

THE CHALLENGE OF INTERPRETATION

Introduction to an interpretive presentation at Texas A&M University, 1969, by Tom D. Thomas, Chief Naturalist, Rocky Mountain National Park. Mr. Thomas is now Director, Stephen T. Mather Training Center, Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.

Historically and currently, interpretation in our national parks as well as in all natural, historic, and recreation areas has been geared to enhance the visit of the expanding and increasingly more mobile American public. The idea of interpretation in its strictest sense had no real moment of beginning, but rather has been an evolving situation. Stephen Mather, the first Director of the National Park Service, is credited with beginning the first formal interpretive program in a national park. He "shopped the competition" and witnessed an interpretive effort at Lake Tahoe in 1919. Mr. Mather was so convinced that this was the way the national park story ought to be told that by 1920 in Yosemite National Park three men were interpreting the natural phenomena and the "story" of the area to the public.

I believe we must realize that Mather had more than one objective in this new program. True, he wanted visitors to better understand the story that Yosemite offered, but I believe he also wanted them to comprehend more fully the whole idea of preserving any area of such magnitude. They could do this better if their visit was enhanced by an explanation rather than by merely looking and not really seeing.

Over the years interpretation has grown by leaps and bounds. The public has both accepted and expected it as an integral part of their visit to public areas. The significance, the drama, as well as the nostalgia of a given area, are being presented in a multitude of ways.

Personal contact, self-guiding devices, publications, movies, slide programs, museums, and visitor centers are but a few of the great variety of methods used. Freeman Tilden, the master of interpretation, has spoken and written on how we can best use these devices for quality interpretation. Their capabilities, according to Tilden, are restricted only by the imagination, initiative and desire of the interpreter himself. The aspect of quality should be emphasized at this point. Regardless of media or method used the final outcome will be weighed in terms of quality. Without a dedicated interest, a keen knowledge, and an enthusiastic approach, all presentations will lack the luster necessary to make the effort dramatic and understandable.

As I have commented, our objectives in the past have been aimed pretty much at developing and presenting the story and value of a scientific area. Today, however, we are awakening to the fact that these areas represent far more than a few thousand acres of man's heritage. They may very well represent his ability to survive on this planet.

This is where interpretation is receiving the greatest challenge-- to not only present the story to the multitudes-- but to weave into that story an environmental awareness, an expression to the public that man is rapidly befouling his own nest and that these areas, rather than representing merely a bit of our heritage, are integral parts of our daily life.

Each year the number of visitors has increased alarmingly and yet it is our purpose to welcome these people and offer them a quality experience. We have suddenly realized that things are getting out of proportion and as we have scientifically decided in the past; that this acre of land will provide for X many cattle, that this is the sustained yield of an acre of forest land; we must now decide how many PEOPLE can use a given acre of land and receive the optimum good from it.

We must use all of the devices mentioned and add our imagination and initiative in developing the vibrant understanding necessary to the total picture if we are to hope for the resultant appreciation and best relationship of man to his environment.

The interpreter who meets with the youth of America and is able to develop in their growing minds the importance of man to his environment, and of man's debt to the very land he has so subjugated, has met the challenge of the new interpretation. He must strive to develop this understanding among all visitors to all public areas, adult and youth alike, and I believe the salvation is a concerted effort in developing understanding in the younger mind. An adult must also become informed so that he, too, will assist in the maintenance of our environment. The examples we as adults offer today may well become the habits of youth tomorrow.