Division of Interpretive Planning

Harpers Ferry Center

National Park Service

A Guide to Interpretive Planning in the National Park Service

DRAFT

Planning for Interpretation and Visitor Experience

The Planning Process

How can the agency meet visitor experience goals in the most cost-effective manner, considering long-term costs and sustainable values? Most interpretive planning teams go through some version of the following steps.

1. Prepare for planning:

- Review park legislation and management goals
- Review visitor studies and visitation statistics
- Become familiar with key resource issues and information
- Refer to subsequent and concurrent planning efforts
- Solicit input from stakeholders who won't be in the planning group

2. Identify and achieve consensus on the scope of the plan, and on overall goals and issues; include visitor experience, themes, resource, and management goals and issues.

3. Collect information and assess current conditions; include information on visitors, cultural and natural environment, media, programs and other visitor activities, issues, goals, other plans, etc.

4. Determine the best ways to achieve goals and provide desired experiences through interpretive media, facilities, activities, and contact with resources.

These phases may overlap, change, multiply or divide. Planning is both sequential and cyclic: a project has a beginning and an end, but earlier phases will often be revisited.

Planning is bringing the future into the present so that you can do something about it now.

Alan Lakein

Why Do Interpretive Planning?

Good interpretive planning ensures that essential park values and experiences are accessible to visitors, and that facilities and media are designed to accomplish visitor use and resource preservation goals. Interpretive planning will help park staff:

- develop consensus on a long-range vision for interpretation and visitor experience
- provide key visitor experiences while protecting resources and enhancing stewardship
- develop the most cost-effective and sustainable solutions to visitor and resource issues
- effectively use interpretation and education to meet management goals (outputs and outcomes)
- fulfill mandates to serve the public AND protect resources

Good interpretive planning ensures that essential park values and experiences are accessible to visitors, and that facilities and media are designed to accomplish visitor use and resource preservation goals. Planning should be a dynamic, continuing process, not only tied to development or solving the issue of the day, but a continuum that supports daily operations in the context of realizing a long-range vision for visitors and resources. On the other hand, planning is not an end in itself; good planning directs us to do smart, effective things, and helps us avoid doing ineffective or damaging things. Interpretive planning is needed because visitor enjoyment is part of the NPS mission, because there cannot be parks without visitors, and because resource preservation requires public understanding and support.

The People Involved

There are many ways to structure an effective interpretive planning team; it is doubtful that any one approach will prove superior in every situation. Team members should have the experience, knowledge, and time to do their assigned tasks. The following groups may be involved to varying degrees in the planning effort:

- park staff (preferably including management, field staff, various disciplines and divisions; consider including staff from another park)
- an experienced interpretive planner as team captain, leader, and/or facilitator (this planner might be an HFC planner or IDIQ contractor)
- interpretive specialists from the regional office
- media, facility, or landscape design specialists
- current and potential partners (especially Native Americans and/or other ethnic groups related to the park story)
- representatives of affected audiences, including park visitors and advocacy groups
- subject matter experts
- publication specialists (e.g., graphics, editing)

"Interpretation provides "opportunities for visitors to interact with park resources in a manner that is both safe for visitors and leaves the resource unimpaired. What has been termed "visitor experience planning" is the core of park planning and development.

Dave Dame

Men often oppose a thing merely because they have had no agency in planning it, or because it may have been planned by those whom they dislike.

Alexander Hamilton

It may be wise to try to involve everyone who will play a role in designing or implementing the recommendations. The final call on involvement usually rests with the park superintendent. Team captains must balance the values of including a wide variety of expertise with constraints of time, money and group dynamics. It is helpful to decide on the roster for the planning team and consultants early in the planning process; this may be recorded in a scope of work that is agreed to by all major participants. While short-term savings may result from a park providing their own planning, quality (and long-term savings) usually will be enhanced by including outside perspectives and guidance from experienced interpretive planners. Such planners work at Harpers Ferry Center, many regional offices, some parks, other agencies, and in the private sector.

WHAT SHOULD AN INTERPRETIVE PLAN INCLUDE?

The scope of an interpretive plan falls within a spectrum from design of a single exhibit or program through general management planning. In all cases, recommendations at the design end should be based on sound, relevant, and agreed-upon conclusions at the planning end.

There are several important general criteria for the form and content of interpretive plans. An interpretive plan should be the best possible representation of that particular planning process, that unique set of resources and visitors, that set of goals and recommendations, those contemporary conditions, and those assumptions about the future. An interpretive plan should also reflect relevant agency policies and guidelines.

Depending on the needs of each project, sections in addition to those discussed in this document may be useful for an interpretive plan. These include cost estimates, implementation schedules and responsibilities, resource and activity inventories, staffing, partnerships, study collections, preliminary designs, value analysis, and research needs and results.

In the balance of this chapter we introduce most of the elements commonly included in goal-driven interpretive plans. The overall goals, from mission through themes and objectives, are frequently defined in general management plans and strategic plans, and can be incorporated in the interpretive plan.

