

PRESERVATION AND INTERPRETATION

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In contrast to the measure of reluctance I felt to talk about policies, I happen to enjoy thinking and talking about the relationship between resource preservation and interpretation. In offering for your consideration some of my musings on the subject, I'd like first to describe two analogies between situations in the "outside" world and those that exist in the Service that have helped me come to terms with the relationship that seems to exist between park resources and interpretation--and perhaps what ought to exist.

The first analogy comes from the world and words of modern, or pop, psychologists. They have written much of late about the process in which we "read" people or are "read" by others. They are talking about the way in which we perceive what a person is thinking or feeling by the sum total of his actions and appearance--how he is standing or sitting or talking or gesturing. I laugh sometimes at the seriousness with which the psychologists take this whole art, not because what they're saying is not true, but because it's so true that we all have practiced it as a matter of course literally as long as we've been alive. It's the process involved in getting a "first impression" or a "general impression" in which we pretty instinctively assess another person by all that he is or is doing, not just by his words. The logic in giving some credibility to first impressions or to our subconscious reading of a person is that, whether we like it or not, most of us are consistent packages of feelings and priorities and beliefs, and our honest feelings can't be disguised for any great length of time, even if we try to do so.

At any rate, I find it useful to realize that that same process occurs when a visitor comes to our parks. He reads us in the same instinctive sort of way that we read each other, and he goes away with a first or general impression that may or may not conform to what we think we are or are doing in a park. A visitor does not have the benefit of our master plan statement or the themes described in an interpretive prospectus. So he responds and reacts to the sum total of all our actions and appearances: where our roads go, how we've placed the visitor center, the words on our exhibits, and our interpretive programs. Just as on a personal level, determining both what a visitor's perception is and why he has that particular impression is a complicated process, one that I'm not prepared to go through in a complete way. But, again as with individuals, I think we can determine what visitors see as most important about our parks--what

the dominant memory is when they leave--by what they ask for when they come back, by the kinds of publicity we get from them in newspapers, and by what they seem to anticipate finding when they come, based on past experience. For the moment, that's the first analogy.

The second has to do with the word "interpretation." I wish I knew more about the Park Service proceedings of the late 20's during which the word "interpretation" was carefully chosen to express the kind of communication that would be planned and done in a park. I like that choice of word--particularly if we understand it in the sense of a language interpreter. An interpreter at the United Nations, for example, has the task of translating when necessary the words of a speaker for individuals in the audience. There his services are made available on an individual basis. He has a very critical job. His translations must be as accurate as humanly possible, and hence based on a complete comprehension of both languages. He can't upstage the main speaker, or say things that the speaker is not saying. And he can't be conspicuous. Notwithstanding the importance of his job, the interpreter at the United Nations should never be obvious. The communication he must assist is that between the speaker and the audience, not between the audience and himself.

It seems to me that the task of a Park Service interpreter ought to be very similar. If, as I mentioned awhile ago, the physical resources of a park are most important, and indeed account for its very existence, then a Park Service interpreter ought to be someone who, when necessary, makes a park's resources understandable and intelligible, and who does so in such a way that the resources are still doing the "talking." That means that a park interpreter has to be thoroughly grounded in the "language" of the resource. He should not upstage the resource or say things it is not saying. And however important he can be on occasion to visitors, he should not be very conspicuous. The communication he needs to encourage is between the resource and the visitor, not between the visitor and himself.

But, to the extent that we can determine how visitors are reading our parks, it would seem that something other than "interpretation" in the best use of the word is going on in some of them. From their verbal responses to us, from their newspaper articles, from our own publicity offices, from the failure of visitors to distinguish between our areas and our commercial neighbors, it would seem that while visitors like us they don't always recognize the values and resources that make us special. If, as often seems to be the case, our programs do not concentrate on the tangible, visible resources and their very special intangible values and associations, we are in effect telling visitors that our own programs and people are more

important than our resources. And in so doing, we've robbed ourselves, in their eyes and emotions, of any status other than that of another amusement area. This is so because programs that don't focus on park resources could be given anywhere--and often are. We might just as well not be the special keepers of special resources.

Let me try to put that into a more concrete example. And I'm going to do so using a park where I worked not in a spirit of great criticism--because I was party to some of the planning that went on there--but in a spirit of some anguish and subsequent learning. I worked at a Civil War battlefield. The resource that's most important there is the site. There are historic houses and monuments. But it's the site that's most important because the soldiers, in accomplishing their aims, had to deal with and adapt to and use the land. So it would seem that interpretation on a Civil War battlefield ought to consist (when needed at all by visitors) of explanations of setting and terrain and the ways they were used and fought over in the course of the battle. That can be a very special kind of interpretation, a kind that can never be duplicated with maps in a classroom, because there on the land visitors can begin to perceive the total setting--its obstacles, its distances, its importance. There will be, of course, some important and related subthemes: the battle's relationship to the entire war; the kind of soldier who came and fought here, his daily lifestyle. But those should be conveyed only after people understand the terrain and its relationship to the battle.

Now, several years ago the park began looking at a relatively isolated historic farm, part of an Environmental Study Area, and thinking it could be developed for use by school children and summer visitors. The justification for using it with visitors particularly was that there we could convey better the effect of battle on the farms and farmers caught up in the battle. That's wholly legitimate, when done in the right proportion. But in the course of three years, spurred by the prevailing sentiments for living history and the goodness of time past, the project mushroomed. We started gathering up old farm equipment donated by farmers. We began to acquire an amazing menagerie of farm animals and to spend an inordinate amount of park time supposedly "recreating" a historic scene. We hired a farmer type and a wife type. The farmer type talked about and showed off his farm. The wife type gave what I still think was an excellent first-person talk about the effects of the battle on the farmers of that area. But visitors only half heard her talk. They had had too much fun getting to know the Jersey cow and reminiscing about what their grandparents had that looked like what this farm had. So while the theme was important, our own program and all our stage setting got in the way of communicating that site-related theme. Visitors went home remembering not a battlefield but a farm they could have visited any number of other places.

Living history is by no means the only culprit in the business of going beyond interpreting the resource, or upstaging it. Regular walks and talks can as easily be misdirected to themes and gimmicks that have marginal relationship to the park. Living history is very simply the most effective culprit. It is fun for interpreters, particularly those with a bent to thinking that the past was somehow better than the present. It is also fun for visitors with the same bent. But with some exceptions it would seem that we are telling people (in a way that we may never quite intend or be conscious of) that we care more about our programs than we do about our resources. The living history activities that are the most common--cooking, farming, soldiering--are usually only tangential to the park resource and theme and could be and are presented other places--at craft centers, folk festivals, and at Disneyland.

If as we perceive the situation and as we perceive how visitors read our parks, we learn that visitors remember us and our programs more than they remember our resources, then it would seem to be time for some concentrated self-evaluation. It doesn't mean that we have to throw away all the programs or all the interpretive tools we use now. But it does mean that we need to look very carefully at our interpretive methods and subjects and themes and make certain once again that the communication that goes on in our parks is occurring between visitor and resource. That would seem to be the definition of what we used to know as a "park experience."