

PAN Parks

Lessons Learned Series



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Raising Awareness for your Protected Area

March 2008



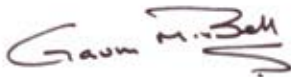
Dear Reader,

One of the most important activities for effective conservation in protected areas is that of awareness raising and promoting understanding. Without understanding, your mission to undertake conservation will be difficult. The key tools for awareness raising are interpretation, education and community engagement.

The best interpretation projects can bring all those tools together in one package. Interpretation relates to the experience of those using it, and both provokes and challenges. It needs to be planned carefully, to embrace principles of sustainability, and be accessible to all.

It is an essential discipline within park management but one that is often neglected or left to the enthusiasm and commitment of individuals to undertake without support or guidance. This lessons learnt will focus on some of the background and key tools for developing effective interpretation for your protected area.

Regards.



Gavin Bell



Gavin Bell,
Communications Manager.

What is Interpretation

Interpretation is communication... - Interpretation is about telling a story...

Interpretation is a vital part of how people experience the places they visit. Interpretation is a part of how we manage and understand our heritage – a wide ranging term which can include the songs and stories of an area, the grassy knolls marking the site of pre-historic settlements, the industries which give life to a town, or the mosses growing in an oak wood. Whatever it is, heritage is conserved because someone thinks it important. Interpretation is a way of helping others to appreciate that importance. And if they appreciate it, people may support efforts to conserve or protect the place concerned.

Good interpretation can achieve many different things:

- Raise awareness and understanding of your protected area; help people to develop a 'Sense of Place'; highlight current issues and trends which might change or destroy elements of the park.
- Support the local economy, bring money into the area, promote local businesses, sustain jobs which in turn will help to retain healthy communities.
- Protect the environment by better management of visitors. Often it will be best to do this in a subtle way; you don't need to be unduly strident and 'evangelical' when attempting to influence the way residents or visitors feel about your park, or the way they behave when they are out and about in the area.
- Increase people's enjoyment of the protected area and its surrounding zone; help people make more of the time they spend here.
- Help local people and others to develop a wider feeling of 'ownership' of aspects of their environment.
- Sometimes interpretive objectives, and indeed management objectives, will conflict with one another.

We may for example want both to cut down visitor pressure and increase access at the same place. Interpretation has a role to play in resolving such a paradox.

Interpretation is a core activity

Interpretation is a specialist area of work that is often neglected – or undertaken as an after sight at the end of other projects. An interpretation officer should be a core member of every protected areas staff and they should receive training in interpretive planning and skills. Producing good interpretation is a very specialised task and should be given the priority it deserves.

The principles and the value of interpretation should be communicated to the rest of your park management team and training in basic skills of face-to face interpretation given to all those staff that meet and deal with visitors, schools and communities. Rangers should not be regarded simply as green policeman but as key awareness raising tools. They have a wealth of knowledge and experience built from all the time they are in nature – with a little support and encouragement they can give visitors a real sense of place – bring the magic of your parks rich cultural and natural heritage alive and instil an understanding and commitment for the protection of your area amongst your local stake holders.

Not just panels leaflets and visitor centres

Producing good interpretation requires imagination. Mention interpretation provision to many park managers and their immediate response will be to suggest producing leaflets and information panels. The content of which is often detail written by scientists that only reaches those with specialised knowledge. The length of text is often more suited for a scientific journal than an interpretation panel.

There are many other ways of providing interpretation – you can use the arts – sculpture and performance to bring the stories of the park to life. You can engage visitors before they reach your park through the internet – develop downloadable audio trails that people can listen to on their mobile phones or mp3 players – and use in conjunction with maps or gps.

Working with local people is the best way to bring the park to life – they hold a wealth of knowledge of the social and cultural heritage. The activities of their ancestors have shaped the landscape and the natural heritage. You should try to ensure that you involve them in your activities and let their experience shape your interpretive planning.

The stories of the local communities can be an important interpretive resource in their own right. Consider story collecting, developing community books and plays. Integrate their tales into your other media – let the visitor meet the community through their words.

A humourous but very serious lesson to be learnt from the corporate advertising sector is the use of toilet interpretation. Most parks or local municipalities provide toilet facilities – and when visitors are using them they are a captive audience – so why not mount simple interpretation material on the back of the door or the walls... it is sure to get read!



Local community telling their story - Peak District NP, UK

Best Practice

Be ambitious...

Enable people to see beyond what is immediately obvious - revealing new stories or ideas, perhaps challenging accepted thinking. Ensure you present your ideas in the wider context of your Protected Area and its surrounding region encouraging people to go on to other places and find out more.

