



Best Practice Interpretation Research for Sustainable Tourism

By Stephen Wearing

INTRODUCTION

This article outlines the development of a framework that enables the classification of different interpretation research so that it can be linked to management needs in protected areas. The developed framework has been linked to selected case studies, thus enabling this research to be systematically placed in a protected area management context. A real life context for interpretation research is important if park managers are to take new knowledge of interpretation and apply it to their operational practices.

The framework was generated through a STCRC Technical that the author recently completed (2007). The aim of the report was the development of a new agenda for interpretation research, which will aid the sustainability of the tourism industry in Australia's protected areas. In undertaking this research the authors have been guided by the following conceptual framework (Figure 1). This framework illustrates the areas that contribute to the development a new agenda for interpretation

research, as well as four principle outcomes of this agenda. The study was a desktop review and collation of existing literature, research and existing knowledge.

Since the early years of park development there has been an uneasy relationship between the seemingly conflicting missions of park managers (Shultis and Way, 2006). Protected area managers must seek to protect and sustain natural and cultural resources for future generations, whilst also providing high quality enjoyable experiences for people. This balancing act must be achieved within an economic rationalist ideology that has increasingly restricted organisational research capabilities.

The potential for tourism to contribute to the development of national parks and protected areas has become an important issue in Australia (TTF, 2004). National parks have become an important part of the Australian tourism landscape over recent years with particular relevance for the international tourism market. From figures published as part of the

2002 National Visitor Survey it has been estimated that 1.8 million people, or 41% of Australia's international tourism base visited national parks at least once over the course of their time in Australia (Griffin and Vacaflores, 2004).

This paper contends that an industry sector that seeks to benefit both industry and the environment can be linked to the notion of sustainable tourism. Although many researchers have used the term sustainable tourism there is substantial discussion over exactly what this term means, and it is important to begin any discussion of this phenomenon with a definition. This paper argues that sustainable tourism can be defined according to two core principles (adapted from Moscardo, 2003, pp. 113-114):

1. Quality. Sustainable tourism should provide a quality experience for tourists, while contributing to improved quality of life for the host community, including maintaining and /or enhancing the quality of the destination environment.
2. Continuity. Sustainable tourism should be designed to ensure

the continuity of the natural and cultural resources it uses, continuity of support from host communities while maintaining continuity of tourist demand.

To achieve these principles of sustainable tourism, those responsible for planning and managing tourism must:

1. Understand the range and nature of tourism's environmental, social, cultural and economic impacts;
2. Understand tourist values, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours;

Develop tools to minimise impacts, whilst enhancing experience.

It is in the development of tools for minimising negative impacts from tourism, whilst creating positive impacts and enhancing experiences that interpretative management is considered valuable (Slattery and Lugg, 2002).

Sustainability and interpretation

Enos Mills is credited with developing the concept of interpretation, as well as founding the nature guide profession (Kohl 2005). Freedman Tilden, another of the early architects of interpretation philosophy (Beck & Cable 2002), defined interpretation as 'an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects by first hand experience and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information' (Tilden 1977: 8-9). More recently, Interpretation Australia (2004) defined interpretation as a means of communicating ideas and feelings which help people understand more about themselves and their environment. The United States National Park Service defines interpretation as the process of helping each park visitor find an opportunity to personally connect with a place (2003a).

When evaluating the current research on interpretation, three major roles or principles have been identified for effective interpretation. While there will inevitably be some form of

overlap interpretation research may be classified as:

1. Research on interpretation mitigating visitor impacts
2. Research on interpretation enhancing tourists' experiences and satisfaction
3. Research on interpretation encouraging positive attitudes toward nature conservation

IMPLICATIONS

A major role of tourism researchers is the development of management strategies to minimise the negative affects of tourism development in natural resource areas such as national parks. To achieve this it is necessary to develop interpretation strategies are relevant to organisational objectives of park management bodies. Based off an extensive literature review and research classification process; the authors have concluded that for this to occur researchers should:

- ❖ Undertake an evaluation of research on interpretation that addresses issues that examine mitigating visitor impacts.
- ❖ Undertake research on interpretation enhancing tourists' experiences and satisfaction. Research in this area will likely focus on the effectiveness of various localised industry based interpretation strategies in satisfying predetermined motivations of visitors.
- ❖ Examine visitor impacts with reference to the effectiveness of different types of interpretative strategies to encourage positive attitudes to nature. This should include research to review all of the agencies involved in interpretation and it should establish how interpretation (and education) is defined and used in their mission statements, corporate plans or strategic frameworks.
- ❖ Develop interpretative services around key successful tangible operational objectives that are related to organisational goals that have been supported by research evaluation studies

The process of linking interpretation to management needs in park environments, which has been a major component of this research, has also raised several questions which we believe are worthy of further examination; these issues also function as recommendations for protected area agencies and tourism industry organisations wishing to research more effective approaches to research in interpretation.

