Heritage interpretation: More than mere facts

The Journeay family is visiting Blackcreek Pioneer Village. A lady dressed in 19th century costume welcomes them at the visitor centre. She tells them that the village is a replica of a typical 1860s Ontario village. Close to 30 heritage buildings have been restored to bring visitors back to the past.

Heritage interpreters are dressed in period costumes. They are demonstrating old traditional trades and crafts such as blacksmithing and milling. Fiddle, a traditional musical instrument, is also played there. At the break in the playing, one of the site interpreters, Stephanie (a fiddle player herself) approaches the Journeays. She asks how they are enjoying the music. In the ensuing conversation, she discovers that:

1. Murray has an old fiddle at home, a gift from his Uncle Alphonse
2. When Murray was a teenager, Alphonse taught him to play
3. Murray no longer plays but the sound of the fiddle has brought back old memories of music sessions around Alphonse’s kitchen table

Stephanie is delighted. She tells Murray that kitchen music is a tradition from the 1800s. ‘People of the 1860s had to depend on themselves for entertainment. Many townsfolk played some type of instrument. Kitchen parties were popular…Can you remember any of the tunes your uncle taught you?’ she asks.

Stephanie and Murray continued to talk about maritime (fiddle) music and how it is a intangible heritage passed from generation to generation. The music is powerful and Stephanie’s information and questions awake in Murray a new interest in his maritime traditional roots and cultural identity – the music, the lives of his ancestors and how the landscape shaped their culture. He begins to think of himself as a link in a chain that passes traditions and memories from generation to generation. Throughout the visit, Murray often returns to the fiddling demonstration to listen and talk to Stephanie and the other musicians. Eventually, he even picks up the courage to play one of his uncle’s tunes on Stephanie’s fiddle. By the end of the visit, Murray is determined to return to fiddle playing and learn from his uncle more of his regional musical heritage, family history and stories.

Interpreting World Heritage sites

All World Heritage sites have more than one important story to tell about their history; the way they were constructed or destroyed, the people who lived there, the various activities there and the happenings, the previous uses of the site and perhaps tales of the notable treasures. In presenting and interpreting the historical story of the heritage site, it is necessary to be selective and to decide which elements will be of most interest to the kind of people that the site will attract; human interest stories are often the most popular.

Management Guidelines for World Cultural Heritage Sites, p.100
# Unit 4

## Heritage Interpretation

### Learning Objectives

This unit is designed to provide you with:

- An understanding of the role of heritage interpretation for the experience of heritage visitors and tourists.
- An understanding of the role of heritage guides in creating visitor experience.
- Appropriate interpretation methods for a given site and the ability to plan and develop interpretive talks.

### Contents

This unit is organised as follows:

**Core Knowledge:**

4.1 The role of site interpretation in the visitor's experience, understanding and enjoyment of heritage

4.2 Interpretation principles

4.3 Interpretation techniques

**Case studies**

**Worksheets**

**Practical Applications**

**Key Readings**

**Unit Summary**

**Facts and FAQs**
Core Knowledge

4.1 The role of site interpretation in the visitor’s experience, understanding and enjoyment of heritage

Heritage interpretation is an integral part of heritage tourism. It is about communicating a site’s heritage values to others. By communicating the meaning of a heritage site, interpreters facilitate understanding and appreciation of sites by the general public. They also create public awareness about the importance of heritage and its protection.

Among different forms of interpretation, tours by heritage guides have the most influence on the visitors’ experience, understanding and enjoyment of heritage. This form of communication is the most direct and is one that allows for a relatively higher degree of interaction (Fig. 4.1). Very often, it is the only form of interpretation that a visitor has access to when visiting a heritage site.

**Definition:**

Interpretation refers to the full range of potential activities intended to heighten public awareness and enhance understanding of cultural heritage sites.

Heritage tourism involves experience, understanding and enjoyment of the values of cultural heritage by visitors at heritage sites.

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**Fig. 4.1: Heritage guides have the most influence on the visitors’ experience**

Paro Dzong, Bhutan

Ong Chin Ee
4.2 Principles of Interpretation\(^1\)

The key principles that heritage guides should consider in heritage interpretation are as follow:

1. **Access and understanding.** The appreciation of cultural heritage sites is a universal right. The public discussion of their significance should be facilitated by effective, sustainable interpretation, involving a wide range of associated communities, as well as visitor and stakeholder groups.

2. **Information sources.** The interpretation of heritage sites must be based on evidence gathered through accepted scientific and scholarly methods as well as from living cultural traditions.

3. **Context and setting.** The interpretation of cultural heritage sites should relate to their wider social, cultural, historical and natural contexts and settings.

4. **Authenticity.** The interpretation of cultural heritage sites must respect their authenticity, in the spirit of the *Nara Document* (1994).

5. **Sustainability.** The interpretive plan for a cultural heritage site must be sensitive to its natural and cultural environment. Social, financial and environmental sustainability in the long term must be among the central goals.

6. **Inclusiveness.** The interpretation of cultural heritage sites must actively involve the participation of associated communities and other stakeholders.

7. **Research, evaluation and training.** The interpretation of a cultural heritage site is an ongoing, evolving process of explanation and understanding that includes continuing research, training and evaluation.

**Note:** At its best, interpretation should relate to the lives of visitors (the “I’m familiar with that” response), should reveal something new (the “I didn’t know that” response) and provoke different thoughts (the “I never thought of that” response).

Interpretation should provoke thought, relate to one’s experience and reveal new ideas.

