



Visitor Experience and Enjoyment

Interpretive rangers are responsible for interacting with visitors and for helping people make a connection to the resources of Point Reyes National Seashore. The function does this through three primary methods: visitor center operations, interpretation, and education.

Visitor Center Operations

The national seashore's three visitor centers provide the primary means for individuals entering Point Reyes National Seashore to obtain both essential and enriching information that enables them to have a safe, enjoyable, and educational experience at the park. All interpretive facilities offer opportunities for visitors to obtain in-depth information on natural and cultural resources found in the park and to become familiar with ecological and environmental principles.

Point Reyes National Seashore has received a 100 percent visitor satisfaction rating for the past four years, despite staffing challenges that cause the main visitor center to close at 5:00 p.m. amidst a steady stream of visitors arriving well past closing hours in the summer. Additional staffing would allow the national seashore to better meet visitor demand.

Interactions with staff help protect the national seashore's resources as well. For example, Point Reyes National Seashore is a nesting area for the endangered western snowy plover. The seashore found that visitors were bringing their dogs to the beach nesting areas of these birds despite posted signs informing individuals of dog restrictions. After implementing a docent program to educate visitors, 46 percent of chicks fledged from nests as opposed to 22 percent before the program existed.

Visitor centers provide valuable safety information. By interacting with visitor center staff, visitors are more likely to encounter warnings about potentially dangerous areas of the park including the area's attractive, yet dangerous, shoreline.

Interpretation

Interpretation at Point Reyes National Seashore consists of formal and informal interpretation and media development. Formal interpretation comprises all ranger-conducted, scheduled interpretive activities at the seashore. Informal interpretation allows for spontaneous interpretive contacts on trails or at facilities and other areas of the seashore. Interpretive media

include all seashore-produced publications, exhibits, bulletin boards, audio/visual programs, and the Point Reyes National Seashore website. Interpretive rangers also conduct special events such as the "Big Time" festival celebrating the Coast Miwok Indian culture.

Point Reyes National Seashore uses interpretation to foster public understanding and appreciation of national parks and their significant cultural, natural, and recreational resources, and to support preservation of these resources. The national seashore uses four interpretive themes to accomplish these objectives:

1. Point Reyes National Seashore and the surrounding marine sanctuaries protect and support an abundance and diversity of species and their essential habitats in a wild and natural state. These resources are a benchmark for monitoring environmental change.
2. The natural abundance of the Point Reyes region has attracted and supported people for thousands of years, creating a tapestry of stories, interactions, and experiences that continues to shape cultures and affect the land.
3. Point Reyes National Seashore provides an outdoor classroom and laboratory for the study of geological and ecological processes and changing land use values that will foster a greater understanding of and caring for America's public lands.
4. Point Reyes National Seashore is a land in motion where geologic processes continue to define the landscape and influence our lives.

Each employee is required to submit an interpretive competency certification as part of his or her performance appraisal. This certification is part of the National Park Service *Interpretive Renaissance*, which seeks to develop and implement professional standards, among other things. Current staffing levels do not allow for program auditing, which is a structured method for feedback relating to an interpretive program.

Education

The education program at Point Reyes National Seashore provides opportunities for students to experience and appreciate the natural and cultural resources of the park and the region. All programs and materials foster park stewardship and introduce students to a wide range of environmentally responsible outdoor activities. The education program is interdisciplinary, using

A Point Reyes National Seashore interpretive ranger leads visitors on the Earthquake Trail walk.
PHOTO BY KRISTIN GILLISS

“For us interpretation is the voice of the resource. We have a chance to help visitors experience the cool stuff we have here and to connect to the world around them.”

— JOHN GOLDA
POINT REYES INTERPRETIVE RANGER

science, art, and history as tools for cognitive and behavioral learning in topics that support park goals as well as local, state, and national curricula. Teams consisting of teachers, resource specialists, park partners, and park interpreters develop all materials and programs. During Fiscal Year 2006, the seashore reached over 6,000 school children with educational programs.

Point Reyes National Seashore also relies on partner organizations to provide educational programs to people of all ages. For example, the Point Reyes National Seashore Association runs the Clem Miller Environmental Education Center, which hosts overnight science camp programs. However, even with help from partners, the seashore must turn away a number of school programs each year due to the lack of staffing capacity.

Point Reyes National Seashore also provides curriculum and facilities to teachers who wish to use the seashore for science education purposes. The seashore would like to give funding assistance to schools for buses and other expenses so that teachers can bring their students to the area for hands-on education. These buses would be especially helpful in reaching underprivileged groups in more remote school areas. This type of funding is currently unavailable.



The Bear Valley Visitor Center offers opportunities for visitors to obtain in-depth information on natural and cultural resources within Point Reyes National Seashore and to become familiar with ecological principles.

PHOTO BY DAVID MIYAKO

VISITOR EXPERIENCE AND ENJOYMENT OPERATIONAL PRIORITIES

Maintain and increase visitor center operation levels. Point Reyes National Seashore has three visitor centers, which close in the early evening. The seashore would like to increase the operating hours of the visitor centers to accommodate user demand in the evening.

Incorporate technology into interpretation. Point Reyes National Seashore would like to acquire portable electronic devices to use in conjunction with interpretive programs. This would allow interpreters to reach a younger, technology-oriented demographic. The national seashore would also like to produce podcasts and to acquire additional bandwidth to enable a live webcam from the Point Reyes Lighthouse.

Continue producing high-quality publications and website content. The national seashore presently self-produces numerous publications. Multiple duties and time constraints challenge the abilities of the Visitor Experience and Enjoyment (VEE) staff to fully support this type of duty. Staff would like to continue producing high-quality publications and website content as their time allows. Additional time would allow for development of an increased number of educational and informative publications.

INTERPRETING WHICH LANGUAGE?

Though the title “interpreter” is not well known, interpretive rangers are among the most recognizable staff within the National Park Service. Interpreters operate the visitor centers, conduct ranger-led programs, and administer special events. Encounters with interpretive rangers are among the highlights of most visitors' park experiences. In contrast, environmental education at the national seashore is responsible for developing school curriculum related to park resources. The purpose of interpretation and education in the National Park Service is to provide memorable, meaningful, and inspirational experiences related to the parks and to strengthen public understanding of the full meaning and relevance of the nation’s natural and cultural resources. The sight of a ranger directing a group of people on a trail was once common. Mounting fiscal pressures have diminished this aspect of the national park landscape. Interpreters translate the language of the rocks, trees, animals, and cultures within an area. Environmental educators develop curricula for schools to use when teaching the next generation of environmental stewards.



The duties of an interpretive ranger at Bear Valley Visitor Center include visitor center operations, interpretation, and education.

PHOTO BY DAVID MIYAKO

Right: Point Reyes National Seashore visitors enjoy birdwatching at Chimney Rock. PHOTO BY JANE RODGERS

