

Visitor Impressions

You, in your uniform, are the National Park Service to the visitor. Visitors, even as you and I, make snap judgments about people. So your first impression on them is very important. They won't like it if you:

1. Talk sloppily or look sloppy. Uniform should be clean and pressed.
2. Talk "down" to them. (They are intelligent, too!)
3. Avoid their eyes, or stare at an imaginary spot on the wall, while talking to them.
4. Talk with too many technical or long words.
5. Are bored by them. (It will show, if you are!)
6. Have glue on the seat of your pants (or skirt).
7. Talk with your mouth full of mush or chewing gum, or with a pipe stem or cigarette hanging out of your face.
8. Lecture to or at them. They'd rather just be "talked to," or sometimes "chatted with."
9. Congregate in uniform, thus looking idle and redundant. (If you do very often, maybe you are!)
10. Use many, or corny, jokes. (Jokes, like dynamite, are dangerous with strangers. Use them the way porcupines make love: "very, very carefully."

- Earl Jackson, 12/6/63

1.

Some Definitions in re Interpretation

We serve interpretation as we promote understanding. Aldo Leopold says "to promote perception is the only truly creative part of recreational engineering. Recreational development is a job not of building roads into lovely country, but of building receptivity into the still unlovely mind."

Harold E. Wallin, of the Cleveland Metropolitan Park District, defines interpretation thusly: "translating, in terms understandable to the receiver, the meaning and purposes of the park and what it offers." You can include Forest in that definition as well as the word Park.

Webster's Unabridged says interpretation covers translation from one language into another; explanation of what is not immediately plain or explicit; and activity directed toward enlightenment of the public concerning the significance of the work of a public service or agency.

Dan Beard, while serving as an Assistant Director of the N.P.S. said, "I predict that in 25 years the interpretive programs of the N.P.S. will constitute the major activity of this agency."

2.

Do bear in mind that interpretation is an extremely potent factor in protection of our forests and parks. Visitors when correctly informed about significance and importance of natural values require much less manpower for police protection of same.

3.

Do realize that good interpretation is just as important in training employees as in working with the public. Every bit of proper indoctrination you instill in a trainee may be multiplied hundreds or thousands of times in service to users of the forest lands. So it's pretty important to give your best thought to making that indoctrination as sound as a dollar.

Do realize importance of interpretive service to the week-end crowds which flood our parks and forests. Because such holiday visitors include more under-privileged and less-informed persons than the week-day groups, and because there are so many of them, misconduct is a serious problem. The week-end people are harried and hurried, often scatter-brained, inattentive, noisy, hard to make real contact with and hard to hold.

Disagreeable as it sometimes is to work with week-enders, it is important that we remember this: they have greater need for spiritual peace and emotional re-creation in wilderness areas than other people. They need more sympathetic understanding and good interpretation of wilderness values, to broaden and enrich their lives, than the folks who can always afford to travel so as to "avoid the crowd."

Don't forget that personal contact is much more to be desired than any other kind, and that we should be constantly on the alert for chances to improve and increase this type of interpretation.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that such contacts are strengthened and supported by preliminary or follow-up use of pictorial displays in visitor centers, wayside and easel exhibits, informational signs, trailside labels and self-guiding leaflets. In this connection, however, we must realize the constant temptation in use of these aids or "gimmicks." The instant we get partial or wholly self-guiding devices and push-button tape recordings to work, we catch ourselves backing away from personal contacts and letting the devices substitute for us. Sometimes this is necessary, but we must never kid ourselves into thinking that any mechanical or pictorial device is as potent in human relations as a living, breathing, talking person.

6.

Do recognize the legitimate place of women employees in interpretive work. They are more patient in repetitive tasks at desks or information counters, and generally do thoroughly satisfactory work in being courteous and helpful to visitors. More and more women are coming to work in the National Park Service areas, both indoors and outdoors wherever great physical strength is not necessary, and they perform excellently as greeters, teachers, interpreters, guides, etc.

7.

Don't ever assume that visitors are stupid. Sometimes they act that way, and occasionally really are. But usually they are far more intelligent than many rooky employees think, and react negatively if being "talked down" to.

The seeming lack of visitor intelligence is usually due to the fact their minds are in "vacation-rest" position, taking it easy while enjoying your area and having the "pause that refreshes." Most of them aren't particularly seeking new knowledge, but they are seeking new experiences and take-home memories. In this condition they are receptive to learning, as long as it is palatably prepared - easy to understand and interesting.

Don't forget that campfire talks are especially potent methods for teaching natural history, talking conservation, or putting over nearly any form of good propaganda which is linked with our objectives of conservation and use. Speakers to campfire groups should be chosen on basis of ability, regardless of job description. There is a tendency to undertake such talks without adequate preparation, and it should be shunned. If your talk is only good enough to succeed because of moonlight, glowing campfire and pine smoke and camaraderie, probably it isn't much of a talk on its own merits! Avoid tendency to ramble in such talks. The subject of campfire talks is so important the N.P.S. has written an entire training booklet on this one subject.

Do remember that interpretation is not restricted to fixed locations or times, but that it is being done every time your area is mentioned over the radio, television, or in the press, and that it behooves administrators and supervisory interpreters to see that such media are provided with best quality material so as to present your area in a true and favorable light. Also remember that interpretation is under way wherever you find people in park or forest, in and out of buildings and visitor centers, along roads, trails, in camp and picnic grounds, etc.