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**Exercise:**

*Exercise 4-1: Discuss the significance of each principle in the context of a particular site.*  
[Use Worksheet 4-A]

**Reading 4-1**

**TOPIC:** WHAT IS INTERPRETATION?

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\(^1\) Based on the ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites (fifth draft).
4.3 Interpretation Techniques

Good interpretation is more than just a selection of good techniques. It requires careful and detailed planning and effective execution.

**Interpretation methods** can take one or more of the following forms:

- Printed Information:
  - Advertisements
  - Brochures/leaflets
  - Guidebooks
  - Books
  - Maps
- Signage
- Exhibits
- Narrated visual presentations
- Videotape presentation
- Websites
- Film
- Rented tape-recorded tours
- Pre-recorded station stops
- Car audio
- Sound and light shows
- Guides
  - Site employed guides
  - Outside guides

[Cultural Tourism: Tourism at World Heritage Cultural Sites: The Site Manager's Hand Book, pp.71-77]

Communication between heritage guides and visitors is the heart of heritage interpretation. Interpretation can take various forms and normally it combines one or more modes of verbal, written or visual communication. When a heritage guide describes a site or tells a story about it, he or she is interpreting verbally. A newspaper article on the heritage value of a site, a flyer or a poster presenting the history of a site, an on-site signboard or a panel in a museum describing heritage elements are examples of written and visual forms of interpretation. A multimedia presentation can be a combination of all three forms of communication.

Good interpretation starts with good understanding of the site and its heritage values. However, different people can perceive heritage values differently. Therefore, understanding heritage values should consider the views of others.
Interpretation can take place almost anywhere. The most common place for interpretation is the site itself. However, it can happen at a visitor centre or in a museum. When interpretation takes place at a heritage site, it is called **on-site interpretation**. Off-site interpretation is interpretation performed in a place away from the site.

The best way to design an interpretation programme is to organise it around a theme. A good understanding of the site and potential visitors help develop a good interpretation programme package.

**Case Study 4-1**

**Title: Interpretation in Heritage Sites**

**Reading 4-2**

**Topic: Visitors to World Heritage Sites**

**Theme**

A theme helps to keep interpretation focussed. It also helps to organise different interpretation components.

A heritage site may have many stories to tell and it is never possible to tell everything about a site. Therefore, a guide should focus on something that he or she would like the audience to take away with them. The following four basic guidelines are key for developing a supportive framework for **thematic interpretation**:

1. **Know your site.** This is more than knowing the facts. Knowing what is significant about the site is important. However, to develop an interesting interpretation, it is equally important to know what different community members know and think about the site. Solid understanding of a site helps identify what needs to be interpreted.

2. **Know your audience.** Different types of visitors have different kinds of interests and expectations. Not everyone visits a site for an in-depth study; many visit just to have a good outing. Knowledge about the nature of your audience helps you decide how to interpret.

3. **Know the community.** If you are from the community where the site is situated, then probably you already know your community well. However, if you come from a different part of the region or country, then you need to know the values and traditions of the host community so that you can avoid any negative impact on the community’s social structure and cultural integrity. This knowledge will help show you the ways communities can be made part of interpretive activities.

**Note:**

**Thematic interpretation**

eliminates the tendency to present a collection of unrelated facts. Focusing on a single “whole” directs interpreters only to those facts that must be presented to develop and support the theme. This not only avoids overloading the audience, but it saves time for the interpreter preparing the presentation.


**Knowing the audience:**

If you want to get your message across, you must fit your interpretation to your visitors’ needs, characteristics and interests. … think about them in relation to these questions:

- Who are they?
- What are they expecting?
- What do they already know about your place?
- How long will they stay?
- Who do they come with?
- Where will they go after they leave your place? Or where would you like them to go?

[A Sense of Place: An Interpretative Planning Handbook, p.26]
4. **Identify constraints and resources.** The size of the site and the length of the tour determine how much is possible. Also important are accessible visitor facilities and enough space for comfortable movement throughout the site.

5. Space determines the number of visitors to a site at a given time. Good understanding of items 1, 2 and 3 above will help tell how much time is available for interpretation. In addition to space and time, selection of **interpretation methods** can be constrained by budget limitations.

In addition, the following five guidelines, which are part of the process called interpretive planning, can help ensure meaningful thematic interpretation.

1. **Develop a vision.** A vision tells you why you are interpreting something.

2. **Plan early.** Allow sufficient time to plan so that every aspect of interpretation is carefully looked at before its implementation.

3. **Involve the community.** To make interpretation interesting and real, include the community in your planning.

4. **Be prepared for the unexpected.** Make your plan flexible enough to keep the impact of unexpected events or situations to a minimum.

5. **Monitor performance.** Set clear criteria for monitoring your interpretation programme. Monitoring may include visitor assessment and the number of visitors over a specific period. Consistent negative results indicate the need for immediate review of the interpretive plan.

**Fig. 4.3: Florence, Italy: A good plan can help minimise the impact of unexpected situations**

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**Case Study 4-2**

**Title:** 'STEP INSIDE AND DO TIME WITH US': FREMANTLE PRISON-THE CONVICT ESTABLISHMENT

**Reading 4-3**

**Topic:** WHY PLAN INTERPRETATION? AND WHAT SORT OF PLAN?

**Exercise**

- Exercise 4-2: Understanding audience’s needs  
  [Use Worksheet 4-B]

- Exercise 4-3: Developing a theme for interpretation  
  [Use Worksheet 4-C]


### Case Studies

**Title: Interpretation in Heritage Sites**

**Case Study 4-1**

**Objectives:** To understand heritage interpretation at heritage sites

**Heritage Site:** Town of Luang Prabang, Lao PDR  
**Date of Inscription:** 1995

Currently, site interpretation in Luang Prabang is underdeveloped. There is insufficient interpretative signage about the significance of the site and, in particular, its specific heritage values for humankind. Sadly, the limited interpretation materials that exist contain inaccurate information and this complicates the task of helping visitors understand the layers of meaning associated with the site.