Good planning ensures that interpretive facilities, media, and programs work to-

More specifically, an interpretive plan should meet most of the following criteria:

- represent an accurate and useful version of both the consensus and the diverse perspectives that emerged during the planning process
- express significant, understandable, achievable, and appropriate goals
- involve major stakeholders, including subject matter experts, those who will implement the plan, and those who will be affected by the actions recommended in the plan
- recommend cost-effective, creative, accessible, sustainable, and achievable actions that meet visitor experience and resource protection goals, and conform to agency mission and park purpose and goals
- provide understandable and useful guidance to program, media, and facility planners and designers
- identify relationships and influences among related planning and management actions
- describe and picture significant resources and experiences sufficiently for readers who may not be familiar with the area
- convey major messages to various readers, including those who skim, those interested only in the major points, and those looking for a detailed analysis
- convey a sense of importance, significance, and passion for the resources, stories, and experiences
- help move the planning process to the next stages (design and production)
- be interesting, readable, and understandable

GOAL-DRIVEN PLANNING

Interpretive plans are goal-driven. They start with identifying the broadest goals relevant to the project or area. Within these broad guidelines, more specific goals and/or objectives are composed. The number and specificity of goal or objective statements will vary with each project. Relevant issues (problems) and assumptions (givens) are considered. Action elements may be associated with goals or issues. One purpose of working within a goal-driven framework is to make sure that consensus has been reached on the results to be achieved. Then discussion can focus on the best ways to achieve those results. This approach helps avoid the trap of automatically designing one's favorite medium or program without considering desired outcomes.

Example of Goals Used for Interpretive Planning

In the example below, the three bulleted items set the background for the articulation of "DEPO Goal for Interpretation #3:"

- Pacific West Region Strategic Goal #3: Engaging Youth: Release the power of the parks to invigorate youth to embrace the heritage of our country and health of the planet though a revitalization of citizenship and science.
- Primary DEPO Fundamental Resources and Values addressed by this goal: Opportunities for scientific study and shared learning about past, present and future environmental conditions and connected bio-geophysical processes.
- DEPO Significance: For a small area, Devils Postpile National Monument supports and maintains unusually rich ecological diversity reflective of its location at the intersection of three bio-geographic regions. The physical setting and context create exceptional opportunities for scientific study and shared learning.

DEPO Goal for Interpretation #3, Youth Involvement: Provide science-based learning opportunities for youth, and to help fulfill park goals, as a means of investing in future generations of citizens and resources.

PURPOSE

Purpose statements describe why an area was set aside, as well as what the purposes of the area are today. Legislation, legislative history, public participation, articles of incorporation, and agency rule-making can provide the basis for purpose statements. From these, the planning team derives clear, concise, and relevant purpose statements. Purposes may have been developed for a general management or strategic plan; these may then be incorporated.

Example of a Purpose Statement

The purposes of Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore are to:

- Preserve a portion of the Great Lakes shoreline for its geographic, scientific, scenic, and historic features.
- Provide opportunities for public benefit in recreation, education, enjoyment, and inspiration.
- Protect the character and use of the shoreline zone while allowing economic utilization of the inland buffer zone renewable resources.

The first two statements above elaborate on the traditional purposes of preservation and enjoyment. The third recognizes the park's legislated buffer zone.

SIGNIFICANCE

Significance statements describe the importance or distinctiveness of the area. These statements are based on resource inventories, but are more than an inventory. Significance statements may exist in area legislation, legislative histories, scientific and historical studies, or general management or strategic plans; the planning team needs to revisit these and update or clarify them if necessary.

Park significance statements:

- describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context;
- are directly linked to the purpose of the park;
- are substantiated by data or consensus; and
- reflect the most current scientific or scholarly inquiry and cultural perceptions, which may have changed since the park's establishment.

Example of Significance Statements from St. Croix National Scenic Riverway:

- The St. Croix National Scenic Riverway contains an unrivaled combination of exceptional natural, scenic, aesthetic, cultural, and recreational values.
- The St. Croix and Namekagon rivers serve as a protected north-south corridor and refuge for large populations of diverse flora and fauna including federal-listed and state-listed endangered species.
- Riverway resources occur at the convergence of the three major biomes: prairie, deciduous hardwood forest, and coniferous forest.
- A diversity of scenic, geologic, economic, cultural, natural, and recreational resources combine to provide an outstanding and accessible public resource in the Upper Midwest.
- The St. Croix National Scenic Riverway resources exist within close proximity to major urban population centers in the Upper Midwest.
- A wide variety of high-quality recreational experiences can be found along the Riverway that may satisfy visitor expectations from solitude to dynamic social interactions.
- The St. Croix and Namekagon rivers functioned as a traditional transportation corridor between the Great Lakes and Mississippi valley and retain cultural resources (archeological and historical) that reflect thousands of years of human use.
- As one of the original rivers designated under the 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway serves as a window into the environmental history of the United States and the revolutionary change from river exploitation to river protection.

Significance statements resemble interpretive themes, but may be larger in scope. Significance statements can lead directly to themes.

> Without goals, and plans to reach them, you are like a ship that has set sail with no destination.
>
> Fitzhugh Dodson

It is important to note that additional significances may have emerged since an area was originally set aside. These may result from new scholarship, acquisition of resources, or environmental changes. For example, Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park has added the significance statement:

- Due to extensive development in the area, the Park has become the largest free green space in the Atlanta region.

INTERPRETIVE THEMES

Interpretive themes organize large-scale meanings and concepts related to park's resources.

Interpretive Themes:

- are based upon park purpose and significance, resources, and values;
- reveal and clarify meanings, concepts, contexts, and values represented by park resources;
- provide guidance to develop visitor experience; and
- focus visitor understanding and appreciation of the significance of park resources.

The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

Themes must be accurate and reflect current scholarship and science. Sound themes encourage exploration of the context in which events or natural processes occurred and the effects of those events and processes. They go beyond a mere description of the event or process to foster multiple opportunities to experience and consider the park and its resources. Themes help to explain why a park story is relevant to people who are connected, as well as those who are unconnected, to an event, time, or place.

