



## Interpretation

### Description

Interpretation is the systematic provision of information to and education of visitors, making connections between them and places, sites, natural areas, wildlife and cultures. Various communication methods are used in interpretation, from static signs to story telling.

A number of specific tools are commonly used in interpretation and these include [visitor centres](#), [visitor marketing](#), [signage](#), [visitor codes](#) and [honorary wardens](#).

### How and when the tool is used

Interpretation has a variety of objectives for visitor education and tourism management. The five main objectives identified are to:

- provide in-depth information about an area that will attract visitors to go there in the first place, or get them to plan a longer visit (see also the tools of visitor information and marketing); this can involve targeting certain types of visitors and managing visitor numbers and where they go;
- provide information that will increase visitor enjoyment of and interaction in an area, site or culture, through increased knowledge or awareness at an intellectual and emotional level;
- provide information that changes visitor behaviour as part of the management of tourism assets and risks - either by conveying messages about limits to behaviour such as rules, safety, fees, permits, bans, fines, etc, or by seeking to reduce inappropriate behaviour, increase appropriate behaviour and reduce environmental effects (such as visitor codes);
- increase visitor knowledge, understanding and respect (protection and enhancement) for the environment, heritage, culture and ways of life, and property (often in line with an organisation's advocacy role for a place, park, ecosystem, conservation, etc);
- increase knowledge of an organisation or agency, including building support for their work and participation in their management plans.

There are many methods for providing interpretation. Some of the more common, formal ones are: signs, information boards and posters;

- displays and exhibits;
- verbal information from rangers, wardens, information centre staff, tourism operators and volunteers;
- audio-visually, talks, lectures, story telling and dramatic performances;
- guided tours;
- guide books, pamphlets and brochures;
- newsletters and newspapers;
- radio and television programmes;
- websites.

There are also informal sources of interpretation, arising from interaction with a host or operator, drivers, shopkeepers, park staff, tribal elders and locals.

Evaluation of interpretation programmes is a substantive area of work in its own right. Evaluations can be front end - developing interpretation objectives; formative - trialling interpretation and testing communications for usability; remedial - checking that the interpretation is working; or summative - looking back to ask if the interpretation met its objectives. Standard evaluation procedures and techniques are used, such as interviews, focus groups and questionnaires. Specialist techniques include methods such as tracking visitor movements around information points in a site using GPS systems.

As an example, for purposes of evaluation California State Parks consider success in interpretation involves visitor perception, participant hours in education/interpretation programs, congruity with educational curricula, and quality of programs based on professional standards. Their evaluation comes from data bases and surveys. The NZ Department of Conservation (DOC) considers guided and non-guided interpretation is up to standard when 85% of visitors report high to very high satisfaction through questionnaires.



## **Application**

Interpretation has grown as a tool internationally around the management of national parks and reserves. Commentators typically trace its growth back to the 1950s, when park managers were looking to enhance the visitor experience through education, knowledge and awareness of the natural environment.

However, interpretation experience and technical capacity have built slowly in the tourism industry. Interpretation is routinely taught as part of university tourism courses, such as (in New Zealand) at Lincoln and Otago Universities, and in the certification of guides. There are numerous professional associations, such as the Australian Interpretation Association. The Interpretation Handbook and Standard published by DOC in 2005 provides NZ best practice guidance about communicating clearly, planning interpretation, and guided and self-guided techniques. There is an increasing focus on both planning for interpretation and monitoring and the evaluation of interpretation activities.

Information often has to be transferred across language and cultural barriers. Messages need to use universal concepts, and images, and content that is widely understood. There is also increasing interest in, and concern about intellectual property rights, particularly in respect to information relating to indigenous knowledge, which has implications for the practice of interpretation.

Interpretation has particular uses in the management of sustainable tourism in fragile environments, for example to provide information to enable visitors not to unwittingly damage cave systems, archaeological sites, or rare and endangered species. In other settings it can be used to increase effective management and visitor satisfaction, by providing information on times when a popular place is busiest, or advice on considerate behaviours that visitors can adopt.

Possible improvements that could be made to application of interpretation include coordinated planning of interpretation - particularly between key agencies and stakeholders such as DOC, the visitor information network, local councils and operators, and greater use of local knowledge. The tourism industry commonly underutilises local knowledge about the natural environment, history, heritage and culture.

## **Our evaluation**

Interpretation is a key tool for integrated management of tourism, with potential for greater use in managing visitor numbers, behaviour and impacts, and enhancing experience. It is closely associated with a set of more specific tools that fit under the broad topic of interpretation - see visitor marketing, visitor information centres, signage, visitor codes and honorary wardens. Considerable potential exists to apply interpretation principles and techniques more fully in visitor information centres and in both guided and self-guided tours.

There is a communication gap between natural area/wildlife managers and social scientists such as sociologists and psychologists, and tourism researchers investigating issues such as visitor carrying capacity. Therefore knowledge from expert areas including cognitive psychology, adult learning processes, environmental education and technical communication, are not applied consistently in visitor management for natural areas.