



The Interpretive Journey

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Interpretation is a journey, a never-ending quest for excellence reaching for wide horizons and challenging frontiers.

Interpretation is a guide, leading national park visitors throughout our history from real park resources to their underlying meanings, from the tangible to the intangible, from sight to insight. Through orientation, information, and education, interpretation facilitates the public's participation in resource stewardship, helping people understand their relationships to and impacts on those resources -- helping them to care.

Interpretation is also a process -- dynamic, flexible, and goal driven -- leading from understanding to appreciation and through appreciation to preservation, the credo of the interpretive traveler. Done well, parks flourish; done poorly, parks perish.

You begin this journey. On it you will follow many tried and beaten paths and pause at many crossroads. You will travel in the hallowed footsteps of Tilden, Mather, Albright, and Mills, building on the turns and valleys they explored. Like them, be courageous in venturing onto uncharted highways. Like them, be open to new directions and destinations, remembering that your footsteps shape the history of interpretation and its legacy of enrichment.

Interpretation has many twists and byways, facets and definitions. It winds through many disciplines. It is a science based on accurate facts and current information -- methodical and exacting in its application of techniques and solid research. It is history-- portraying both the famous and the commonplace of human drama, chronicling not just dates and numbers but emotions, ideas, and universal concepts. It is art -- rooted in passion and love for parks, ever moving the visitor's journey through memorable and meaningful experiences. Interpretation challenges the mind but engages the heart and the emotions.

A journey of such significance has mission and direction. Interpretation's mission is the National Park Service's -- a strategic mission based on preserving park resources, forging binding ties between visitors and their heritage, perpetuating strong park partnerships, and ensuring the effectiveness of our organization in achieving its mission. Our destination is clear but destiny will be determined by our devotion to its accomplishment.

You are about to embark on this journey with your first steps in developing interpretive competencies. You stand on the brink of learning why, what and how we do interpretation. You will need guides and those guides are embodied in knowledge -- of the resource, of the audience, of interpretive techniques. But knowledge alone is not enough. YOU are the final

key element in this equation. With your interest, enthusiasm, competencies and skills you create the opportunities for interpretation to occur. YOU are the future of interpretive quality.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE RESOURCE is a constant discovery, the compass to new insights and layers of understanding about the mountains, structures, rivers, artifacts -- the national treasures we care for. It is cultural history in context and not just in facts. It is natural history as ecosystem and environment, not just genus and species. It is an adventure into new interpretations of people, time, and place -- the courage to face controversy and challenge.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE AUDIENCE is the realization that no "average" visitor exists. Our visitors are infinite in their variety, outlooks, values, and opinions. They exist both inside and outside park boundaries. They are not only the captive audience in a visitor center auditorium or the repeat visitors who love our parks, but also the cyberspace generations not yet at our doors or in the circle of our programs. They are old and young, national and international. They question and challenge old ideas and priorities, ask "why" the full dimensions of heritage are not yet explored. They must be respected as independent travelers on this journey of discovery, free to choose the meaning of the resource for themselves, free to determine what paths their stewardship will follow. And, in doing so, our journey will be exquisitely enriched.

Finally, YOU are part of this equation. KNOWLEDGE OF YOURSELF is essential because interpreters hold the ultimate responsibility and accountability for their own development. Interpretation is love, not lecture. Sensitivity, attitude, teamwork, and constant evaluation are the tools with which interpreters hone and evaluate their readiness to progress, understanding there will be obstacles along the way. Interpretive techniques and basic competencies are not islands but rather steppingstones to your career, the foundation for your future. Build strong because you construct a lifetime framework. The directions are in place; the pace is yours.

The interpretive equation is ever-shifting, but essentially stable. It is delicate balance, not perfect chemical formula. It is an intricate linkage where neglect of one part tragically weakens the whole. There is no one INTERPRETATION, no single perfect way, but rather multiple techniques and relationships, linking visitors with the real, the tangible, resource and its immeasurable intangible and universal meanings to forge a lifetime bond.

The outcome of the journey is in all our hands. To effect interpretation, we must first affect a memorable change within visitors, moving them to see a kaleidoscope of meanings with critical and wondering eyes. We are the facilitators of connecting visitors to resources. We are the catalysts for creating interpretive opportunities and outcomes. But interpretation instructs; it does not inflict. We can lead visitors to the brink of learning but the leap of caring and concern must be theirs.

Let the journey begin. As you take your first steps on the path of interpretive competencies, hold your eyes on the road but your heart in the stars. And may your journey never end!