

# BIG ANSWERS TO BIG QUESTIONS

## overview of the project

Big Answers to Big Questions (BABQ) was an educational program run by the Botanic Gardens Trust at the Royal Botanic Gardens in the heart of Sydney. Over six months, the Trust stimulated public debate by posing questions around the three major contemporary issues of water, urban trees and genetically modified plants. The Community Education Unit devised and implemented a holistic program comprising evening lectures, weekend events, outdoor theatre, debates in the Domain, tours and other public programs. Over 1400 people participated in programs conducted by this grant. With community involvement as its primary focus, they provided a wide range of learning opportunities where the general public could explore their opinions, shape their ideas and make informed decisions about these environmental issues.



*The little green man*

## how the project was carried out

The program used a variety of approaches to engage the different target audiences. There was a range of informal weekend events to interest families, including theatre, tours, talks, workshops and displays, as well as a poster competition to cater for school aged children. A series of dinner debates appealed to adults, who could join in the dialogue in a relaxed atmosphere, facilitated by entertainers as well as



*Debate in the Domain*

experts. Debates were held in Sydney's Domain at lunchtimes. These were planned as a nostalgic reminder of the freedom of speech exercised at Speakers Corner, a forum for impassioned opinion throughout last century.

A variety of experts were chosen to give different viewpoints on the three topics, and the audience were encouraged to participate. Other activities included self-guided tours, a display garden, holiday programs, evening lectures, seminars and workshops. A BABQ website visited by over 399,600 people at the time of the final report provided information, and publicised and documented events. This site was constantly updated and BABQ activities expanded with links and extra information.

The program's mascot was a 'little green man', a stylised figure representing balancing of facts and opinions. It formed an easily recognisable and appealing link to all BABQ events.

## outcomes now and in the future

The BABQ program provided a showcase for the most current knowledge about the three topics, and stimulated critical thought and debate on many complex issues. The partnerships built with industry bodies, universities, research

facilities and many other organisations are a valuable outcome that will enhance future programs. With its extensive spread of activities, the program provided improved access for many community groups to good quality environmental education.

The Botanic Gardens Trust used this varied approach to trial a variety of interpretive strategies, it plans to incorporate the most successful into ongoing programming. More dinner debates and evening lectures are planned and the BABQ website will continue to evolve as a valuable on-line educational resource. It now contains material on the three BABQ issues, with practical information and advice as well as links.

## benefits, challenges & lessons learned

This program provided benefits for the whole community. The Botanic Gardens Trust gave sound, unbiased information to almost all age and background groups, with most activities free of charge and centrally located. Organisers found that not all activities were equally attended. The eight debates held in The Domain, for example, attracted far fewer participants than other activities. The advent of electronic media means The Domain no longer has strong significance as a discussion forum, especially with young people. Advertising and promoting the large number of events and getting sufficient media exposure in a city with many recreational choices was a major challenge.

The program was an ambitious one, combining a huge number of events and involving a high level of commitment from the organisers, and many lessons were learned that will help in the planning of future programs.