

INTERPRETATION AND INCLUSION

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The purpose of this column is to address the need for improving our interpretation diversity. This is defined as a need to broaden both our techniques and our subjects to reflect a more diverse and encompassing education and interpretation program.

Column Notes

This is the third article in an occasional column on the In Touch bulletin board. Replies can be sent to me as can any articles for later dispersment. I am serving as an editor and will issue materials on an occasional basis. Comments, essays, notes, and news, are welcome. You can address to me by cc:mail "reply to this message" or find my name on the directory. (Remember - do not retain all original addressees!) Please indicate if your item is intended for future distribution.

Commentary: From Kent Bush, Regional Curator for the Pacific Northwest Region:

Currently I am serving as the Regional Curator for the Pacific Northwest Region, and have been in that position since 1980. I am a museum professional with extensive museum experience, both in and outside of the National Park Service. I also have a lot of first hand experience with park level interpretation.

The Service is unique in the museum world, in that the professional curator is not normally given a role in the exhibit and educational aspects (which the NPS calls "interpretation") of park and museum operations. Many of us currently serving as NPS Curators have lots of experience in these areas, but this experience has not really been recognized and used by our counterparts in Interpretation.

So it is from this background that I would like to make some observations on Larry Point's recent article, The Changing Visitor Pattern at Assateague Island in the February issue, and offer some suggestions for general comment.

Visitor patterns are indeed changing within the National Parks, and we Service professionals do not understand, and are ill prepared to deal with, what these changes are bringing. It is my contention that we no longer have a valid understanding of who is visiting our parks, and what their wants, needs and desires are upon arrival at the front gate. Since we lack this very basic understanding, we are not doing a good job of answering our visiting public's needs, and we are also not doing a good job of presenting the individual park theme, message, story, or values, to the receptive audience that has taken the time to seek us out.

Understanding these changing patterns is not about counting cars, and counting people, and estimating age and totaling attendance. It is about doing the necessary studies to determine what visitors need to know about us, and how to best fill that need. Larry Points has begun the process by asking some key questions:

- What is different about today's campers?
- Why the decline in evening slide programs?
- Are visitors bored because our park isn't Disneyland?
- Why are visitors "escaping" from Ocean City to the park?

The answers provided in the article were determined by Larry Points' observation of some visitors and their behavior:

- Lots of kids.
- Good, honest people.
- Decedents of those who once attended our traditional programs.
- Want to connect their kids to nature.

The point here is NOT a denigration of Larry Points' informal survey and conclusions: Quite the opposite. He was

astute to recognize that change is occurring, stimulated to record observations and extrapolate findings, and motivated to share these with peers.

My real point is that we need first to recognize that we are in the midst of GREAT change; In terms of WHO is visiting parks, WHY they are visiting parks, and WHAT do we need to know in order to fill these needs. And there are other questions that we need to ask, and ask in different ways from different groups, in order to develop a broader understanding of who the contemporary visitor is, and the type of information they require during their visit. Some suggestions might be:

What is the primary motivation for visitation -

By age

By gender

By ethnic/racial group

By economic status

How can we establish this primary motivation -

What kind of questions do we need to ask

How many groups (age, gender, et al) do we ask

How can we assure an adequate sample of responses

How do we assure candid response

What are the basic types of questions each group are asking about each individual park

Directional ("Where is the ...")

Security ("Is safe to camp in ...")

Empirical ("What is the little yellow flower ...")

Conceptual ("If the rain falls will the mouse ...")

How do we make sure our answers to these questions fill the needs of the visitors in each of the above groups?

How will we know if the various forms of our interpretive media are effective?

As Larry Points indicated in his article, more and more of our slender resources are being committed in attempt to serve visitor needs that we don't really understand. We are now in the mode of "reacting" to visitor pressure for various types of information, rather than determining what is needed, and how to put the best possible NPS and/or park message in the various message media that we use.

It is becoming very clear that the Service must begin to actively and accurately survey all elements of our visiting public. We need to do this as a normal, established part of our various park planning efforts, for example the development of focus groups truly representative of our visiting public to work with us in all levels of planning for services and interpretive media. We must also institute professionally run entrance surveys to determine visitor expectations, and exit surveys to determine how well these expectations were met.

Of course all of this comes with a cost - In terms of our shrinking budget dollars - In our treasured self image of "our" parks and their values - In our traditional methods of approaching park planning and development. We have become extremely arrogant in our perceptions of, and dealings with, the American public. We need to get back in touch with our visitor, to do a much better job of providing information, as well as developing an understanding and appreciation of these marvelous resources.

Kent Bush

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Reality Check

We often think of parks as being far from urban areas. This is often not true. Here is a reality check.

Largest 25 Cities in the U.S. and the nearest unit of the National Park System (1990 Census):

City Nearest Park Distance from City
 New York Gateway (and many other parks) In the city
 Los Angeles Santa Monica Mountains In the city
 Chicago Indiana Dunes Approx. 40 miles
 Houston Big Thicket Approx. 100 miles
 Philadelphia Independence,Poe,
 Thaddeus Kosciuszko In the city
 San Diego Cabrillo In the city
 Detroit Perry's Victory Approx. 100 miles
 Dallas Chickasaw Approx. 100 miles
 Phoenix Casa Grande Approx. 40 miles
 San Antonio San Antonio Missions In the city
 San Jose Golden Gate Approx. 70 miles
 Indianapolis William Howard Taft Approx. 110 miles
 Baltimore Fort McHenry In the city
 San Francisco Golden Gate, Ft. Point,
 San Francisco Maritime In the city
 Jacksonville Fort Caroline In the city
 Columbus Mound City Group Approx. 50 miles
 Milwaukee Indiana Dunes Approx. 140 miles
 Memphis Shiloh Approx. 100 miles
 Washington D.C. National Capital Parks
 (and many other parks) In the city

Boston Boston,Boston African
 American In the city
 Seattle Klondike Gold Rush In the city
 El Paso Chamizal In the city
 Nashville Stones River Approx. 25 miles
 Cleveland Cuyahoga Valley Approx. 6 miles
 New Orleans Jean Lafitte In the city