

journal



of the Association for Heritage Interpretation

# Interpretation



## Interpreting protected landscapes

*Creating a sense of place*

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**Sustainable tourism**

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#### Apology

We are aligning the volume numbers of *Interpretation Journal* with calendar years. Volume 6 will therefore run from No 1 (the previous issue, dated Spring 2001) to No 4, to take account of this delayed Landscapes issue which is dated 'Late Spring 2001'.

Subscriptions will remain payable on 1 April each year and will still entitle members to three issues.

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For more information about the Association for Heritage Interpretation (AHI), send an email to [admin@heritage-interpretation.org.uk](mailto:admin@heritage-interpretation.org.uk) <<mailto:admin@heritage-interpretation.org.uk>>, write to the Administrator, AHI, Cruachan, Tayinloan, Tarbert PA29 6XF or telephone / fax 01583 441114.

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# Interpreting protected landscapes

| Margi Bryant and Julian Gray

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The inspiration for this journal originated in an AHI workshop held in the Lake District National Park in late 1999. Since then, there have been important developments in landscape protection, including the prospect of new national parks in England and Scotland and increased opportunities for areas of outstanding natural beauty (AONBs).

The idea of giving landscapes legal protection dates back to the creation of the world's first national park, Yellowstone, in 1872. But protection then meant excluding all human inhabitants, a model that still applies in many parts of the world. In the UK, national parks and AONBs have always been inhabited and economically productive. They are Category V 'protected landscapes' (see below), reflecting a longstanding interaction between people and nature. And people, play an increasingly important role in ensuring their survival.

This theme runs through the articles in this issue. Charlie Falzon takes an international perspective, drawing on his experience in developing countries where people are sometimes marginalised by the

conservation agenda. Yvonne Hosker explores our emotional response to landscape, while Ruth Taylor shows how public consultation can help determine the 'spirit of place'. Margi Bryant and Susan Evans describe research into learning, emotional and behavioural outcomes which has chalked up a resounding victory for guided walks.

Edward Holdaway and Gerald Smart highlight the importance of public involvement in AONBs. Julian Gray recounts the experience of the South Downs AONB, while Simon Woodward looks at some of the research needed to prepare for the proposed South Downs National Park. And Neil Diment wonders why the splendid principles of interpretation are often so hard to put into practice.

Tilden wrote that interpretation leads, via understanding and appreciation, to protection. We may question the simplicity of that formula, yet we all believe that our work both reflects and stimulates that crucial link between people and environment which is a prerequisite for sustainability. This issue explores the challenge of making that link.

## What is a 'protected landscape'?

IUCN, the world conservation union, defines a protected area as: 'an area of land and/or sea especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and managed through legal or other affective means'.

There are six categories of protected area:

- I Strict nature reserve/wilderness area: protected area managed mainly for science of wilderness protection
- II National park: protected area managed mainly for ecosystem protection and recreation
- III Natural monument: protected area managed mainly for conservation of specific natural features
- IV Habitat/species management area: protected area managed mainly for conservation through management intervention
- V Protected landscape/seascape: protected area managed mainly for landscape/seascape protection and recreation

- VI Managed resource protected area: protected area managed mainly for the sustainable use of natural ecosystems.

## Web links

### **Association of National Park Authorities**

<http://www.anpa.gov.uk/>

### **AONB Association and Staff Forum**

<http://www.aonb.org.uk/>

### **Countryside Agency**

<http://www.countryside.gov.uk/>

### **Countryside Council for Wales**

<http://www.ccw.gov.uk/>

### **Europarc Federation**

<http://www.greenchannel.com/fjnnpel>

### **Europarc - Atlantic Isles**

<http://www.europarc-ai.org.uk/>

### **IUCN, World Commission on Protected Areas**

<http://wcpa.iucn.org/>

### **Scottish Natural Heritage**

<http://www.snh.org.uk/>

# The spirit of place

| Ruth Taylor

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**'So, how do you decide what to include when interpreting a landscape?'**

People's opinions differ on the interpretation of landscapes even to the extent of whether we should interpret a landscape at all. At one extreme is the 'don't do it - let the landscape speak for itself; let visitors experience the place unencumbered by other people's interpretations and come to their own conclusions'. At the other extreme the landscape can be so well interpreted that the presence of interpretation panels in the landscape can become an eyesore.

## Research in the countryside

However, our research in the countryside on National Trust sites has shown that visitors do want to learn about the place they are visiting and welcome interpretation panels if carefully sited. At Cley Hill near Warminster, a small chalk grassland site with rare plants, butterflies and archaeological features, visitor surveys were carried out before any interpretation was produced for the site. Visitors requested information on the history of the site, footpaths and bridleways and wildlife. When they were provided with a new interpretation board the satisfaction on the available information went from 40% satisfied with the information available to 80% satisfied with the information available (Calver 1996).

We have also carried out research to find out whether visitors take any notice of the information they are provided with - does it make any difference to their behaviour (Taylor 1998)? At Studland in south Dorset, we produced a welcome leaflet aimed at

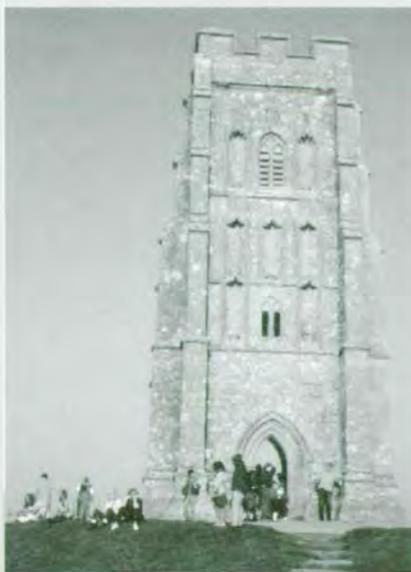
putting across some management messages as well as giving visitors useful information such as a map showing the location of facilities. Staff on site feared that producing a leaflet would add to the litter problem. However, when we surveyed visitors on the beach, the single message from the leaflet that made the most impact was the cost to the National Trust of clearing litter off the beach every day. We did not find any copies of the leaflet in the litterbins or on the beach. Whether there is any less litter on the beach is more difficult to quantify as our visitor numbers went up the year the leaflet was produced but we certainly know our visitors are more aware of how they can help keep the place special.

## Themes and stories

So, how do you decide what to include when interpreting a landscape? Obviously asking visitors what they want to know about is a valuable first step. Often visitors need orientation, which means that a map and usually a bird's-eye-view type map will need to be included somewhere. But what about themes and stories? What is significant in a landscape - the wildlife, the archaeology, the habitats, the vernacular buildings, the way the landscape has altered through the years or been altered by people?

## Statements of significance

In the National Trust we start by formulating a statement of significance for the site. This explains why the Trust owns a place. It explains what matters about the place and why. It expresses its 'spirit of place' and summarises the features and attributes which are considered at the time of writing to be the most significant and which the National Trust should seek to conserve. Views on significance are actively gathered. The search is conducted with an open mind. A dialogue takes place with the many communities who have an interest in the place. Indeed, the statement of significance can provide the basis for a continuing dialogue between the National Trust and the local communities. Significance might cover archaeological features such as walls and trackways, burial mounds or ancient woodland. There might be social and cultural records associated with the place like folklore and tradition or particular ownership with associated archives. There



R TAYLOR



Far left: Glastonbury Tor is a popular historic site

Above left: The extraordinary landmark

Glastonbury Tor can be seen for miles around

Above right: Visitors enjoying the amazing views from the top of the Tor

might be particular aesthetic responses such as the peace and tranquillity, the intimacy or the wildness of a place. There might be a particular architectural style or particular species and communities or rare habitats. Significance may lie in the fact that a feature is missing - for example an agricultural landscape denuded of hedgerows or a Deer Park without deer.

