

**INTERPRETIVE SKILLS I**

**LESSON PLAN:** 13

**SESSION TITLE:** THE ROLE OF INTERPRETATION IN PARK OPERATIONS

**SESSION LENGTH:** 3 hours  
(Originally "PVI", MW Team)

**PREPARED BY:** M. Gillett, 1/92

**OBJECTIVES:**At the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- 1.Describe three management goals of park areas;
- 2.Describe three basic needs, desires, and expectations of park visitors;
- 3.Describe Interpretation's role in bridging the gap between park management goals and visitor expectations;
- 4.Describe at least five ways the image/message of the park is communicated to the visitor, including ways the park and visitor interact before contact with the interpreter;
- 5.Describe methods interpreters can use to diffuse visitor complaints, and how they can use controversy to build public support.

**TRAINING AIDS:** Flip chart  
Prepared role players

**HANDOUTS:** None

Note: Breaks are not scheduled in this lesson plan, but time is allowed in the 3 hours for two 10 minute breaks.

Content	Method	Time
<p>I. INTRODUCTION</p> <p>State that Interpretation plays a vital role in management of park areas. Much of Interpretive Skills I is focused on methods and techniques; it is essential to understand that while "performance" skills are important, the work of the interpreter is far more than simply either entertainment or communicating basic facts about natural and cultural history. Interpretation is THE place where the public understanding and support for park resources and park values is built and maintained. Without public support, park management goals will fail. Without an understanding for park management, public support will not happen. Interpretation's unique and VITAL contribution to park management is to ensure that the public understands park values, thereby building the support park management needs in order to function.</p> <p>Go over the session objectives with the class, emphasizing how each one relates to the interaction between the park and the visitor, and interpretation's vital role in bringing those together.</p>	Participative Lecture	15 Min.

Content	Method	Time
<p>II. CASE STUDIES</p> <p>To demonstrate the importance of the relationship between the public, the park, and Interpretation, begin with two real examples of park management goals. One should be an example of a management decision that was successfully communicated to visitors via interpretation, and therefore enjoyed public support, and the other should be an example of a park management decision that failed because interpretation did not build the public support necessary to accomplish the goal. Dramatic examples are best, so that the class is convinced of the importance of interpretation in creating a positive atmosphere of support between management and visitors. Suggested examples of management decisions that failed because interpretation did not fill the gap between the visitors and the park:</p> <p>1:Olympic NP's decision to remove mountain goats from the park. 2: (Instructor choice)</p> <p>Suggested examples of management decisions that were more successful because interpretation created an atmosphere of public support:</p> <p>1:Channel Island's decision to remove wild hogs from the park. 2: (Instructor choice)</p> <p>CAUTION:This is NOT a session on interpreting critical issues. That is covered in Interp. Skills IIIB. I suggest the use of vivid, dramatic examples, in order to interest the students immediately and "sell" them on the importance of interpretation's interaction between park and visitors, but it is important that instructor get back to the "basic" role without dwelling too long on critical issues.</p>	Participative Lecture	30 Min.
<p>III. PARK/VISITOR INTERACTIONS</p> <p>A.Define PARK MANAGEMENT GOALS</p> <p>Ask class to create a list of park management goals. "Answers" you're looking for will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Resource protection</li> <li>-Providing recreational opportunities for visitors</li> <li>-Providing and maintaining visitor facilities</li> <li>-Visitor protection</li> <li>-Research opportunities</li> <li>-Building public support and appreciation for the park</li> </ul>	Brainstorming	10 Min.

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B. Define VISITOR NEEDS, DESIRES, AND EXPECTATIONS	Brainstorming	10 Min.
1. Ask the class to create a list of visitor needs, expectations, and desires. "Answers" should include:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Creature comforts - restrooms, food, shelter</li> <li>- Safe, enjoyable recreational opportunities</li> <li>- Educational opportunities</li> <li>- Friendly, helpful service - often have high expectations for NPS areas</li> <li>- Brainstorming</li> </ul>		
2. Discuss who our visitors are, where they come from, why they come to parks, and demographics of population/culture changes (instructor may find some helpful information in Skills IIIA, Lesson #3, on demographics). Have the class offer examples of how differences in visitor groups affect their needs/desires/expectations at the park. Some examples might be language barriers, access issues, educational levels. Helpful background information for the instructor can be obtained by calling your local census bureau and asking for demographic information.	Participative Lecture	10 Min.
C. Bringing PARK MANAGEMENT GOALS and VISITOR EXPECTATIONS together	Buzz Groups	25 Min.
<p>Create a scenario exercise in which the visitors and the park interact, WITHOUT the benefit of interpretation. Keeping the class in one room so that all can see the two lists you've created on the flip charts, divide them into buzz groups for 10 or 15 minutes, and ask them to discuss how the visitor needs/expectations and the park management goals would be met without interpretation there to bring the two together. Have them come up with examples for how park management goals would fail, and how visitor experiences in the park would fail, without interpretation. When you bring the class back together, have them share their insights. Some examples to hope for:</p>		
Failures from visitors perspective:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Won't know where the bathrooms are.</li> <li>- No access to safety information.</li> <li>- No knowledge of recreational opportunities.</li> <li>- No education about the natural or cultural history of the park.</li> </ul>		

