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Visitors are the ones who suffer when heritage interpretation services are cut.

Surviving budget cuts for heritage interpretation means becoming relevant.

By Jon Kohl



Thirty years ago, before young Tim Merriman became executive director of the National Association for Interpretation (NAI), he was an interpreter for Illinois State Parks and one of four survivors of a budget cut. Eighteen of 22 full-time interpreters and 55 seasonal employees lost their jobs. The associate director of the park wanted to cut interpretation at all 77 sites but spared Merriman's program. "I was afraid to cut it, afraid of local reaction," this director says. This program had done a lot of community work.

Budget cuts periodically sweep through public land agencies and target interpreters as low priorities. If not cut outright, interpreters may find themselves left out of management decisions, or earning salaries that are lower than peers in comparable areas. Park managers frequently view heritage interpretation as little more than entertainment without relevance to their bottom-line objectives.

The Fathers Were Serious About Interpretation

Enos Mills, father of modern heritage interpretation and avid naturalist around the turn of the 20th century, considered interpretation key to protection. He wrote in his book *Adventures of a Nature Guide* of what interpretation could remedy: "Undervaluing and underestimating of the great health-giving, mind-stimulating outdoors, have probably been one, if the most impor-

tant, cause of the general indifference to things out-of-doors, and of the common practice of unnecessarily destroying wildlife and beautiful wild scenes."

Not only did he seed the birth of the interpretation field, but he—protégé of John Muir—lobbied to create Rocky Mountain National Park.

In 1952, the National Park Service hired journalist Freeman Tilden to study interpretation in America's national parks. His resulting book, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, gave form to the nascent field of interpretation. Like Mills, he had no doubts about interpretation's purpose. "Not the least of the fruits of adequate interpretation is the certainty that it leads directly toward the very preservation of the treasure itself ... Indeed, such a result may be the most important end of our interpretation, for what we cannot protect we are destined to lose."

In recent years, more interpretive voices clamour for an objective-based justification. "I can't conceive of the use or application of interpretation in a protected area that didn't have a clear and identifiable connection to a park management objective. If someone showed me one that didn't have a connection, I'd say 'why are you spending the money on it?'" says Sam Ham, author of the classic, *Environmental Interpretation*, and leading interpretation scholar.

NAI also insists on "mission-based" interpretation both in its definition of the field and its certification programs. Objectives do matter. Why then, if



PHOTO BY JON KOBE

A visitor waits for the emergence of a bald eagle through the fog during a trip to Sinnemahoning State Park in Pennsylvania.

interpretation's founders and modern leaders regard interpretation valuable, not only for biodiversity conservation but other management objectives, is interpretation caught in the noose of tightening budgets?

One theory argues that many park managers come from land management schools where they studied the land side, not the human side of management. Thus they have never seen effective examples of interpretation. Another says that for many years interpreters declared that their calling was special, above mainstream management, earning scant respect among managers. Still, another notes that interpreters' culture avoids self-inquiry making it very difficult to demonstrate value.

Back in Illinois and still employed, Merriman began to realize the value in creating a high-community profile for his program. This was not characteristic of other recently defunct programs. In fact, a year after the cuts the associate

director commented that "not one manager asked for his interpreter back and the public hasn't written in to complain." Merriman wondered, "What were those interpreters doing?"

Interpretation Can Meet Management Objectives

When many park managers refer to interpretation, they think of information, education and making visitors happy. While those relate to heritage interpretation, this interpretive slice of the communications pie involves something more. Journalist Tilden says, "Interpretation is the larger revelation of truth behind any statement of a fact."

Interpretation isn't about teaching; it's about provoking people to consider features of a place. The more time visitors spend contemplating a resource, the more likely they create meanings for it. Effective interpretation then helps visitors to forge positive meanings, even a deeper relationship.

In a sense, the information that interpreters use is like the scaffolding on a building. Once the structure—in this case, appreciation for a place—is built, then the scaffolding can fall away.

Visitors will only choose to participate or continue in an interpretive program if they enjoy their experience. So at the bottom of all ways in which interpretation serves park managers, it must first serve a place's visitors. Fortunately today, researchers, especially in America, Australia, Scotland and England, are documenting a spectrum of interpretive applications to park objectives, beginning to dispel the notion that interpretation is just for fun and should be cut when budgets get tight.

Management Funding

The private sector, in collaboration with parks, has created interpretation that involves visitors emotionally where they actually contribute to a place's conservation.

Linblad Expeditions: The naturalist cruise ship company has raised more than \$1 million for the Galapagos Conservation Fund. Tourists spend a week with onboard interpreters who expose them to the Galapagos and deepen their appreciation for the national park. After a high quality experience, many donate to the Fund.

