

The Role and Responsibility of Interpretation in the 1980s

Park Interpretation - The Essential Elements

Our national parks are among this nation's brightest treasures. The richness of their natural, cultural and recreational resources are the tangible evidence of our heritage. As resources, they represent the physical, intellectual, and even spiritual bases from which this nation's strength, continuity, and pride of purpose have been fashioned. Visitors to national parks have the right to be stirred by their visit to these sites of our heritage. If they are not, they have been cheated and both our nation and the parks are the poorer for their loss. Instilling appreciation for our heritage is one of the tasks of park interpreters. There are others, and they are important, but instilling an understanding and appreciation for the significance of our parks-- and through this understanding support for preserving them--is the critical challenge. If we fail this crucial task, even outstanding success at all the other elements of an interpreter's job will be a hollow accomplishment.

Our national parks can be considered unique "human designed ecosystems," special creations of our society. These areas represent a societal organization and technology which has been developed for the preservation and enjoyment of the resources contained within them. These special "ecosystems" are dynamic and irreplaceable. The policies and regulations linking the public to the preservation and appropriate use of these resources can and do change in response to changes in our society and, as a result, of new knowledge and understanding. These park "ecosystems" are considerably different from the familiar environments of most of our visitors. Whether they are natural, cultural, or recreational, they are often more fragile, less forgiving of misuse, and more likely to be dangerous due to their unknown or unfamiliar physical, biologic, and climatic conditions. The interaction of our diverse visitor groups and such complex settings as national parks requires substantial adaptation and behavior changes, if both visitors and park resources are to be protected. The exchange of information critical to the successful adaptation of visitors to a park "ecosystem," is another of the tasks of park interpreters.

The National Park Service is a professional organization with a cadre of diversified specialists, and an infrastructure responsible for the planning and operation of the national parks. We have invited the public to participate in decisions that can affect their national park resources.

To invite them into the decision-making process without affording them easy access to the information they need, makes little sense. To help the public understand the reasons behind management policies and decisions, especially when those policies and decisions result in managing visitor use for the mutual benefit of both the resources and the public, is another part of the park interpreter's job. The public is more likely to accept and support a sound even through controversial policy or plan when they understand its rationale, the research on which it was based, and the possible consequences of not adopting it. This understanding should be developed by interpreting the dynamics of the park's resources, not by functioning as an advocate or salesperson of our policies.

These three major elements of a park interpreter's job, the essential core of our programs, are summarized in both the Service's management policies and interpretive guidelines. They should be the basis on which we plan and operate our park interpretive programs.

1. To foster public understanding and appreciation of national parks and their significant cultural, natural, and recreational values and, through this understanding, support for preserving them.
2. To encourage and facilitate thoughtful, safe, and minimum impact use of the park's resources.
3. To promote public understanding and support of the policies and programs that the preservation of our park's resources imposes on their use and management.

Park Interpreters - Communicators

Interpretation has grown and evolved in response to our nation's ever changing social conditions, educational level, and political concerns since its formal inception in the early 1900s. Despite the changes in emphasis, philosophy, techniques, and media, our basic mission has not changed. Interpretation is a tool, one of many, used in accomplishing the basic mandate of the National Park Service.

"... to conserve the scenery and the natural and the historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the some in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

A programmatic tool, interpretation is a facet of the larger endeavor--the management of national parks. Not an activity that can be justified as an end in and of itself, it must be an integrated part of overall management program.

The most difficult facet of any management scheme is the "management" of the most demanding and indispensable management tasks is that of communicating with the public. Ultimately, the success of any park management program depends on informed public support. Such support is developed through courteous helpful visitor services, through informational and educational programs and by providing immediate tangible benefits to the public.

Interpretive programs, by providing information to and affecting the attitudes and behavior of visitors before, during, and after their visits to parks, are a significant means by which management communicates with the public. Interpretation operates at the interface of the public and the National Park Service. In most instances, it provides the primary contact the visitors have with park management. It also provides the opportunity for a single National Park Service employee to communicate with large numbers of visitors at one time. By informing visitors about the national park's significance and values, purposes and regulations as well as their personal relationships with and effect on the resources, interpretation influences their enjoyment and behavior. Properly utilized, interpretation can be our most cost-effective way to minimize visitor related protection, maintenance, and resource management problems as we educate the public in the principles of National Park System stewardship and appropriate use.

Interpretation - Room for Improvement

There is a great deal of activity in interpretation in parks. Hundred of thousands--millions--of citizens and international visitors are enjoying the parks and their interpretive programs. In general, we can be proud of our efforts in this field. Still, there are some elements of our programs in which we can improve our efforts and effectiveness. The main elements of these "problem" areas are:

- The mistaken belief that the chief value of interpretation is in providing entertainment and enjoyment for park visitors. Entertainment and enjoyment are and should remain the hallmark of our programs. (If we lose this aspect, we can lose our audience as well as our effectiveness). But they are not the chief values. Programs that are entertaining but not truly relevant to the area's primary themes and resources, belong in amusement parks, not national parks. Most of our interpretive activities and programs are highly relevant to our areas and help achieve management objectives. But others that commit sizeable chunks of our personnel time and dollars to interpreting minutia and trivia poorly connected to our themes, or to very low priority subjects of no direct value to the area's resources and management objectives, are a luxury we can no longer afford. Relevancy and appropriateness should be rigorously applied to the program, and this core expanded, as resources allow, rather than expanding on tangents as resources increase.