Aim not just to inform, but also to touch people's emotions and perhaps change their views or behaviour. Interpretation should encourage people to value and care for your protected area, and reflect on the way their own activities might affect the environment.

Where appropriate consider discussing global issues (e.g. climate change, biodiversity, sustainability) through the story of your protected area.

Relate to your audience...

Answer questions which arise spontaneously, framing answers in terms that relate to people's real life experiences.

Keep it simple. If people want detail there are always lots of good books on the in depth scientific issues of your park. . At any one place focus on just one or two themes so people go away with a clear understanding of those issues or stories.

Plan carefully before you begin...

Be very clear about why you are doing this, and what you hope people will gain from your interpretation. Don't think everywhere has to be interpreted! Some areas should be left so visitors and residents can develop their own interpretations. In particular be wary of interpreting sites which may have fragile ecology, geology or archaeology.

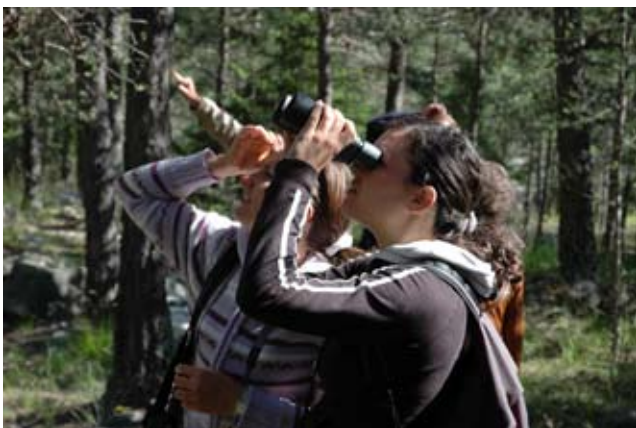
Focus on what is distinctive or unusual about the place you are interpreting.

Not another Interpretation Board...

Boards and leaflets can be very effective, but they are not the only ways of achieving your objectives. Talking to people face to face, community or school events, and informal get togethers can be just as important. 'First person' interpretation (done well) is often the most effective approach. Imaginative use of sculpture and other forms of art can reach audiences that are 'turned off' by traditional media such as panels and leaflets.

Your interpretation should embrace principles of sustainability...

Interpretation should be produced where possible by local people in a way that is not detrimental to the environment. Interpretation should respect the landscape and the local community, perhaps by implementing low key, minimum impact designs, and thinking carefully about siting. Where possible use local materials such as timber or stone.



Rila NP



Central Balkan NP



Sculpture breaks down barriers - Peak District NP, UK

In particular:

- i) Interpretive panels should only be produced for outdoor sites where a clear need for interpretation has been identified, the site is already well-used and easily accessible, and no other medium is possible. Such panels to be designed and mounted in the most sensitive possible way
- ii) Information on walking and riding routes should be published only after full liaison with landowners and others responsible for the maintenance of such routes

Don't be an island – build partnerships

Make sure you involve other agencies, local communities, businesses – developing a local interpretation planning group is an excellent tool for stakeholder involvement and breaking down barriers. You are involving the players in a fun activity.

Be inclusive...

Interpretation should be accessible to all categories of people who might be interested in it. This doesn't mean every piece of interpretive provision must be aimed at everyone. The goal is to be aware of who we are reaching, and who we are failing to reach. Then, if possible, we need to widen the range of people we touch with our interpretive provision.

Inclusive interpretation can be achieved partly by diversity in provision, for example balanced use of both words and pictures, person to person interpretation and impersonal interpretation.

Providers should consider the full breadth of their potential audience - including for example:

- The able bodied and people with physical or mental disabilities.
- Residents, visitors and potential visitors (those who might wish to come here if they had the opportunity or the confidence to do so).
- Visitors who come for the day, and visitors staying at camp-sites, hostels, guest houses or hotels. Families, single people, groups both informal and organised, adults and children.
- People of different educational attainment or ethnic background, and people for whom your national language is not their first language.
- The affluent, the impoverished; those who travel by car, train, bicycle or on foot.

We can all get better...

We should always be critical of what we are doing, looking for ways to improve. Interpretation is provided in many places these days. This means that our audience has become more sophisticated and more critical. We need to develop new approaches rather than stick solely to established ways of getting our messages across.

Evaluate how effective provision is in a systematic way.

And be prepared to learn from others experience - visiting other places, learning from what others do well and what they get wrong! .

