

THE MEANING OF INTERPRETATION

Because interpretation can be almost limitless, its scope and direction must be in conformity with the mission of the National Park Service. The following guidelines summarize what most people believe to be the basic elements of the interpretive mission. Essentially, all relate to the primary purpose of interpretive services: engendering a love and respect and knowledge of those special places of natural beauty and historical significance which have been set aside in the National Park System. As with most great activities of mankind, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Perception as the highest form of park use. All interpretive programs should seek to enhance the experience of the visitor. The abiding purpose of national parks is to bring man and his natural and cultural environment into closer harmony. Interpretive programs should be designed to help people perceive and treasure the natural and historic processes through which the land and all living things have achieved their existence. Perception, then, should become the highest form of park use.

Preservation through appreciation. Interpretation can become the most effective device for preserving park values. One superintendent declared: "Interpretation is the frontal attack which through proper use can ease law enforcement problems, get across safety, and aid the maintenance and littering problems." Visitors who are informed about the reason for park policies and who understand the threats to survival of the parks are more likely to become personally involved and to help in preservation efforts.

Realization of the educational potential of national parks. The Conservation Foundation Task Force on "The National Park System as an Educational and Cultural Institution" concluded "The National Park Service does not have to become an educational and cultural institution; it already is one. The Park Service boasts the nation's, if not the world's, largest, most generously endowed campus without walls." Such programs as the Yosemite Institute and the Rocky Mountain Summer Seminars provide models for utilization of national parks by educational institutions for programs of instruction from the elementary grades to the college level. In a time of intense pressure from enormous numbers of visitors, interpretation must also provide some in-depth programs. Parks are self-revealing, educative environments where park values can be understood by the visitor in a context which relates them to his own life and values.

Support of the environmental movement. In the not too distant past, interpretation was an activity which added much to the visitor's appreciation and understanding of national parks. Now the stage has been expanded. Interpretation is coming to be an activity which will add much to the visitor's appreciation and understanding of his world. "That drum surely has been beating loudly and clearly: parks today - a social force for an environmental ethic, and out interpretive programs at the hub of that force."

Outreach through environmental education. A participant in the Grand Canyon meeting, Bill Eddy, who directed production of the film "Earthbound" and the book Consider the Process of Living, described the role of environmental education programs such as NEED, STEP, and the Environmental Study Areas, all of which involve young people through the school systems:

"These represent a specific and detailed involvement by the Park Service primarily in the public educational system throughout this country. Environmental education as defined in this context is not to be viewed as a substitute for, but rather as an extension of the interpretive program within each park. Its prime purpose is to amplify in national and even global terms a concern, with sensitivity to surroundings, similar to that expressed by local park interpretive programs. However, the particular role of environmental education within the whole of the national parks interpretive mission is to utilize existing school systems, social organizations and appropriate park areas to create a greater sensitivity to all natural processes and a greater awareness of them as a living organism."

Relevance to the interests and traditions of all visitors. The United States is a pluralistic nation; interpretive programs, particularly in historical areas, need to communicate this rich cultural diversity. As NPS is the steward of America's natural resources, it must also be the fair-minded steward, and the interpreter, of the cultural contributions made by the Indian, the black, and the Chicano, as well as the European.

Communication with young people. Presently, many young visitors are turned off by traditional terms of NPS interpretation. Yet both NPS and young people share many of the same goals; an interest in the future welfare of the parks, a sensitivity to natural and social values, a concern for environmental degradation. Interpretation should seek to build an alliance between NPS and young people through better means of communication. Programs which involve the visitor as a participant, rather than as a spectator, are generally more successful.

Parks as examples of environmental integrity. Interpretation is a vital way of dealing with parks themselves, as well as of dealing with visitors. The parks must be managed and developed in a way that will complement, rather than contradict, the interpretive theme of environmental quality. NPS is on stage, front and center; it must practice what it preaches.

Quality, the distinctive feature. There are many land-managing organizations that offer interpretive programs, just as there are many outstanding natural, historical and recreational sites administered by other Federal, state and private agencies. One characteristic that should always identify NPS administration is that any facility put in a park and any program developed for a park should be distinctive for its quality. Whatever the medium and whatever the goal of an interpretive program, it should be a quality performance. People have a right to be touched, to be moved, to be inspired by their visit to a national park. There is as much reason to restrict the number of

people participating in an interpretive program, in order to preserve the quality of the program, as there is to restrict the number of people entering a national park, in order to preserve the quality of the park experience.

Above all, diversity. National parks are set aside because of their diversity. One of the great values of a national park is its ability to offer a contrast to the environment in which most park visitors live. The strength of the environmental message is that all park ecosystems are interrelated and often interdependent. But this does not mean that all park interpretation should take on a sameness. People do not travel all the way from Florida to Mt. Rainier to hear a lecture on water pollution. A park interpretive program must begin with, or return to, the basic park theme.