#### Glastonbury Tor case study

Last year the National Trust put considerable effort into gaining people's views on the significance of this prominent landmark, owned by the National Trust since 1933. Glastonbury Tor is visited by many hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. Towering 158m above the Somerset Levels, topped by St Michael's Tower, the Tor is of significance nationally and internationally. Archaeological evidence suggests that the site has been occupied since the 5th or 6th century with St Michael's Tower being added in the late 13th or 14th century. The National Trust recognised the need to draw up a conservation plan to guide the management of this popular historic site so drew up a consultation campaign.

#### Local and national consultation

To encourage people to express their views the National Trust Wessex newsletter included an article on the Tor asking members to send in their views. Information was included on the National Trust website with an email address for people to respond to. A display was put up in Glastonbury Town Hall about the Tor, manned by the Trust countryside manager for the Tor, and a press release sent to the local press encouraging people to come and express their opinions. Local staff held illustrated talks and a poster inviting people to 'Talk about the Tor' was used.

Fifty residents came to one of the meetings and expressed a diverse range of views. People were concerned about the traffic on the quiet country lanes around the Tor and some people wanted railings put up around St Michael's Tower. Another person suggested the tower could be clothed in plastic sheets to deter graffiti and donkeys could be used to transport people from Glastonbury Abbey to the Tor.

The consultation process produced just under 100

responses as to why Glastonbury Tor is special. These included the amazing views, the Tor's place as an extraordinary landmark and important geological site. Also people felt the Tor's association with myths and legends, early Christian history and spirituality was important. It was felt to be a sacred site and unique in its qualities.

From this consultation the statement of significance has been written and a conservation plan prepared. An appeal has been launched to help fund some of the urgent management work. The first priority is to improve the access to the Tor by repairing footpaths and entry points so that all visitors, including those in wheelchairs, are able to enjoy the place and the area is protected from erosion. The interpretation will also be improved at this stage. The second phase is to carry out conservation work on St Michael's Tower and renew the protection of the archaeological remains beneath it.

The interpretation plan is being written using the statement of significance as a guide for key themes. A strong theme which has come through the consultation is the Tor's association with spirituality and myths and legends, it is likely that this will feature more in the future interpretation. Some market research will be carried out this year to look more closely at the themes to be used and the way people want to gain information at Glastonbury Tor. This will then be used to guide the provision of new interpretation.

The consultation process and subsequent writing of the statement of significance has been invaluable in informing the interpretation of Glastonbury Tor.

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*Ruth Taylor is the National Trust's interpretation officer in Wessex responsible for interpretation planning and strategy for the region and advising on and commissioning interpretation projects.*

# Walking back to happiness

| Margi Bryant and Susan Evans

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**'No form of interpretation seems better suited to a protected landscape than guided walks and other personally-led events'**

'Personal interpretation is the highest and best form of interaction, and the most desirable and best use of visitors' time.'

*Freeman Tilden 1957*

'Old hat, boring, costly, preaching to the converted - these are some of the criticisms that have been levelled at the humble guided walk ...'

*CEI 1992*

There are widely divergent views about 'personal interpretation', as you can see from the above quotes. Yet no form of interpretation seems better suited to a protected landscape than guided walks and other personally-led events. The interpreter can control the location, route, content and activities, while at the same time informing and entertaining the participants and slipping in those all-important conservation messages. And participants get to experience the landscape at first-hand, gain insights into what makes it special, ask questions, venture opinions and generally enjoy a bit of human interaction.

Most of us are familiar with the memory retention findings that have influenced national park interpretation in the USA: people remember 10% of what they hear, 30% of what they read, 50% of what they see but 90% of what they do (Lewis 1988). A similar message emerges from a slogan used by the Association of Independent Museums: 'I read and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand'. Walks and other events - which definitely involve doing something - must therefore have unrivalled potential for winning the hearts and minds of the public.

But is this really true? Like many other beliefs that have become part of interpretation orthodoxy, it is seldom put to the test. How effective is the doing component of a guided walk if it only consists of walking? Isn't most of the interpretive content delivered through the spoken word, which has the lowest memory rating of all? And are we confusing successful interpretation with the feel-good factor of a pleasant day out?

## **Pembrokeshire gets personal**

Pembrokeshire Coast National Park has one of the longest-established traditions of personal

interpretation in the UK, dating back to the first 'turn up and go' guided walks for the general public in 1966. In recent years we've conducted participant profile surveys and satisfaction surveys, carried out a strategic review, diversified our range of activities and events, and run a comprehensive training package for leaders. But we had never looked at the effectiveness of personally-led events or compared them systematically with other forms of interpretation.

Since 1999, the National Park Authority has been developing its new management plan for the first five years of the 21st century. Unlike older plans, which have concentrated mainly on outputs (i.e. the work that national park staff do), this one puts the focus on outcomes (i.e. the end results). So a conservation project, for example, would measure performance not by how many hours of staff time and metres of fencing went into sand dune protection, but whether more bee orchids flourished in the dunes as a result. This approach, of course, would call for systematic and regular monitoring.

Conservation may be national parks' first objective but the second is 'public enjoyment and understanding'. Interpretation and the other communication-related functions (information, education etc) are seen as directly serving the understanding objective. We 'communicators' like to think that our work also serves conservation, following Tilden's formula that understanding leads to appreciation, which leads to protection. But we don't have much evidence to substantiate this belief.

The challenge facing us was to develop an outcome-focused approach as systematic as ecologists counting their bee orchids. We could use simple quantitative measures - the number of people who buy a leaflet or participate in a guided walk - but this would show takeup rather than outcome. We could use surveys to establish whether people found the leaflet interesting or enjoyed the walk, which would indicate consumer satisfaction levels, but would this be enough?

What we needed was a way of assessing interpretation by measuring our performance against our stated objectives. Interpretation, as we all know, has three classic types of objective: learning, emotional and behavioural (Veverka 1994). Despite the obvious



difficulty of measuring emotions and behaviour, we felt these three categories defined exactly the outcomes we should be seeking.

**Starting the research**

This was the context in which the collaboration between the present authors took place. One of us needed consumer survey data to establish the outcomes of the National Park's interpretation products and services; the other was looking for a challenging postgraduate research topic relating to protected landscape interpretation.

The research was carried out in summer 2000, across four very different types of interpretation: guided walks, publications, the exhibition at our Visitor Centre, and the reconstructed Iron Age fort at Castell Henllys. The survey was carried out by questionnaire, using mostly closed questions to make analysis and comparison easier, but with a couple of open questions and space for further comments.

The questions directly addressed the three main types of objective. On the learning front, people were asked what they'd learned about the natural heritage, cultural heritage, role of the National Park Authority, importance of conservation and sustainable development, and whether they would try to find out more about a particular topic. The emotional dimension was explored with questions and a tick-list about respondents' feelings. We wanted to know

to what extent the interpretation had created positive feelings and helped create an emotional attachment to the landscape.