Ecos Communications: This interpretation design company pioneered donation exhibits and kiosks that, when integrated into an interpretive experience, provide a compelling and convenient opportunity for visitors to become involved. For example, Denver Zoo's Primate Panorama Exhibit interprets the big idea that humans are the only primate that can care for other primate species. After visitor involvement with the primates and exposure to this message, the zoo provides an opportunity to donate. The exhibit has raised more than \$40,000 in pocket change. Visitors are able to see cumulative totals and what the money supports through interactive graphics on the kiosk.

Fermata, Inc., in collaboration with the Center for International Training and Outreach, University of Idaho: This sustainable tourism planning company teamed up with Ham's organization to develop an interpretive training program that teaches parks to design interpretive programs that meet management objectives, especially conservation. The program trains park managers, especially those who deploy interpretation, to identify conservation threats, draw a simple system of how interpretation contributes to threat mitigation and then design media and training guides that will involve visitors at that park. For example, Texas's Bentsen Rio Grande State Park developed a model for how interpretation contributes to the reduction of an invasive grass species. See the chart on page 56.

Big Bear Lake, San Bernadino National Forest: Thanks to the 1996 federally mandated Recreation Fee Demonstration Program, many land management agencies have retained a portion of fees charged for site en-

hancement. This potential revenue windfall precipitated a backlash from indignant visitors. At Big Bear Lake, however, researchers found that canoe trips with naturalists resulted in more positive responses by visitors towards fees than visitors who took self-guided trips.

Alaskan Marine Highway: A fleet of

summer ferries chugs 500 miles through the Inside Passage of Tongass National Forest from Bellingham, Wash., to Skagway, Ala. Since 1970, the U.S. Forest Service has staffed all ferry runs with forest interpreters, who don't just talk about whales and eagles, but what the U.S. Forest Service does on a regular basis.

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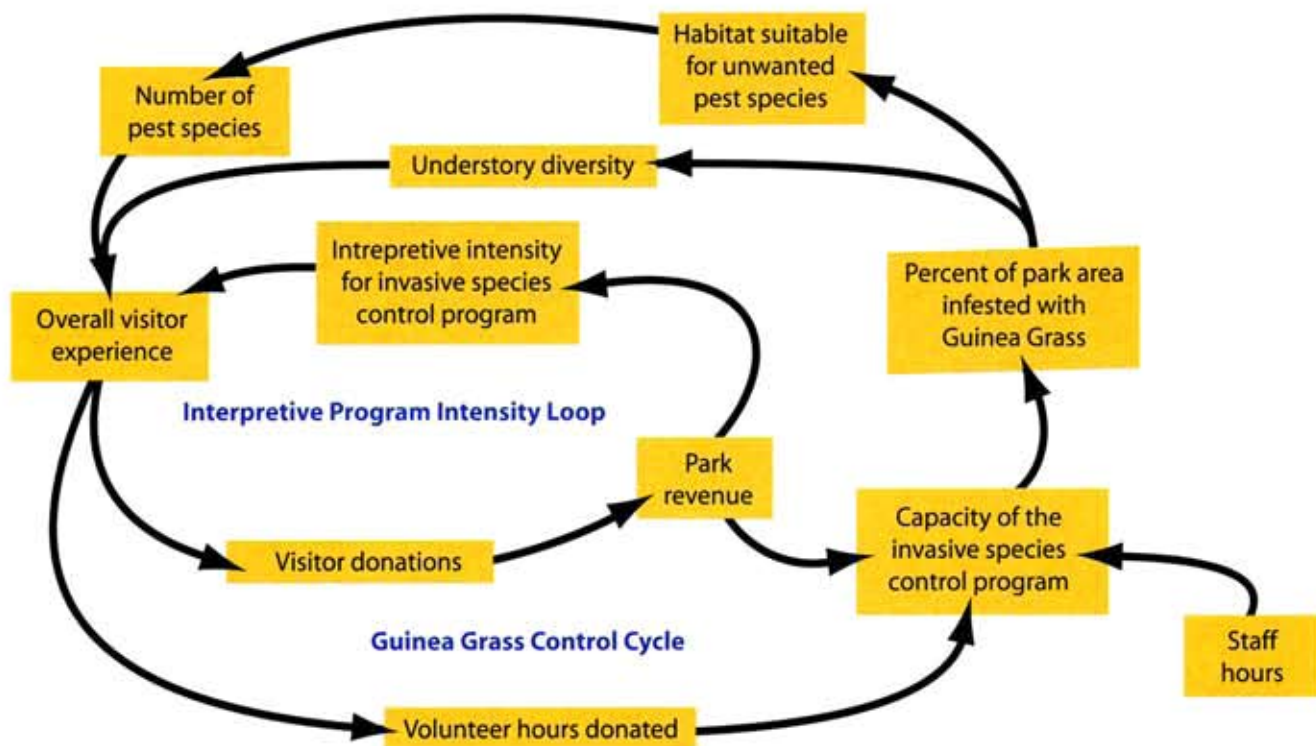
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Neil Hagadorn, Alaska region assistant director of recreation, heritage, wilderness and tourism, began his 29-year career as a ferry interpreter. "I always told folks that I wanted people at the end of a trip to understand who the Forest Service is, what we do and why,"

he says. "They don't have to like the multiple-use mandate of the Forest Service, but they need to understand it."

