

# Interp

*G U I D E*

An introduction to the profession of Interpretation as presented and conducted by  
the Intermountain Support Office of the National Park Service

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**An Introduction to the Profession of Interpretation**

## the **places**

All cultures embrace the idea that there exist places of special importance. These places rejuvenate our spirits, challenge and strengthen our beliefs, and provoke contemplation and discussion of our past, present, and future. They embody our shared heritage. They define our character as a people.

## the **mission**

People yearn to forge their own intellectual and emotional connections to the ideas and meanings inherent in these special places. Interpretation is the profession whose mission is to provide opportunities for people to forge deeper and more meaningful connections.

## the **stories**

Although each place holds many meanings, each place also possesses a core set of overarching stories. These stories prompt individuals, groups, and societies to explore each place in more depth, time and time again. The interpretive program uses interpretive themes to tell the stories of these special places.

## the **operation**

Thematic interpretation — interpretive services based on the exploration of a place's core stories — is the fundamental framework of the profession. A strategic, comprehensive interpretive planning process uses this framework to drive the development, management, and implementation of all interpretive services.

## the **interpreters**

It is critical to the accomplishment of the interpretive mission that professional interpreters develop and conduct interpretive services. Such professionalism is developed through a program of instruction that embodies interpretation's best practices and requires demonstration of fundamental interpretive skills.

# People need parks

Our nation is founded on the principle that people are happiest and society works best when individuals are guaranteed the greatest freedom in their quest for personal enrichment consistent with the preservation of our shared natural and cultural heritage. The defining American challenge is to balance that independent drive to succeed with the equitable and sustainable use of resources necessary to assure the same benefits to others, including our descendents.

The National Park System is a microcosm of this essential American philosophy. The founding legislation of the National Park Service directs it to provide for public use and enjoyment of park resources in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. Thus, the challenges of managing park resources are a direct reflection of the challenges facing the nation and, indeed, the world.

The natural and cultural resources of the national parks are, by definition, among the most significant in the nation. Their greatest value is calculated not in dollars, but in importance; they are among the best places to explore our national and personal identity and character. Parks serve to rejuvenate our spirits, challenge and strengthen our beliefs, and provoke contemplation and discussion of our past, present, and future. They move us to become better stewards of each other and the world around us. National parks, along with museums, nature centers, state parks and historic sites, zoos and botanical gardens, universities and schools, and other places that interpret natural and cultural heritage, provide opportunities to explore

self, society, and the world  
in which we live. •

# Interpretation's mission

From time immemorial, societies have relied on the power of *story* to explore, clarify, and share the ideas, meanings, and values that collectively constitute culture. People use the allegorical and metaphorical properties of story to capture the essence of who we were, who we are, and who we wish to be. People visit parks because, consciously or unconsciously, they seek a personal connection to the powerful stories found in these special places. Providing opportunities for people to forge deeper connections to these meaningful places is the mission of interpretation. •

# Themes explore meanings

In the profession of interpretation, stories flow from interpretive themes. Interpretation uses themes to connect tangible park resources to the larger ideas, meanings, and values of which they are a part. *Thematic interpretation* is the profession's communication framework that provides opportunities for people to increase their understanding and appreciation of the significances inherent in park resources. This fundamental

# Interpretation provides opportunities

framework ensures that the core stories of a place are accessible to those who seek them. •

Interpretive programs provide access to core stories by offering interpretive services to the public. *Effective interpretive services* provide opportunities for people to forge their own intellectual and emotional connections to the ideas and meanings inherent in the resources of parks. These services are specifically planned, designed, and conducted by interpreters to encourage people to discover more about the park and form their own conclusions about the ideas and meanings inherent in its resources.

Interpretive services are most effective when they are planned comprehensively. Comprehensive interpretive planning is conducted by the park's interpretive staff and other stakeholders, who together establish a long-range vision for the program to best achieve the mission of interpretation. The park's staff continues the process by determining the short-range actions necessary to achieve that vision, and by assembling a reference database to assist in managing the program. This process includes all interpretive services: those delivered personally and non-personally (media), regardless of provider. It considers diverse audiences and multiple points of view, and addresses all those who experience park interpretation — in park and off site. These elements are integrated by design and mutually support achieving desired outcomes. The process produces a *Comprehensive Interpretive Plan* — the strategic underpinning of the park's interpretive program. All interpretive and educational activities performed by the program are based on it and coordinated by it. It forms the overall vision and basis for decision-making relating to the park's interpretive function. •

