Interpretation

Excerpted from a handout by Holly Walker, VA Department of Conservation and Recreation

What is Interpretation?

Interpretation is an approach to communication. Like translating one language into another, interpretation translates the language of natural science or history - what you're seeing at a particular site into terms and concepts that people can readily understand. And it involves doing it in a way that's interesting and entertaining to people of all ages and backgrounds.

It's the art of providing information to help visitors understand and appreciate the significance and values of our natural and cultural resources, while at the same time minimizing the visitors' impact on those resources. It's taking something that has little meaning to someone and giving it meaning.

Interpretation can range from what is called *personal services interpretation* such as personally conducted tours for local sites or program presentations for schools - to *nonpersonal services* - which do not involve a living person, such as signs, exhibits or interpretive brochures.

Freeman Tilden, author of Interpreting Our Heritage, was one of the first people to analyze museum guides and park rangers to find out how they captured and held people's interest at historic sites and natural areas. He selected “interpretation” as the best word to explain what they did and defined it as “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.” He added, “Interpretation is the revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact,” and that it's “for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit.”

> *Through interpretation comes understanding, through understanding comes appreciation, and through appreciation comes protection.*
>
> - Freeman Tilden

Since Freeman Tilden's work in the late 1950's, many people and organizations have elaborated on his definition. For example, the National Association for Interpretation has stated that, “Interpretation is a communication activity designed to enhance the quality of the recreational experience of the visitor and to inspire greater appreciation of the resource in an enjoyable manner.” In 2000, the definition was modified to “Interpretation is a communications process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the inherent meanings of the resource.”

Interpretation Canada has defined interpretation as “a communication process designed to reveal meanings and relationships of our cultural and natural heritage, to visitors, through first hand involvement with an object, artifact, landscape, or site.”

H. Walker. 1 May 2006

Sam Ham's textbook Environmental Interpretation was published in 1992. There he wrote "Interpretation is simply an approach to communication translating the technical language of a natural science or related field into terms or ideas that people who aren't scientists readily understand. And it involves doing it in a way that's entertaining and interesting to these people." Later he adds, "In interpretation … the goal is to communicate a message … that answers the question 'so what?' with regard to the factual information we've chosen to present … There's always a 'moral' to an interpreter's story"

A more recent interpretive textbook (published in 1998) is Interpretation for the 21st Century. Authors Larry Beck and Ted T. Cable have defined interpretation as "an informational and inspirational process designed to enhance understanding, appreciation, and protection of our cultural and natural legacy."

Interpretive trainer John A. Veverka has written "It should be stressed that interpretive communication is not simply presenting information, but a specific communication strategy that is used to translate that information for people from the technical language of the expert to the everyday language of the visitor"

In Interpretation of Historic Sites, authors W. T. Alderson and S. P. Low stated that: "For true understanding, more is required than the communication of factual information; understanding will occur only if meanings and relationships have been revealed."

In Environmental Interpretation, Sam Ham states that what distinguishes interpretation from other forms of information transfer - such as traditional teaching methods - can be summarized as the *interpretative approach* 1) Interpretation is pleasurable, 2) it's relevant, 3) it's organized, and 4) it has a theme.

Interpretation is pleasurable means that it's entertaining and informal, not like a classroom. It's more like telling a story than delivering a lecture. By being relevant, interpretation is meaningful to people, and relates to their personal lives. It's organized, so that its presented in a way that's easy to follow and doesn't require a lot of effort from the audience. By being held together with a theme, an interpretive program provides a single message - not just a lot of facts that the audience is more likely to remember and 'take home' with them.

Why do we bother with interpretation - and why is it becoming an integral part of organizations around the world? It's been shown that interpretation can be used as an effective resource management tool, and it helps people to understand and appreciate our natural and cultural resources. It's also been shown that when people appreciate something, they protect it. It's that stewardship ethic that you as interpreters here at Ivy Creek Natural Area will foster in the many kids that come to your programs.

