

BE RELEVANT OR  
BECOME A RELIC

Meeting the Public  
Where They Are

Originally presented at  
the George Wright  
Society Conference,  
April 19, 2001

David L. Larsen  
Stephen T. Mather Training Center  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior

Loren Eisely once wrote, “Life is a series of shooting sparks—all the rest is interpretation.” Most readers who are scientists or resource managers know science is capable of measuring, describing, and explaining much if not all of Eisely’s shooting sparks. I agree with them. For the scientist, some truths exist. Sure, attaining certainty is not easy. Those who know science understand that data requires interpretation and that explanations are challenged, refined, and change with the passage of time. Yet science assumes that if verifiable questions are asked and appropriate tests conducted, unified explanations, laws, schemes, models, and theories regarding nature are possible.

In the 21st century, the resources we have been charged to protect and manage will come under increasing pressure. I used to think I wanted to be a superintendent. Not now. It’s an incredibly difficult job. A manager has so many people to answer to—so many perspectives to consider. Most of those stakeholders do not have the scientific literacy of most resource professionals. What’s more, scientific explanation holds little relevance or power for many, even when they comprehend. People understand, value, and order life and nature in an incredible variety of ways for just as incredible a variety of reasons. Regardless of whether science does or does not provide the best explanations of the physical world, its boundaries do not contain all, or even close to all, constructions of meaning.

Whether that is good or bad, or whether science provides access to the only truth, are not a questions I am willing to debate. I think, though, we can all agree that different perspectives and ways of finding meaning in the resource exist. I present a vision of the profession of interpretation as well as suggest a relationship between interpretation and resource management, because I believe that embracing the variety of meanings that audiences see in the resources we protect and manage is a critical strategy for preservation.

Interpretation is a budding profession. It is in the process of defining its purpose, standards, and language. One of the problems with interpretation so far has been that there have been too many interpretations of interpretation.

One caricature holds interpretation to be interpreted. A quick joke: Too often, asking an interpreter a question is like trying to take a drink of water from a firehose. All that pressure and volume can be overwhelming. Unfortunately, such an approach ignores the reality that scientists, historians, and anthropologists all use data to say something about their subject. Even more importantly, interpreted fails to help the audience make personal connections to the resource. All interpretation must be built upon accurate and comprehensive information, but if audiences were simply seeking knowledge, most would have little reason to experience the site at all.

Another outlook describes interpretation as intertainment. This perspective is satisfied with a pleasant visitor experience and holds that interpretation is valuable only because it is entertaining. Certainly good interpretation needs to entertain and connect to audience interests, but intertainment warps the concept and fails to connect the visitor to the resource. It places the resource in the same arena with Disneyland.

Interpreganda is another. The primary goal of interpreganda is to convince the audience of the singular validity of a particular ideological or agency perspective. Audiences often know when they are being told how to think and don't like it. Interpreganda is mostly effective for visitors that already share the articulated point of view. Interpreters need to say something significant about their places, but proselytizing can do a great deal of damage.

Finally there is interprecaion. While education and interpretation are related and often overlap, there are significant differences between the two. Educational goals are usually directed at specific learning objectives. Formal education embraces, to varying degrees, testing and teacher accountability. Interpretation should support those goals. Partnerships with schools, Elder-hostels, scout, and church groups connect resources with institutions that have long-term influence over learning. However, interpretation can't be constrained by a test of knowledge at the end of a program. Learning happens in many ways outside the classroom and even outside the field trip. There must be more.

The National Park Service's Interpretive Development Program has been in existence since 1995. It sets standards of excellence and provides learning resources that motivate and enable interpreters to create opportunities for the public to form their own meaningful connections with the resource. The Interpretive Development Program was created by more than 300 field interpreters and is comprised of a curriculum that supports professional development in 10 interpretive competencies, such as talks, tours, interpretive writing, educational programs, media, and planning. The Interpretive Development Program also has a functioning peer-review certification system for each of those competencies.

The Interpretive Development Program views the resources we work with as tangible places and things and also considers the intangible meanings those tangible resources represent. Intangible meanings include, among others: systems, processes, relationships, values, ideas, and beliefs. Tangible resources can be viewed as icons that focus and reveal intangible meanings or connect the observers to something larger than themselves. This is true for the resource as a whole, as well as for all its parts, flora and fauna, furniture, and landscape.