# Standards of the profession

The Interpretive Development Program (IDP) of the National Park Service describes

standards and best practices for its interpreters and others who provide interpretive services in the National Park System. This program's content is widely applicable to all places that interpret natural and cultural heritage. It provides a path for the development and demonstration of the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to accomplish the interpretive job. This competence-based program produces highly skilled individuals that effectively plan and deliver interpretive services to the public. It focuses interpreters on the mission of interpretation (*increasing understanding and appreciation*); it develops sound interpretive methodology (*interpretive services that provide opportunities for people to forge their own intellectual and emotional connections to the ideas and meanings inherent in park resources*); and it provides a framework for accomplishing the mission (*thematic interpretation that is planned comprehensively and implemented professionally*).

For more information, visit the National Park Service's Interpretive Development Program Internet site at <http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp/>. There you will find a complete description of the IDP, its philosophy and structure, modules and component plans, submission procedures, and more. •

# More meaningful park experiences

Effective interpretation leads to park experiences that are more meaningful for

visitors. The best interpretation effectively combines the philosophy of Freeman Tilden's masterful work, *Interpreting Our Heritage*; an outcome-driven focus (mandated for federal agencies through the Government Performance and Results Act); the competency-based rigor of the standards and best practices in the Interpretive Development Program; and the structured, yet flexible framework of thematic interpretation and comprehensive interpretive planning. This new synthesis greatly enhances the ability of interpretation to make park experiences more meaningful to people — fostering stewardship of our shared human heritage within and beyond park boundaries. •

# Essential Tools for Interpreters

## Interp Guide

**An introduction to the profession of interpretation as presented and conducted by the Intermountain Support Office of the National Park Service.** *This publication explores the relationships between people, places, and interpretation — a useful introduction for those interested in better understanding the profession of interpretation. June 2001 edition; 8 pages.*

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## Theme Guide

**A guide to the thematic approach to interpretation used by the Intermountain Support Office of the National Park Service.** *This publication addresses significances, primary interpretive themes, subthemes, and theme-based interpretive services. It includes numerous park examples — complete sets of significance statements and the primary themes derived from them. An excellent resource for frontline interpreters, seasonal training, and theme workshops, this guide is a useful tool for all those involved in managing and conducting daily interpretive operations. June 2001 edition; 56 pages.*

## Theme Guide Abstract

**A brief description of the thematic approach to interpretation used by the Intermountain Support Office of the National Park Service.** *June 2001 edition; 8 pages.*

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## CIP Guide

**A guide to the comprehensive interpretive planning process used by the Intermountain Support Office of the National Park Service.** *This publication addresses how to conduct and implement comprehensive interpretive planning. It includes the appendix, “The Role of Cooperating Associations in Accomplishing the Interpretive Mission of Parks,” which serves as a guide to developing a Scope of Sales Statement for educational sales outlets in parks. June 2001 edition; 100 pages.*

## CIP Guide Abstract

**A brief description of the comprehensive interpretive planning process used by the Intermountain Support Office of the National Park Service.** *June 2001 edition; 12 pages.*

## CIP Guide Planner’s Assistant

**Templates and other support materials useful to planners conducting the comprehensive interpretive planning process used by the Intermountain Support Office of the National Park Service.** *June 2001 edition; 24 pages.*

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## About the Authors

**Richard Kohen** is the Lead Interpretive Planner for the Intermountain Support Office of the National Park Service. He entered the Service in 1991 and worked in the areas of cultural resources, park planning, and ranger activities before joining interpretation in 1995. With a background in communication arts — theater, music, art direction, illustration, graphic design, typography, and sculpture — he draws from a rich palette to craft solutions to interpretive communication challenges. His special skill in organizing and clearly depicting processes is valuable in helping others achieve their desired outcomes.

**Kim Sikoryak** is a 25-year veteran with the National Park Service and has worked as Chief of Interpretation and Interpretive Specialist at parks and regional offices in Oregon, California, Hawaii, Colorado, and New Mexico. Kim's varied background in secondary and college education, public radio and television, field biology, and theater provides him with an opportunity to view interpretive challenges and opportunities from diverse, and sometimes unusual, perspectives. Since 1997 he has worked with Richard Kohen to develop a set of essential tools for interpreters that are tightly focused on outcomes, yet intimately tied to operational realities.



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