While themes are important as an organizational tool to guide management decisions, they are not intended for public use. The themes offer park staff guidance to develop visitor experiences, and what matters to the public is how these themes are represented through park services, media, programming, and facilities.

Examples of Theme Statements:

Following are the revised interpretive themes for Casa Grande National Monument:

- Diverse oral traditions of ancient Sonoran Desert people and the evocative Casa Grande Ruins provide insight into the ability of humans to thrive within the constraints of challenging natural conditions, and raise questions about the sustainability of a modern society that does not live within those constraints.
- The ancestral people of the Sonoran Desert applied traditional knowledge of engineering, hydrology, and astronomy, and practiced economic and resource planning that enabled them to live comfortably throughout the region.
- The cultural landscape of the Gila River Valley, which includes Casa Grande Ruins and surrounding communities, has been home to ancestral Sonoran Desert peoples and their descendants for thousands of years. This landscape is sacred to the people of the six traditionally associated tribes and speaks of ancestral homeland, identity, and tradition.
- The establishment of Casa Grande Ruins as the first archeological reserve in 1892 sparked the beginning of America's archeological preservation movement, from which we all benefit today.

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Interpretive planning describes visitor experience opportunities. We cannot require that visitors engage in these activities, learn these facts, notice these feelings, or marvel at this vista. But we do identify the important experiences that should be available. Important visitor experiences may deal with emotions, impressions, relationships, or other subjective elements that may be difficult to express in a linear or objective manner. They are nonetheless essential. Do not let perceived "fuzziness" or lack of specificity prevent you from describing important visitor experiences. But all experiences should relate to park purpose, significance, and desired outcomes.

Visitor Experience Goals

The planning team lists the important experiences that should be available to visitors. Experiences include knowledge, attitudes, behavior, and sensory experiences. The knowledge portion is covered by interpretive themes. But don't stop there; few visitors come to parks just to learn information. Visitor experience goals describe opportunities for visitors to derive meanings and values from park resources and experiences.

Visitor experience goals describe opportunities and targets rather than achievement; they don't have to be measured to be useful.

Visitor experience goals and statements lead directly to interpretive media, activities or facilities; they help planners decide among various options for activities and media; and they help designers craft specific approaches to media and facilities.

Example of visitor goals from Andersonville National Historic Site:

Visitors to Andersonville National Historic Site should have the opportunity to:

- Locate the site easily from major transportation corridors.
- Access basic information and orientation to the site quickly from all key entry points to the site.
- Explore and make a first-hand connection with some of the key sites and stories of this historic place.
- Gain a basic understanding of the Civil War and Andersonville's role in it – in particular, that
- Andersonville was never a battlefield, and that soldiers arrived here by train after capture at major battles much farther north.
- Visit and become engaged in the themes and stories portrayed in the National Prisoner of War Museum.
- Understand and appreciate that Andersonville National Historic Site is a National Memorial dedicated to all U.S. Prisoners of War in all wars.
- Use self-guided tour materials, museum materials, or assistance from interpreters to pursue some of the many stories and perspectives on Andersonville, the Civil War, or the POW experience according to their own individual interests.
- Be able to access online records and archives relating to individuals, states, or military units known to have been imprisoned or buried at Andersonville.
- Tour the Andersonville National Cemetery and explore its different areas and monuments.
- Enjoy a quiet, peaceful atmosphere conducive to contemplation, solitude, and respect.

AUDIENCES

Planning for audiences includes considering motivations and expectations, and projecting and predicting trends. Visitors are individuals; but describing major visitor groups yields potentially useful approximations. Targeting groups such as elementary school students, family vacationers, website users, interstate travelers, backcountry users, or beach users enables planners to better identify and serve primary audiences. It is also important to identify those who aren't coming to the park, and ask if there are issues of access or opportunity. The planning team may consider ways to reach out to previously uninvolved audiences.

Real park audiences differ in many ways: age, gender, ethnic backgrounds, expectations, types of groups, frequency of visits, socioeconomic status, education, and knowledge. Not all differences are significant. Time, money, and patience usually prevent audience analysis in exhaustive detail, but the major segments and relevant differences should be described. Planners and designers should try to match visitor diversity with experiences suited to the major groups represented (as well as matching experiences to resource conditions, fragility, and accessibility). Think about addressing the following questions about audiences in your interpretive plan:

- How many people visit the area? in what patterns (daily, weekly, seasonally, yearly, ...)?
- How long do they stay?
- Where do they come from?
- Why do they come? What are they interested in?
- What do they expect from their visit? What do they know about your area, resources, stories, regulations, opportunities, etc.?
- Who is not coming, and why?
- How do visitors feel and what do they think about your resources, experiences, facilities, and staff?

There are many practical considerations regarding information about audiences. For each interpretive plan, you need to decide on what information is most important, and how accurate does that information need to be?

The second question, how accurate should the information be, should be addressed before determining how you will get that information. A useful concept here is the confidence level: the probability that the conclusions represent reality. A university researcher submitting a thesis or a paper to a professional journal might choose a 95% confidence level, whereas an agency decision maker might settle for somewhat less. Research costs are often directly proportionate to the confidence level of the results, so managers and planning teams need to decide how much accuracy you are willing to pay for.

