

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
HORACE M. ALBRIGHT TRAINING CENTER
Grand Canyon, Arizona

PI-35

INTERPRETATION POLICY

The general policy on interpretation is set forth in the Organization Volume of the Administrative Manual as follows:

"Visitor understanding of scenic, scientific, and historic features is recognized as essential to full enjoyment and appreciation of areas of the System. Interpretive programs shall be developed and maintained to aid visitors to understand the significance of the area and to encourage them to view and enjoy its features. Appreciation of their preservation and the will to preserve the historic, scientific, and aesthetic resources of National Park Service areas are enhanced by popular use and understanding.

"Interpretive service shall be provided by means of conducted field trips, illustrated talks, exhibits and displays, nature trails, markers, libraries and literature, visual aids and photographs, study collections and fact files, and other interpretive devices and media."

In addition, the following statement of basic principles set forth by the Service in 1932 is considered as valid today as when it was written:

"In the development of the enlarged program of educational activities, several main general policies have been followed. Important among these are the following:

"1. Simple, understandable interpretation of major features of each park to the public by means of field trips, lectures, exhibits, and literature.

"2. Emphasis upon leading the visitor to study the real thing rather than to utilize secondhand information. Typical academic methods are avoided.

"3. Utilization of a highly trained personnel with field experience, able to interpret to the public the laws of the

universe as exemplified in the parks, and able to develop concepts of the laws of life useful to all.

"4. A research program which will furnish a continuous supply of dependable facts suitable for use in connection with the educational program."

Background material of great value for an understanding of Service interpretive policies will be found in the reports of the Committee on Study of Educational Problems in National Parks dated January 9 and November 27, 1929; in the Service publication, Research and Education in the National Parks, by Harold C. Bryant and Wallace W. Atwood, Jr., 1932; and in an article by Carl P. Russell entitled, "The History and Status of Interpretive Work in the National Parks," which first appeared in the Regional Review, Region One, National Park Service, July 1939. Digests of some of this material appear in the Service publication Information and Interpretation in the Field, first issued in 1955 as part of the Administrative Manual, and now available in revised form as a Handbook. Discussions of Service information and interpretation programs, with important implications for interpretive policy, appear in the MISSION 66 publications Our Heritage and The National Park Wilderness.

Probably the following excerpts from Freeman Tilden's book Interpreting Our Heritage best explain interpretation as we understand it today:

"In the field of Interpretation, whether of the National Park System or other institutions, the activity is not instruction so much as what we may call provocation. It is true that the visitors to these preserves frequently desire straight information, which may be called instruction, and a good interpreter will always be able to teach when called upon. But the purpose of Interpretation is to stimulate the reader or hearer toward a desire to widen his horizon of interests and knowledge, and to gain an understanding of the greater truths that lie behind any statements of fact.

"The national park or monument, the preserved battlefield, the historic restoration, the nature center in a public recreation spot, are exactly those places where Interpretation finds its ideal opportunity, for these are the places where firsthand experience with the objects of Nature's and Man's handiwork can be had.

"Here, then, are the six principles:

"1. 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.

"2. Information, as such, is not Interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.

"3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.

"4. The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.

"5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.

"6. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program."

Regarding the value of interpretation Dr. Clark Wissler once said, "As a rule the visitor entering Mesa Verde the first time has no conception of prehistoric life in the Southwest. Everything looks strange and unexpected." Now, imagine the visitor to have come to a prehistoric Indian ruin on Thanksgiving Day, after a typical modern dinner. He would probably have been eating turkey, squash or pumpkin pie, and possibly corn bread or corn in some other form. At least sixteen articles of food in our present-day menu have come down to us from these aboriginal peoples, according to Dr. John Corbett. Here, for the visitor, is at once offered a vivid link with the past. Skilful interpretation goes on from there into homely parallels with our own day-to-day existence. These people of other centuries played, loved, quarreled, worshipped, knew beauty--all the essentials were about the same. The strangeness and unexpectedness mentioned by Dr. Wissler disappears. The visitor says, "These folks were not so different, after all."