

Theme

G U I D E

Abstract

A brief description of the thematic approach to interpretation used by
the Intermountain Support Office of the National Park Service

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Thematic interpretation facilitates exploration of meanings

Interpreters provide opportunities for people to explore ideas and meanings inherent in places of natural and cultural heritage, and arrive at their own conclusions about them. This important concept was articulated years ago when Freeman Tilden established, as one of his six principles of interpretation, that “The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.” (*Interpreting Our Heritage*, University of North Carolina Press, 1957.) This concept lives on in current interpretive philosophy, which consciously respects the individuality and independence of the visitor, and works toward providing that person with tools for continued personal growth. *Thematic interpretation* embodies this idea and implements it through a progressive flow beginning with the resources of the park and ending with the comprehensive program of interpretive services offered to visitors.

The resources of special places possess inherent significances.

The idea of *place*, and the attachment of meanings to place, are fundamental human traits. We ascribe significance to special places because they rejuvenate our spirits, challenge and strengthen our beliefs, and provoke contemplation and discussion of our past, present, and future. They embody our shared heritage. These places define our character as a people.

The significances of a place are embedded in the tangible and intangible characteristics of its resources. These are the elements that are so attractive, interesting, and engaging that people choose to experience them time and again. These elements are identified in the *set of significance statements*. Significance statements embody the power of the place through a factual representation of what makes the place special. They are facts placed in relevant context that makes the facts meaningful, summarizing the essence of the importance of these resources to our natural and cultural heritage. They clearly describe the distinctiveness of a place’s natural, cultural, scientific, recreational, and inspirational resources. Significances may evolve over time as a result of discoveries or other updates to knowledge about the place. The inherent resource significances of these special places make them valuable locations to explore the particular ideas and meanings associated with them.

Primary interpretive themes flow from resource significances.

To provide opportunities for exploration, significances are translated into the largest, most overarching stories of the place — the *set of primary interpretive themes*. 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. *Story* is at the heart of human interaction, and at the heart of interpretation.

Primary interpretive themes link tangible resources to intangible ideas and meanings, and center around universal concepts: concepts common to all people, though the values placed on them differ markedly among individuals, and from culture to culture. Universal concepts are powerful because in just a word — love, family, war, honor, education, sacrifice — many different meanings are instantly accessed. Universal concepts in both primary interpretive themes and subthemes are

the critical components that foster inclusion of multiple points of view, enabling the widest range of people with diverse life experiences to become engaged with the place, with the program, with the exhibit.

Subthemes flow from primary interpretive themes.

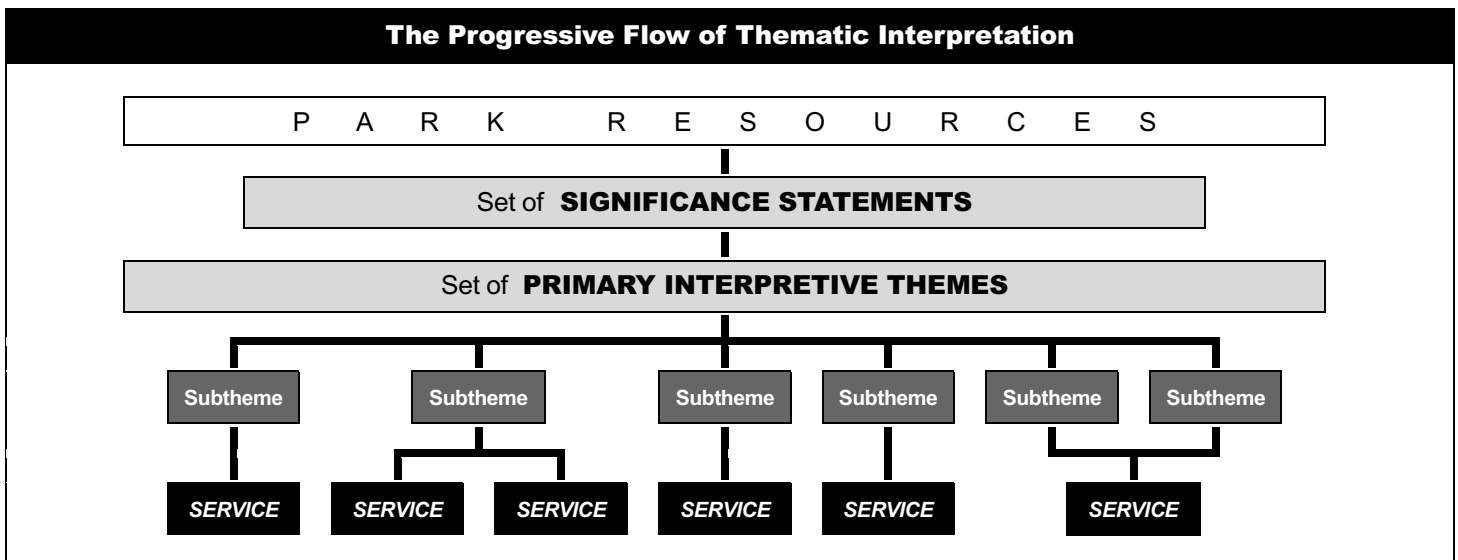
Subthemes are the myriad smaller, more specific stories that nest within primary interpretive themes. They are focused more narrowly than primary themes and offer opportunities for deeper, more focused exploration of the meanings of the place.