As well, visitors are given no information about local customs and the especially important cultural “dos” and “don’ts”, i.e. the need to dress appropriately when visiting sacred places and the need to obtain permission before photographing local people. Clearly, inappropriate behaviour can be better avoided if visitors are told why certain kinds of behaviour are unacceptable.

The purpose of interpretation is not only to enhance the experience of tourists, but also to provide the local community with a means of more effectively managing tourists to prevent negative site impact.

**Discussion Points:**

- Do you see such problems in your home country? If so, what can be done to solve these problems?

**References:**

**Title:** ‘Step Inside and Do Time with Us’: Fremantle Prison-The Convict Establishment

**Case Study 4-2**

**Objectives:** To equip trainees with knowledge of good thematic interpretation

Fremantle Prison was one of the projects built by convict labour that first arrived in Western Australia. Doing interpretation for a site and building of punishment and imprisonment is not an easy task. However, the heritage interpreters at The Convict Establishment devised a theme interpretation that allows visitors to role-play.

Visitors to the largest convict built limestone structure in Western Australia were invited to “do time” as convicts in a “Doing Time Tour”. The brochure suggests:

> Take a visual journey back in time in the Main cell block where you can view life as it was for both convicts and prisoners. What type of cell would you prefer to be in?

At the visitor centre, my travel companions Doreen, Daryl and I started our “Doing Time Tour” with our first convict briefing. There, our friendly but ‘authoritative’ warden Harry instructed us to go ‘collect’ our prison standard issue consisting of our green prison uniform, our plastic mugs and toiletries. After completing our ‘checking in’, we were brought to view some of toilet facilities The Convict Establishment has to offer.

The viewing of the toilet facilities were supplemented with colourful tales of inmates’ toilet meetings and the fights and settlements of disputes that took place. We also discovered how we can pass our time in the yards.

Inmates commonly get a day off a week and were permitted to socialize in the wider spaces of the yard. There in the yards, wardens commonly adopt a hands-off approach and inmates often use these off-days to settle their disputes. Fights were not uncommon. The more peaceful days in the yards see inmates occupy themselves with weight-training, balls games, chatting and reading.

We were also led to the Chapel where stories of how spiritual support helped inmates get by their trying times. We were told the chapel service is one of the rare moments male and female inmates - though still located on different galleries and sections of the Chapel, were allowed to catch a glimpse of each other.

The whipping post, gallows and solitary cells formed the emotional high points of the tour as we were introduced to traumas of punishment upon inmates and also the wardens who mentored them. We were also shown different technologies of punishment. For example, we were shown the different methods of hanging and the ways to make sure a convict does not have access to inflict self-harm in a solitary cell.

**Photos:**

- Fremantle Prison: largest convict built structure in WA
- The towering walls of the decommissioned maximum security prison
- ‘Inmates’ (visitors) briefed on rules of “doing time” by their prison warden (heritage interpreter).
- ‘Doing time’ in the yards
We were also shown the artwork of prison inmates. These include wall paintings and murals in the convicts' cells. The artwork reflected their longings for freedom. We were also shown the ways in which the cells in Fremantle prison change over time and how different sections of the prisons were created in order to allow for better supervision and control.

At the end of the tour, Warden Harry congratulated us on having successfully served our respective 'sentences' and released us from The Convict Establishment. We left Fremantle Prison with a deeper understanding of both the harsh and lighter side of prison life and we cherish our ‘new-found’ freedom!

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- How can role-playing help make heritage interpretation more interesting?
- Can you think of possible role-plays for the UNESCO World Heritage sites in your country?

REFERENCES: Story and Photos by Chin Ee ONG
Activity type: Discussion
Worksheet 4-A
Title: DISCUSS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EACH PRINCIPLE IN THE CONTEXT OF A PARTICULAR SITE.

OBJECTIVES: Understand how the principles are linked to practice

INSTRUCTIONS:

The seven interpretation principles:

1. **Access and understanding.** The appreciation of cultural heritage sites is a universal right. The public discussion of their significance should be facilitated by effective, sustainable interpretation, involving a wide range of associated communities, as well as visitor and stakeholder groups.

2. **Information sources.** The interpretation of heritage sites must be based on evidence gathered through accepted scientific and scholarly methods as well as from living cultural traditions.

3. **Context and setting.** The interpretation of cultural heritage sites should relate to their wider social, cultural, historical and natural contexts and settings.

4. **Authenticity.** The interpretation of cultural heritage sites must respect their authenticity, in the spirit of the *Nara Document* (1994).

5. **Sustainability.** The interpretive plan for a cultural heritage site must be sensitive to its natural and cultural environment. Social, financial and environmental sustainability in the long term must be among the central goals.

6. **Inclusiveness.** The interpretation of cultural heritage sites must actively involve the participation of associated communities and other stakeholders.

7. **Research, evaluation and training.** The interpretation of a cultural heritage site is an on-going, evolving process of explanation and understanding that includes continuing research, training and evaluation.

Equipment:
- Copies of this worksheet
- Pencils and erasers

Procedure:
- form groups of 4-5;
- provide a copy of this worksheet to each group;
- ask the participants to identify which of the seven interpretation principles they consider easier to follow and why.
- ask each group to present and discuss its conclusion;
- total time for the activity: 12-15 minutes.

