

NEW TRENDS IN INTERPRETATION OR
ENVIRONMENT, THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN

by

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This just may be a little late in the week to say something new about Interpretation. If my Park Service colleagues Tom Thomas and Paul McCreary haven't already caught all the big nuggets in their sluice boxes I had better review their performance records. I'm particularly fearful of how far Tom may have ranged under that cryptic, if inspirational, opening address "Time and Understanding."

And, If I could have been present for a number of the other interesting sessions listed on the program for Interpretation, I would have today a much better idea of what the new trends really are.

My situation reminds me of a general during the French Revolution who was sitting with a friend at a sidewalk cafe in Paris when a large crowd of men rushed past and headed down the avenue. As the general jumped to his feet and ran after them his friend called "Where are you going?" "These are my followers", the general shouted back, "and I must lead them."

Actually, the title given me for the occasion "Latest Trends in Interpretation" has just about been embalmed by tradition--it's almost camp. Like, "Play it again, Sam."

And, it could be that the reason conference leaders like Art Wilcox nearly always include a session on "What's New in Interpretation" is that, eternally optimistic, they are hoping that someday there actually will be something new to report.

We Interpreters have nearly always approached the subject from the angle of new methods of communication, exploring new techniques which will help us to be more effective in telling the park story.

But, if I could express my message of today in a single sentence, it would be this: Interpreters have a new story to tell; Interpretation is a new game.

Just a few weeks ago, the Director of the National Park Service, George Hartzog, was invited to speak to the brand new Civil Service Institute for Federal Executives in Charlottesville, Virginia. His talk, as prepared, bore the title, "Environment, the Only Game in Town." Either because the title was a little too breezy for him--or perhaps it was a stenographer's omission--his speech ended up without any title.

So I will borrow it--as my subtitle--and thereby suggest that, for Interpretation, environment is the only game in town worth playing.

I will anticipate your thought processes, for many of you may have in mind that New Yorker cartoon which showed the conference room of an automobile corporation with the tycoon telling the Members of the Board, "Gentlemen, this year the gimmick is safety."

But, I offer in reply the theme of Director Hartzog's speech, that the current interest in things environmental is not the latest gimmick designed to save the world, it is the newest chapter in man's continuing search for his own identity.

And, environment has become a leading topic of conversation around town--witness the fact that it has moved from way back in the inside section to the front page of newspapers across the country.

For perhaps the first time in history, the Congressional hearings on the confirmation of the new Secretary of the Interior very nearly overshadowed--at least in the press--the other Cabinet appointments of a new Administration. During these extensive hearings Senator Gaylord Nelson summed up the concern of the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, when he declared that the Secretary of the Interior is the trustee of the American environment.

That the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs has a far ranging concern for the environment was expressed last July when it recommended to the attention of the full Senate a special report which it has prepared entitled "A National Policy for the Environment". The report concluded:

If it is ethical for man to value his chances for survival, to hope for a decent life for his descendants, to respect the value that other men place upon their lives, and to want to obtain the best that life has to offer without prejudicing equal opportunities for others, then the cornerstone of environmental policy is ethical.

I believe you are going to see a great deal stirring in the Congress toward establishment of a national policy for the environment--toward an environmental ethic--in the years ahead. The acceptance, by both parties, that the ecological consequences of the Santa Barbara incident far outweighed the economic implications was a milestone in the conservation history of our country.

It is to all of us an enormously hopeful sign that the quest for a quality environment is becoming national policy. The percolating sense of urgency which accompanies this trend suggests that the development of an environmental ethic is an idea whose time, finally, has come.

Union Oil accepted the very considerable tab for cleaning up the beaches of Southern California. But to whom shall the National Park Service present the bill for the tragic loss in Canyon de Chelly National Monument of an 800 year-old cliff house--an irreplaceable National treasure, destroyed in one split second by a sonic boom?

I think these two unfortunate incidents, at Santa Barbara and in Canyon de Chelly, give a timely illustration to our discussion today.

In the first place, the obvious answer to both incidents is not to seek funds for clean-up or restoration--after the damage has been done. The only solution is to insure that an informed public will weigh in advance the consequences of modern technology and act accordingly.