Approval by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) may be required for federal agencies to use appropriated funds to formally interview or survey visitors. Approval generally will be granted for legitimate research that has some thought behind it and is intended for specific purposes. Most discussions with visitors do not require OMB approval. You can, AND SHOULD, talk to your visitors. Asking "which exhibits did you like the best?" and "what was it that appealed to you?" can reveal patterns and indicate effectiveness, while being an enjoyable conversation for visitors and not requiring approval. Perspectives on visitors by front-line staff are especially important to the planning process.

FUNDAMENTAL RESOURCES AND VALUES

These are the most important ideas, tangible resources, or intangible values to be communicated to the public about a park and that warrant primary consideration during planning and management because they contribute to significance and are critical to achieving the park's purpose.

Fundamental (and other) resources and values are described within an LRIP by their significance, visitor experience goals related to those resources, and their associated interpretive stories. The degree of detail will vary. Too little detail can lead to ambiguity and misinterpretation by readers; too much detail might obscure the main points of the plan and discourage some readers. Resource descriptions should usually include assessments. These can summarize what we know about the health of park and regional ecosystems, habitats, species, and cultural, social, and recreational resources. Resource conditions can then be related to visitor experiences.

Humans impact natural and cultural resources in many ways both positive and negative. Influencing visitor behavior requires more attention to attitude and behavior change than do more traditional interpretive efforts. Influencing resource-related behaviors requires management and communication strategies that relate to the ways that people form their attitudes and beliefs, how those attitudes and beliefs relate to behaviors, and how decisions about behavior are made.

There are three aspects of resources that are especially important for interpretive planning teams:

- What are the primary resources, and the stories and values associated with them, that we want to interpret, provide access to, and protect? What are the characteristics, conditions, changes, influences, and relationships?
- What are desired future resource conditions?
- What are the visitor behaviors that affect these resources, how do they affect them, and how can we influence behavior to help meet our mission and achieve our goals?

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Examples of resource-related behavior:

- hiking on or off trails wildlife viewing, studying, feeding, disturbing, or poaching; plant viewing, studying, or collecting vandalism or respectful enjoyment of resources thoughtless and dangerous behavior, or careful and safe behavior
- public involvement (social, political, and economic), or lack of interest about or opposition to resource goals
- sustainable or destructive visitor experiences
- land developments or habitat preservation outside protected areas
- compliance with or violations of regulations and policies

SUBJECT MATTER KNOWLEDGE

Interpretation helps visitors move from tangible experiences to under-standing systems, relation-ships, processes, and meanings. Insuring that our interpretation is relevant and contemporary requires frequent reevaluation of existing facts, identification of new sources, consideration for different points of view, and reconsideration of past themes.

Planners work on a variety of projects which involve many types of resources, stories, and subject matter areas. No one can be an expert in all areas; but planners must be willing to learn what is important for each project. Resources can include: beams and bricks from an old Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls; geysers, hot springs and fumeroles in Wyoming; an apple orchard in Zion Canyon; petroglyphs at Saguaro; tide pool denizens at Acadia; a Navajo rug and its creator at Hubbell Trading Post; a tall grass prairie in Kansas; a cornfield at Antietam; solitude in the Mojave desert; and words to an old spiritual, "Follow the Drinking Gourd."

Interpretation helps visitors move from tangible experiences to understanding systems, relationships, processes, and meanings. An interpretive plan may suggest how history can be narrated to show multiple perspectives and the relationships of events, and encourage visitors to derive personal meanings. Gaining these insights involves research, critical examination of evidence, selection of facts, and synthesis of these facts into meaningful interpretive narratives.

Interpretation is not just a collection of static facts; rather it seeks to provide visitors with a better appreciation and understanding of resources and experiences. Insuring that our interpretation is relevant and contemporary requires frequent reevaluation of existing facts, identification of new sources, consideration for different points of view, and reconsideration of past themes. Cultural resource specialists attempt to answer the classical questions of who, what, why, when, and how, by organizing known facts into illuminating or provocative patterns.

Humans decide what is worth knowing about our world and our past. What in our past holds meaning for us individually? as children? as women? as men? As Americans? as American Indians? as descendants of immigrants or of the enslaved? as laborers? as business owners?

In planning for the interpretation of our parks we must challenge ourselves to gain the knowledge of audiences and other resources that will allow us to facilitate links among them.

Sound research methodology can help planners:

- present accurate messages
- present balanced and complete messages
- present single objects (e.g., organism, place, person, event) within larger contexts (e.g., ecosystem, landscape, community, period)
- provide an understanding for the evolution of thought as it relates to a specific place, organism, object, or event
- present multiple perspectives, voices, and interpretations
- select and analyze evidence
- deal with contradictory evidence
- deal with controversial issues and themes
- use different models or methodologies for interpreting evidence
- identify connections among processes and events
- find original and secondary sources

RECOMMENDATIONS

Interpretive planning teams recommend ways to meet park goals through interpretive media, facilities, and activities, and through direct experiences with resources. These are not prescriptions; many recommendations are likely to be modified in the design process. All modifications should meet the original goals. Goals may be modified, but this should be a formal process and incorporate all stakeholders. Recommendations should constitute the most cost-effective means of achieving desired outcomes. Whether or not a formal value analysis is conducted, alternatives should be considered, choices should be based on comparisons of benefits and costs, and decisions and rationales should be documented.

Interpretive Media

Interpretive media selection is as much art as science. There is rarely only one way to achieve a goal. Involving specialists in key media is highly recommended. Each situation has its own particular mix of factors to consider. Some of the most important elements in a media decision are: message, audience, and resources.

