

# Seasonal Interpretive Training at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks

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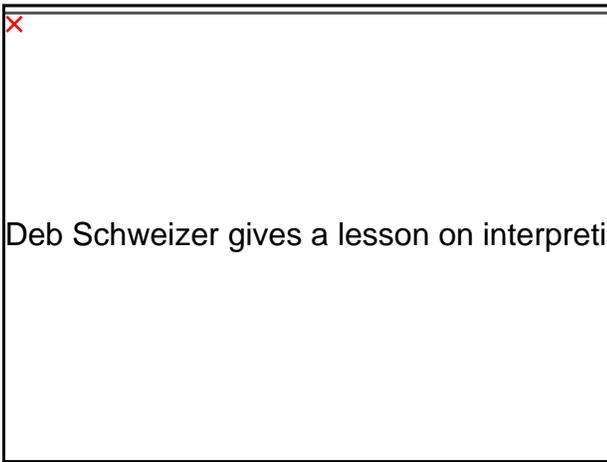
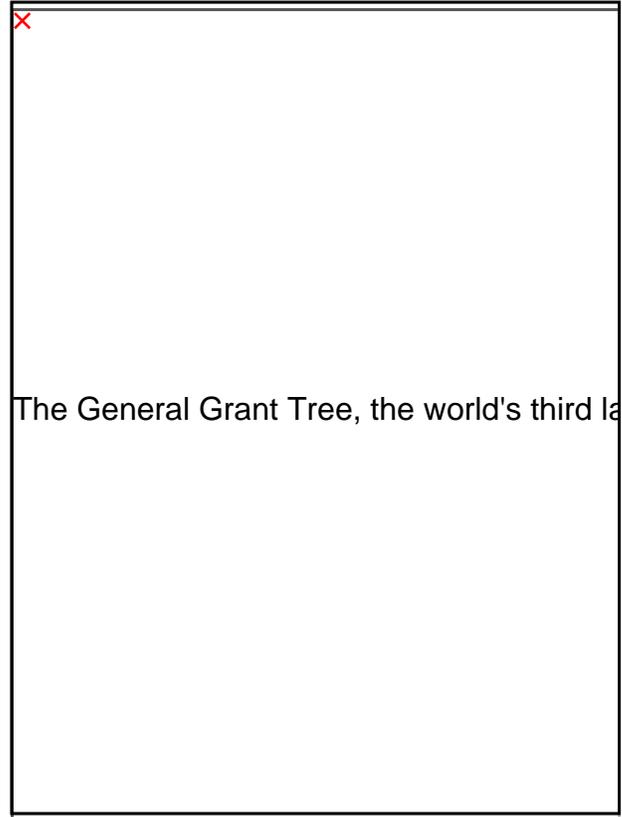
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In late May and early June I traveled to Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks to take part in an interpretive training course. I did this because a very important part of my job description is "educator and communicator." It is not my job to simply sit in front of a computer screen and create videos and write articles. No, it has been necessary for me meet face-to-face with people and help them understand what fire means to the National Park Service.

Before heading off to the Sierra, I took an online course on the art of interpretation, or as Freeman Tilden wrote "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." The class, "Foundations of Interpretation" was free through the Eppley Institute available online at eppley.org. Additionally, I've brushed up on my fire and NPS knowledge by reading relevant books and articles, as well as keeping informed of current fire activities. Lastly, I give periodic tours of the facilities here at the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC), so my speaking skills are gradually improving. Needless to say, I was excited to travel to California to apply what I've already learned to my classroom experience.

When I arrived at the park, I was stunned by everything I saw. The towering sequoias were simply astounding to look at. The drive into the park from Fresno to Grant Grove showed such an outstanding ecological difference: In the valley I was surrounded by farms, then brush, chaparral, foothills, forests and then finally the giant forests of the Grant Grove. I drove through and made my way to the Lodgepole campsite where I stayed the night.