The behavioural dimension was more tricky. People tend to behave well when they're on a guided walk under the beady eye of the leader, or when they're looking at an exhibition in a visitor centre. If they're going to behave insensitively towards the environment they'll do it at another time. However, we didn't have the resources for the far-reaching and complex task of follow-up studies. So people were asked to assess the likely affect on their future behaviour, in relation to the National Park in particular and the environment in general, and changes in their attitudes towards conservation, also divided into specific and general examples.

The questionnaire also explored people's overall impressions of the product or event, with categories such as enjoyable, interesting, informative, lively and thought-provoking, and how easy the content was to understand. And there were a few questions to establish the respondent profile, including age, sex, occupation, home area and existing interest in conservation.

**Walks win**

The results were astounding. For learning outcomes, guided walks came top in six out of the seven separate topic categories (the exception was cultural

*Far left: Guided walkers break for coffee and a bit of human interaction  
Below: When the landscape is stunning, how much does interpretation add?*

PCNPA





heritage, which probably reflects the fact that most walks major on landscape and nature). Nearly 50% of guided walk participants said they had learned a 'considerable amount' about the natural heritage of the area, and 34% had learned a 'considerable amount' about the importance of countryside conservation, compared with 34% and 18% respectively for readers of publications. Guided walks also got the best scores for being interesting and informative and for encouraging people to investigate a topic further.

For emotional outcomes, guided walks came top in two out of four categories - overall enjoyment and a sense of being in a very special place - and had the best overall score when the four categories were averaged out. Admittedly, if the landscape itself is stunningly beautiful, interpretation can't take all the credit for an appreciation of place (Stewart et al 1998). This was checked out by asking how much the interpretation had increased people's enjoyment and appreciation. In the case of guided walks 95% of respondents said it had ('very much' or 'quite a lot') compared to around 77% for publications and exhibitions.

Guided walks came top again in all six questions exploring attitudes to conservation and likely future behaviour. Some 37% of participants said they cared more about conserving the National Park landscape and 34% cared more about conserving the countryside in general as a result of the walk, while 28% said they would treat the National Park and the wider environment with more care in future. This compares with 12%, 9% and 9%, respectively, for readers of publications.

#### Conservation-conscious

In asking respondents whether they had become more conservation-conscious as a result of the interpretation, the survey allowed for the possible answer that they were 'already fully committed to conservation.' Some respondents might have felt their attitudes and behaviour didn't have much room for improvement. The attitude and behaviour outcomes therefore reflected the views of respondents who did not feel 'already committed'.

The inclusion of the 'already committed' option did, however, highlight the large segment of interpretation consumers who've already signed up to

conservation values. This was confirmed by the data on membership of conservation societies, running at nearly 50% of respondents for guided walks and publications. There is thus some justice in the charge that we 'preach to the converted', but efforts to reach new and wider audiences are already in hand.

So Tilden was right. Our research findings suggest that personal interpretation has a head start over other techniques and facilities. The very immediacy of the experience presses emotional buttons and encourages people to care about the landscape. Without follow-up studies, we don't know how long these effects last, but we expect that the experience - and hopefully some of the attitudes - stay in people's memories long after specific facts about the National Park have been forgotten.

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*Susan Evans undertook this research for her MSc thesis at the International Centre for Protected Landscapes, University of Wales, Aberystwyth.*

# Interpretation and global politics

| Charlie Fazlon

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**'In the case of politically oppressive countries rich in biodiversity but poor on the rights of the rural deprived, whose interpretation matters?'**

In developed countries, interpretation is generally recognised as being of fundamental importance in any attempt to widen public understanding of and support for protected landscapes. It is also accepted that in some contexts local communities should be represented in the development of interpretation programmes, so that they express their own relationship to such places.

A key challenge facing any advocate of environmental education and interpretation programmes is to convince decision-makers in regions of extreme social poverty, inequity and injustice that such programmes are worthwhile. This is not because of the visitors (and therefore money) they might attract, but because they are an opportunity for local people to express themselves, their respect for nature and their occasional scepticism about the systems that attempt to protect it.

## **Whose interpretation?**

Many people (including the originator of the concept, Freeman Tilden) would argue that interpretation is about presenting 'truths'. Given that truths are about values, it is worth asking 'whose values?' In the case of politically oppressive countries rich in biodiversity but poor on the rights of the rural deprived, whose interpretation matters? This is an important question for fellow interpreters working in such countries, because the designation and management of national parks is and always has been political. The question is even more critical, given that opportunities are increasing for interchange between staff of parks in developed and developing countries. My own experience is that visiting professionals tend to be more interested in the technology of interpretation than in its principles.

This is a story of dispossession and social injustice, and also one of sad neglect when it comes to interpretation, and there is an important but complex link between these apparently unrelated concerns. The following account is based on recent visits made to 'flagship' protected areas, mainly in Africa and Nepal.

By way of explanation, the parks and reserves referred to below are true 'national parks', as defined by Category II in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) classification system. (UK's national parks are Category V 'protected

landscapes', where people and nature interact.) Category II areas have often been protected through government annexation of the land and the expulsion of its people, as occurred in the USA in the 1870s during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. This approach was subsequently exported to Africa and Asia, originally to provide game for wealthy colonists. The national park vision presented by Roosevelt to the people of the USA contrasts strikingly with the African experience at the time:

'The carnage, in the first few decades of European penetration, was staggering. The hunters eliminated the blaubok and quagga, both of which had survived three million years of contact with Africans. Some men boasted of shooting two hundred elephants on one safari ... Theodore Roosevelt and his son led an expedition which killed five thousand animals of seventy species, including nine of East Africa's few remaining white rhinos' (Monbiot 1994).