What is essential to understand here is that tangible resources have little value for an audience or potential constituency without their context of intangible meanings. Further, those meanings derive, for the audience, a specific power and relevance because of their association with the tangible thing. Tangible and intangible resources require a connection or link to one another.

The Interpretive Development Program suggests that protecting and managing the tan-

gible resource alone is not enough. Perhaps Tanaka Shozo, an eminent Japanese Conservationist who died in 1911, said it best:

"The care of rivers is not a question of rivers but of the human heart."

Shozo uses the word *care* to refer to the tangible resource management that we are all familiar with. In that sense, he uses care in terms of *care for*—we all work to care for the tangible resource. Yet Shozo tells us that care is not about the tangible resource, rather it is "of the human heart." In this way, Shozo uses care in terms of *care about*. How can anyone come to support the care for the tangible resource unless they first come to *care about* the resource.

In essence, Shozo describes the role of interpretation. By linking tangible resources to their intangible meanings, interpretation helps audiences both *care about* and encourages them to *care for* resources.

This only occurs when resource professionals—and that would be you—understand the sovereignty of the visitor. Don't misunderstand. When I say the visitor is sovereign, I am not suggesting the customer is always right. Most of us work for protection agencies and appropriately prevent audiences from doing physical harm. However, in terms of what visitors believe, think, and feel, they are sovereign. No matter how much confidence we may have in our science and our professional procedures, no matter how enthusiastic and polished our presentations, the audience ultimately decides if the resource has value. The audience determines if they will care enough about the resource in order to support the care for the resource.

This requires that interpreters and other resource professionals meet audiences on their own ground. While it is easier to speak and write for those who understand our rules and think the way we do, an understanding of the resource challenges that lay before us will quickly illuminate the need to cultivate the support of the broadest possible spectrum of people and points of view.

The role of interpretation is to facilitate connections between the meanings of the resource and the interests of the visitor. Interpretation does not provide answers; it poses questions. Interpretation does not teach; it offers opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections. Interpretation does not educate; it provokes increasingly sophisticated appreciation and understanding. Interpretation does not tell people how it is; it reveals personal significance.

Central to effective interpretation is the understanding that resources possess a plurality of meanings. These meanings come from a variety of sources.

Meanings may be grouped in at least two important categories: ascribed and inherent. Donald Worster, the preeminent scholar of environmental history, writes of the Grand Canyon, "Environmental history looks very different if you stay up on the plateau, prowling around the human structures that have accreted here, than if you plunge deep within the chasm."<sup>1</sup>

First the ascribed.

Again Worster: "What we mean by nature profoundly depends on who is speaking and at what point and place in time. It is culturally determined." Surely most sites—natural, historic, and cultural, have been affected by the changing scholarship, tradition, folkways,

<sup>1</sup>All Daniel Worster quotes from the transcript of a paper presented by Worster at Albright Training Center, May, 2000.

societal conflict, geographical influences, and group identity that comes with time. Indeed, many will say that all meanings are the subjective projections of the values and beliefs of people in various cultures. It might be argued that parks, refuges, reserves, and museums are by definition cultural abstractions identified and labeled as something of value—something worth saving.

Yet others resist the abandonment of a reality or truth. They may recognize and even be interested in ascribed meanings, but for them, the resource has meanings that can only be described as inherent. Donald Worster recognizes that possibility as he leads the reader on a walk to Phantom Ranch at the bottom of the Canyon. “Something more, something larger, looms and impresses, challenges and defines. Beneath all the texts, beneath our constructions, a real Canyon, I believe, is out there, one that can be discovered and revealed, not merely one created by elites or nonelites.”

This revelation of the larger seems to be an essential function of science, the discovery and explanation of the inherent—the real.

But are inherent meanings restricted to the scientific? Worster doesn't comment, but ask a Hopi about the inherent meaning of the Canyon. If that person chooses to share something of significance and value they might describe a particular place in the Canyon as the source of their origin.

How about an artist—someone who moves in the ether of color or sound? Is the inherent meaning for them materialistic, theological, mythological, or aesthetic? Perhaps all of them?

The distinction between ascribed and inherent is important as meanings provide the fiber for personal connection—intellectual, emotional, and perhaps spiritual, for those who may or may not exercise stewardship. Those who hold a place dear often do so because they believe it contains the truth. It is difficult for them to see that others could view the place differently. And of course, here is the difficulty, one person's or audience's inherent meaning is another's ascribed.