Do remember, when talking to visitors:

To give them the name of the Service and Department you work for.

Avoid long words and elaborate sentences when possible. Your average visitor is better acquainted with Saturday Evening Post and Readers Digest than with Harpers or the Saturday Review of Literature.

Use approved common names instead of technical names, when possible.

Talk to visitors, not lecture at them. The word lecture frightens the visitor and stiffens the spine of the speaker. Informality is preferred, although it can be overdone, too.

Don't, when talking to visitors:

Talk with a mouthful of mush. Open your lips and enunciate clearly.

Greet visitors while chewing gum or with a pipestem or cigarette hanging out of your face.

Have glue on the seat of your pants, or skirt. On visitor contact duty be willing to get off your seat and serve somebody.

During quiet or slack periods, congregate in groups, especially when in uniform. It looks bad to visitors, for in such setting you may look idle and redundant, and if you do it often, maybe you are!

Forget that jokes and funny stories, when talking to strangers, must be handled the way porcupines make love - very, very carefully! It is so easy to misconstrue a witticism from the talker, especially if there is any possibility it may be tinted in any degree with race, religion, politics, or physical oddity.

Do remember, importance of your personal appearance. You are an image, especially when in uniform. Often you are the only representative of your service a visitor will see, and to him you typify the service.

Your bearing should be erect, not slouchy.

Your uniform should be clean and pressed and in order, from hat to heels.

Even fatigue duty clothes don't have to be ratty, and they look better after laundering.

Do make special efforts to increase on-site personal service interpretation at points away from headquarters or visitor center. People who drive many miles out of town to see the wilderness don't get much wilderness value if they merely stay around a crowded visitor center or headquarters parking area vicinity. When rangers can make frequent patrols during busy periods and have time enough to visit with the people when they stop here and there to see how things are going, they can offer a lot of worthwhile stimulus to visitors to stop in more places and visit more places on foot away from the parked car.

Don't overlook the high potential for good or bad interpretation to visitors by employees of hotels, lodges, and operators of horse-back sightseeing and hunting trips. If we work as carefully and tactfully with these people as we can, we can persuade concessioner employees to give much more accurate information to their paying guests, which enables us to reap rich harvests in improved visitor behavior in the back country. For this reason, it is wise to audit concessioner talks whenever good opportunity arises, to ascertain accuracy and adequacy of them.

Do remember that some visitors, regardless of the quality of interpretation offered in person or by exhibits, are far better satisfied, after their original meeting and greeting by a uniformed employee upon entering the park or forest, to pick up a self-guiding trail leaflet and wander alone on some stake marked trail. Once this group has been exposed to whatever instructions or admonitions appear in order, we must respect their desire for relative solitude, and with top quality leaflet interpretation let them guide themselves.

Do remember that a self-guiding nature trail is more likely to be remembered if it stresses a theme or concept along with the identity of a plant, instead of serving simply as a trailside catalog of plant names and uses. Isn't it more interesting to learn that a certain manzanita growing in an open space in the forest is a stage in the long process of re-growth of that area from burned-over area to climax conifer forest? Or that a winding canyon-bottom trail merges two climatic zones as it weaves from sunny side to shady side and back again? In either case, of course, we want people to know the names of the plants and other features of interest, as well as how they tie into a picture.

Do remember that for self-guiding trails, and at overlook points, it is an extremely good idea to install seats or benches so that people may relax and get their breath. As our population grows older, there will be more and more need for these rest points. However, regardless of age, rest spots also serve to relax visitors and enable them to see, hear, and feel more of wilderness nature.

Do benefit from the following pointers on guided nature walks:

The guide should arrive at the trip starting point at least 10 minutes early, so as to "break the ice" with early arrivals and get the questioning frame of mind off to a good start; the guide should watch very carefully to see that he doesn't set too fast or too slow a pace; he should develop enough conversational fodder that when his group is stopped he can not only identify objects and locations for them but can explain a little about the ecological niche in which nature's visible productions properly fit.

Don't forget that, despite frequent bugs in them, taped-voice message repeaters at strategic points, for push-button use, are quite valuable when you can't have a human at such a position, to convey information and warnings of need for caution or observance of certain rules.

Don't fail to provide regular inspection and maintenance on all interpretive devices. Signs warp and crack, paint peels, wayside and easel exhibits spring leaks, become stained with rain streaks or moisture condensation under glass, trailside stakes and labels get torn up, pulled up, broken off, stolen, or require changed location because of change in vegetation or excess wear on local terrain; self-guiding leaflets are rapidly stolen from dispersion and collection boxes, coin boxes are broken open or stolen; audio devices, such as push-button trailside message repeaters, frequently go haywire or must be taken out for repairs. It often looks worse to a visitor to see poorly maintained equipment than to see none at all.

Don't forget one last but important item on interpretation: We have given great emphasis in these do's and don'ts to being understandable in talks, labels, taped voices, pictorial exhibits, etc. The finest interpretation does more than that, however; it forces the audience to stretch just a little, if they are really going to savor the entire essence of the thought! Not only must the visitor stretch a bit, standing on his mental tiptoes part of the time, he needs to be teased or intrigued into wanting to learn a little more. When you've got the vacation-minded visitor in that frame of mind, where he not only is interested but wants to go home and read up on the subject, then you've arrived as an interpreter!