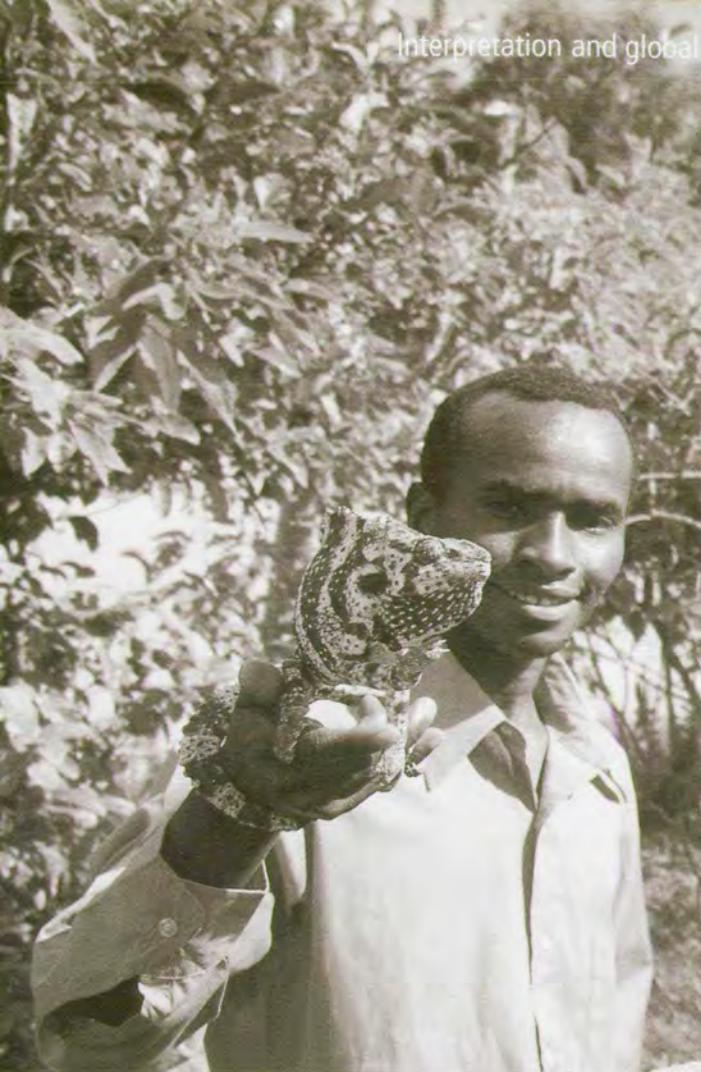
## **Parks exclude people**

Nowadays, the purpose of national parks is to protect the integrity of such places and to provide for tourism. The consumer is the overseas visitor and the political drive is to maximise tourism income. Local people are usually not part of the equation, and have little opportunity to tell their story unless it is sanitised and packaged by government agencies.

In Kenya, for instance, the Maasai Mara National Park is a tourist paradise, with superb opportunities for visitors to view the 'Big Five' animals. But the living is grim for the Maasai themselves. They see few direct benefits from park management, and resort to encroachment and poaching. It is said that the Maasai eliminated the black rhino from Kenya because of its links with tourism and the loss of their lands.

At the southern end of the Maasai Mara is Keekorok Lodge. 'Keekorok ... is Maasai for black trees. The lodge had been built around a clump of acacias both culturally and spiritually important to the western Maasai ... (but) the only way in which the Maasai could legally enter their old territory was to turn up at one of the gates in a vehicle and pay the entrance fee' (Monbiot 1994).

Such communities are denied any say when it comes to telling stories, their 'truths', about these places. It can be impossible to advance values other



than those that the government promotes, that the tourism companies require or that visitors wish to hear.

#### Political consequences

The political implications of this in volatile and impoverished countries are obvious. In South Africa, for instance, the parks are under enormous pressure from surrounding communities. In 1992 youths from the township of Matsulu, just outside the southern boundary of Kruger National Park, were seen singing 'Weep, Kruger, you shall weep'. They had gone out into the streets to protest at what they saw as an insensitive management system which allowed animals to roam free, while they were arrested if they ventured in to collect firewood or poach game. They associated parks with forced removals, restricted freedom and paramilitary game rangers.

When it comes to serious civil unrest it is the government-owned parks, unsurprisingly, whose resources are plundered and whose staff are killed. Such places often become war zones since, having previously ceased to be of any benefit to locals, they provide food, fuel and shelter to guerrilla groups.

The social problems associated with many national

parks around the world present a huge challenge to in-country parks educators, but this is not the only problem. In a number of cases governments are too strapped for cash to provide adequate resources for park management, and important priorities such as training, education and interpretation go by the board. This is often (ironically) because money is wrapped up in policing and enforcing rules to protect parks against adjacent communities who depend on the land for resources such as fuel wood, protein, fodder, water and timber.

#### Interpretation loses out

Interpretation is not a high priority in such circumstances, and is thus allowed to deteriorate where it is provided, or is poorly planned, piecemeal and of low quality. Sometimes schemes collapse because corrupt governments deny the agencies the money that they need in order to sustain programmes of awareness-raising and interpretation.

Well-meaning international organisations donate money for facilities without building the capacity of protected area agencies to maintain and update them, let alone training local staff to decide for themselves what the interpretation needs are. Evidence of this abounds: the shell of the visitor centre at Mkomaze Game Reserve in Tanzania, the neglected visitor centre above Namche Bazaar in Sagarmatha National Park in Nepal, the dereliction that passes for a visitor facility at the superb little remnant rainforest near Kitale in Kenya.

All too frequently such places are devalued in the eyes of visitors, who feel that governments do not care about protected landscapes other than as a means to generate income. Even more tragically, these places are devalued in the eyes of the very people who have traditionally supported and relied on them, because they are denied access to them and can see no benefits to themselves.

One of Tanzania's most well-known national parks is Arusha, with its dramatic crater on Mount Meru. The entrance fee is US\$26 but little, if anything, is spent by the parks service on interpretation here. The so-called museum at the Ngurdoto entrance gate, with its unkempt displays, is a sorry sight.



C. FAZLON

*Left: Local guides can convey their knowledge and enthusiasm directly to visitors*

*Above: Bricks-and-mortar interpretation facilities are often under-resourced and uninspiring*

### The personal touch

Yet just down the track from here is a reptile farm, established to supply anti-venom drugs. For a few Tanzanian shillings visitors can be shown around by the guide, one of the most infectiously enthusiastic people I've met on visits to the region. His knowledge of the animals and understanding of the importance of the farm's work are impressive, and his stories hair-raising!

The value of this kind of interaction is well understood. In Belize and Costa Rica, for instance, much interpretive work is carried out through communities. In the South Pacific, most protected areas are managed at community level. Local people can do this because their traditional land rights are recognised. Interpretation reinforces their links with their lands, so they are the ones who do it. The result is often a highly interactive, low-impact programme of guided walks or boat trips, traditional story telling with music, dance, food and local drink.

This sort of interpretation reflects the nature of protected area management in these countries and is in sharp contrast with the Category II model described above. In fact it is very much in line with the increasingly important 'protected landscape' (Category V) approach to park management, currently championed by organisations such as the International Centre for Protected Landscapes (ICPL). Such an approach is familiar in the UK national parks system, since it recognises the value of traditional links between people and their land and the critical importance of sustaining those links, since this is how places of great biological and cultural importance have been maintained.

The challenge is to reconcile the needs of people with that of nature, to restore some linkage between natural resources and their value to indigenous people, and to give them a say in management.

### A global partnership

What are the implications for interpreters based in developed countries? We should get involved in skill sharing, but we must be aware of the political and cultural contexts in which parks are managed, and we need to recognise the complex and mutually beneficial relationships between people and nature

that have existed for millennia. We also need to recognise that detaching people from their traditional places is not usually a good strategy for conservation management.

There are few professional interpreters in developing countries, and those that exist are grossly under-resourced. Perhaps we need to build a global partnership, funded by developed countries but driven by the needs of developing country interpreters, and to build capacity on a systematic rather than a piecemeal basis. The US National Parks Service exports its own brand of interpretation, and very impressive it is too, when seen in Taroko National Park in Taiwan or Kanha Reserve in India. But the approach is strong on technology, scale and sophistication; perhaps a bit too slick, and characteristically American rather than indigenous. More worryingly, the presentations are somewhat timid on asking challenging questions about the politics of conservation.

There is need for training for interpreters in developing countries, but it is not just about technology. We certainly don't need to teach such people to tell stories, just to reinforce and support their efforts, to build their confidence and to raise their awareness that we could share their values if they would convey them to us. We must hear their stories, see their places through their eyes as well as ours, and help them to present their messages in their own ways.

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# Rhetoric and reality

| Neil Diment

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'...experience has too often shown that grant funding dictates the choice of interpretive product...'