The Interpretive Development Program holds that all these meanings, and many more, provide reason enough to care about the resource and develop grounds for caring for the resource. All are invited to declare with certainty that which is inherent and obvious, and that which is ascribed. The profession of interpretation has no need—or mandate from a democratic government, for that matter—to choose or disregard a particular truth. The profession of interpretation has a much more practical mission: to provide for both the protection and enjoyment of resources that connect us to our heritage—and perhaps for our very survival.

Don't misinterpret me. I am not advocating a relativism that holds all data, stories, and interpretations to be of equal value. The reader knows, certainly better than I, which ones hold the truth.

Interpretation in the field is a practical thing. What is relevant to the audience determines the starting point for successful interpretation. When interpreters do their jobs well, they meet visitors at the place where resource meanings are relevant to them, where the truth is inherent for them, and then provide additional opportunities for personal emotional and intellectual connections.

There is a marketplace of relevant meanings out there. Audiences are the customers. Interpreters need to recognize and be fluent in the meanings that are attached to their site, meanings that are common and those which are more obscure. In places where science is an

important part of the story, it will be a relevant and sought after commodity by a significant part of the audience. At those sites, leaving science out or diminishing its influence and power by automatically providing equal time to other perspectives simply won't be relevant to the majority of audiences.

But interpretation cannot just pander to existing perspectives. It also has the responsibility to provoke new feelings and new thinking. This responsibility to provoke is critical for satisfying the audience's desire to find something of personal value. Provocation provides access to ever greater complexity, understanding, appreciation, and attachment. It also allows for the accurate articulation and description of a variety of potential meanings.

Two examples: While interpreting a feature in terms of geologic time I might become aware that the person I am speaking with is a Creationist. To successfully provoke, I must first establish personal relevance. Dismissing creationism or taking up the evolutionist side of a dichotomy fails to do this. A successful interpreter, in these circumstances, knows that it is possible to believe in God and evolution and that many creationists embrace aspects of science. The individual may be a Flat Earther, a Geocentrist, a Young-Earth Creationist, an Old-Earth Creationist, a Gap Creationist, a Day-Age Creationist, a Progressive Creationist, an Intelligent Design Creationist, an Evolutionary Creationist, a believer in Theistic Evolution, or something else all together. *Whichever perspective the individual adheres to, their support for and participation in preservation and stewardship is equally valuable.*

An appropriate interpretive strategy might be to ask “You're a creationist—what kind?” The answer might allow us to discuss ways in which the feature might fit into the individual's belief system. In the exchange, I might agree that many creationists employ the methodologies and processes of science. In this way I'm hoping to establish personal relevance and an opportunity to provoke. I might use the conversation to move into descriptions of other ways the feature might be viewed—by native people, perhaps, or by scientists. I might explore the differences between creationists who use some science and canonical science, or “pure science,” by pointing out that creationists begin with the assumption there is a creator God. Conversely, canonical scientists assume the world has an objective reality that can be understood via observation, testing, and logical analysis, and that the existence or non-existence of God cannot be established by science. As an interpreter, I am not attempting to change the beliefs of my audience. Rather, I am striving for an ah-ha moment or the statement, “I never thought of that before.”

I can have a similar interpretive encounter with an individual who understands the workings of science and believes it to be the only valid means of explaining the natural world. Again, my role is to establish relevance and I might do so by engaging in a conversation about the power and aesthetic nature of science. Once relevance is established, I might then attempt to provoke by stating, “As useful and revealing as science is, it still doesn't answer all the questions. Science can explain how this feature developed the way it has, but it can't tell us why because it can't address the metaphysical. There seems to be a need in humanity for an understandable purpose that, so far anyway, our knowledge has not captured.”

Hopefully these examples illustrate the interpreter's role as a facilitator. The Interpretive Development Program does not suggest that any resource professionals abandon their beliefs and perspectives. Instead, resource professionals must take an anthropological position of understanding perspectives and diverse meanings, and stand outside of perspectives and meanings in order to communicate and provide opportunities for audiences to make personal, real, and significant connections to the resource. The resource benefits when

resource professionals are secure enough in their own perspective and beliefs to step outside those beliefs and enable others to care about the resource for their own reasons. The Interpretive Development Program teaches interpreters how to approach audiences in this manner and is beginning to hold them accountable for doing so.

There are many strategies that help implement these ideas. I wish to share a few strategies that I feel are especially important for all resource professionals, regardless of their field, to understand and utilize.