-Occasionally, we devote considerable time, resource, and effort to peripheral programs that, while they may be important in themselves, are not directly relevant to the parks or the mission of the agency. Examples would be teaching nationwide and worldwide based environmental education concepts not based on the park's resources or developing programs designed to cover an entire subject--only a small portion of which is relevant to the park. Or using interpretive programs as a vehicle for expounding our personal beliefs or those of special interest groups. These can be exciting programs, but our job is to interpret the resources and themes of our parks, not to function as subject matter educators or as spokespeople for special causes.

-The objectives of park interpretive programs are often poorly coordinated with the rest of the park's objectives, or are restricted to only a portion of the overall park management needs. Few objectives are sufficiently specific to identify the practical dimensions of a successful public communications efforts. The park ranger, resource specialist, maintenance personnel, scientist, manager, and interpreter must interact together, if we are to fulfill our mandate.

Most of these problems have their origins in the historic evolution of the Park System and of interpretation, in the multiplicity of purposes for parks, in the variety of uses and users, and in the range of special events and celebrations the Service has been involved in. All have contributed to the confusion as to the proper role and function of interpretation. Fuzzy understanding means fuzzy objectives and fuzzier results.

Interpretive Program - Objectives

Interpretation can and should be used as a management tool for achieving a variety of objectives.

1. INFORMATION AND ORIENTATION OBJECTIVE.

Provide all park users with the information they need to have a safe and enjoyable park experience.

This involves making our visitors aware before, at the onset of, and during their visit of (1) the use opportunities, facilities, services and resources available in the park and (2) the time, equipment, skills, physical capabilities, hazards and safety precautions, regulations and considerations of resource protection necessary to knowledgeably and safely enjoy their park visit.

2. UNDERSTANDING AND APPRECIATION OBJECTIVE.

Provide receiver groups with a variety of services, activities, and opportunities to aid them in gaining a deeper appreciation and understanding of the park's resources, and by extension, their heritage.

Good interpretation can significantly enhance the visitor's enjoyment and understanding of the park's resources. Most visitors come to parks to see and experience new things; our programs enhance their ability to observe and perceive. We must recognize the need to provide different levels and kinds of experiences which enable visitors to participate at their level of ability and also assure them of opportunities to do so without imposing "messages" or unnecessary restrictions on them at the same time; we must be sure that our efforts are relevant to the mission of the agency and the management objectives of the area.

3. PROTECTION OBJECTIVE.

Provide visitors with a variety of opportunities to safely interact with and enjoy the potentially dangerous, the fragile, and the irreplaceable resources of the area, while protecting those resources from over-use, unintentional damage, vandalism and theft.

Interpretive services can significantly aid in the protection of the park's resources and visitors by increasing the visitor's awareness of the resource value of the internal threats endangering those resources, and of the damage they can cause those resources through careless acts or inappropriate use. This objective can be further enhanced by insuring that visitors are aware of the rules, regulations and hazards of the area by directly controlling the interaction between the visitors and the resources through guided tours and conducted activities, and by scheduling programs, activities, and roving interpreters specifically to manage the use of heavily impacted or fragile resources, or to provide protection from the actions of other people in the park.

4. PARTICIPATION AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVE.

Aid and motivate visitors to develop the skills necessary to enjoy the parks. Certain basic skills are required to use park resources fully and compatibly. Many thousands of annual visitors spend their entire time in the park's developed areas because they lack skills to venture comfortably outside these human-built environments. Others, through lack of knowledge and/or skills, become search and rescue cases or unintentionally cause resource damage.

Interpretive activities that involve visitors in learning-by-doing provide increased opportunities for primary resource experiences. Direct participation in traditional cultural activities and in outdoor recreational activities expand their knowledge and/or skills and, thus, can increase their understanding, appreciation and enjoyment.

5. DIALOGUE OBJECTIVE.

Provide a means for the public and park management to communicate their thoughts and desires to each other. This communication channel helps insure that park management is kept aware of and appropriately responsive to the needs of all the publics we serve. Conversely, it can improve the public's understanding and support for plans and policies that the preservation of the park's resources imposes on their use and management.

By providing the public with accurate information (not filtered propaganda) on the logic of our policies and programs, and by providing a communications channel for the public to reach park management with their concerns, interpretation develops the public support critical to the successful management of our parks.

6. EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVE.

Provide interested users and educational groups with knowledge necessary to develop a thorough understanding of the area's significance and improve their appreciation of the park's natural and cultural resources.