Interpretive services flow from subthemes.

Each subtheme lends itself to specific kinds of expression — individual *interpretive services* — that will best facilitate visitors’ exploration of the park’s resources and the meanings that may be ascribed to them. Interpretive services are always developed from interpretive themes to ensure that the direct linkage from resource significances, to the story format of primary interpretive themes, to the depth and focus of subthemes, remains intact. Consciously building an interpretive service around the framework of a well-crafted interpretive theme maximizes the value of the service in fulfilling the primary goal of interpretation — facilitating the exploration of ideas and meanings. This structure also serves to prevent the desired outcome of the service being overshadowed or deflected by interpretive medium, technique, or personality.

Interpretation facilitates more meaningful park experiences.

Providing opportunities for people to forge deeper connections to these meaningful places is the mission of interpretation. Thematic interpretation, an outgrowth of the most fundamental of human communication systems — story — is the most effective method for successfully, consistently, and systematically facilitating these connections.



Park Significances and Primary Interpretive Themes

HAWAI'I VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK

Set of Significance Statements

Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park features Mauna Loa and Kilauea, two of the most active volcanoes in the world.

Mauna Loa — measured from its base deep beneath the surface of the sea to its peak — contains more material by volume than any other mountain on Earth.

The unusually high degree of approachability to the park's active volcanism affords opportunities for fundamental and detailed research not duplicated (or even approached) in any other park in the world, offering relatively safe experiences with lava flows, fountains, and other products of active volcanism.

The long history and collaborative nature of the research performed by the USGS Hawai'i Volcano Observatory and others at Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park have made Mauna Loa and Kilauea among the most studied and best understood volcanoes in the world.

Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park provides critical living space in a wide variety of ecological zones for the highly endemic native biota, much of which is threatened or endangered, requiring active management of native and non-native species.

The diversity and importance of the cultural resources in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park — and the protection of natural features and processes afforded by national park status — combine to make Hawai'i Volcanoes critically important to the perpetuation of traditional native Hawaiian religion and culture.

Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park encompasses the largest expanse of Hawaiian natural environment managed as wilderness, with the associated wilderness values of natural sounds, lack of mechanization and development, natural darkness, and opportunities for solitude.

The park's resources are so rare, valuable, and inspirational to all the people of the world that the United Nations has declared the park an International Biosphere Reserve and a World Heritage Site.

Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park protects the most extensive tract of protected montane tropical rain forest in the National Park Service.

The structural complexity and isolation of the Hawaiian Islands and their active volcanic setting makes them a world-class living laboratory of biogeography and evolution. The protected status of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park lands offers important opportunities for this work to continue.

Set of Primary Interpretive Themes

The approachable, active volcanoes of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park allow first-hand discovery of and connection with one of the most fundamental forces of our world — in both its creative and destructive roles.

