

INTERPRETATION AND INCLUSION

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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.

Comments and Notes

A number of readers commented on the initial issue that was sent in January. I appreciate the spirit of open discussion and the interest in using In Touch as a forum. Please keep the dialog going. As a result of some thoughtful suggestions, I have changed the name of the column to Interpretation and Inclusion.

For those who missed the January message, this is the second article in an occasional column on the In Touch bulletin board. Replies can be sent to me as can any articles for later dispersment. I am serving as an editor and will issue materials on an occasional basis. This way we will not clog the bulletin board with multiple messages. This is not an attempt to serve as any kind of censor, rather it is an attempt to maintain a useable system. (It would be impossible to be a censor since you all can access the entire net any time you want!)

Comments, essays, notes, and news, are 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!) Please indicate if your item is intended for future distribution.

This issue's perspective is from Larry G. Points, Chief of Interpretation, Assateague Island:

The Changing Visitor Pattern at Assateague Island

It is interesting to note the change in the profile of visitors who are attending our programs, particularly at the Maryland end of Assateague Island National Seashore.

All through the 1970's and the first half of the 1980's, our "traditional" nature offerings consisting of evening slide programs and field walks were well attended by campers. Then we began to see a yearly decline to low attendance numbers in recent years, even though the campgrounds remained full and our program publicity did not change.

What is different about today's campers? Is society now so bombarded by theme park amusement, video glitz, or programmed nature via cable TV that ranger "slide shows" have become old hat?

On the other hand, our visitation to the visitor center has exploded with a profile that is family oriented - lots of kids! Many are still campers trying to enjoy an inexpensive vacation. More important, the bulk of our day-use visitors in Maryland now come from the nearby resort of Ocean City. Ocean City and its boardwalk trappings are not what appeals to most of us who work for the National Park Service. I would wager most of our employees would not have a lot of positive things to say about visitors who spend their vacations in such places - they are "tourons" as one writer put it!

The fact of the matter is that these people are overwhelmingly good, honest, tax-paying citizens who increasingly represent the core of our visitation. They must be the children and grandchildren of the baby boomers who once attended our traditional programs. Today's adults seem to enjoy an opportunity to see the natural world, and they appear to place some value in knowing it is protected. They want to somehow connect their children to nature while they are at Assateague.

In the past few years we have reacted to this by shifting much of our salaried and VIP personal services to the visitor center. We have also greatly strengthened quality book offerings in a new children's section of the cooperating

association outlet.

If these are the majority of folks who are now visiting our center, and it is the only time and place we can touch their lives with some kind of message, why not offer a barrage of short, sensory, "it's good that this place exists" messages and programs? Our center is often a bee-hive of things going on, and almost always with children somewhere in the limelight.

Our hope, of course, is that this approach is causing more of these folks to check their Ocean City mentality at the park entrance, if only for a few hours, and get out from behind their windshields to spend some time in the field - walk a nature trail, examine a wayside exhibit, whatever. If they leave with some warm fuzzies for the National Park Service (and which might be reflected in the voting booth some day), so much the better.

This new focus is not without its problems. Along with higher visitation which seems to be driven by word-of-mouth publicity, increased programming has resulted in an increased length of stay in the visitor center. That means more staff needed at the information desk, more demands on the restrooms, a parking lot that now routinely overflows, and frayed nerves at the end of a Visitor Center shift.

Still, we know when an Ocean City visitor has truly learned something and is appreciative for it. In the final analysis, we are gratified.