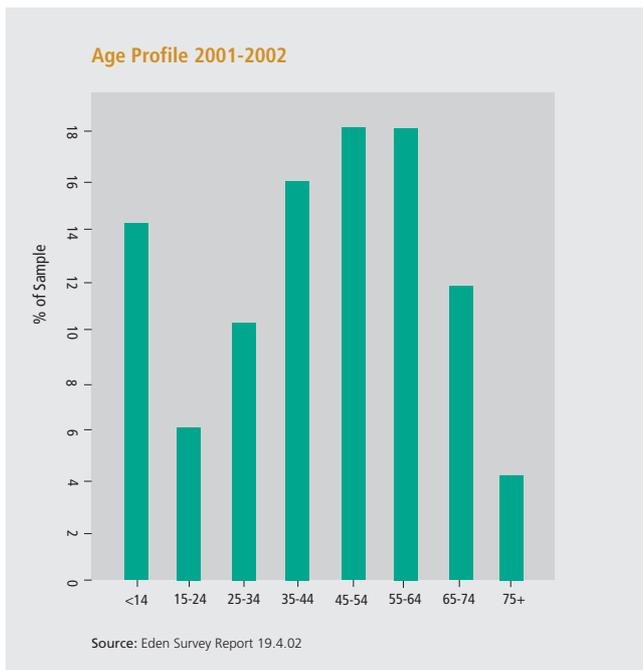
"Some of the best things only come out of daring to **** up."

"If you get the right people together the self is uplifted because you create something that is bigger than the sum of us."

"If luck is going your way, you must share it."

"Part of our job is to have everyone expect to see something which they then do not see."

"I do have an objective, which is to make people feel good."



pushed too far. 'Indeed there are but with Eden the limits are so high it doesn't worry me.'

This is the road that leads us to Smit's insistence that 'Eden isn't really a visitor attraction.' In common with many destination makers, he dislikes being constrained by the category definition of what he is involved in creating. Unlike most destination makers, he has both the justification and - ironically by virtue of his visitor attraction's success - the opportunity to throw off such shackles. 'It's a theme park but its theme is life ... Eden has a quality about it that speaks of optimism, of something bigger, not religious but spiritual ... and it speaks like that to an extraordinary amount of people.'

It is a statement such as this that persuades you that Tim Smit is truly a visionary. As does his priority for Eden's development. 'In order of precedence, (first) the Education Resource Centre ... a celebration of looking laterally. I want to build a place called the Meeting House and here to host the Tithing College.' (It transpires this is a project name, 'a shorthand for people giving to society!') 'I want to ask a thousand of the most catalytic people of your generation to come for three to five days a year, half of it to teach, half of it to deconstruct the world you live in and look for solutions that are lateral ... just about everyone I speak to says "I'd love to be part of that". I believe we have a generation of people around at the moment who do not want to be constrained by the baggage of the past. I am quite interested in how the idea of the self being lost through collaboration has been allowed into our culture. One of the things I feel passionate about here at Eden is to demonstrate that in fact if you get the right creative people together the self is uplifted because you create something that is bigger than the sum of us.'

Like the elder in a giant New Age kibbutz, Smit keeps returning to the principle of sharing. 'We're quite superstitious that if luck is going your way you must share it ... I feel incredibly strongly that your luck will desert you if you do things purely for yourself. You've got to have generosity or the dice will all go on ones.'

Tim is wary of spelling out Eden's plans for the third biome, particularly if this confirms popular expectations of a 'desert' approach. 'I really am profoundly bored about having another collection of plants. I might wish to tell you about the fecundity of

the desert and hardly tell you about the desert at all. (I might wish to talk) about oases of the mind. I want to build a giant oasis. I might have the whole thing as an oasis ... I think part of our job is to have everyone expect to see something which they then do not see. It's boring if you come to see a desert and cactuses and have us tell you why these things thrive in the desert. How very dull.'

So watch this space and assume nothing, or at least nothing predictable. Then, just when you wonder if Tim Smit risks going walkabout and forgetting what business he is in, he reminds you of what keeps him rooted. 'Becoming chief executive of Eden has been the biggest metamorphosis in my life. I suddenly realised I'd gone from being a dreamer to someone who had really serious responsibilities in every sense, not just legal but to all those people who were risking their careers to come and join you. So for the first time in my life I had to take on the completer-finisher role. I had to really force myself into that. And the last six years of my life I have never worked so hard. Because I've got this responsibility.'

Every time you challenge Tim Smit, his response earns your respect.

On what he wants you to take out of Eden: 'The most important thing is that you put champagne in your veins, that you feel optimistic, because when people feel optimistic they have a different mindset.'

On the forgotten art of sharing: 'It is said that the most important invention *made* by man is the basket because only with the basket could food be gathered in sufficient quantities to be shared.'

On his true mission at Eden, when he sounds, in all innocence, like a latter-day Walt Disney: 'I do have an objective, which is to make people feel good.'

Even when he baldly states his vision for Eden, in terms that would frighten any conventional operator, you sense that Tim Smit might well lead his people there - outsider, troubadour, storyteller, team leader, visionary, the complete Pied Piper of legend, he might just do it. 'Within five years, I want us to be perceived by the rest of the world as the UN of the environment. End of story.'

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