The journeys of the Hawaiian people, who continue to inhabit these rich and diverse lands, include cultural clashes, adaptations, and assimilations that provide enduring lessons about human resourcefulness, interdependence, and respect for the life of the land.

In Hawai'i, active volcanism created an isolated home for a few immigrant species that gave rise to a rich yet fragile endemic biota; due to the accelerating change brought about by human actions, much of that unique heritage continues to be lost to extinction, challenging all of us to learn from the past and work together to preserve the remaining native plants and animals.

Kilauea, the home of Pele, is sacred to many Native Hawaiians: it is a place of birth and the well-spring of many spirits and forces; the active volcanism, the features of the terrain, and the plants and animals that live there are all important to Native Hawaiian sense of identity, unity, and continuity.

Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park provides an opportunity for people to experience the values of Hawai'i's diverse wilderness; the park's designation as a World Heritage Site and International Biosphere Reserve attests to its importance as a benchmark for monitoring environmental change.

Primary Themes, Subthemes, and Interpretive Services

HAWAI'I VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK

Set of Primary Interpretive Themes

The approachable, active volcanoes of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park allow first-hand discovery and connection with one of the most fundamental forces of our world — in both its creative and destructive roles.

The journeys of the Hawaiian peoples, who continue to inhabit these rich and diverse lands, include cultural clashes, adaptations, and assimilations that provide enduring lessons about ...

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Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park provides an opportunity for people to experience the values of Hawai'i's diverse wilderness; the park's designation as a World Heritage ...

Example Subtheme

The unusually high approachability to the park's active volcanism not only affords opportunities for personal exploration, but for fundamental and detailed research that benefits us all.

Example Service

A subtheme like this might best lend itself to an **interactive computer station** that graphically demonstrates how fundamental volcanic research benefits other scientific inquiries with which visitors are familiar, such as studies into dynamic global change like plate tectonics or climate patterns like the El Niño/ La Niña effect.

Example Subtheme

Landforms created by the volcanic activity of Kilauea and Mauna Loa sensationally demonstrate the role of volcanism in shaping and reshaping Earth's surface, and deepens our understanding of other planetary bodies.

Example Service

A subtheme like this might best lend itself to an **illustrated program** that shows varying landscapes of Earth, and then shows landscapes of other planets and moons (as mapped and photographed by NASA). Inspiring music might accompany the imagery, followed by an interpreter-led discussion about the similarities and differences in these landscapes.

Example Subtheme

Earthquakes, tsunamis, ash and debris fallout from eruptions — consequences of volcanic activity — have at times been disastrous for humans, but have also provided opportunities for people to thrive.

Example Service

A subtheme like this might best lend itself to a **guided hike** across the flank of Kilauea, on a trail that transects a place of cultural significance to Native Hawaiians. The interpreter might draw visitors' attention to plant species that thrive in this environment, then discuss the connections of human populations to this place, and their successful lifeways.

Example Subtheme

A civilization-enriching aspect of science is introducing and testing new ideas: Mauna Loa and Kilauea exemplify the theory that volcanic activity above a fixed hot spot in the Earth's interior built the Hawaiian Islands, a relatively new idea.

Example Service

A subtheme like this might best lend itself to an **interpretive talk**. Starting with the idea that the Hawaiian Islands are probably the best example on Earth of hot-spot volcanism, the interpreter might expand into procedures of scientific inquiry (hypotheses, testing, improved hypotheses), and end by asking about the benefits/detriments of science to society.

Etc.

Note: Subthemes were written by the authors for the purposes of instruction only and may or may not represent actual subthemes used by the park.

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.*

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

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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.*

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.*

The publications in this series are designed to be electronically distributed and printed using Microsoft Word 6.0/95[®] or newer version. The electronic files are formatted as “Word 97-2000 & 6.0/95 – RTF (*.doc).” Listed page counts are measured cover-to-cover. Updated publications are distributed as they are produced. Federal government agencies can download these files from the Intermountain Support Office Intranet page at “http://im.den.nps.gov/den_interptools.cfm”. Please direct inquiries and comments to the authors at:

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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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