

Techniques for effective interpretation

Successful interpretation can be achieved through a vast variety of means. However, there are many elements which are common to a successful interpretation program. Some of the most important techniques are employed before you even meet your audience — planning — and after they have gone home — evaluation.

Some of the ideas given below may not suit your operation, or even your own personal style. Techniques which involve close interaction with your audience — an important component of successful interpretation — may not be possible with large numbers of people aboard a vessel, but may be more appropriate for 4WD tours or trips aboard smaller vessels.

The first step — planning

Think about what you want to say and achieve beforehand. Jot down your ideas on paper. Such planning allows you to identify the main components of the topic you wish to interpret and can reveal effective ways of doing so. Planning allows you to

concentrate on those elements that will contribute to the message that you wish to get across. For example, if you wish to highlight the trees that are unique to Tasmania, think about where this can best be done. You may already know of special little spots where all the illustrative species occur together, and all you have to do is walk along to discover examples of the different plants which will illustrate your talk.

Understanding your audience

Knowing what kind of people comprise your audience gives you the opportunity to tailor your interpretation to that particular group. This is particularly useful for large audiences, where circumstances require you to develop your talk around the characteristics of the 'typical' visitor.

With smaller audiences it is possible to gain considerable background knowledge about your clients simply through the important pre-tour chat. If the great majority of your visitors are from the mainland, then it is useful to

relate what they will see here in Tasmania to what occurs on the mainland. Similarly, point out those things that are unique to Tasmania.

For example, many mainland visitors may believe they already know what a rainforest is, for they may have visited the tropical rainforests of Daintree or other areas in northern Australia. However, they may never have seen a cool temperate rainforest (the type we have in Tasmania). The differences between the two are huge. Point them out. Ask them if they see any buttressed roots on the trees in our rainforests. Can they see a profusion of lianas and epiphytes? Can they see large-leaved species? These are all features of tropical rainforests which do not occur in Tasmania's cool temperate rainforests. Point out those species that are found only in Tasmania — Huon pine, King Billy pine, whitey wood, leatherwood and many other plants and animals. Highlight the differences so that your audience is better able to appreciate the uniqueness of the environment that they are in.

Developing the message

The use of a theme in any interpretive activity is vital. As you talk with your guests try building up a story that illustrates a theme that you want to get across. For example, you may wish to talk about where the plants and animals in Tasmania come from. At the risk of oversimplifying things, you might take the following tack:

Mention that the Bennetts wallaby you just glimpsed hopping into the scrub is a marsupial, a group of mammals that is only found in Australia and South America. That yellow-tail black cockatoo you just heard is a member of the parrot family. Australia is known as the 'land of the parrots'. So is South America. Half of the fresh water fish that are native to Tasmania — the galaxids — have their closest relatives in South America. That trigger plant that we just set off is a member of a family that also occurs in South America. Many of the trees in this rainforest that we are now walking through have their closest relatives in South America. That beautiful, gnarled, old myrtle belongs to a group of plants that occur in South America and Antarctica...

Now, by this time people are either wondering what the hell your obsession with South America is, or that you are daft for thinking that trees grow in Antarctica. Chances are someone will ask, 'Why the South Ameri-

can connection?', or pipe up, 'There's no trees in Antarctica!'

And there is your chance to talk about how Australia, South America and Antarctica were once joined together in the great super-continent, Gondwana, and that many of the plants and animals that are now found in those places are derived from common, Gondwanan ancestors.

Help your audience relate

An important aspect of interpretation is to help your guests relate to whatever it is that you are interpreting. Educational psychologists suggest that deep learning is achieved through the attachment of bits of information to related, pre-existing bits of information. Make the link.

Don't just name an object. If you can't think of something interesting to go along with the name, forget it. If you can tie an unfamiliar object within the natural environment to a familiar object within the increasingly artificial world we have built around us, then all the better.

A nice analogy for our cool temperate rainforests, for example, is an ancient cathedral — huge, open vaults, dark and silent and spiritual; a place for meditation on the glory of Nature (or the glory of God — take your pick). If you're in a whimsical mood you can point out the gnomes that run about the forest floor!

Knowing it all

Nobody knows the answers to everything about the area that they are interpreting. Indeed, the more we learn, the clearer it becomes how much more there is to know. Your knowledge and experience however is much greater than that of the people who come to visit. Share what you know, but if you don't know the answer to a question, don't make up an answer. For example, if someone asks you what kind of bird that is, and you have no idea, then say you don't know. Don't invent a new species just to satisfy your inquirer's curiosity or to satisfy your own ego. Carry books or notes to cater for such situations. Offer them the chance to look through them to discover what it was for themselves.

Evaluating your performance

An important aspect of interpretation is evaluation. It is through evaluation that an activity, such as talking to a large group of people, can be improved upon. You can identify areas of weakness which may simply be the result of using the wrong words, or perhaps even putting your own words in a funny order. Try recording your dialogue and listening to it. Ask a colleague or a friend to listen and provide feedback. Seek ideas from wherever you can, and incorporate or dismiss them as you see fit. We all benefit from the collective knowledge and experience of others.