Research to review all of the agencies involved in interpretation should be undertaken. The review should establish how interpretation (and education) is defined and used protected area agency mission statements, corporate plans or strategic frameworks. It should also indicate how these definitions are subsequently adhered to in the broad operating goals for interpretation (and education) services and if they are not it should evaluate why. Is it a failure of the definition or the relationship of interpretational information to other aspects and heritage functions of the agencies? More specifically research should identify the fit of interpretation (as defined or redefined in the new operating environments brought on by the increased engagement with the tourism industry) in the business rules, business strategy and operating parameters of the agency and an evaluation of how it can be increased and improved. Research is also needed into the definitional relationships between interpretation marketing. This research would enable a customer classification framework such as market segmentation to distinguish types of visitors and their profiles to ensure end users of interpretation (and education) services can be appropriately catered for.

The development stage of any interpretation service is a key factor in its success. Research in this area should target issues, including:

- ❖ Research that establishes a distinctive interpretative planning process. Research that demonstrates how to translate broad interpretation (and education) goals into tangible

Wineglass Bay, Tasmania



operational objectives that are related to organisational goals;

- ❖ Research that identifies and analyses the priority needs of the various market segments that use or don't use parks and in what form interpretation can be provided to meet these.

Effectively delivering the final 'product' to the visitor is difficult to achieve without appropriate knowledge and understanding of issues relating to policy/visitor interaction. The following are just some areas worthy of additional investigation:

- ❖ Research into organisational management areas to establish mechanisms that will allow better delivery of interpretation with particular focus on monitoring and reporting;
- ❖ Research that develops strategic communication to ensure interpretation objectives, targets and programs are most effectively and efficiently communicated to and understood by all the variety of stakeholders and providers (staff, contractors, volunteers, suppliers, tour operators, visitors).

The constant and ongoing evaluation of any management program is essential to its success. Research should focus on how best to:

- ❖ Develop key performance standards and measures for

interpretation services and subsequently key performance indicators

- ❖ Enable the monitoring of delivery of key performance indicator(s). KPIs identified should address key corporate objectives and relate to the key performance standards for the organisation. They should be linked to corporate objectives.

Stephen Wearing is associated professor with the School of Leisure, Sport and Tourism, Sydney.

REFERENCES

- Beck, L. and Cable, T. (2002) *Interpretation for the 21st Century: fifteen guiding principles for interpreting nature and culture*, Sangmore Publishing, Champaign, USA.
- Griffin, T., & Vacaflores, M. (2004) 'Project Paper One: The Visitor Experience', *A Natural Partnership: Making National Parks a Tourism Priority*: TTF Australia Tourism and Transport Forum, Sydney.
- Interpretation Australia (2004) *What is Interpretation?*, viewed 17 July 2006, <http://www.interpretationaustralia.asn.au/aboutwhatis.htm>
- Kohl, J. (2005). 'Putting Environmental Interpretation to Work for Conservation in a Park Setting: Conceptualizing Principal
- Conservation Strategies', *Applied Environmental Education and Communication*, 4(1): 43-54.
- Littlefair, C. J. (2003) *The Effectiveness of Interpretation in Reducing the Impacts of Visitors in National Parks*, School of Environmental and Applied Sciences Faculty of Environmental Sciences, Griffith University
- Moscardo, G. (2003) 'Interpretation and Sustainable Tourism: Functions, Examples and Principles' *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Vol 14, No 1, pp 112 – 123.
- Moscardo, G. & Pearce, P. (1997) *Interpretation and Sustainable Tourism in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area: A Case Study of Skyrail Visitors*, Department of Tourism James Cook University Townsville
- National Park Service (2003a) *Interpretation and Education*, viewed 15 December 2006, <http://www.nps.gov/learn/>
- Parkin, D. & Parkin, D. (2001) *When Nature Calls*, Parks and Leisure Australia, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 42-43
- Shultis, J. & Way, P. (2006) 'Changing Conceptions of Protected Areas and Conservation: Linking Conservation, Ecological Integrity and Tourism Management', *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, vol. 14, no. 3, 223-237
- Slattery, D. & Lugg, A. (2002) 'If they treated the whole world like a national park : environmental education by teachers and rangers', *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*; vol. 18, 47-55;
- Tilden, F. (1977) *Interpreting our heritage*, 3rd edn, North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.
- TTF Australia: Tourism and Transport Forum (2004) *A Natural Partnership: Making National Parks a Tourism Priority*, http://www.ttf.org.au/research/pdf/nationalparks/NP_Exec_Summary.pdf