Excerpt from:

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EXAMPLES OF GENERAL THEMES AND CONCEPTS FOR THEMATIC INTERPRETATION

From "Environmental Concepts through Questions"?

- * Change is a constant process, both in the earth and the communities that populate it.
- * Water, temperature, and climate are related to each of the changes.
- * Biotic communities are often significant factors in earth changes.
- * The earth and its resources are finite.
- * Man and other animals are products of their environment.
- * The environment is a complex web with everything connected.
- * Cultural change and historic events have strong linkages to environmental factors.

From "Environmental Conceptual Strands":

- * Variety, similarities, and patterns
- * Interactions and interdependence
- * Continuity and change
- * Evolution and adaptation

From "The Name of the Game: Thematic Interpretation":

- * Man's dependency on the environment/nature
- * Interdependency of all life
- * Similarity of all men
- * Similarity of all life
- * Change
- * Man's adjustment/misadjustment to the environment
- * Cultural order
- * Natural order
- * The food chain
- * War is Hell
- * War is necessary/unnecessary
- * War is futile
- * War is natural
- * Adaptation
- * Adjustment to change
- * Adjust/cooperate or die
- * Courage and reward
- * Greed and price

Adapted from "Examples of Central Themes" by William J. Lewis:

- * RMNP appeals to each of the five senses.
- * RMNP is affected by the seasons of the year.
- * The Rocky Mountain landscape is in a constant state of change.
- * RMNP has great diversity.
- * Man is capable of destroying his environment and its ability to sustain life.
- * Man depends upon the biological organisms with which he shares this planet for his own health and well-being.
- * The natural world is extremely complex, having many interacting and interdependent parts.
- * All things in nature must be cycled so that they can be used over and over again.
- * Diversity is necessary in the living world.
- * Our national parks have important therapeutic effects on urbanized man.
- * The story of man in RMNP is adventurous, humorous, and troublesome.
- * Glacial function is dependant upon several variables.
- * The landscape of RMNP is the result of a variety of forces.
- * Can RMNP survive the pressures man is putting on it?
- * Man's view of RMNP has undergone many changes during its recorded history.

Additional Themes:

- * ~~Adaptation~~
- * Strategies for survival
- * Evolution
- * Ecosystem structure and function
 - Nature as a whole with interlocking parts
 - All parts of an ecosystem are interrelated.
 - Stability of ecosystems is a function of diversity.
 - Succession
 - Closed system: Spaceship Earth with finite resources
 - Population dynamics: There are finite limits to the number of organisms a given ecosystem can support (carrying capacity).
 - Energy flow through ecosystems (food chains)
 - Nutrient cycling in ecosystems (hydrological cycle, carbon cycle and the importance of decomposition to life, etc.)
- * Earth's history as depicted in RMNP (relate to Mesa Verde, Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, etc.)
- * The forces of nature are continually at work in RMNP.
- * Human-environmental interactions
 - Man is a part of nature.
 - Man's welfare depends upon the state of his biosphere.
 - In many cases, man has had a deleterious affect upon the land.
 - Environmental ethic and sense of stewardship, responsibility
- * Role of NPS in conserving natural and historic resources (compare and contrast with U.S. Forest Service)

ORGANIZATION OF TALKS

- I. Introductions have three purposes: (1) to create a favorable atmosphere for the talk (2) to stimulate interest in the subject (3) to clarify the topic.
 - A. A favorable atmosphere may be created by:
 1. Referring to momentary interests
 2. Responding to mood of audience
 3. Referring to special interest of audience
 4. Honestly complimenting the audience
 - B. Interest may be stimulated by:
 1. Asking a stimulating question
 2. Asking a series of questions
 3. Beginning with an unusual statement
 4. Beginning with an illustration or narrative
 5. Beginning with humor (if related to talk)
 6. Beginning with a provocative quotation
 7. Relating a pertinent personal experience
 8. Referring to a problem
 9. Referring to the occasion
 - C. The topic may be clarified by revealing the theme and its main headings.
- II. The body of the talk may be developed by: (1) disclosing the theme (2) dividing the theme into main and subordinate headings and arranging them into an organizational pattern, and (3) supporting your ideas with explanation, reasoning, evidence, analogy, etc.
 - A. The theme should be worded as a complete sentence which summarizes the entire speech.
 - B. The main headings must support the central idea. They may be arranged according to one of the following patterns:
 1. Deductive or inductive
 2. Problem-solution
 3. Time-order
 4. Enumeration-order
 5. Logical (step-by-step) order
 6. Location-order
 7. Cause-to-effect and effect-to-cause
 8. Simple-to-complex
 9. Familiar-to-unfamiliar
- III. The conclusion rounds out the theme by (1) summarizing the main points, or (2) amplifying the theme, or (3) indicating desired action, or (4) any combination of them.