*Below: The panel at Low Cleughs Bastle encourages visitors to ponder on the past*



Interpretation provides the 'food and drink' for visitors to protected landscapes, according to one of America's leading authorities on interpretation, Gabe Cherem (Cherem 1977). But, assuming these visitors go away well fed, does interpretation really help protect landscapes? My experience in the UK in a variety of such landscapes - from world heritage sites and national parks to local nature reserves and a voluntary marine conservation area - has shown just how difficult it can be to put principles into practice.

## The rhetoric

The rhetoric of interpretation can be found in a set of principles that we all support. These have been drawn mostly from the work of Freeman Tilden, Bill Lewis, Sam Ham and John Veverka - all Americans - and can be summarised as follows:

- Interpretation is not an end in itself. It increases understanding and appreciation, and hence the desire to support and care for a site and its conservation. On one level this might mean that people won't drop litter, at another that they may go on to join a conservation organisation.
- 'Provoke, relate and reveal'. Tilden's work (1957) still provides the starting block for much of what we try to achieve.
- Thematic interpretation. Sam Ham (1992) develops the idea of a theme as simple, core message. People forget facts, but remember themes. Express your theme by completing this deceptively simple sentence: 'If there's one thing I want visitors to take away with them when they leave the site, it's ...'. Then make sure all your interpretation - words, graphics etc - illustrate that point and get the message across.
- Interpretive planning. This is basically an attempt to answer, or at least to ensure you have considered, the who, why, what, when and how questions. This is necessary if only to avoid going straight in at the media and techniques stage, or at least being able to justify why you chose a particular technique. It means setting objectives against which success or otherwise can be later evaluated.

To these principles I have added two of my own:

- People relate to people. People are the best form

of interpretation, whether leading a guided walk, performing in a live interpretation event, featuring on a panel or an audio-visual presentation, or telling their own stories about a place.

- Use the arts. Interpretation should have learning, behavioural and emotional objectives: what we want people to learn, to do and to feel as a result of our interpretation. But how often does a leaflet or panel create emotions strong enough to inspire you to help protect a site or a landscape? If we want to touch the emotions, we need to use the arts, in whatever form (and that doesn't necessarily mean the now-ubiquitous sculpture trail!)

These then are the principles. Putting them into practice, as we all know, is very difficult to achieve. I offer some thoughts and observations on the reality.

## A truly interpretive panel

Well, have you ever seen one? Mostly they're text-heavy, contain few graphics, are written largely for experts by experts, have no clear theme and too many (usually unstated) objectives. And they've been there too long, and are in need of renewal if not downright removal.

## Producing a strategy

A strategy or plan is essential for many reasons: to guide work and thinking, identify messages and themes, define what's special about a place, establish agreement amongst partners and colleagues, argue a case for budgets, etc. But experience has too often shown that grant funding dictates the choice of interpretive product, such as a leaflet or panel. Specific, measurable outputs are entered on forms by those non-interpreters who drew up the grant application. Don Aldridge (1989) argued some time ago in his 'ship of interpretation' that we've been blown off course. The good ship doesn't stand a chance in the open seas; it often feels like a huge oil tanker that takes a year just to slow down, and then needs turning around. Ways of doing things become self-perpetuating and there's no time to stop, think and plan.

## Working with local communities

Interpretation often comes across uncomfortably as



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*Above: Community involvement is time-consuming but wonderful when it works!*

'us' explaining things to 'them'. Involving local people in the process of saying what is important and special about their place is, however, time-consuming. Our agenda will almost certainly not be their agenda. There is also the difficulty that they come up with firm wishes in opposition to those of the 'professional interpreter'. Community groups on the edge of the Sussex Downs, for example, were adamant that they wanted outdoor panels, despite a high percentage of regular users of the site (who don't really need panels) and the likelihood of vandalism. Was this because sticking signs up is what they see 'us' (national parks, conservation boards and local authorities) doing? Perhaps the panels option had more to do with ownership than interpretation. Interpretation can become a way for an organisation or group to 'cock a leg' over a site in its care.

#### **Logo-overload: interpretation or public relations?**

Peter Freeman and Tim Haley (1993) have pointed out the dangers of interpretation getting sucked into public relations exercises, and thus the danger of diluting our efforts by spreading thin resources even more thinly. Is interpretation about communicating with site visitors or about raising corporate profiles? Some visitor centres seem to spend a lot of time explaining who we are and who we are not, as if visitors really care. There are panels in some places promoting the 'family of national parks'. Is this really the job of site interpretation? In the end it just means too much 'stuff on a stick'.

#### **Whatever turns you on**

What is it that gets people 'turned on and tuned in' to the environment in the first place? This is a question well worth considering, for all of us. Some research seems to indicate the importance of initial childhood contacts: school trips in the UK, summer camps in the USA. But today, outdoor centres run by local education authorities in the UK are closing, and an increasingly urban population is unfamiliar with and suspicious of the outdoors. 'Stranger danger' - despite all the evidence that danger is more likely to come from within the home - means that places where children used to play are now considered unsafe.

Busy, harassed schoolteachers whose work is dictated by the National Curriculum are not taking kids out as much. Shopping malls, electronic games, urban leisure and lifestyles have replaced 'plodding in the burn' as pleasurable pastimes. A generation is growing up that has not had the early contact with nature enjoyed by many of those now working in landscape interpretation.

#### **Monitoring and evaluation**

Is our interpretation working? Do we really know what the sum of all our efforts has managed to achieve? Is there any demonstrable shift in attitudes, Tilden-style, to show a causal link between understanding and protection? In an evaluation covering panels and visitor centres at three national nature reserves managed by the Countryside Council for Wales, 80% of visitors said the interpretation had increased their enjoyment, though only 10% could recall that CCW managed the sites. People will read panels, but not as much as we may think. So when we provide interpretation in nature reserves, are we assisting their protection?

#### **Multiple media**

Think of all the other communication tools for getting across environmental messages, both positive and negative, at different levels: TV and radio, magazines and newspapers, education in school, books, stories, novels, myths and fairy tales (which are full of wolves and woods!), museums, the internet, and personal visits. Only the last of these offers first-hand experience, but how often are we then preaching to the converted? Interpretation works as just one of a whole range of media through which people can receive environmental messages.

#### **Why interpret protected landscapes?**

A cynic might say 'because we have to'. Access and interpretation are now built into funding conditions, often to the chagrin of some of our colleagues in conservation. But there are other possible reasons:

- To raise environmental consciousness, whether generally or in relation to particular sites. Northumberland National Park Authority recently erected a panel at a restored historic building, Low Cleughs 'bastle' (fortified

farmhouse), which has now become accessible to the public. As well as identifying the site, the panel's intention is to encourage people to ponder further on the nature of such buildings and the troubled times that produced them. Future surveys could help establish whether people really do respond in this way.

- To promote or provide an enjoyable recreation experience. The self-guided trail, for example, can work hand in hand with sustainable tourism initiatives, helping to support local communities.
- To raise appreciation and awareness. Interpretation can explain what is special or unique about a place, and thus why it is worth protecting, why it should matter to each individual who sees it, who is managing it, and everyone's shared responsibility for protecting it.
- To raise public support for our efforts. This will mean reinforcing the messages outlined above.
- As a visitor management tool. Interpretation can point out where people can and can't go, or can do the same job implicitly by not interpreting some sites or parts of them.