Message

What is to be communicated affects the method of communication, and vice-versa. Is the message simple or complex? Is it an abstract concept that can only be presented verbally or are there graphic components? Does the concept require a specific sequence or chronology to be understood? Is it helpful or necessary to involve many senses? How can we make the messages attractive? compelling? relevant? What priority does this information have in relation to the overall interpretive program? What are the desired outcomes of this communication?

Audience

The more detailed the audience profile, the easier it is to select appropriate media.

- What knowledge and expectations are they likely to have when they arrive at the site?
- How much time do they have?
- When would this information be most useful: before, during, or after experiencing the resource?
- What primary languages? literacy patterns? ages? group types? cultural differences?
- What are their motivations for coming to the site?
- What physical abilities do they have?

Resources

The quality and quantity of resources available to support media development will not only affect the kind of media selected, but may determine the feasibility and cost of production. Are there landscape elements to support the message? Are they accessible? How much information is available on the selected subject? Has the accuracy of the information been certified? Are there additional perspectives that should be interpreted? Are quality photographs and other graphic elements available and can the proper use rights be obtained? Does the message rely heavily on the use of artifacts and are these artifacts extant and available? Can the artifacts be adequately protected while on display? Common types of media used to deliver interpretive messages include audiovisual products, museum exhibits, wayside exhibits, publications, and personal services. Each has qualities which make it more or less suitable for a given application. Some of the recognized strengths and limitations of each medium are listed below. Note that these are generalizations; exceptions can usually be found.

AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA

Advantages

- Well suited to the presentation of chronological and sequential material
- Can capture realism and provide emotional impact
- Provide opportunities for dramatization
- Can be portable for off-site use
- Provide views of places, animals, plants, and seasons otherwise unavailable or inaccessible
- Can create a mood or atmosphere
- Can reach many visitors at one time
- Can be adapted to serve physically impaired visitors
- Can illustrate before and after effects
- Can be produced in different languages

Limitations

- Cannot be used everywhere
- Require back-up equipment, periodic maintenance, and regular monitoring
- May be perceived as sterile or impersonal
- May offer little opportunity for visitors to browse or study an item in depth or at their own pace
- Repetitious sound tracks can annoy visitor center staff
- May be a visual or auditory intrusion
- Production and maintenance costs can be expensive
- People usually have high expectations of audiovisual media; low-budget products can fall short of expectations

HISTORIC FURNISHINGS

Advantages

- Offers visitors a special interpretive experience by allowing them to go inside historic spaces
- Being surrounded by historic artifacts helps visitors feel that places "come alive," and relate more directly to the historic events and personalities commemorated by parks
- Frequently historic furnishings researchers unearth new archival resources, make new contacts, or discover previously unknown artifacts that add to the site's interpretation
- Experiencing an accurately reproduced historically furnished room helps visitors develop a visual vocabulary of material culture and decorative arts

Limitations

- Expensive to maintain due to security, housekeeping, and conservation costs
- Accessibility can be a problem because of narrow hallways and doorways for visitors in wheelchairs, and low light levels for visually impaired visitors
- Historically furnished rooms usually cannot "stand alone," but require some kind of additional interpretation (e.g. tour guides, interpretive panels, audio stations, etc.)
- Barriers can block sight lines or seem obtrusive, but are necessary if room is not restricted to visitors on guided tours

MUSEUM EXHIBITS

Advantages

- Can be viewed at visitors' own paces
- Can display objects associated with the site
- Can incorporate artifacts, artwork, or mixed media to produce desired atmosphere and effects
- Can transcend language and cultural barriers
- Can promote the use of the senses to aid the perception of the able-bodied and handicapped visitor alike
- Can promote visitor participation
- Can be designed for both indoor and outdoor use
- Are well suited for ideas which can be illustrated graphically
- Permanent exhibits can be grouped with rotating, seasonal, or temporary displays to provide a sense of change
- Can provide experiences of varying complexity, allowing visitors to select the depth they choose

Limitations

- Are sensitive to agents of deterioration
- Require security and maintenance
- Must be housed in adequate facilities
- Exhibit materials may have high commercial value, making them targets for theft
- Can be very expensive
- Inexpensive exhibits may look amateurish, and are usually less effective than higher quality (and more expensive) productions
- Technology and materials can overwhelm the message

SOCIAL MEDIA

Advantages

- Can engage immense numbers of people who might not be reached through other media
- Allows active engagement from, and two-way conversations with, virtual visitors
- Can be used for emergency alerts, networking, recruitment, information, and interpretation
- It may be possible to update several social media sites through one channel (such as park website)
- Establishes an official digital presence, which in many cases is necessary as a measure to offset rogue sites

Limitations

- Social network sites require continual monitoring
- User posts may require park to provide information or answers
- Postings must occur regularly
- Park will not be able to totally control messages
- Negative commentary must be handled on an individual basis

To get consensus usually requires agreement first on goals. Disagreements frequently occur at the "how" level. By stepping back and discussing "why" and "what", consensus can often be reached at a higher level. Then discussions can focus on the best ways to accomplish agreed-upon goals.