TEACHER’S COMMENTS:

Reference:
### Activity type: Discussion

#### Title: Understanding Audience’s Needs

**Objectives:** Understand the differences between stakeholders in terms of interpretation of heritage sites

**Instructions:**

**Your assumed role:**

**What story do you want to be told?**

**Equipment:**
- Copies of this worksheet
- Pencils and erasers

**Procedure:**
- Form groups of 4-5;
- Provide a copy of this worksheet to each group;
- Ask the participants to assume the role of specific stakeholder. What stories related to the site do you feel need to be told, especially stories that can transform a WHS into a place of learning and reflection.
- Ask each group to present and discuss its conclusion;
- Total time for the activity: 12-15 minutes.

**Teacher’s Comments:**

**Reference:**
Reading 4.1:
Practical Applications

Tip 1: Theme Game

At the start of the tour, ask visitors to play the ‘Theme Game’: Visitors are to pay attention to the interpretive talk and then identify the theme. A small reward should be given to the winner.

Tip 2: Alternative Themes

Create greater involvement by asking visitors to suggest alternative themes for interpretation for the site they are visiting.
# Key Readings

## LIST OF KEY READINGS

### Reading 4.1:
**Topic:** What is interpretation?  
**Source:** A Sense of Place: An Interpretive Planning Handbook  

### Reading 4.2:
**Topic:** Visitors to World Heritage sites  
**Source:** Management Guidelines for World Cultural Heritage Sites.  

### Reading 4.3:
**Topic:** Why Plan Interpretation? and What Sort of Plan?  
**Source:** A Sense of Place: An Interpretive Planning Handbook  
Interpretation Is About Special Places

Interpretation is all about helping people appreciate something that you feel is special. Throughout this handbook we refer to interpretation being about 'places', but it can be about:

- a building,
- an area of countryside,
- an aspect of cultural life, for example a traditional celebration,
- a town,
- an object, or a collection of objects,
- an industry,
- an historical event or period,
- an activity, for example working with a sheep dog.

The principles covered in this book apply to all of these: we have simply used "place" in most of the examples to save repeating the list each time.

The handbook aims to help you both to plan interpretation which will be effective, and to involve local people as much as possible in the process.

There are many ways to define what interpretation is, but all definitions have at their heart the idea of sharing with others your enthusiasm for somewhere, or something, which is significant. It’s also important that people will actually see or experience for themselves the place you are interpreting.

Interpretation has been happening ever since people have visited places because they thought them interesting. Regency gentlemen making their Grand Tour of Europe in the eighteenth century were probably offered the services of local guides. But interpretation was first established as a subject in its own right by the United States National Parks Service.

Freeman Tilden, who was involved in the early interpretation work of the US National Park Service, and was writing about interpreting landscapes like the Grand Canyon, or Yosemite National Park. His loves for them, and his clear sense of how important it is that other people care about them too, are worth remembering. The early National Parks had a mission to persuade a sometimes skeptical public that the Parks were worth conserving. You may not have such grand landscapes to deal with, nor such an urgent conservation message, but all good interpretation needs at its heart an enthusiasm and a love for a place, and a desire to share that with others.

Interpretation can take various forms - it may involve walks or tours with a guide, publications, or panels at features of interest. Perhaps a series of arts events can celebrate the wildlife of a forest, or bring to life the history of a fishing village. Important sites or large collections may need a building of their own as a visitor centre or museum. You may already have ideas about the interpretation you would like to provide, but to make it successful you need to make sure that it is appropriate for the site, for the people who are coming there, and for the organisations and individuals involved. That involves planning, which is what this handbook is about.
The Heritage Connection

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.

As Freeman Tilden described it, interpretation not only cells people what is interesting about a place, it aims to convince people of its value, and encourage them to want to conserve it. Some have seen this as an essential part of all interpretation. It is important when you are dealing with sensitive or threatened areas such as nature reserves. In other cases you neither may nor want to directly encourage a 'conservation ethic' - interpretation in an historic town centre, for example, does not usually include anything about, how visitors can care for the buildings. But behind all interpretation there is still a sense that what is being interpreted is valuable.

The tourism connection

Interpretation is also an important part of tourism developments. This is especially true in Scotland, where tourism relies more on the country's culture and landscape than on the chance to sunbathe! Good interpretation helps visitors to explore and understand a little more about the places they visit. In doing so, it adds depth to tourists' experience, making a visit something more than just a trip to see the sights. In some cases interpretation is essential if the site is to 'come alive' at all: most battlefield sites would be nothing but an empty field to most visitors without interpretation to evoke something of the atmosphere of the time, and to tell them how, what happened there. This makes interpretation as important a part of the tourism product as places to stay, a friendly welcome, and good food. If visitors feel that a place is interesting or exciting, they are more likely to recommend it to others. Good interpretation makes for satisfied customers, and satisfied customers are good for business.

Interpretation can also make money in its own right, through the sale of publications or admission fees to centres, but it's not always easy to combine this with a sustainable approach. In financial terms, it may be better to think of interpretation mainly as something which contributes to the overall sense of place, and to the quality of a visitor's experience, and thus to greater success in the business of tourism.

2 What Makes It Interpretive?

However you define interpretation. It's all to do with communication. There are clear guidelines to what makes communication effective, established through years of research in cognitive psychology. What makes communication interpretive is less easy to define. Freeman Tilden described what he considered to be six 'principles of interpretation'. Three of these are particularly important. They are that interpretation should provoke, relate, and reveal. Getting interpretation to relate to its audience is largely about good communication principles, and section 7.1 gives a review of these.

Provoke Thought

There's an important difference between interpretation and information, Information just gives facts, but interpretation can provoke ideas, perhaps even jolt people into a completely new understanding of what they have come to see. This sometimes means being controversial, but if you send your visitors away
buzzing with discussion about your place, that's no bad thing!