just a thought by Russell James

They say travel broadens the mind. In my case it gives me precious time to think. I drive—I fly—I drive. And while I'm on the move all those stray thoughts shake down and begin to make some sense. Which is exactly where this issue's column is coming from: a quiet drive between Sydney and Springwood. I want to share with you why I think that in most instances the quick fix is not a solution.

We've all been there. It's part of our working lives. Something has been set up—a task, a project, whatever—and there is a plan to follow to get the job done. But then something crops up, time gets short (and becomes the enemy) and the quick fix option starts popping into view. By this time most of us are keen to get the job finished and off our plates...so we gobble up the fix.

And the problem with all this you ask? Well, it's worth remembering that someone, or even a team of people spent a bit of time setting up the job, forming the plan, making a series of (we have to assume) intelligent decisions all aimed to produce the best result. Keep this in mind and it's not hard to see that a quick fix may in fact be better described as a fast compromise driven by short term necessity.

For example, we could be planting trees—our ultimate objective being to give people something to park or picnic under for the next couple of generations. But because we're running behind time, we've decided to ignore a brilliantly developed set of planting and

establishment specifications. Instead, we're going to cut a few steps here and there to speed things up. Yes?

No: because if we want to set those trees up for the next 150 to 200 years we need to take a deep breath, chill about the extra cost (yes time usually equals money) and avoid the temptation to apply a quick fix to the front end of the installation. No one will remember that the tree planting went a bit over time and budget, but they will appreciate the long term contribution all those healthy, well-established trees make to the landscape.

Or maybe it's a playing field that's down for a rebuild, but somehow finds itself shoved to the end of the to-do list season after season having been treated to a quick-slick treatment instead. (Add up all those treatments and in a few years you'll have spent the equivalent of the rebuild.)

Which brings me to another point worth chewing over—synergy. If we think about any plan behind a project, or specifications for a job, they're both basically a series of steps which someone has decided will work together to produce the best result. It's not about one step being the one that nails it; it's about the way everything works together to give you what you're looking for. (I read once about a research scientist who always wore his lucky jocks because he was convinced they were part of the process which was delivering the results – but I think this is taking things a bit far.) But

seriously, let's go back to those trees; save some time digging smaller holes and your trees will suffer; same with scrimping on the establishment irrigation or being a bit light on with the mulch.

So if we pull this all together (it came together for me as I drove through Blaxland) that it was the act of pulling the pieces out of a well-designed piece of synergy, just to shortcut the job, that was doing all the damage. Pick anything out of the line up of steps and you'll end up with something very different from what was originally on the table.

Which leaves us with two thoughts; a good plan is worth sticking to if you want to end up with the result you were anticipating in the beginning. And if everything is working well together, don't spoil it by pulling things out of the equation.

In case you're wondering who **Russell James** is, he runs a business called TC Advantage, supplying TerraCottem, a soil conditioner which helps plants establish where conditions are really tough.



Parks and Leisure Australia Business Directory



National Office
P.O. Box 210,
Bendigo Central,
Vic. 3552

PLAYMOOR Playspace Management
ph. 1800 64 64 56
we ♥ community builds
be fit! fitness equipment for all ages & abilities moving + fixed 29 pieces
playmoor playground equipment hot dipped galvanized, triple powdercoated steel. PVC coated decks & steps
waterplay playmoor for affordable water fun!

ACS Distance Education
CD, online, or Correspondence Horticulture, Herbs, Professional Development Permaculture, Organics, Established 27 Years Ecotourism, Management, 400+ Courses I.T, Health & Fitness, and much more!
P: 07 5562 1088 F: 07 5562 1099
E: admin@acs.edu.au
www.acs.edu.au

To Advertise here call our National Office on 03 5444 1763 E-Mail: office@parks-leisure.com.au