PERSONAL SERVICES

Advantages

- Direct human to human communication is often more enjoyable to visitors than communication by impersonal media
- Can easily be customized to meet visitor needs or changing conditions
- Can use group/visitor reactions to stimulate interest
- Can be interactive
- May be monitored and changed accordingly
- Tap diverse skills of interpreters
- Versatile, effective, and relatively easy to implement
- Can be cost effective, especially in the short term
- Can convey complex messages, and help visitors connect tangibles and intangibles to universal concepts

Limitations

- Require well-trained interpreters
- May not give consistent messages
- Require close supervision and management
- Can be difficult and expensive to maintain year round
- High recurring costs
- Can be difficult to critique properly

PUBLICATIONS

Advantages

- Are portable
- Can treat a subject in-depth
- Provide a source of detailed reference information
- Can be produced in different languages
- Suited to presenting sequential or complex material
- Can be read at visitors' own pace
- Can produce income
- Can often be revised at a reasonable cost
- Can be produced at various levels of detail
- Have value as a souvenir, something to take home
- Can be used before going to a site, during the visit, or after returning home
- Can be produced to treat the same subject for different audiences
- May be appropriate for stories lacking in artifacts or photographs

Limitations

- Can discourage potential readers with lengthy and/or complex texts
- Can be a source of litter
- Require periodic revision to remain current and accurate
- May require facilities and maintenance (such as brochure dispensers)

WAYSIDE EXHIBITS

Advantages

- Can be available 24 hours a day
- Use real objects and features in their own setting as objects of interpretation
- Are relatively inexpensive
- Can be designed to blend with site environment
- Provide onsite interpretation of specific sites and stories
- Can depict a place as it appeared many years before
- Can show a feature from a view unattainable by visitors
- Can illustrate phenomena that are invisibly affecting a resource
- Establish a park identity at remote, unstaffed locations
- Alert visitors to safety or resource management issues at the point of danger, decision, or environmental impact
- Can be replaced relatively quickly and inexpensively

Limitations

- Limited amount of text and graphics per panel
- Don't work well for complicated subject matter
- Focus attention on tangible resources; less effective with intangibles and universal concepts
- May intrude on a park's visual landscape
- May not be practical at sites with climatic or environmental extremes
- Susceptible to vandalism

HAND-HELD DEVICES

Advantages

- May increase accessibility of information
- Can capture information and scenes for future viewing or listening
- My allow for enhanced reality or other special effects

Limitations

- May require site to have cell phone or internet coverage
- Only useful to those who own or can borrow the devices
- May detract from natural sounds and experiences
- Devices may become obsolete

INTERPRETIVE PLANS AND FACILITY SYSTEMS

Following is some background material which may help interpretive planners figure out how facility systems may fit into their plans. For example, an LRIP may suggest that the interpretive division:

- Submit a non-asset project to PMIS
- Submit an asset project to both PMIS and FMSS
- Work with the park's facility manager to obtain the FCI and API for assets which are important to visitor experience, in order to justify recommendations

The interpretive division of a park may have many funding needs. Some needs are addressed in-house, as park divisions compete for shares of the park's base funding. Other "soft" funding sources, such as VIP and PAC (Volunteers in Parks and Parks as Classrooms) require that projects are entered into the PMIS (Project Management Information System) to compete for funding with other parks.

Beginning in 2010, it has been required that projects involving real property be entered into PMIS. For interpretation, these may include waysides and exhibits. The reason that these media projects must now be entered into PMIS is that interpretive projects of this type can now compete for several funding sources which were previously available only to maintenance (cyclic and repair/rehab funds.) These funding sources require that projects be entered into FMSS (Facility Management Software System), and FMSS requires a parallel PMIS entry, as well as a great deal of other information such as replacement cost and remaining life.

PAMP (Park Asset Management Plan) is a process representing the primary steps required to properly maintain and account for physical park assets. Some park assets are closely tied to visitor experience, such as trails, visitor centers, waysides, and seating areas. When a park makes decisions about an asset, for example, which entrance pavilion needs to be repaired and which needs to be torn down, PAMP provides the guidance to make the right decisions based on FCI and API, as described below.

FCI (Facility Condition Index) is a measurement of a facility's relative condition at a particular point in time. The FCI utilizes a numeric rating system whereby assets are ranked. Dividing the cost of all deficiencies (corrective action) by the Current Replacement Value (CRV) for the asset gives you the FCI.

API (Asset Priority Index) is a numeric rating that quantifies the value of an asset in relation to the mission of the park. The API criteria are weighted based on their importance to NPS core priorities: the importance to mission, importance to park operations, and substitutability.

Combined, the FCI and API provide direction for how to manage park assets. Being aware of the API and FCI indexes may help interpreters determine where to focus interpretive efforts: there is no point in planning for a future commemorative event to be held in barn, if the API and FCI suggest that the building is not important to the park's mission, in poor condition, and slated to be demolished in three years.

LANDSCAPES

The challenge for interpreters and planners is to help visitors experience landscapes in beneficial, enjoyable, and sustainable ways, and help them relate experiences to more intangible values, meanings, and traditions. Interpreters and planners should consider landscapes when addressing resource significance, visitor experience goals, and interpretive themes.

There are landscapes that are so recognized as having special qualities that their mention conjures images in the mind's eye: Maine's rugged coastline, cornfields in the Midwest, Florida's Everglades, the red rock country of Arizona and Utah. Other landscapes, associated with historic events or people, are just as recognizable: New York City's Central Park, the streets of Harlem, the plaza in Santa Fe, New Orleans' Bourbon Street, the White House south lawn.

What are the special qualities associated with these landscapes? Why and how do we connect with certain landscapes?