And this, it seems to me, is a major purpose of environmental interpretation.

We would all agree completely with the man who described the effects of living under the sonic booms of the super jets as "tantamount to living inside a drum, beaten by an idiot at insane intervals."

At some point, and hopefully soon, the Nation will come to regard the sonic boom and all such actions as infringements upon the personal rights of the individual. For freedom in America has always been guaranteed with the stipulation that this freedom shall not interfere with the rights of others.

And this is why, I believe, the Senate report concluded that environmental policy is basically ethical.

In the second place, the above incidents are proof that National Parks are not sanctuaries, isolated and safe from the destructive hand of modern civilization.

It seems to me that the National Parks might well be considered in the same light as, in a previous era, the canary in the miner's cap, whose stilled voice signalled the presence of a lethal force in the mine shaft. In a sense, the parks and other similar preserves are our DEW line, our distant early warning system.

If we do allow Everglades National Park to perish, is there real hope for environments elsewhere? The choices we make in the parks and forests today are the same choices we will be making in the cities tomorrow. They concern noise, and pollution, and ugliness, and congestion, the kind of environmental quality we will insist upon, the degree to which we will accept infringements upon our personal rights.

How then does all of this relate to the new story the Interpreter will be telling?

His story is the environment--and not only the park environment. His audience is the people of this country--and not just park visitors.

His purpose is to work toward development of an environmental ethic which will insure that the earth shall be an attractive, meaningful home for man.

I wish I were better able to give you a more precise definition of environmental interpretation. It might well be described as an attitude, as much as a program. For example:

Among the Commandments for Service Interpreters, "Know Your Park" has traditionally led all the rest. And, it is an essential order of business for any naturalist, or historian, or archeologist. But perhaps a more significant objective is that the Interpreter develop the overview and sensitivity to relate man to the park resources, and the park environment to the total environment.

This suggests that the park naturalist will not be content to lay out a nature trail in which numbered stakes identify plants and flowers and trees, or to develop a slide lecture enumerating the wildlife of his park. Instead, he will establish as his overall theme, say, the ecology of the river which is the dominant physical feature of his park. Geology, wildlife, plant life, aquatic life, prehistoric man, and the history of man--all are threads woven together, and the whole always is greater than the sum of its parts.

The inclusion in this story of such benefits of civilization as water pollution enables the program to convey the consequences to the ecological pattern resulting from pollution--here in the park or in the environment to which the visitor will return home.

The interpretive program must relate to the problems and the conditions which the visitor lives with all year round.

Because the search for a better life must begin with man himself. It is he who has been the polluter and destroyer, it is he who will have to live with the mess he makes. Essentially, then, we are pursuing a man-centered philosophy of Interpretation.

I have said that the audience of the Interpreter is the people of this country. If so, a major objective of our program should be the young people.

By hoary, encrusted tradition, the wavelengths of our Interpretive programs can best be picked up by adult receivers. Young people, quite often, have great difficulty in receiving.

True, we produce an occasional "children's exhibit" for our museums, or an animal coloring book. But, if we are not in communication with young people--children, teenagers, college students, we had better give up any hopes we have for achieving a better environment.

None of us would argue this premise, all of us are well acquainted with the statistics--the majority of Americans are under 30. But do we revise our administrative manuals accordingly? The kids tell us that we Established-types have our hang ups, and I would have to agree.

One of our Park Service hang ups is the Yellowstone syndrome; we tend to measure all programs, activities, and new ideas in terms of how they would go in Yellowstone. But, the National Park Service is not only the big Western parks. The majority of our visitors are to parks east of the Mississippi; the majority of National Park Service employees work in parks east of the Mississippi.

I can report one hopeful sign. Spud Bill, our Deputy Director has a sign over his door which says, "But we've always done it this way

at Yellowstone," That's real progress on our hang up. How are you doing with yours?

While I do not have any precise conclusion on how you communicate environmental education to young people, the Park Service is trying to find some answers, and I would like briefly to describe three projects which the Service launched in the past year.