**Reveal**

The essence of good interpretation is that it reveals a new insight into what makes a place special. It gives people a new understanding. If you have ever visited an exhibition, or been on a guided walk, and come away saying “Well I never realized that...” or thinking “Aha! Now I understand”, you've been an audience for some good interpretation.

Insight can be emotional too - remember Freeman Tilden's description of how interpretation is about revealing “beauty and wonder”. A guide who manages to make their audience feel sorrow, empathy, or anger at the plight of the victims of the Highland clearances is a good interpreter; so is the leaflet writer who can bring alive the history of a derelict industrial area, and send visitors away thinking it a fascinating place. It would be wrong to suggest that all interpretation can, or should, be like St Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Sometimes the ideas or insight visitors take away can be quite simple. The thing to remember is that interpretation does not involve simply giving visitors facts: it aims to give them new insights, ideas, and ways of looking at or appreciating a place. You may use facts to do this, but it's the ideas which are important.

There are no rules to follow which can guarantee that what you are doing is truly interpretive. It's also true that what is a new insight for some visitors will be familiar to others, but you should always aim to make the information you have support an interesting story or idea.

**Themes**

A theme organises your interpretation, and expresses the idea you want people to take away with them. This is different from the subject or topic of your interpretation. For example, a naturalist might plan to take a guided walk in summer, looking at wild flowers. This is a huge subject, and could support a number of themes. She might decide that she wants people to leave the walk understanding that different flowers use different strategies to attract the insects. This would be a theme for her walk.

The theme does not mean, of course, that if she suddenly sees a Golden Eagle during the walk she should ignore it because it does not fit the theme. She can point out the eagle, let her audience look at it, and tell them a bit about it if she can. But she then returns to the theme of the walk.

Using a theme like this does a number of things:

6. It helps to focus the naturalist's work. From the masses of facts which she could give her audience, she can now concentrate only on those which support her theme.

7. It helps her to structure the walk, and choose where to stop. Without a theme, the walk could become a collection of random stops with no link.

8. It helps her audience by giving them a clear thread, rather than a series of unconnected facts. This makes it more interesting, and more memorable.

Many television documentary programmes use themes - they look at a number of different subjects or topics, but all of them support a central idea. Rather than being limiting, themes expand the possibilities for interpretation. There would be dozens of possible themes which our naturalist could choose for her walk, giving her material for a whole programme of events!

**3 Other Aims for Communication**

So far, we've concentrated on the heart of interpretation, sharing enthusiasm about a place so that your audience will find it interesting too.
Strictly speaking, anything else is not interpretation, but you will almost certainly want to communicate with people to achieve other things. Here are some ideas about what you may need or want to do for your visitors:

**Orientate**
Before they can take an interest in what you want to tell them, visitors need to feel at home. You will almost always need to let them know what there is to do in your area or site, how to get to the places which interest them, and where important things like toilets and cafes are. This applies whether you are dealing with a building or an area of countryside. Remember that people like to know how long a particular activity will take as well as, say, how many miles they will be walking. You must also point out any safety hazards, and places which people should not visit because they are dangerous.

**Inform**
There's a big difference between interpretation and just providing information. Some visitors will want to know plain facts, but they are usually a minority of your audience. You can provide what they need cheaply and simply. For example, the keen bird watchers at a bird hide might want to know what birds they might see today; some visitors to a distillery will be interested in how many bottles an hour it produces. You could meet the needs of these visitors, who often have a special interest in the subject, by a blackboard which you update weekly at the bird hide; and a photocopied fact-sheet at the distillery.

**Entertain**
If you are in the tourism business, you'll certainly want to send visitors away feeling satisfied. If you want to increase visits from tourists, you may well want to think about how to provide fun things for visitors to do as they explore your place. This doesn't mean that interpretation is superficial or trivial, but that it can play a part in schemes which are essentially about enjoyment. Some interpretation has a serious story to tell, such as the interpretation at Ann Frank's house in Amsterdam of how the Jews were persecuted by the fascists. Even here, however, interpretation must take account of the fact that visitors are at leisure: it should be accessible, rather than hard work.

**Persuade**
Some organisations have a clear objective to persuade people to do something or to influence what they think about something - remember the origins of interpretation, in the movement to establish the U.S, National Parks. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds might well want to encourage visitors to join the Society; the operator of a visitor centre at a nuclear power station will aim to tell people how safe it is, If this seems one sided, remember that what seems like common sense to you may be controversial to others!

**Explain**
Sometimes it's not possible for visitors to see the whole of a site, or it may be in a mess because of building or landscape work. Rather than just leaving it at that, try giving visitors some explanation of what's happening. While the new Museum of Scotland was being built in Edinburgh, the National Museums of Scotland provided windows in the high wooden fence around the site through which passers-by could see what was happening. Small notices by each window explained what stage the work had reached.

**Promote An Organisation**
Any organisation which puts money into your interpretation is likely to want their contribution acknowledged. Like the business of persuasion, this is a perfectly valid aim, and it can be important for an organisation to be identified as caring for or managing a site.

**Influence Behaviour**
Interpretation is often seen as a way of influencing what people do. This might include encouraging them to visit particular places, perhaps for
commercial reasons; directing them away from other places such as the fragile areas of a nature reserve; or getting them to take their litter home. Again, these are valid aims, but remember that they are not the reason your visitor has come. You need a subtle approach to influence people, which recognises and meets their needs while at the same time getting your message across.

**Develop A Local Sense of Place**

Most interpretation is aimed at visitors from outside the immediate area. But involving local people in thinking about what makes their place special, and how they might tell others about it, can help them find a new sense of pride in their own area. For some projects, this may be the most important thing of all, and any actual end product only secondary.