#### Does interpretation protect landscapes?

Does Tilden's received wisdom work? Even in the USA there appears to be 'little tangible research confirmation to demonstrate the effectiveness of this 'educational' process or as proof of any change in attitudes as a result', according to Peter Keene (Keene 1996). Is it all an act of blind faith?

Increasingly we are going to be asked: is it working? And is it worth it? Having managed - just about - to get interpretation established on most people's agendas, including those of the grant funding agencies, we now need to devote more time and resources to monitoring and evaluating our efforts. We need to be able to justify our work in terms of visitor satisfaction and enjoyment, and

even more important, in terms of objectives that we've had a hand in setting.

Until we can do this, we will continue to face the question 'Does interpretation make any difference to the process of protecting landscapes?' and the honest answer will still be: we don't really know.

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# The South Downs experience

| Julian Gray



**'The strategy examines the issues involved in the provision of information, and promotes a structured approach to planning interpretation'**

In 1995 the Sussex Downs Conservation Board published a draft *Information and Interpretation Strategy for the Sussex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty* for consultation. This was the first step in a journey to interpret a landscape, working in partnership with government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local communities, and local government. The strategy was developed as a framework to guide interpretation within the Sussex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), promoting interpretive planning and good practice. For this to be successful, interpreters within the AONB would need to work together. Six years on, a final element of the strategy, a South Downs Interpretive Forum is soon to be realised through a Heritage Lottery Fund supported project.

## Plans and strategies

The Sussex Downs AONB was designated in 1966, and the Conservation Board set up in 1992 with a remit to protect, conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB. One of the first tasks of the Board was to undertake a *Landscape Assessment* and develop a *Management Strategy*, defining what special qualities made up this nationally important landscape and giving a strategic vision of the approaches needed to conserve the AONB. An *Information and Interpretation Strategy* was developed in parallel with the *Management Strategy* as part of the management planning process.

As the document defining the landscape, the *Landscape Assessment* is a key resource in the interpretation of the landscape. However, as its main purpose is technical, it is not accessible for more generalist audiences. A glossy 'coffee table' version of the report, *The Landscape of the Sussex Downs*, was therefore produced in 1996. Re-written and designed to reflect the special natural and cultural qualities of the area, the book has been used to raise the profile of the landscape with specific targeted audiences.

For wider audiences such as visitors to the area, publications such as *The Landscape of the Sussex Downs* have little impact - with an estimated 32 million visits to the South Downs annually (Osborne, 1995), a systematic approach to interpretive provision has to be taken. In the AONB this has been developed through the production

and implementation of the *Information and Interpretation Strategy*.

The strategy is aimed at all those involved in the provision of interpretation and information within the area. This includes countryside services, heritage sites, educational establishments, local attractions, tourism providers and local amenity societies. It examines the issues involved in the provision of information, and promotes a structured approach to planning interpretation. In other words, the strategy gives a framework within which guiding principles for the development of logical, coherent and consistent interpretive provision can be set down. The strategy guides interpretive development within the AONB, encourages the production of structured local interpretive plans and helps with the formulation of a regional interpretive strategy to interpret wider landscape themes.

To promote this approach a number of pilot interpretation projects were developed, promoting good practice. These included:

- Running community participation workshops to facilitate urban fringe communities in the interpretation of their local countryside.
- Developing a self guided heathland trail with clear interpretive objectives to illustrate the interpretive planning process.
- Running interpretive training events for local community groups (with the Sussex Wildlife Trust and Sussex Rural Community Council).
- Hosting an interpretive planning workshop for countryside and museum managers within the area to link countryside and museum services for collaborative ventures, and to encourage the adoption of the principle of regional interpretive planning (with the Centre for Environmental Interpretation and the South East Museum Service).

## Creating a sense of place

Whilst having strategic responsibility for the wider landscape, the Sussex Downs Conservation Board is also responsible for the day-to-day management of over 2,200 kilometres of public rights of way and over 40 countryside recreation sites. They range from informal car parks giving access to the countryside, through to more comprehensive facilities such as Seven Sisters Country Park. This gives an opportunity



16 Above left and right: events, workshops, signage and public relations all help to build support for protecting the South Downs' stunning scenery

to reach a large proportion of visitors to the area. An assessment of signage and countryside furniture was undertaken across the area. Sixteen different styles of signage were found along the rights of way network alone, many of which were urban in design and did not reflect the outstanding landscape they were situated within. Working with Michael Renton of the Guild of Sussex Craftsmen, *Sign Design Guidelines* were developed. These encapsulate traditional signs and countryside furniture designs, their rounded shape reflecting the Downs landscape. Made from local oak, with routed lettering, the signs are easy to maintain.

Within Rights of Way signage, Gill Sans typeface is used, both for clarity of lettering and also to reflect the link between Eric Gill and the area - Gill being a founder member of the Ditchling arts and crafts community at the foot of the Downs in 1907. From the roadside and at major path junctions, public rights of way are marked with oak fingerposts. At other locations intermediate posts are used and, where possible, directional signage is incorporated into existing countryside furniture, reducing the clutter of furniture in the landscape. All waymarking uses the Countryside Agency's nationally recognised colouring system. Additional information, such as the destination of the route and the distance to the destination is included on selected posts. The aim has been to develop a signage system that is easy to use, helps make a visit to the countryside enjoyable, and adds to rather than detracts from the landscape.

The *Sign Design Guidelines* have been used to develop signs used to mark gateway sites where visitors can access the landscape. These entrance signs show the site name, designation (if applicable), and refer to the Sussex Downs AONB. Further signing within the site shows site facilities and who to contact. As with the rights of way signage, the aim was to help create a sense of place and promote access to the landscape. These signs have been used not only on sites managed by the Board, but also sites owned and managed by agencies, local authorities and NGOs across the area, providing a consistency of approach which helps create a sense of place.

Prior to any site signage being installed, a Welcome Audit (Countryside Commission, 1995) is undertaken to ensure that visitors are able to enjoy safe,

accessible and pleasant surroundings – a prerequisite to any interpretive activity.

### The South Downs approach

In 1998 there was a long-term decision to see co-ordinated landscape management across the whole of the South Downs. This gave the Conservation Board's the remit to work more closely with the East Hampshire AONB Unit, and offered new opportunities in the interpretation of the landscape. One of the first joint projects (in collaboration with the Environment Agency) was the *Rother Valley Walks*, a series of self-guided trails promoting sustainable access to a river valley landscape running between the Sussex Downs and East Hampshire AONBs.

Also in 1998 the management of the South Downs Volunteer Ranger Service (VRS) came under the management of the Boards' Information Team. The VRS comprises over 200 active volunteers who undertake a wide range of activities including: practical conservation and recreation management tasks; public relations work; staffing the Visitor Centre at Seven Sisters Country Park; and patrolling the rights of way network. With a 20-year history (and two members about to reach their 20th year of service), the volunteers are ambassadors for the South Downs and play a vital role in raising the profile of the landscape, the work of the VRS and Board. Working in partnership with the East Hampshire AONB Unit, a Hampshire wing of the VRS has now been set up.

