

What is interpretation?

Origins

The art of interpretation was born in the United States of America during the closing years of last century. Nature guides such as Enos A. Mills (1870-1922) felt that their task was more than to merely guide, but to share and inspire visitors with a holistic appreciation and knowledge of the environment. Mills fine-tuned his techniques through evaluation of what did and didn't work — an important component of interpretation today.

Freeman Tilden was an American writer who travelled for many years observing the ways in which national park interpreters communicated with the public, all the time analysing and assessing which techniques worked best. As a result of his research, Tilden published *Interpreting Our Heritage* in 1957, which encapsulates the philosophies, goals and principles of interpretation.

Today, natural and cultural heritage educators in many parts of the world adopt the principles of interpretation to enhance the quality of their presentations, to increase the relevance and immediacy of the information or ideas they

wish to express and to introduce visitors to a fuller understanding and appreciation of the area they are visiting. Outdoor guides and tour operators use interpretation to enhance the experience of the visitor, thereby helping to ensure satisfied customers.

Definitions

So what is interpretation? This is a difficult question to answer, as interpretation is more than education, more than just giving names, more than just providing facts. Perhaps contrary to popular belief, passing on knowledge is not the sole, central purpose of interpretation. Although education does play a role in interpretation, it is not necessarily the most important aspect.

Interpretation is used to help a visitor gain a knowledge of, and affinity for, the natural and cultural world. Effective interpretation uses both accurate information and a variety of interpretive techniques which help visitors respond to the environment on both an intellectual and emotional level.

Perhaps some interpreters' own comments can shed some light on the definitions

and purposes of interpretation:

'Interpretation is an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.'

Freeman Tilden

'Interpretation is the revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact'.

Freeman Tilden

'...awaken people's curiosity. It's enough to open minds, do not overload them. Put there just a spark. If there is some good flammable stuff, it will catch fire'.

Anatole France

'...Knowledge revealed imaginatively'.

'Through interpretation, understanding. Through understanding, appreciation. Through appreciation, protection.'

Principles of interpretation

Freeman Tilden, the founding father of interpretation, outlined the following six principles of interpretation

in his book, *Interpreting Our Heritage*:

- i) Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
- ii) Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
- iii) Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
- iv) The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
- v) Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole person rather than any phase.
- vi) Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best, it will require a separate program.

An old Chinese proverb is often cited which captures the spirit of interpretation:

- I hear, I forget.
I see and hear, I remember.
I see, hear, and do, I understand.

This proverb suggests techniques that work well — hands on, multi-sensory, participatory interaction.

The role of the interpreter

The interpreter's role is to facilitate the visitor's enjoyment, understanding and appreciation of the region they are visiting. His or her job is to interpret the 'language' of nature and the tapestry of history to those people who find themselves in a situation removed from their own realms of experience. In this way, the interpreter can open new windows of perception and inspire and add perspective to visitors' lives.

Through interpretation, a visitor can come to more fully appreciate the natural and cultural heritage of a region, and be moved to empathise with the need to ensure that such heritage is preserved. In this respect, interpretation is about helping people form appropriate attitudes towards the natural and cultural heritage of the area they are visiting, to encourage appropriate behaviour in fragile landscapes and to encourage visitors to take an active interest in the management and future of the area.

Another aspect of the interpreter's role is to provide an interesting, entertaining and fun experience for visitors. Those people who participate in tours do so by choice rather than compulsion. They are on holiday. They are out to have a good time. The last

thing they want is to be lectured to. They want to be involved. A good interpreter involves his or her audience.

Finally, good interpretation will enhance the image and reputation of the tour operator. Such an outcome will only prove beneficial to the success and continuing profitability of the operation.

Indoctrination

As an interpreter you are trying to indoctrinate people — indoctrinate them with an appreciation, respect and, hopefully, love for nature and our cultural heritage. You may find that some of your guests are already there, and feel that you are preaching to the converted. For others you may get no reaction at all. But for many, you can act as a catalyst which helps them to develop a better understanding and appreciation of the world to which they are inextricably tied, and for which we all have become increasingly instrumental in determining the fate of. If you can achieve this with just one person, then you will have succeeded. This is the joy of interpretation.

Further reading

Tilden, F. (1957). *Interpreting Our Heritage*. University of North Carolina Press.

Regnier, K., Gross, M. and Zimmerman, R. (1992). *The Interpreter's Guidebook*. UW-SP Press, Inc., University of Wisconsin.