

DIVERSITY AND INTERPRETATION

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

What does diversity mean?

Diversity means seeking a more holistic look at what we interpret and to whom we interpret. This does not necessarily mean "minority" populations. Everyone is some type of minority. It means seeking to develop interpretation and interpretive programs that are more encompassing in their coverage of the people, places, and events we interpret. It means making our natural history understandable to urban audiences. It means reaching out to populations that have little or no experience with the National Park System. It means employing multiple languages, new technologies, and alternative methods to communicate with a fuller spectrum of visitors. It also means more awareness of foreign visitors.

We seek to do this as a means of achieving Tilden's first principle: Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.

It also enables us to fulfill our basic Mission as described in the 1916 Organic Act: ...to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave the unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.

These diverse audiences are the "future generations."

What it is not.

This is not a "politically correct" program. It is not an attempt to rewrite history or pander to special interests. It is not part of the Affirmative Action or Equal Opportunity programs. Nor is it driven by directive, regulation, or policy. It is good interpretation and a part of our Mission.

As interpreters, our goal is seeking that balance that comes with knowledge of the resource, skill in delivery, and knowledge of our audience. Failure to know our audience is as great an error as a factual mistake or using the wrong medium. It means our message is not being received.

Why is this important?

Studies show that the visitation to our parks is not reflective of American society as a whole. Entire segments of the population have no experience or knowledge of the National Park System. This should concern us for a number of reasons:

- o. Visitors who cannot or do not understand the purpose or use of a park will be frustrated when they visit. Frustrated visitors are unhappy visitors.
- o. Visitors who are not aware of safety considerations or regulations can mean risks to themselves, damage to the resource, and extra work for us.
- o. It means a loss of visitation. People will not visit if they feel a site has no purpose for them. While we know some parks are over-visited, most are not. Even for the parks that are too busy, it would be exclusionary and prejudicial of us to say that only those who already have come are welcome.
- o. We will fail to provide a service to which all Americans are entitled. Everyone owns a part of the National Park

System. Everyone should have access to our shared heritage.

o. Damage to the resource is a common problem from visitors who do not understand park ethics. As the population becomes more diverse, we must change our delivery systems to reach this diversity. Otherwise, we risk increased resource damage and spending more of our time in reactive work.

o. Insensitivity or lack of knowledge of other cultures can cause inadvertent offense to visitors. These type of incidents can escalate to law enforcement or political problems.

o. Parks that are not used by the public lose the support of the public. We need public support for laws, money, and stewardship. As much as we don't like to admit it, parks are not forever. Parks exist only as long as the electorate chooses to support them. There are 435 members of the House of Representatives, 100 members of the Senate. It takes only a majority vote and a Presidential signature to make law. If those 270 people decide tomorrow to abolish the National Park System, it's gone. And as a representative democracy, elected officials answer to the public. The population that we are not reaching is a voting population and is increasing in political clout.

We all know the history of dealing with resource threats of logging, dams, shopping centers, and countless other impacts upon parks. In every case, it took a concerned public and sympathetic officials to take action. The end product is almost always some sort of compromise. In the past, the National Park Service has sometimes been out in front of the public, and sometimes behind (the National Park Service was opposed to the Wilderness Act). In either case, the agency has eventually made concessions to meet public demands. We can list the current issues that reflect public desires that force us to make changes in park management: mountain bikes, mushroom picking, jet skis, snowmobiles, on and on. By dealing with a public uninformed of park needs, purposes, and values, we are forced to lurch reactively from issue to issue. It would be much better to act positively and develop a stewardship ethic in people from childhood. People do not destroy what they own. Our efforts to increase the reach of our interpretation to a diverse population is an effort to get more owners for the National Park System.

Increasing our interpretation diversity is an all-encompassing attitude that overlays all aspects of interpretation from planning to presentation. Interpretation has one major purpose: to preserve and protect the resources we hold precious. If we are not reaching a true representation of the population we will fail in this purpose. When the choices come for spending time and dollars, people will not choose to spend them on those things for which they have no personal connection.

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NOTE:

This is the first article in a series that I hope to begin as an occasional column on the In Touch bulletin board. Though In Touch has been doing a fine job as a means for announcements and notices, I would like to see it do more. Used judiciously, the bulletin board can serve many of the purposes of the old In Touch magazine. It can be a place for articles and dialogue.

This first issue is an experiment. Since reading and answering cc:mail can take an inordinate amount of time, I would like to try this as though it were a column in a publication. Replies can be sent to me and any articles for later dissemination can be sent to me. I will serve as an editor and issue materials on an occasional basis. This way we will not clog the bulletin board. This is not an attempt to serve as any kind of censor, rather it is an attempt to develop a useable system. (It would be impossible to be a censor since you all can access the entire net any time you want!)

I appreciate comments and feedback on this idea. Other essays, notes, and news, are also welcome. You can address to me by cc:mail "reply to this message" or find my name on the directory. (Remember - do not retain all original addressees!)