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Defining our wicked problem

Missouri Botanical Gardens is a tourist attraction of St. Louis with beautiful sights to see. It is also considered one of the best botanical gardens in the world. But MOBOT (Missouri Botanical Gardens) has a problematic past that has resurfaced. The founder of the gardens, Henry Shaw, had owned slaves and had slaves work on the property. Which is not exactly surprising with the time it was founded, unfortunately the gardens also being a historic sight did not highlight these facts very well. Therefore, causing our wicked problem for reparative justice.

Vague Problem Definition is a vital characteristic of a wicked problem. Missouri Botanical Gardens was founded with enslaved people, but unfortunately there is not much documentation on the slaves owned by Shaw, a majority of the information being their names. We do not know the extent of the work Shaw’s slaves did, nor do we know how they were treated. With this, there is also a good amount of stakeholders in this, being the garden, its workers, board, and president. There are also the families of the enslaved people of Shaw, who see this garden thrive while barely acknowledging the fact of their ancestors being enslaved by the founder of the gardens. So, with this, there will be some variation with the extent of what the problem may be.

Undefined solution to the wicked problem is another characteristic that I do believe plays a role in our problem. We cannot fix the fact that the Missouri Botanical Gardens’ founder had owned enslaved people, but we can make sure that this history is represented properly. From what I saw in the Gardens, there is not much of this story being told on sight. There is however information about Shaw’s slaves on the website, but I only found that because I was digging for that specific information. But even with implementing the true history of the gardens into the site, that does not change the fact of what happened. So how do we truly solve this problem, I do not know at the moment since the solution could be different to any person you ask. We just need to start with addressing the damage done.

Another characteristic of a wicked problem is No End Point. I personally do not see a heavy connection to our problem of reparative justice at Missouri Botanical Gardens. I do believe that there is a very complex solution to our problem if there is a good solution at all. I still do have a lot to research and learn about Missouri Botanical Gardens because I do not know everything about our problem. But at the moment I do not see many other problems arising with any implemented solutions at Missouri Botanical Gardens.

Irreversible is a characteristic of a wicked problem that I also am not sure how to connect to our problem. The fact that Missouri Botanical Gardens had slaves on site and Henry Shaw owning slaves is very much irreversible. There is no denying that, but whatever solution we may implement, I do not see there being many changes to the world that cannot be undone.

Unique is the fifth characteristic of a wicked problem, and I would say this applies to Missouri Botanical Gardens. There are so many aspects to this problem, so what we do may not work or work fully. Henry Shaw owned slaves and founded MOBOT, MOBOT continued to run after his death and praise him. On the grounds there is not much mention of him owning slaves anywhere, so obviously that is where we come in. Within all of this, it is in St. Louis, a very racially divided area so we also must take that into account. But there is so much to consider when attempting to craft a solution, which makes our problem very complex and unique.

The final characteristic of a wicked problem is being urgent. I do think our problem with MOBOT is slightly urgent. The fact that Missouri Botanical Gardens’ founder Henry Shaw was a slave owner is very unfortunate and disappointing. But if we do not find a solution to this soon, I do not see many other problems arising because of it. However, history is continued to be taught inaccurately to this day, so in a way, we need to find a solution quickly, so that the history is taught correctly and accurately. Also, if we continue to let injustice happen, only more injustices will happen. The damage has already been done and has been done for a while, so I think it is more of a matter of how we will find the solution, not when will we find a solution.

So, to me, the problem with Missouri Botanical Gardens is clear. They were founded with slavery present, and continued to idolize their founder, Henry Shaw. On top of that, Missouri Botanical Gardens does not have an accurate representation of their history on site. This is damaging to African American people and especially to the families of the Shaw’s slaves. To watch the gardens, thrive after being built with such immorality and to not even mention it, is just disappointing.