Interpretive Planning – a quick introduction

In the past an ad hoc approach to Interpretation has occurred - panels and leaflets often being the preferred approach. However there are many other ways that the provision of Interpretation can be approached.

Planning interpretation means thinking carefully about what you want to tell people and why. It also leads you to ask a whole range of questions about who your visitors are, what is significant about your place and why you feel it is important to interpret it. Asking these questions before a project starts helps to focus the interpretation and means you will be able to measure its success. Interpretive planning gives a structured framework in which to work - to discover what the need is and to ensure it is achieved in the best possible way.

'Interpretive planning is the complete process of answering the questions what, where, when, and how, in relation to interpretive provisions. It begins with a series of surveys and ends with a prospectus of interpretive provision' - Don Aldridge, 1975

Interpretive Plans can vary in length and format depending upon the nature of the site and the objective of the plan. In preparation for the planning process you should ask yourself why the plan is necessary and that will help to determine what format the plan should take. Is it required as part of a funding application? Is it a chance to get all the people involved with a particular site or project together and record their thoughts and ideas? Or is it simply a way of focussing the interpretation – making sure the aims, objectives and storylines are identified and adhered to?



Fulufjallet National Park, Sweden



Hadrians Wall, UK

In some parks 'Local Interpretive Plans have been produced. These help providers of interpretation to think about why they are involved in interpretation, who their interpretation is aimed at, what they wish to interpret, and how they will go about it.

Local Interpretive Planning aims to gain a wide community involvement in telling the story of their area and making the decisions about what is to be interpreted. This participation helps to foster a sense of ownership and appreciation of a site or area.

A well-produced plan can raise the profile of interpretation as a tool for communicating a specific message and can provide essential support for funding applications.

The process needs to identify and involve the key players - both individuals and organisations involved in the site. They should come together to form a planning group. If possible involve a skilled facilitator to lead the group and co-ordinate actions - acting as an honest broker to solve disputes!

The Interpretive Planning process

The first key steps are to answer the following questions

Why are we doing this?

It is essential to agree what a project is for and who will benefit from it. State your aims as clearly as possible - they are the foundation that will ensure success. They also act as an important part of the baseline for checking that your interpretation is doing what you want it to do.

Who is it for?

It is essential to find out who your audience is? Why do they come? How often do they come? What do they want when they get here?

This information will help determine the most appropriate media for site interpretation. Without a clear idea of what

The best approach to finding out is to use a variety of methods - visitor surveys and local knowledge combined for a balanced view.

What are you going to interpret?

The first step is to carry out an audit of what is significant about this place? What is its character? What makes it distinctive?

Identify the key features; what are the unique stories your place has to tell? Identify key sites for providing interpretation

Look at existing provision - is it satisfactory? What needs replacing?

Do not forget that interpretation can be a key tool for managing visitors - what are the constraints of the site? Where do you want to control and encourage access?

How will you do it?

This is the time to identify the themes you will use to tell the story.

Identify a theme - A theme is a statement that unites different strands of information, using an idea or concept as a way of understanding a place. This ensures that you have thought about what you want visitors to understand rather than giving them a string of isolated facts.

People do not need to know all the facts but should be provoked to find out more. Themes can be used to link interpretation over an area. Themes should be stated as a complete sentence, contain one main idea; be as interesting and as specific as possible.

"From fortification to farm; there is evidence of settlement through the ages, and of its impact on the culture and landscape of the area" - a key theme from a Peak District National Park local interpretive plan.

Set clear objectives - what do you want to achieve in a particular area or site. Clear objectives enable interpretation to be more focused. Consider learning, behavioural and emotional objectives - what do you want people to know, do or feel?

Choose the most appropriate method and media - be it print, panels, art, performance.

Choose the most appropriate means - remember, whatever you choose will become part of the place. A balance must be achieved between what you feel is appropriate for your audience, the budget, the story you wish to tell and the site.

Have the courage to leave a site undisturbed - to retain its air of mystery. Maybe the best place to interpret a place is elsewhere.

Be creative - interpretation is not just about panels and leaflets, it need not always be something tangible. Consider storytelling, music and arts. Events that centre on the people and the place provide a way of celebrating local distinctiveness and linking the community with the visitor.

Doing it - Implementing and managing the project

This includes considering where the money will come from. Do not let a perceived lack of funding limit good ideas - there is a wealth of funding sources available to support well thought out, creative and well-planned projects. When assessing resources be imaginative - involve as much local support and skills as possible. Bear in mind that a well designed interpretation project can be an effective rural development tool.