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<p>Failures from park management perspective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Park resources will be degraded, since visitors will not understand the value of protecting them.</li> <li>-There will be increased visitor accidents and injuries.</li> <li>-Visitors will be upset by management decisions that they don't understand, resulting in congressional inquiries, bad press, an overall negative image of the park area and the NPS.</li> </ul> <p>NOTE: Your goal with these three "lists" is to illustrate that the expectations of the visitor and the needs of the park management are often quite different, and that it's up to the interpreter to tie them together. It's important TO THE VISITOR to have access to basic information; it's important TO PARK MANAGEMENT that the visitors understand and support park policies. Interpretation is the place it all happens, where park management and the public come together, and the goal of this session is to ensure that interpreters perceive their role as SHAPING public attitude rather than just informing them.</p>	<p>Buzz Groups</p>	<p>Con't.</p>
<p>IV. HOW IS THE PARK IMAGE PROJECTED?</p> <p>Visitors' impressions of park areas and the NPS are often formed long before their first contact with an interpreter.</p> <p>What is the "voice" of the park? (Or How does the park "speak" to the visitor?) Ask the class to name ways visitors gain information or impressions about parks, recording their answers on your flip chart. Answers should include such things as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-the quality of information that was mailed out</li> <li>-things they may have read or heard about in the -media (both good press and bad press)</li> <li>-the condition of the restrooms</li> <li>-what they see on bulletin boards</li> <li>-general visual quality of park area</li> <li>-road signs on their journey to the area</li> <li>-a law enforcement contact they had</li> <li>-a disappointment they might have had because a trail or resource is closed for restoration, etc.</li> </ul>	<p>Participative Lecture</p> <p>Brainstorming</p>	<p>20 Min.</p>

Content	Method	Time
<p>Lead the discussion into how interpretation fits into the overall park management scheme, with other divisions. How can interpretation assist other divisions with their goals? Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Providing good safety information can decrease the number of rescues</li> <li>-Providing information about regulations can reduce law enforcement incidents</li> <li>-Good interpretation about resource closures can increase public understanding/support for resource management decisions.</li> <li>-Bulletin boards that are well done are more likely to be read by visitors and can convey information that will lighten the maintenance workload</li> </ul> <p>Encourage participants to develop closer working relationships with other divisions, and to learn as much as possible about the goals and needs of each division. They can then find ways to use interpretation to solve problems and meet park management goals at all levels, in all divisions. If interpreters can successfully reduce litter, for example, through better bulletin boards, or can successfully reduce the number of rescues by providing better safety information, all divisions will begin to understand the importance of interpretation's involvement in management of all issues.</p> <p>It might be helpful to carry this a step further by discussing some of the more critical management issues that interpretation can and should address, but again, the bulk of that application is for the Skills IIIB course.</p>	<p>Participative Lecture</p> <p>Brainstorming</p>	<p>Con't.</p>
<p>V. HANDLING COMPLAINTS/CONTROVERSY</p> <p>Note to instructor: Basic visitor center-type complaints are addressed in Skills 1, Session 14 (Visitor Center based operations). Without going into depth on developing pro-active programs and strategies for interpreting critical management issues, which is covered in Interpretation of Critical Issues in Skills IIIB, this session should prepare interpreters to at least be able to deal with visitors who bring up critical issues. ALL front line interpreters should have at least some introduction to the serious issues the park faces, and how to assist the public in understanding them.</p> <p>Start with two short role-playing exercises. Use your imagination to come up with a real issue that is pertinent to the participants in your course.</p>	<p>Participative Lecture</p> <p>Role Playing</p>	<p>20 Min.</p>

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In the first scenario, roles should be played by the instructors. One instructor plays a visitor, asking a front line interpreter about a sensitive management decision the park has made. The interpreter should exaggerate handling the situation poorly, displaying ignorance about the subject, being secretive about the NPS position on the issue, and acting defensive and protective of the NPS. When the role play is over, ask the class to point out some of the problems with the way the issue was handled, and some of the potential results of the encounter.

Some hoped-for answers:

- A disgruntled visitor who does not understand why the NPS has made the decisions it has, and who is LESS sympathetic toward the NPS than before the contact
- Negative impressions of the NPS being spread to others with whom the visitor speaks
- Possible bad press
- Possible congressional inquiries
- ETC

In the second short scenario, ask for volunteers from the class to role play how the scene could have been handled better. The interpreter should handle the issue in a positive manner, demonstrating at least a rudimentary understanding of the issue, respect for the visitor, openness and honesty about reasons for NPS decisions, and empathy for why the visitor feels as he does.

After the role-playing, discuss with the class the importance of learning to deal effectively with controversy. Interpreters have more power than any other unit of park management to influence public perception, and it is crucial that all front line interpreters acquire at least a basic understanding of significant issues that affect their parks. They need to understand both sides of issues, not just the park's "party line", in order to be effective mediators between the park and the public. It is not realistic to expect front-line interpreters to be able to diffuse anger from all of the public all of the time, and there may be times when visitors asking sensitive questions will need to be referred to supervisors. However, they should at least be able to deal with the basics of most important issues.

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<p>VI. CONCLUSION</p> <p>Instructor should refer back to the original objectives, asking the class to help summarize what they learned. Instructor should highlight at least one major point from each area of discussion. Good thoughts to highlight:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-It is important to visitors to have access to basic creature comforts, information about resources and recreational opportunities, and education.</li> <li>-It is important to managers to gain public support for management goals, such as resource protection.</li> <li>-Interpretation is THE place where the exchange between the park and the public happens. Without interpretation, both management objectives and visitor expectations will fail.</li> <li>-The park "speaks" to the visitor in many ways. Interpreters need to work closely with all divisions to assure that the messages going to the visitors support management objectives.</li> <li>-Interpreters play a vital role in shaping public perception of the park and the NPS. It is essential that front line interpreters understand controversial issues facing the park, and learn to effectively communicate these to visitors.</li> </ul>	<p>Participative Lecture</p>	<p>20 Min.</p>