This chapter has looked at what interpretation is, at some principles which help co make interpretation effective, and at some other aspects of communicating with visitors which you may need to think about. You'll probably have realised that making interpretation work requires a bit of thought and planning. The next chapter looks at what's involved in that.

**REFERENCES:** A Sense of Place: An Interpretive Planning Handbook, James Carter. Tourism and Environment Initiative, Inverness, 2001, pp.3-7
TOPIC: VISITORS TO WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Objectives: to discuss the key issues related to presentation and interpretation at a World Heritage site

Presentation and Interpretation

All World Heritage sites have more than one important story to tell about their history: the way they were constructed or destroyed, the people who lived there, the various activities there and the happenings, the previous uses of the site and perhaps tales of the notable treasures. In presenting and interpreting the historical story of the heritage site, it is necessary to be selective and to decide which elements will be of most interest to the kind of people that the site will attract; human interest stories are often the most popular.

- The aims of the interpretation of the heritage site need to be clearly established before work starts, and reviewed regularly in the light of experience and changing thinking.

The media used to interpret the history of the site should be chosen to be as effective as possible for all visitors, without harming the appearance or ambience of the heritage site. For instance, the equipment for Sound and Light (Son et lumière) performances may harm ancient walls or obstruct the overall setting during daylight hours. Signs explaining things may spoil views or cause damage by their fixings. Media used for interpretation could include:

- clearly written notices, didactic panels, plans, leaflets, guidebooks, souvenir books and reference books in various languages, as required;
- human guides or teachers;
- museums, exhibitions, models, samples of building materials, copies of art objects, pictures or coins;
- dioramas, listening posts, portable tape players; and
- films, television, video, tape/slide shows, plays, music, Sound and Light performances and lighting to accent features.

Mistakes are easily made in the use of media: money can be wasted; the appearance of the site can be compromised; guided tours can disturb other visitors; and leaflets and didactic panels can be poorly written. It is best to start by determining the message to be conveyed and establishing the audience. Each site is unique, and what has worked on one heritage site may not be effective for all. A substantial budget has to be allowed, and skilled advice sought for the interpretation of all heritage sites of world significance.

It is often useful to sell a simple guidebook which is easily understandable to those with little or no previous knowledge of the site; this could be designed to fill in some of the gaps in historical knowledge. Serious students should have detailed guidebooks that have been checked for accuracy by experts, are free of speculative interpretation and include references for further information.

General tourist information is often provided on heritage sites. This is a useful and sometimes profitable service, ranging from selling tourist guides and maps to giving advice, making reservations at hotels and theatres, providing leaflets about other attractions and advising upon transport. If such a service is extensive, it should be separated from information about the heritage site proper, so that queues do not develop. Well-illustrated souvenir books which remind people of their visit, picture postcards and books on various subjects related to the site can provide an important source of income.
The didactic panels explaining the site will have to be well-designed and made of durable material, with attractive lettering and carefully chosen colours. They should all use the same graphic style, which should be clearly distinguishable from that used for direction or warning signs. Avoid technical language, except in parenthesis. Since they will often be the most important part of the interpretation of the site, their presentation should be given high priority. It is advisable to assign a single, visually-aware person responsibility for the design and siting of all signs; and also control of the quantity of signs on the site.

Audio-visual presentations have to be of the highest quality, and normally about 10-15 minutes is the maximum acceptable length. Sound and Light presentations can be much longer, but care must be taken to ensure that the script is dramatic, historically accurate and without prejudice or discrimination.

Scaled-down or full-sized reproductions can be used to help explain past happenings on the site, and these have the advantage that they can be replaced when they become damaged or wear out. As far as possible, the same, traditional, materials of the original should be used, as modern materials, such as plastics, will not weather in the same way.

Since languages that are widespread (such as English and French) are pronounced differently throughout the world, it cannot be assumed that they will be understood by visitors, even native speakers. This factor can affect the use of listening posts and human guides to the extent that sometimes it is better to use only written material. Display screens that can be interrogated by push button and give a written or diagrammatic answer, provide an alternative to listening posts.

Human guides must be well-trained and knowledgeable, and either licensed by the state or employed by the heritage site management. School parties should be assembled and briefed about the site in an area set aside for the purpose, preferably indoors. Staff instructors can help the children’s own teachers explain the heritage site, and it is a help if visiting teachers can be invited to see the site and be briefed in advance of the parties they are bringing. The availability of educational materials for teachers would be useful in this context.

Archaeological digs can be explained by panels or a guide, or both, and special provision for easy viewing, such as visitor observation platforms, may be required in order to avoid interrupting those digging. Information needs to be updated on a regular basis, but special discoveries could be announced to the press only at times when it is not likely to add to visitor-management problems.

Children will understand the story of a heritage site better if they can talk to actors playing historic roles, watch or even take part in re-enactments of great events, listen to ballads, or see Sound and Light performances with live actors. The actors should be present on the right occasions and the performances heavily publicized. The show should suit the specific audience; the information should be accurate, but some artistic licence may be permitted.

Visitor Management
Techniques of visitor management can ensure that the sheer number of visitors does not detract from general enjoyment of the site, prevent a proper appreciation of it or cause physical harm to historic resources. These techniques can also reduce maintenance costs and increase income.

Excessive visitor pressure can be reduced if there are other attractions nearby. These might include a zoo, aquarium, leisure park, beach or live entertainment. Since the most vulnerable heritage sites are those which are well-known and promoted, with no other attractions in the vicinity, tourist boards could be discouraged from over-publicizing vulnerable heritage sites. They can also help develop counter-attractions or divert attention to lesser-known heritage sites with spare capacity.
Peak loadings can be reduced if there is a booking system for coach parties and a limit to the number of visitors admitted at any one time.

Small changes in the times of arrival can greatly ease the pressures.