Interpretation, by providing special seminars and other in-depth educational opportunities based on the park's themes and resources, helps people understand and appreciate their dependence on and interrelationship with their environment and history. Through these special programs, interpretation is a valuable part of this nation's total educational effort.

Interpretation - A New Look At An Old Game

The changes facing us are many--some serious, some frivolous, few clearly understood-- and all data indicates even more changes ahead. The most important of these, in terms of their impact on interpretation are:

1. The trend toward "new federalism" with its decentralization of governmental authority, and expectation that government agencies develop a serious dialogue with the public and respond to their needs and desires.

2. The economic constraints facing the National Park Service and the resulting demand for increased fiscal responsibility, efficiency, and accountability in everything we do.

3. Changes in the composition, attitudes, and expectations of our publics. More international visitors are using our parks. Our nation's population is aging steadily. The post World War II "baby boom" has matured. Our user population is not only larger and older, but is also coming from a wider spectrum of our nation's population. It is healthier, better educated, more interested in outdoor recreational activities and intellectual growth, retiring earlier, living longer, and has more available income than its predecessors. Coupled with these demographic changes, a revolution in high technology is changing the nature of leisure time activity.

Our world is getting increasingly complicated, our jobs as interpreters equally so. With public involvement in park planning and resource management decisions increasing, and with changes in visitor use desires and patterns, interpretation has a vital role in managing parks. A knowledgeable public makes more informed and ecologically sound decisions; they respect our cultural heritage more. By creating an identification with our resources, an emotional involvement with and commitment to preserving them, as well as an understanding of the "whys" of resource-related actions and regulations, interpretation can be the most cost-effective.

Clearly defined and measurable objectives relevant to the park's management and visitor's needs must be developed. Their accomplishment must be supported by accurate data clearly demonstrating that interpretation is cost-effective, able to reduce resource damage, maintenance requirements, and law enforcement actions, in addition to improving park safety and enhancing visitor enjoyment. Interpreters and managers working together must initiate the necessary critical self-examination of their existing programs. We can no longer afford to continue "business as usual." New methods, new approaches, new technology must be tried and fine tuned to meet the changing conditions we face.

In the past, interpreters have been primarily involved in planning and operating personal services programs for park visitors. The fact that a resource existed in the park or an event or activity could be related to the area's theme, was justification enough to interpret it. Our programs were designed primarily for family groups, the traditional users of interpretive services. With the number and diversity of our visitors constantly increasing along with numerous internal and external pressures on our resources, we must now reach a much wider spectrum of users and of the general public; we must rethink our programs. We do not have the resources to develop special programs for each identifiable group of visitors. And even if the resources existed, this approach would only serve to keep people divided in special needs groups. We should, instead, be developing an overall program core that will allow all our visitors the opportunity to have a safe, enjoyable and meaningful park experience.

Because a resource exist in a park does not make it a mandatory subject for interpretation. Because a story or activity can be related to the park theme does not mean it must, or even should, be included. Because family groups have traditionally attended our programs, does not mean we have to target our efforts to meet only their desires. We must identify the resources and information that are primary, to the park's purpose and essential to park management's current needs. We must identify the full spectrum of our potential audiences and develop our programs to serve their needs. In addition to a full spectrum core program, we must develop target specific programs specially designed to reach identified populations at risk, and those causing unintentional resource damage. Interpretation's goal must be more satisfactory visitor experiences, better resource protection, improved visitor safety, and increased public understanding of the park system and our stewardship ethic.

Managing and facilitating visitors use will become a critical element of interpretation during the 80s. The changing patterns of our visitation must be kept in mind. Family groups still dominate, but other subdivisions are growing in importance--foreign visitors and elderly people, handicapped, and members of minority cultures. These new subdivision add another factor, they are often members of organized tour groups and come by the busload with very tightly organized schedules and itineraries. Many do not speak English. Our time and location type of tightly scheduled activities just don't allow for their participation.

We don't want to overlook our traditional family and small group visitors when planning for these "new" audiences. We must serve all our visitors. A technique long used by the organized recreation industry should be considered. Providing different levels of services: For

- beginning park visitors
- intermediate park visitors
- advanced park visitors
- expert park visitors

This is only one of many possible concepts. Many others can be used. The important point is to improve our ability to better serve all our visitors.

We should be moving toward planning and designing activities and resource based experiences that our visitors can participate in and enjoy with or without the direct assistance of a park interpreter. We should be available for those who need us, but not an interference to those who don't.

Yesterday's approach was not "wrong" for yesterday and tomorrow's may not be "right" for the longer range future. The programs for each period must be keyed to the needs and realities of that particular time.

Interpretation exists, to "showcase" park resources--to make them appropriately available and appreciated by our visitors. If our resources are suffering unintentional visitors caused damage, we are failing.

Interpretation exists, to "communicate" with our publics--to develop understanding and support for the policies and programs of the Service. If public support does not exist, we are failing.

Finally, and most importantly, interpretation exist to "enrich" visitor's park experiences--if enrichment does not occur, if our visitors are not touched, we have failed.