He attributes the program's longevity precisely to its relevance to the Forest Service's effort to interpret its mission to visitors.

Yellowstone Wolf Reintroduction: Perhaps no example of building constituencies to support park policies stands out more than the 1995 wolf reintroduction to Yellowstone National Park. Organizations including Wolf Education and Research Center, Wild Sentry, Mission Wolf, Wolf Haven and Montana Natural History Center used interpretation and environmental education to soften resistance of mostly ranchers on the park's border. These organizations deployed speakers, fact sheets, videos, slide shows and even live wolf interpreters to convince neighbors that when wolves killed livestock, wolves would be controlled and people compensated.

Visitor Behavior: Protecting Sites from Visitors and Visitors from Sites

Perhaps the most studied management use of interpretation is controlling visitor behavior. Every park manager entertains stories of visitors who just wouldn't follow rules, money and time invested to fix their damage, and resentment caused by forceful strategies such as restricting access and charging higher fees.

Twenty Characteristics of a Good Guide

Rare, a global conservation organization, has been conducting nature guide training in developing countries since 1994. Through the years, it developed a list of 20 characteristics for park guides that contribute to conservation. This list also gives sequence to the training. For more information visit www.rareconservation.org.

A Good Guide...

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Speaks loudly and clearly | 11. Suggests a relevant conservation action |
| 2. Uses non-verbal communication | 12. Uses interesting language |
| 3. Acts professionally | 13. Is a good birder |
| 4. Prepares in advance | 14. Manages the group |
| 5. Provides necessary information for tourists | 15. Uses basic first aid |
| 6. Involves the audience | 16. Handles difficult questions |
| 7. Uses objects on every tour | 17. Carries appropriate equipment |
| 8. Knows the audience | 18. Evaluates a presentation at the end |
| 9. Has a message for every presentation | 19. Uses the ABCs of design (see Ham's book) |
| 10. Prepares structure for a presentation | 20. Follows up with the visitors |

Nevertheless, interpretation has been introduced to reduce visitors' leaving food that attracts black bears in Yosemite National Park, Wyo.; feeding squirrels at Crater Lake State Park, Ore.; trampling young forest regrowth at Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, Wash.; pilfering petrified wood from Petrified Forest National Park, Ariz.; and respecting rules without verbal warnings or citations in Great Sand Dunes National Monument, N.M., and Rocky Mountain National Park, Colo., among others. Interpretive signs at Mt. Field National Park in Tasmania have even induced visitors to pick up cans littered by other visitors.

Relevance Is Key to Survival

Some interpreters have not seen the light of relevance, such as the entire interpretation department at Parks Victoria in Australia. Ten years ago the agency, which manages more than 10

million acres of protected areas, fired all its interpreters, opting to outsource interpretation to commercial operators.

Other agencies, however, have dodged budget-cut bullets. In 1994 King County, which includes Seattle, hired Chuck Lennox to create the Interpretive Programs Office. During his tenure, the office dodged six budget cuts. In fact, the office actually gained staff. "Part of the reason why we grew in these times, was because we marketed internally showing our value to management," he says.

He distributed an annual report with anecdotes and photos of program success; he circulated information about intertidal programs on Puget Sound to hard-science agencies which, as a result, asked for Lennox's help in beach monitoring; an article on beavers in the program newsletter included a telephone hotline from another agency for people having trouble with overzealous beavers; and they interpreted historical

buildings whose increased exposure assisted in procuring both historical designations and support of corresponding agencies.

Despite the common ground Lennox laid down, a seventh budget cut in 2002 finally killed his program. But he does add that the cut was "so dramatic, they practically closed down the park system."

Now 30 years later, Merriman reflects on his early experience from the NAI headquarters in Fort Collins, Colo. "We were never really part of the management team. We did self-serving, entertaining programming that did not achieve management objectives," he says. He warns interpreters now that programming nothing more than interpretation is dangerous. "I call it *Groundhog Day*, like the movie. If we don't learn the lessons in making our programming relevant to management, we're doomed to repeat the cycle of cuts again." ☺

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