Landscapes, whether Yosemite Valley or the neighborhood where we played as children, have

qualities that can be identified, documented, protected, and interpreted. The challenge for interpreters and planners is to help visitors experience landscapes in beneficial, enjoyable, and sustainable ways, and help them relate experiences to more intangible values, meanings, and traditions. Historic preservation traditionally has focused on buildings. A holistic approach to preservation, involving both cultural and natural resources, has been practiced only recently. Cultural landscapes include: historic sites (associated with important events, activities, or persons), historic designed landscapes (deliberate creations reflecting recognized styles), historic vernacular landscapes (illustrating values and attitudes toward the land and reflecting patterns of settlement, use and development over time), and ethnographic landscapes (associated with contemporary groups and typically used or valued in traditional ways). Landscapes illustrate human adaptation and use of natural resources, and provide a setting for past and present human activity.

A cultural landscape can be "read" on many levels: as nature, habitat, artifact, system, problem, wealth, ideology, history, place, and aesthetic. Few of us have learned to recognize historic land use or settlement patterns, or to identify constructed elements of a landscape, let alone realize that change is an important aspect in considering landscape character. Interpreters and planners give visitors tools for appreciating landscapes by explaining broad historical, social, and physical contexts; by describing lost character-defining features; and by explaining historic themes and associations. Interpreters and planners should consider landscapes when addressing resource significance, visitor experience goals, and interpretive themes.

Interpretation can be linked to the landscape's ability to convey the past through its character and defining features. The level of integrity (i.e., the degree of visual change over time or the similarity to an earlier era) may affect the types of media chosen to interpret the landscape. For example, wayside exhibits may intrude upon a high-integrity landscape, whereas they may work in landscapes with lower integrity, in one with missing elements. Decisions on how to best interpret cultural landscapes should be based upon careful planning, research, documentation of existing conditions and relationships, preservation approaches (e.g., preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, reconstruction), projected maintenance needs, and management goals. The social, recreational, and educational benefits can lead to understanding, as well as enhance an “experience of place.”

The importance of landscape to many National Park Service sites can be found reflected in multiple locations within the LRIP, including:

Park Mission: Cane River Creole National Historical Park preserves the resources and cultural landscapes of the Cane River region and enhances the understanding of its peoples and traditions through research, interpretation, education and technical assistance. Cane River Creole National Historical Park, 2006

Management Goals: The integrity and ambience of Central High School's adjacent historic streetscape, and the surrounding national historic district neighborhood, would be protected to the extent possible to preserve the historic scene in which the dramatic events of 1957-58 occurred. Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site LRIP,2004

Park Significance: The cultural landscape of the Gila River Valley, which includes Casa Grande Ruins and surrounding communities, has been home to ancestral Sonoran Desert peoples and their descendants for thousands of years. This landscape is sacred to the people of the six traditionally associated tribes and speaks of ancestral homeland, identity, and tradition. Casa Grande National Monument LRIP, 2010

Park Purpose: The purpose of Bering Land is to protect and provide the opportunity to study and interpret the landscape which contains an invaluable record of floral, faunal, and human migration between Asia and North America and which supports an ongoing traditional subsistence culture. Bering Land Bridge National Preserve LRIP, 2010

Park Themes: Oral traditions of the modern day Pueblo people say that Hovenweep is their ancestral village and a stepping stone in their journey to the sacred center place. The preserved cultural and natural landscape gives physical form to oral traditions of living Pueblo people regarding their creation and migration stories. Hovenweep National Monument LRIP, 2010

Desired Visitor Experience: Visitors… experience historic settings and cultural landscapes that have substantial visual and auditory integrity. Grand Portage National Monument LRIP, 2005

Fundamental Resources and Values: The park presents the opportunity for visitors to experience the serenity of the landscape and explore the simplicity of the small town rural character with all of their senses. The ability of visitors to immerse themselves in the simplicity of the time and experience the serenity of the place is fundamental. Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, 2009

Issues and Challenges: Oil drilling rigs and production facilities have a physical presence on the landscape that does not complement the historic scenery. Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site LRIP, 2010

Goals lead directly to interpretive media, activities or facilities; they help planners decide among various options for activities and media; and they help designers craft specific approaches to media and facilities.

EVALUATION

Evaluation asks whether goals were met; it can also identify and quantify both causes and results. Like most other aspects of planning, evaluation should be an ongoing process, the form of which is tailored to the tasks and questions to be answered.

Evaluation is an essential part of planning. Nearly everyone on planning teams has ideas about how different media, programs, or facilities work, about how important are various visitor experiences; yet these are too seldom based on empirical research. The planning team should ask questions such as "How well has that worked in similar situations?" and "How do visitors evaluate their experiences here?" and “How well do we know?”

Evaluation asks whether goals were met; it can also identify and quantify both causes and results. Planners then recommend a certain location for a new contact station because they know the present one does not capture many visitors. Planners can recommend using roving rangers and small signs or wayside exhibits to cut down on trail shortcutting because evaluations showed them to be more effective than other options. Planners can recommend using color photographs rather than abstract designs in a marketing brochure, because evaluations show them to work better with the public. Like most other aspects of planning, evaluation should be an ongoing process, the form of which is tailored to the tasks and questions to be answered. The planning team may commission studies be done as part of the planning process; the team should be knowledgeable of previous research that relates to planning issues; it should recommend further studies that are needed to tell us more about visitor experience, and interpretive themes, media, programs, and facilities.