First: We need to know more about our audiences! Accurate and up-to-date knowledge of audience perceptions, the meanings they bring to our resources, the way they make personal connections, and how interpretive experiences effect them over time are tremendously valuable.

If we ask, “What does the forest mean to you?”—surely we will get a variety of answers. If the answer is “A place of solitude, renewal, and creation,” we need to create a certain kind of interpretive product. If it is a place “where I can get bitten by a snake,” we need to create another. If it is a place of economic opportunity, we need yet a third. If we get all of these answers and more, we need to plan and account for them.

The Interpretive Development Program is encouraging interpreters when they informally encounter audiences to ask questions like, “What did you hope to find here? What do you hope your children will take from this experience? If you had my job, what would you tell people? What did you think about when you saw the bison?” The collection of the answers they receive will not be scientific, but we believe these answers will create a greater understanding of audiences and more effective interpretive interactions than the old approach of “Where are you from?”

Second: Never replace an existing meaning or perspective with a new one. Doing so denies the sovereignty of the audience that holds a meaning as inherent, denies their connection to the resource, and creates unnecessary controversy. It is a mistake that occurs often as new information, methodology, and ideology develop. It can happen in official presentations as well as informal conversation. However it occurs, it undercuts stewardship. New meanings and perspectives should be introduced as an addition to or in relationship to existing meanings and perspectives. Interpreters first establish relevance, then provoke new understanding and appreciation.

Third: Present multiple points of view. Interpreting multiple points of view is a technique that respectfully, fairly, and accurately describes and explores two or more meanings, perspectives, opinions, ideologies, or ways of looking at the same resource or resources. Each meaning or perspective provides significantly different opportunities for the audience to make their own intellectual and emotional connections to the resource. These meanings or perspectives can be from the past or the present, may disagree or conflict, but may simply illustrate difference.

Interpreting multiple points of view is an effective interpretive technique for at least four reasons: a) it provides opportunities for more audiences to find more relevance; b) it provides opportunities for greater provocation; c) it creates an environment of respect that allows for dialogue rather than conflict; d) when controversial resource management decisions are made, it provides a moral high ground for the explanation of the agency's position.

Fourth: Know when a situation is interpretive and when it is not. A situation is not interpretive when the audience has no interest in opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource. This might happen when the situation is

charged with emotion—for example when the re-introduction of a species is feared as an assault on freedom. Or it might also occur when audiences have a strong political or ideological agenda. Of course these people deserve information and communication services, and those services might be delivered by an interpreter. But the goal of those encounters is not primarily to provoke greater care about or care for the resource. Often those audiences already do care a great deal about the resource. The controversy and maneuvering necessary in these circumstances require different and, obviously, very important skills.

Finally, it is important to recognize that resource management and interpretation have a great deal in common. They each apply different knowledge and skills to the preservation of the resource. I am the reader who agrees that both professions serve the mission more effectively when they work in relationship with each other.

Relationship is a key concept here. Interpreters are dependent upon resource managers' expertise and immediate experience of the resource. However, if either or both view that relationship as the simple handing off of information, if the multiple meanings of the resource are not taken into account, if the focus is on a single message that ignores the meanings ascribed to the resource by others, then critical opportunities for building constituency are missed. Interpreters are not simply the communicators of a resource management perspective. They are also the conduit through which resource management might better understand audiences and the ways in which the public finds meaning in and provides support for the care of the resource.

You can help. Support the professional development of interpreters at your site. Demand professionalism from them. If they are not familiar with the ideas and concepts presented here, direct them to the Interpretive Development Program. Encourage their participation.

Most specifically, Module 340: Advanced Research and Resource Liaison develops and measures interpreters' abilities in subject matter knowledge and research, knowledge of audiences, liaison with resource managers and other experts, and in the interpretive application of all of these. All of this material, content outlines, references and resources, as well as the assessment tool for certification are available on at [www.nps.gov/idp/interfor](http://www.nps.gov/idp/interfor) anyone who wishes to view or pursue them.

We all know the stakes are high. We face ever greater acceleration of change and an ever more diverse public. Can your resource afford to communicate only one meaning? Can your resource afford to speak to only those who already agree? If your resource does not clearly communicate a variety of meanings and values that engender care for, what will it be like in fifty years? One hundred? Two hundred?

Forever is a very long time.

Interpretation can help.

Be relevant or become a relic.