Last Spring we undertook an experimental program in this field called NEED--National Environmental Education Development. Its purpose is to bring 5th grade classes into National Parks for a week at a time, and to develop curriculum materials for teacher use. Its philosophy is that the subject of the environment is not something separate, which can be taught, like algebra, and mastered, and on to the next subject, but an attitude which pervades the entire educational process. The response of the 5th graders, for example who came from inner New York City to Fire Island National Seashore last April was so remarkably good, that we are expanding the program this year.

Each child, each day in the park, was asked to spend one quiet hour, all alone, in the place which he thought most beautiful, observing all the things which made that spot beautiful. The results were intensely moving.

As you may know, the Nation's Capital is almost a great city park, with the National Park Service administering the monuments and memorials and green spaces--including the White House. Somehow we never found the handle of how to make the parks more alive and useable until last summer when we put together a program called Summer in the Parks.

While it didn't solve Washington's great social problems, some 300,000 people had been infected with the idea that parks are for fun after the kids had ridden rafts and a Chinese junk, caught fish and climbed tree houses, explored old forts and learned to use a potter's wheel--seeing a world outside their own neighborhoods. And office workers listened to combos and looked at exhibits during lunch hours. Every night rock and roll bands, African fashion shows, and stars of the entertainment world put on shows under the lights.

While all of our parks are, to a degree, study areas, we have begun a program to identify Environmental Study Areas within the parks. These are areas whose natural, cultural, or historic characteristics can be effectively combined with an organized study program to provide an understanding of the environment and man's relationship to it. This program is largely for school groups to provide an additional dimension to their educational experience.

At the Home of FDR in Hyde Park, for example, an appreciation of President Roosevelt's interest and love of natural history both stimulates a similar study by the child, and helps him to better understand the character of an American President.

In reporting to you something of the current philosophy and programs of National Park Service Interpretation, I must admit the ideas are not entirely new, or very radical. Similar kinds of activi-

ties have been carried out in the parks and no doubt by many of you. As a matter of record, several years ago the noted author and naturalist, Irston Barnes, writing in the Washington Post, called upon the National Park Service to go beyond the traditional bounds of its interpretive programs, and use its trained staff to help provide Americans with a basic understanding of ecological matters:

The incidental education of park visitors in the fundamentals of conservation and resources is the most important public function that the Interpretive services of the National Park Service could perform....An educational program woven into the interpretive services of the National Parks could make a larger contribution to national welfare than the enjoyment and safeguarding of the National Parks, which is the historical reason for the interpretive services.

All in all, it gives the Service a goal for park interpretation somewhat short of saving the world. I trust Congress will be of considerable help in keeping our program objectives manageable.

To intelligently pursue the philosophy of environmental interpretation, we feel the need to provide considerable training for all people involved in the program. We began with special courses for interpreters at the Mather Training Center, Harpers Ferry.

Highly pleased with the results of the training, the Director decided that we were starting at the wrong end of the organization. Last week we began a course for Regional Directors and the Superintendents of our largest parks, including Yellowstone.

In his remarks to the members of the Seminar, the Director suggested that the zeal of an evangelist would not be out of place for all those who seek to further the course of our environment. And I think the simile is an apt one for us here today.

There are many great church buildings in the world today--all are the work of great architects. But a truly great church may well be something else. It is created by people, for people.

I remember being stationed in Boston during World War II, near Copley Square, home of Trinity Church. This was the church of a minister who possessed such eloquence that when he preached, it was said, God himself surely must be standing beside him. In front of the church is a statue of Phillips Brooks, and beside him, the figure of God.

There are many great parks in the National Park System, and despite occasional evidence you may have observed which would suggest a pride of authorship on the part of employees of the National Park Service--**they were created** by other hands. And, a great interpretive program is something else. It is created by people, for people.

I should like to add that I don't see how any public organization whose work influences the health of our society, can develop its programs without an awareness of the social problems and needs of America today.

What we are everywhere seeking is survival of the human spirit as well, a sense of well being, of living in harmony with our world. At a recent White House Conference Eric Severeid counseled that we must look to the land if we would save our souls.

And it just could be that we need soul conservation more than soil conservation.

But the gut-lonely search for a way to make life more bearable--eventually truly livable--could hardly be a more important subject for the attention of us all.