Evaluations done during a process are called formative; evaluations performed at the end of a process are called summative. Summative evaluations have been more common in government agencies: performance is measured and assessed at the end of a fiscal year; achievement of media objectives is determined after the media are installed for a period of time; achievement of short-term educational goals is measured at the conclusion of a program. Formative evaluations are increasing in the Park Service, especially with the implementation of GPRA and value analysis. Benefits are seen as the degree to which alternatives support long-range and mission goals; costs include long-term costs, and are estimated to the accuracy possible at each stage of planning or design. Cost effectiveness of projects is then evaluated in various ways at major decision points.

NPS evaluation programs include:

Visitor Services Project, which assesses visitor backgrounds, preferences, activities, and opinions through surveys; about ten parks a year are studied; the program is coordinated by the Cooperative Park Study Unit (CPSU) at the University of Idaho.

Many **park-initiated evaluations** are conducted or contracted by parks with assistance from regional offices, service centers, and the Washington Office of Interpretation and Visitor Services.

Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA); which holds offices and areas accountable for defining and assessing desired outcomes.

The **Value Analysis Program**, which assesses the cost effectiveness of design/construction projects in excess of $500,000.

Post Occupancy Evaluation (POE); which assesses the effectiveness of interpretive facilities and media largely through observation and interviews.

Post Construction Evaluation; which looks at the quality of construction of facilities built by DSC; the program is coordinated by DSC.

ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY-ASKED QUESTIONS

We're about to get $20,000 from a foundation to improve the media in our visitor center. Our interpretive plan is obsolete. What should we do?

You'll need to do some planning. How much and what types depend on many things, including your budget, what you mean specifically by "obsolete," the state of other planning (management, strategic, and resources planning), how persuasive you are, how anxious your donors are to cut a ribbon, etc. Work to get matching funds, use creative financing, make calls. Do not let limited funds preclude doing at least some planning. Many grants require adequate planning and evaluation. We should plan and evaluate even if it is not required. It may not be necessary to formally write a new long-range interpretive plan. An interim document can be produced that may be a bit weak on background information and production values, but develops consensus on themes and goals, describes desired visitor experiences, and analyzes choices for media, programs, and activities. But when you've finished those elements, it doesn't take too much to produce a formal long-range plan.

Our interpretive plan is pretty outdated. We have no plans to make major changes in our interpretive media or visitor facilities, but would like to improve our personal programs. Do we need a new interpretive plan?

Again, it depends partly on what you mean by "outdated". You probably want to do some planning to decide the best niches for personal programs, assess their effectiveness, describe audiences, review themes and goals, etc. You may have higher immediate priorities than producing a formal plan, since media or facility changes are not likely. You probably want some outside perspectives. These do not have to be packaged in a formal interpretive plan, but why not spend the extra effort? A formal plan can help solicit funding for needed improvements to your program.

How much should an interpretive plan cost?

That depends on the scope of the project and the plan. It should cost the least amount necessary to do it right. In 2011, an HFC-produced long-range interpretive plan for a moderately large and complex park could cost $25,000 to $35,000. More comprehensive or larger plans will usually cost more.

I want to re-do our exhibits and make them all "hands-on," but I can't talk some of the rest of the staff into it. How can I get us all pulling the same direction?

To get consensus usually requires agreement first on goals. Disagreements frequently occur at the “how” level. By stepping back and discussing “why” and “what,” consensus can often be reached at a higher level. Then discussions can focus on the best ways to accomplish agreed goals. Be prepared to initiate a discussion on goals with an open mind. Interactive or “hands-on” exhibits aren’t always the best choice for visitor center exhibits. They tend to work well with children and kinesthetic learners, but they also have limitations: they can break down, and they may encourage “hands-on” but not “minds-on” interaction. Be willing to go where the discussion leads, and consider all options.

Whenever I suggest a wayside exhibit to interpret some resource issue like walking off trails, my boss says something like, "We don't want to have a sea of signs in the park; this place should be natural. Besides, they won't read or obey them anyway." What can I say to her?

This argument is an example of stating the question in exaggerated terms, then criticizing that exaggeration. Nobody advocates a sea of signs. But some parks expect visitors to obey regulations of which they are not adequately informed. That generally does not work.

Wayside exhibits can be intrusive on the landscape. There should be reasons for each wayside, a carefully executed planning effort that begins with comprehensive goals, and narrows to identifying the best ways to accomplish these goals. In the case of waysides, a wayside exhibit proposal will identify the rationale, locations, and topics for exhibits.

A common question is whether to use waysides or a publication (brochure, site bulletin) to interpret outdoor attractions. Brochures are often better for stops that are part of an integrated story, whereas waysides might be better at interpreting separate stories. Waysides usually cost more, yet they might encourage more attention from visitors. Waysides can be more easily vandalized. Site bulletins can be updated more easily and cheaply. Brochures and site bulletins require a dispenser and staff to re-stock them. You may wish to interpret a site initially using a site bulletin; that will allow flexibility in determining the best stops and messages. When you have evaluated the results, and are sure you have the story right, you can then opt for wayside exhibits or a more expensive and effective publication.

How do I decide the best way to get our interpretive planning done? It would be cheaper to do it ourselves.

There is no standard answer. Harpers Ferry Center is mostly project funded; parks and regional offices are mostly base funded, so costs may appear lower. If a park or regional office has people with the needed experience, time, and capabilities, an excellent team can be assembled. It is highly recommended that you include team members from outside the park. An outside perspective is very helpful and often results in ideas that may not be voiced by park staff.

There is also a real difference between interpretation and interpretive planning. If a park interpreter is expected to function as an interpretive planner on a project, s/he should have some experience and expertise in planning. Many regional interpretive specialists are also experienced planners.