Draw up an action plan defining each individual project, responsibility and timescales.

Decide who is responsible for ensuring actions are followed up. With projects covering multiple groups and areas it is worth considering involving a project manager - include as a cost within funding applications. When setting timescales ensure they are realistic and achievable.

Ensure it is sustainable - agree responsibilities for maintaining completed interpretation.

Have we got it right? - Monitoring and evaluation

After spending all those hours in meetings, preparing and implementing the plan it is important to find out if it is working? Whether it is achieving your aims and objectives? And how might we improve it? Both indirect (observation) and direct (through interviews and questionnaires) methods can be used to evaluate your project.

Evaluation can also take place early in the process - pre-test designs before committing to the expensive final piece. Once you have evaluated - use the results to improve where you can. Learn from your mistakes!

This is only a simplistic guide to the process - The useful contacts and books section gives some suggestions of helpful texts



Dealing with multi-lingual issues, Majella NP, Italy



Panel in harmony, Peak District NP, UK

Integrated projects

Undergoing a thorough LIP process will enable you to identify not just the interpretive needs of the area but will also reveal many other issues regarding visitor management and tourism development. This can lead into the development of an integrated project that brings together interpretation, visitor management and sustainable rural development

One of the most effective ways of raising awareness and at the same time gaining the support of your local stakeholders is through the development of local or regional projects that combine community engagement with improving visitor facilities and developing local economic benefits. This approach of combining interpretive activities with rural development can open up wider sources of funding

Local produce and traditional skills are also an important resource in telling the story and giving visitors a real sense of place. This is one of the best examples of face to face interpretation you can provide – and at the same time by charging visitors for the experience of for example visiting a shepherds summer camp to learn about traditional land management, visiting a traditional bread maker or bee keeper, you can provide additional economic benefits. This helps you gain credibility with your local stakeholders.

Visitor centres have their place!

A well designed and located visitor centre is one of the best ways of making face to face contact with your visitors. Location is extremely important – there are many examples of GAA funded centres that are located in the middle of nowhere. The ideal location is close to a community where the centre can also act as a support to the local economy and act as a focal link between the community and the park managers.

Visitor centres and information points do not have to be huge – it is possible to create a small but effective centre by refurbishing old buildings. This can help protect important parts of the local built heritage and gain the support of local communities. It is good to incorporate information and interpretation into any visitor shelters that you provide for visitors.

If considering building a new building or refurbishing an older centre, the use of green technology can both raise awareness of environmental issues, act as an educational tool, whilst at the same time can help reduce the running costs of the centre. The initial investment in this sort of technology can be high – but is always a plus point when applying for external funding. At the same time small steps can be made implementing green improvements in existing centres as replacement and refurbishing of facilities takes place.

When developing content for your centre – make sure you undertake a comprehensive interpretive planning process to ensure you get the right messages and themes covered.

It is very easy to get carried away with the use of new technology – modern technology brings many new opportunities to portray information. But it also brings with it lots of issues about maintenance and sustaining it in the long term. Ensure to budget for long term support. There is nothing worse than finding lots of exhibits with out of order signs all over them.

Think about visitor flow in your centre and also how you can support running costs through sales. A visitor centre can be a prime location for marketing local produce – supporting local economies and generating income – whilst at the same time enhancing the visitor experience. Bear in mind that a well designed interpretation project can be an effective rural development tool and can be identified as such in .



Hi-tech & Eco - Moorlands Centre, Peak District NP, UK



Bringing old local buildings back into use, Peak District NP, UK

Letting people know you are there!

If you are providing visitor centres, trails and other facilities – don't forget to let people know they are there! Ensure you work with local authorities to provide road signing and orientation information in car parks and places where visitors arrive. This should be part of your planning process anyway!

Further information

Ham, Sam.

Environmental Interpretation: A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets
North American Press, 1992

Carter, J.

A Sense of Place: an interpretive planning handbook
Tourism and Environment Initiative, Inverness, 1997

Veverka, J. A.

Interpretive Master Planning
Falcon Press, 1994

Association for Heritage Interpretation www.ahi.org

Scottish Interpretation Network www.scotinterpnet.org.uk - good resource and downloads

Upcoming Lessons in the Series

- How to Lobby Decision Makers March
- Conducting Independent Audits April
- The Value of a Research Network May

Contact Details

If you have questions please feel free to contact us:

Gavin Bell
Communications Manager
gbell@panparks.org

Zoltán Kun
Executive Director
zkun@panparks.org

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Borjomi Kharagauli NP, Georgia