It is useful to have alternative routes for visiting parties so that if several arrive at once they can be separated, or taken on routes of different lengths.

Wear on floors can be reduced by putting down strip coverings of carpet, canvas, rubber, etc. Grass can be maintained by regularly moving footpaths a meter or so to one side. It is not so easy to repair the damage resulting from the touch of thousands of hands, or from human breath, and controls to keep people at a safe distance may be necessary in some cases.

Visitors should be allowed to view heritage sites at their own speed. Where, for security reasons or lack of space, individual viewing is not possible, the speed of circulation of guided parties can be varied and visitors given a choice between quick tours and slower, more detailed ones. As crowds inside buildings can raise the relative humidity to damaging levels, the number of visitors at any one time may need to be strictly controlled.

Visitor routes should allow for the natural tendency of people to turn left on entering any space.

Shops should be conveniently located near the entrance and exit of the site.

**Topic: Why Plan Interpretation? and What Sort of Plan?**

Objective: to understand how to plan an interpretative programme

Whether you are a group of individuals with a common interest in a site or a subject, or whether you are thinking of interpreting a place as part of a community initiative, you need to plan what you will do. An interpretive plan is a clearly written statement to which you can refer when you need reminding what you need to do, or when you are in danger of being blown off track. You can use it to encourage others to join you; and to show others that you know what you are doing. This is important when you apply for funding from agencies or sponsors: most of them will need to see that the projects they are being asked to support are well planned.

At its simplest, interpretive planning helps to make your communication more effective. It also means that you think about what else is happening around your place; this can lead to interesting links between sites in the area, and helps to avoid the same story being offered several times over. Interpretive plans can be part of larger plans – for tourism or economic development, or for the physical management of a site. Planning involves thinking about:

- Why you want to communicate with visitors;
- Who your visitors are;
- What your place is like, and what it has to offer;
- What else is happening around;
- What you want to say about your place;
- How, and where, you are going to say it.

### 2.1 How a Plan Will Help You

Going through this process, and writing down your decisions as a clear set of statements will help you because:

- You will have determined whether or not interpretation of your subject is appropriate, and what level of development you want.
- You will have set yourself some clear objectives, and know why you’ve embarked on the project. You can refer back to this if or when confusion creeps in.
- You will know who your audience is, and more importantly who it is not, so that you can plan your interpretation with a clear picture in your mind of the people and groups you are addressing. Many projects disappoint the people who implement them because they fail to communicate with large numbers of the 'general public', or because they were subconsciously designed to interest fellow professionals, few of whom are in the actual audience.
- You will have thought about where you want to encourage visitors to go, and where you do not want them to go, so that any fragile areas are protected.
- You will have considered what other interpretation is offered in your area, and planned your initiative to complement this rather than duplicate or compete with it.
- You will know what your themes are, so that you, your committee and your helpers don’t have to sit for days recording every snippet of potentially useful information about every aspect of your place.
You will also be forewarned and forearmed when someone tries to offer you a prized collection of objects which clearly don’t relate to the themes you want to present.

- You will have a clear understanding of which media are appropriate given the characteristics of your place and its sensitivity; your likely audience and how many of them you expect; the themes you are presenting; and the resources you have or can raise. Armed with this you should be able to deflect or dissuade the assertive member of your committee who has their heart set on the latest in elaborate multi-media shows.

2.2 FLOW THROUGH IT

Interpretive planning is a process in which the information you gather, or the decisions you make, about one issue will influence other issues and decisions. The diagram opposite shows how this works.

Start with some clear thinking about why you want to provide interpretation: this will affect everything else. Then decide who the interpretation is to be for, and what it is about your place that you want to interpret. You can then make informed decisions about how you’re going to do it. Chapter 5 will help you work your way through this process.

At some point you will also need to ask whether the interpretation is working as planned, and make any changes necessary to improve it.

It’s not all logic
The diagram looks like a computer flow chart in which each step leads logically to the next. As you work on your plan, remember that good interpretation is as much about creativity and intuition as it is about logical decisions. You might decide that a publication you can sell is the best medium for your aims, your audience, and the messages you want to get across. But to make it work you will need some lively ideas about the themes you will use, some sensitivity towards what your audience will find interesting, and a creative approach to what the publication looks like.

What if we already know what we want to do?
Many groups start with an idea for something in the what? box. It’s quite possible to short circuit the process like this, and for the idea to be perfectly right for your situation. But you do need to think about the issues in the other boxes of the diagram, and to do some honest appraisal of whether your idea really fits with the information you gather. This can only help your project. Thinking about themes, for example (see pages 7 and 24), will always make your interpretation more focused. In addition, any agencies which you approach for funding will expect you to show that you have thought things through.

2.3 WHAT SORT OF PLAN?

Some plans are blueprints for action. They identify what is needed, and set out how it will be achieved. Others may be a strategic framework for building consensus on your objectives, for assessing and agreeing the significance of sites, for applying for funding or other resources, and for agreeing how finance and staff are allocated. Chapter 3 gives more detail on the types of plan which are possible.

Most interpretive plans cover more than just communication with your visitors. You’re not only planning for better communication, you’re planning a development and management process, a visitor management programme and a visitor financial programme. You may also be trying to achieve other benefits related to conservation, sustainable tourism or community development. Chapter 1 gives more detail about these other issues.
A good plan is a public declaration of your intentions. It will help you find out where you are, where you want to be and how you are going to get there.

Before you start work, think about what sort of plan you need. You can choose to plan at one of two levels: to produce a **strategic statement**, or a **detailed plan** which will guide practical work. And your plan can cover a **specific site**, or a **wider area**. But you can’t write an interpretive plan unless you have something to interpret! Interpretation helps visitors to experience a place, to understand a topic or simply to enjoy a view. If there is no story to tell, interpretive planning becomes theoretical. It must be a practical exercise with real benefits.