How to Plan and Present an Interpretive Program

Themes

When you have completed a good interpretive program, your audience should be able to summarize it in one sentence. That sentence is your program's theme. A theme is the central idea, purpose and main point of your presentation. It's not the same as your topic, which is the general subject matter, such as 'birds' or 'trees in winter.' The theme is the message you're trying to convey -- or the story you want to tell about that topic.

A theme is the central idea stated in a *single, complete sentence*. Without a theme, your program will be too broad in scope and therefore too shallow to be meaningful (Mark Twain once wrote that he was sorry the letter he wrote to a friend was so long, but he didn't have time to write a short one!) If you don't have a theme, you risk having your program become simply a collection of names and facts, an identification of objects without any connections, or lacking in context.

Having a theme will also help you keep your program on track -- it limits the facts you present, so you don't overwhelm people with too many details Remember, it's more important to light a spark of interest in your audience than to tell them ever)'thing you know!

When you plan a program, ask yourself "What is the one thing I want people to how about this subject, and the one thing that I want them to remember?" That answer is your theme.

Few tools are more important than the theme when it comes to selecting and organizing ideas for a presentation. **People remember themes - they forget facts.**

Examples of converting a topic into a theme.

TOPIC	**THEME**
Snakes	-Snakes are interesting animals that have adapted to a life without legs.
	-Snakes are some of the most misunderstood and hated animals in the world.
	-Some snakes are dangerous and need to be avoided, while others are beneficial to humans

Examples of themes:

- Everything is on its way to becoming something else.
- Everything in life is related to everything else.
- Underneath the ground is a fantastic plumbing system.
- We can find out about wildlife by studying the clues and evidence they've left behind.
- The landscape of this area bears the marks of people who lived here a hundred years ago.
- Walking in the woods at night can help us understand how noctumal animals survive.
- Insects living in this meadow (or stream) have certain characteristics that help them survive.
- Wildflowers have long been a source of food and medicine for people, as well as an inspiration for folklore.

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Goals
After you have the theme of your program, develop one or more goals you would like your program to achieve. A goal is a broad concept that deals in general terms and that relates to the overall purpose of your presentation, such as "to inspire an appreciation of the environment."

Objectives
An objective is a statement that tells how you will know whether or not you are accomplishing your goal. An objective of this chapter would be: “After reading this section, interpreters will be able to identify or state three components of program development.”

Tips for Children's Programs
The preparation for children's programs begins by understanding that nature awareness for children is best learned from direct personal experiences touching, smelling, seeing and hearing. When developing children's programs, include the following:

- Develop a central theme for your program. Make sure your theme relates in some way to the site and its resources. If your theme deals with water, go to the water. Stand under a tree to talk about trees.
- Ecological concepts such as habitat, communities, migration, carrying capacity, predator/prey relationships and recycling all make good topics.
- Use a mixture of different activities, games, crafts and hands-on explorations to support your theme. Keep in mind that no children's program should be lecture-based; it should consist of activities reinforced by a brief discussion or explanation. Remember, it's not school, and it should always be fun!

How can you acclimate children to the outdoors?

- *Look or experience first, and talk later. Children seldom forget a direct experience.*
- *Tell them how you personally feel and perceive natural objects. Children respond better to observations than textbook explanations.*
- *Involve children as much as possible. Ask them questions and point out interesting sights or sounds. Include even uninterested children, for they are probably not accustomed to watching nature closely.*
- *Be receptive and aware of each individual.*
- *Respond with kindness, respect and honesty to each question and comment expressed.*

Don't forget to:

- Be flexible. Some activities may last longer than you planned, and others may end too soon. Always have backup and rainy day activities planned.
- Involve all the children's senses (except taste!). Many of them have never listened to the wind, or taken time to feel it blow on their faces.
- Sometimes it pays to slow down. Some of the simplest things can catch and hold kids' attention for much longer than you thought.
- Take the time to answer questions, but don't allow one child to monopolize. Set a good example. Pick up litter and encourage kids to do the same.
- Have fun! If you do, the kids will, too.
- Above all, put *safety* first - both indoors and out!

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