On the first day we trained in Grant Grove in Kings Canyon. I met the training cadre and the seasonal employees that were there for the training with me. We discussed the NPS mission: what that mission means to us and various ways that message is imparted to the greater public. We also saw a fire interpretive lesson from Deb

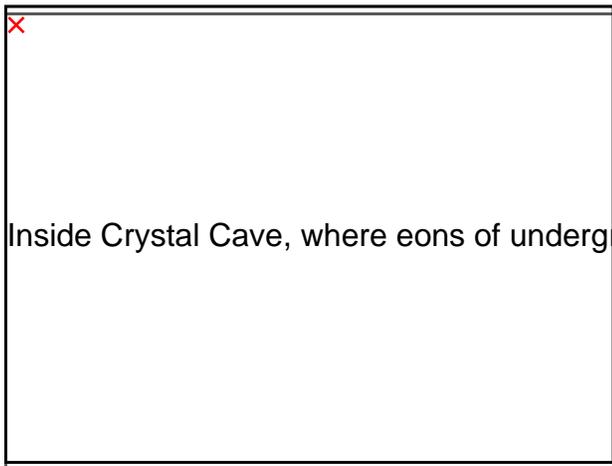


Schweizer, the Fire Communication and Education Specialist for the park. She helped us understand the ecological benefits of fire and the key elements of the park fire management program. Plus, she helped us understand the many challenges that come with interpreting fire.

Day two was at Ash Mountain in the foothills of Sequoia National Park. We saw presentations regarding the air quality, wildlife issues, cultural awareness, and climate change in Sequoia and Kings Canyon Parks. Each presentation equipped the seasonal employees with a general understanding of current issues facing the parks. The training, after all, was focused on

Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, the place where all these new employees would be working all summer. I played the part of outside observer, someone who was there for the experience, especially since NIFC does not frequently do hands-on interpretation. Still, I gained so much knowledge about creating interpretive programs, that I feel it was still worth it for me to attend the course.

There were in fact many universal interpretive lessons that the cadre taught us. Matt Fagan, the Sequoia North District Interpreter, was especially adept at explaining how to use tangibles, intangibles and universal concepts in order to connect with visitors and help visitors connect to the parks. For example, an interpretive ranger might explain the importance of the giant sequoia trees in a way that connects them to the pioneering spirit of early America. Or perhaps the ranger might explain how black bears protect their cubs by comparing such behavior to the way people raise their children--in turn creating those intangible and tangible connections between the audience and the subject.



On the third and fourth days of training, we made practical use of the lessons we learned. We spent time writing goals, objectives and themes, and applied them to an interpretive program plan. We discussed interpretive skills and techniques, worked on program introductions and conclusions, and how to anticipate different kinds of issues. Lastly, we discussed different courses that are available through the Eppley Institute.

The last activity we participated in was a tour through Crystal Cave in the foothills of Sequoia National Park. There, we observed cave tour guide Matt Springer apply many of the tools and techniques we had learned throughout the week.

My trip wasn't all training though. I spent one day hiking the Lakes Trail to Emerald Lake in the high Sierra. During the climb, I observed the changing vegetation from dense pine forests to the rugged and sparse

foxtail pine stands and rocky outcroppings of the higher elevations. I saw a bear and several yellow-bellied marmots. I stood at the Watchtower and took in a fantastic view of the Tokopah Valley, then ate lunch at Emerald Lake.

Overall, the training was a fantastic experience. I was well prepared coming in by studying the fundamentals of interpretation beforehand. The hands-on training I received in the park brought context to what I had already learned. From park-specific informational training to the universal and transferable interpretive lessons we received, the training was valuable on every level. I made some valuable connections with both the training cadre and the incoming seasonal interpreters who took the course with me. The setting we received the training in also made it worthwhile. Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks are beautiful places to visit, and the interpretive staff was well prepared to train the incoming interpreters. I only hope I will have a chance to visit the area again in the near future--either for work or recreation.