### 3.1 STRATEGIC OR DETAILED?

**Interpretation strategies**

Strategies set out clear aims and objectives, but with limited detail. They give broad funding arrangements and budgets, overall priorities and timescales, and describe general management responsibilities. This demands clear vision and avoids a clutter of detail. Strategies are statements of intent which can gain support for a course of action. They are not programmes of work with detailed costings.

* A strategic plan aims to:
  - guide and co-ordinate the efforts of all those who want to play a part;
  - ensure comprehensive coverage of a large area or broadly-based topic;
  - establish guidelines for local, or subject-specific, detailed plans;
  - prevent duplication of effort;
  - encourage appropriate networks.

A strategic plan is the best way of dealing with a large area or a big subject. It gets everything in perspective and gives everyone a chance to consider the implications. It can provide an agreed structure within which several organisations can work, each developing their own interpretation. Alternatively, it can pull together existing plans to develop a cohesive approach and minimise duplication. It can also provide a framework for detailed plans which deal with particular sites or themes.

**Detailed plans**

For less extensive schemes or areas, a single site, or individual projects within a strategic plan, you will need a detailed interpretive plan which sets out a programme of work. The plan should give enough information to focus the proposals tightly so that they can be put into practice. This means:

- giving clear objectives, with targets for achievement;
- specifying precise interpretive themes, content, methods and media;
- estimating all capital and running costs, and sources of funds and revenue;
- setting schedules for action within agreed priorities;
- determining responsibilities for implementation, management and staffing;
- deciding how you will know whether you have succeeded.

When it comes to setting objectives, especially when identifying targets,
make sure they are realistic – can you achieve them? – and acceptable to all those involved – do you all agree? But don’t be faint hearted! Go for a little more than you think you can achieve.

3.6 HOW DOES INTERPRETIVE PLANNING LINK WITH OTHER INITIATIVES?

Interpretation is a means to an end. It can contribute to visitor management, conservation, the local economy, education, community pride and so on. Where possible, therefore, an interpretive plan should dovetail with other activities and initiatives to enhance their success, or gain from their operation.

For example, interpretive planning and interpretation should:

- share objectives, markets, themes and mechanisms with the marketing plan for a site, an area or a region – to ensure a consistency of message;
- be an integral part of strategic tourism development and promotion initiatives;
- be linked to the planning, development and operation of commercial heritage sites.

Interpretive planning and interpretation can also contribute to:

- school curriculum work, and to wider education at all stages of life;
- the development of recreation and the arts locally or more widely;
- the economic development of an area through increased tourism, more jobs, and a better environment;
- strategic and local planning policies by widening perceptions and introducing a thematic approach; the process of urban or environmental renewal.

Additional Readings

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Jones, Shar. Sharing Our Stories. The National Trust of Australia (WA) and Museums Australia (WA), 2007.


WEBSITES

Interpretation Canada, Canada - http://www.interpcan.ca/
Interpretive Development Program, USA - http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp/
National Association for Interpretation, USA - http://www.interpnet.com
Unit Summary

Good and effective heritage interpretation is crucial for the experience and satisfaction of heritage visitors and tourists.

Heritage guides play a key role in creating these visitor experience and satisfaction.

There is a need to plan and devise appropriate interpretation methods and interpretive talks for a given site.

A given site may have many different stories to tell. One interpretive strategy involves the use of themes. To do this effectively, heritage guides must:

1. Know their WHS well
2. Know their visitors well
3. Know their community where the WHS is located well
4. Be able to identify constraints and resources at their WHS

To do the above-mentioned tasks well, heritage guides should:

1. Develop a vision
2. Plan early
3. Involve the community
4. Be prepared for the unexpected
5. Monitor performances
Facts and FAQs

1. **What is interpretation?**
   Interpretation is the art of explaining the uncommon or new with language and images familiar to participants.

2. **What is the difference between interpretation and presentation?**
   The difference between presentation and interpretation are:
   “Presentation” denotes the carefully planned arrangement of information and physical access to a cultural heritage site, usually by scholars, design firms, and heritage professionals. As such, it is largely a one-way mode of communication.

   “Interpretation,” on the other hand, denotes the totality of activity, reflection, research, and creativity stimulated by a cultural heritage site. The input and involvement of visitors, local and associated community groups, and other stakeholders of various ages and educational backgrounds is essential to interpretation and the transformation of cultural heritage sites from static monuments into places and sources of learning and reflection …
   
   [Charleston Declaration on Heritage Interpretation, The US ICOMOS, 2005]

3. **What is the job scope of a heritage interpreter?**
   Heritage interpreters’ job is to help others understand and appreciate cultural or natural heritage through the use of various communication processes designed to reveal meanings and relationships.

4. **Where do heritage interpreters work at?**
   Where do heritage interpreters can work at, but not limited to the following sites:
   
   1. Historic sites
   2. Museums
   3. Art galleries
   4. Interpretive centres
   5. Aquariums
   6. Parks
   7. Zoos, industrial sites
   8. Adventure travel sites
   9. Nature sanctuaries
   10. Tour companies
5. Who is commonly regarded as the Father of Modern Interpretation?

Celebrated heritage interpreter, Freeman Tilden, is commonly regarded as the Father of Modern Interpretation.

Tilden advocates the following six principles of interpretation:

Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality of experience of the visitor will be sterile.

Information, as such, is not Interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.

Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.

The chief aim Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.

Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.

1. Interpretation addressed to children should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate programme.

[Interpreting Our Heritage, p.9]