### Access to information

With 32 million visits a year, 100,000 residents, and 1,500,000 people within 20 minutes of the South Downs, a major challenge for the Board and its partners is reaching the people living, working in and enjoying the area. Information is a fundamental resource in the promotion of understanding and management of the South Downs. New technologies offer exciting opportunities in the dissemination of information and interpretation - visitors are more sophisticated in their information needs; schools and other interest groups have access to the World Wide Web; and managers are able to utilise information systems to underpin policies and



action on the ground.

However, with greater access to a wider variety of information and increasingly complex resources such as the World Wide Web, it can often be difficult to navigate around such systems to source relevant data. In addition, a great deal of information about the South Downs is held within the libraries and filing systems of the Board and its partners making it relatively inaccessible to the public. To meet this challenge a *South Downs Access to Information – Access to the Landscape* project has been developed, to provide the following outputs:

- Provision of a central information resource for the South Downs including the development of a South Downs gateway on the World Wide Web - the South Downs Virtual Information Centre.
- Improvement of the co-ordination, collation and access to management information for the South Downs, through a South Downs Geographical Information System.
- Improvement to the information systems for rights of way and open access management to enable targeting of resources to key routes and areas.

The South Downs Virtual Information Centre (VIC) was launched last year at [www.vic.org.uk](http://www.vic.org.uk). Its advantages are twofold. For the Board and its partners it acts as a powerful promotional and interpretive tool, enabling messages to get through to a wider (and growing) audience. For the end-user it gives access to the most comprehensive information and interpretation resource for the landscape of the South Downs. As a gateway site VIC not only holds data generated by the Board and partners, but also gives hundreds of links to other relevant information resources. This is a new way of looking at the visitor centre concept, moving it beyond the confines of a building and keeping interpretive provision up to date with communication developments more generally.

#### Next steps

Six years on from the creation of a draft Interpretation and Information Strategy the final piece of the jigsaw is finally being put into place through the development of the South Downs Gateway Project. The aim of this project is to improve the interpretation of the heritage of the South Downs through the

development of a number of hubs (displays and focal points for events and interpretive activities). These hubs will act as gateways to the Downs and will be sited at strategic visitor attractions located between Winchester and Eastbourne. The development of these landscape-wide themes will be steered by a South Downs Interpretation Forum. All the interpretation and research undertaken within the project will be made freely available through VIC to widen public access to the interpretation of the landscape.

#### Lessons learnt

Interpretation of landscape requires a long-term approach and therefore long-term political and financial support. Too often projects are developed in response to short-term funding opportunities.

Landscape interpretation in the United Kingdom can only be effective if a partnership approach is taken. The main advantages of this regional approach to interpretation are: area-wide interpretive themes can be taken up; duplication can be avoided; collaboration rather than competition can be advocated; and the expertise and resources within the landscape can be pooled for special projects. The outcome will be resource and other efficiencies, and an enhanced interpretive experience for those visiting the area.

One key point needs to be borne in mind. The overarching goal of interpretation is to build long-term support for the conservation of the environment amongst the general public.

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# Landscapes for recreation

| Dr Simon C Woodward

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In recent months, PLB Consulting Ltd and Landscape Design Associates have been exploring the potential use of the Recreational Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) as a tool for assessing the recreational value and potential of different parts of the South Downs. This exercise is part of a much wider project identifying the area of search for the boundary of the proposed South Downs National Park.

## A new concept

The Recreational Opportunity Spectrum concept was developed to aid planning for recreation in wilderness and forest areas of the USA (Clarke & Stankey 1979). It allows landscape managers to break down an area into a continuum of opportunity classes, each of which offers a different level of wilderness (or conversely, a different level of recreational service and facility provision). The classes conventionally identified in an ROS appraisal are: Primitive; Semi-primitive non-motorised; Semi-primitive motorised; Roded Natural; Rural and Urban. These settings are broad and within each it is possible to describe sub-classes.

Some of the main criteria used to define the opportunity class for a particular plot of land are:

- Current levels of usage at present.
- The density of road, trail and footpath provision.
- The scale and nature of management activity already occurring.

By categorising the landscape according to these different classes, it is possible to assess the capacity of the landscape to accommodate different types of recreational demand, without compromising the overall quality of experience offered within that landscape.

Obviously such an approach can work reasonably well when planning for a wilderness area where there are currently limited facilities for recreation. Our interest was to establish whether or not the ROS can be applied in a landscape that already has a relatively well-developed recreational infrastructure. In particular, we wished to assess the value of ROS in terms of its ability to define a number of different recreational landscapes that, when combined, might meet the needs and aspirations of all potential audiences for the proposed South Downs National Park. In other words, we were keen to identify an overall area of search for the detailed Park boundary

that encompassed easily accessible and non-threatening landscapes on the one hand, and more remote and challenging environments on the other.

## Study method

Our brief from the Countryside Agency required that the area of search for the National Park boundary commence with a thorough evaluation of the two existing Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in the Downs - the East Hampshire AONB and the Sussex Downs AONB. In particular, it was important to establish from the outset the extent to which the two AONBs already provide, or could provide given appropriate investment, the 'markedly superior recreational experience' required under the Countryside Agency's current criteria for Park designation. Thereafter, we were charged with assessing whether or not there was any merit in extending the area of search for the boundary into the countryside beyond the AONBs.

The starting point was to review landscape character studies previously prepared for the two AONBs (Cobham Resource Consultants 1991). The study area was then categorised into 10 broad landscape character areas for which detailed information was collected on landscape quality, recreation provision and service provision.

The following issues were investigated in detail:

- The quality and relative remoteness of the landscape at present.
- The presence already of a good suite of recreation and interpretive provision suited to the aims and objectives of National Parks (e.g. rights of way, fixed point recreation sites, nature conservation areas, scheduled monuments and listed buildings, interpretive trails or visitor centres linked to some aspect of the area's 'sense of place').
- Proximity to the services and facilities needed to support sustainable tourism and recreation (e.g. public transport interchanges, locally owned tourist accommodation, cycle routes).
- The opportunity to enhance informal recreation either through increasing use of existing resources (where these were reported to be operating below capacity at present) or through changing land uses (principally downland restoration or woodland planting).

Far right: Tranquil  
Downland found on  
open chalk escarpment

'Our interest was to establish whether or not the ROS can be applied in a landscape that already has a relatively well-developed recreational infrastructure'

A matrix was drawn up listing these measures of suitability and each landscape character area within the AONB was assessed to see whether or not they satisfied each measure. Data on the range and quality of existing recreation provision was gathered from OS Maps, through discussions with AONB managers and from a survey of all local authorities, governing bodies and statutory agencies with responsibility for the development and management of informal countryside recreation in the South of England.

A similar exercise was carried out for some 36 additional plots of land that lie outside the two AONBs but where the landscape was deemed to be of sufficiently high quality to allow them to be considered for inclusion within the new National Park. These additional areas included the Forest of Bere, Alice Holt Forest and the Pevensey Levels to the south-west, north and east of the AONBs respectively. The landscape character of these 36 additional plots was identified from existing Countryside Commission reports, and the primary data needed for assessing existing recreation provision gathered in the same way as for the two AONBs.

#### Research findings

Once all the data was collated and reviewed, we were able to establish the presence of five principal recreational landscapes within the South Downs. It quickly became clear that although the main study area was of a significant size (around 1,360 km<sup>2</sup>), a long history of human occupation meant that no part of the area could conceivably be considered as being wilderness. Thus an alternative concept - *tranquillity* - was used to indicate those parts of the Downs that are less busy and that are able to offer a quieter experience.

The Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) has published Tranquil Area Maps for the whole of England, indicating those parts of the country that remain relatively free from the intrusion of transport corridors, flight paths, overground pylons and night time glare from road lighting and built up areas. Information from the Tranquil Areas Map for the South East was transposed onto base maps showing the landscape character of the study area and existing provision for recreation, allowing

us to identify the following recreational landscape types that can be found within the two AONBs and the surrounding area:

Within the AONBs	Outside the AONBs
• Tranquil Downland	• Tranquil Downland
• Fragmented Downland	• Fragmented Downland
• Tranquil Open Upland	• Tranquil Open Upland
• Tranquil Wooded Upland	• Relatively Tranquil Enclosed Valleys
• Tranquil Enclosed Valleys	• Fragmented Lowland Areas and River Valleys
• Urban Areas and Access Corridors	• Urban Areas and Access Corridors

At the time of writing (February 2001) it is not possible to publish a map showing the dispersion of these recreational landscape types across the area, as the findings are yet to be presented to the Countryside Agency. However, it is possible for us to discuss the implications of the findings for the boundary identification process.

Of the above groups, we recommended that all areas within the two AONBs showing tranquillity should be included in the proposed National Park as of right. This is a clear reflection of the role of National Parks, to provide for quiet, countryside recreation. Tranquil areas outside the AONBs, but whose landscape character was contiguous and whose landscape quality was high, were generally included within the recommended Park boundary. Other than Downland, which constitutes the principal landscape type of the area, all fragmented areas were to be excluded from the area of detailed boundary search except where they consolidated the area of recreational landscape available. Similarly, urban areas and access corridors were generally excluded from the proposed National Park except where their exclusion would fragment the park into two or more small (and therefore less easily manageable) parts.

The broad picture is one of an open, well-used and close to capacity recreational landscape in the east and a more enclosed, under-capacity landscape in the centre and west of the boundary search area. In strategic recreational planning terms, this offers





Above: Tranquil Wooded Lowland comprising woodland, heath and farmland

the opportunity to develop provision in the centre and west that complements that which is available in the east, and which can meet the needs of those audiences seeking a more tranquil experience. In particular, the large amount of woodland in the central and western part of the search area provides the chance to absorb significantly more usage than occurs at present. This is true both for the wooded areas inside the AONBs such as the Hampshire Hangers and for woodland outside the AONB, such as the Forest of Bere.

In the main, the different recreational landscapes are separated by the main transport corridors that pass through the Downs, linking the South Coast with London, Surrey and Berkshire. Although these transport corridors disrupt the area's potential to provide one seamless and unspoilt recreational landscape, they do create the potential to provide recreational opportunities for many different audiences. In particular, they will enable residents of South London, Surrey and eastern parts of Kent to access the proposed National Park via public transport. Given that one of Countryside Agency's objectives is to establish a National Park that meets the needs of all potential audiences, including the socially excluded, then the presence of transport corridors passing through the search area is not as great an issue as it would be if one was seeking to offer only a 'wilderness experience'.

### Concluding remarks

This application of ROS is believed to be the first of its kind in planning for protected areas in the UK. Resources were not sufficient to permit the digitisation of all the necessary management information at 1:10,000 level. However, by manually manipulating the information on landscape character, recreation facility and service provision, we have been able to assess the capability of different landscapes within the South Downs to offer particular types of recreational experience. This in turn has added a new dimension to decision making regarding the area of search for a National Park boundary, over and above the previous approach that

focused principally on landscape form and recreation provision as two separate items.

For instance, the commitment by the Countryside Agency to social inclusion meant that it was important for us to establish whether or not the new South Downs National Park will offer a homogenous recreational experience, or a varied mosaic of provision capable of meeting the needs of all potential users. In particular, we were keen to ensure that much of the Park will be relatively easily accessible to those households without regular access to a car. It was also important to identify how much of the area was accessible to people with impaired mobility, for instance, and how much could never be fully accessible without destroying the very character that makes the Downs unique. ROS has allowed us to do this in both instances.

Overall, our view is that the ROS approach has proved to be a useful analytical tool, capable of discriminating between a range of different recreational landscapes that are present across the broad search area. In doing so, it allowed us to match the type and scale of provision within the original search area (i.e. the two AONBs) and that available outside, enabling us to establish how far outside the AONBs the proposed National Park could extend. This in turn allowed the team to identify a suitable area of search for the precise boundary, although how much of this is included within the draft boundary proposals prepared for public consultation later this year remains to be seen.

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# AONBs: Cinderellas or national treasures?

| Edward Holdaway and Gerald Smart

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*Above: The term 'national park' suggests scenic grandeur*

To most people, the term 'national park' conjures up visions of the grandeur of Snowdonia or the Lake District - an immediate link to some of our finest landscapes. But what does the term 'area of outstanding natural beauty' or 'AONB' (to use the more familiar initials) mean to the same audience? To some it will mean little or nothing at all; to others it will be a term used by planners to refuse planning applications. How many will recognise it as a term to describe our other finest landscapes, such as the Norfolk Coast, the Tamar Valley or the High Weald?

AONBs have long been the Cinderellas of the family. Their position has improved a little since the recent Countryside and Rights of Way Act, but they still do not have the statutory framework and long-term commitment of resources enjoyed by national parks. Interpretation, along with other branches of communication, can help promote the message that AONBs are landscapes of similar quality to national parks and are therefore worthy of active conservation.

This article looks at some of the background issues affecting public perception of AONBs, and highlights moves to raise awareness of these national treasures.

## **An artificial distinction?**

Why do these landscapes have a second-class status? First, there seems to be a somewhat artificial distinction between AONBs and national parks. On the one hand, both are seen as high-quality landscapes. On the other, national parks are also designated for the opportunities they provide for recreation; yet in practice, AONBs also provide a wide range of recreation experiences. They are often close to centres of population and, in some cases, attract greater numbers of visitors than national parks.

Furthermore, national parks' statutory purposes embrace the natural and cultural heritage of the area, in recognition of their significant concentrations of wildlife, rare habitats, historic buildings and so on. Yet this is ignored in the case of AONBs, which may have similar concentrations. National parks also have a duty to ensure the well-being of local communities, which AONBs do not have. There seems to be little logic in the distinction.

Many people seem to perceive national parks as upland areas with wide-open spaces and AONBs as lowland agricultural areas. As a generalisation this

has some truth in it. However, a closer examination of the geography of these areas reveals a much more complex picture. Whilst the early national parks, apart from the Pembrokeshire Coast, were based on upland areas, more recent thinking has included the Norfolk Broads and the New Forest within the family, both very much lowland areas, while serious consideration is now being given to national park status for the South Downs, a hilly area but by no means upland.

Many of the areas designated as AONBs are actually hilly in character: for example the chalk and limestone escarpments of the Chilterns, the Sussex Downs and the Cotswolds, the dramatic cliffs of Dorset, Devon and Cornwall and the great variety of relief in the Shropshire Hills. Indeed, some areas like the North Pennines and Nidderdale, are truly upland in character. So, is the difference so great that they merit such different treatment? Hardly.

## **Lack of awareness**

Second, the lack of a comprehensive approach to AONBs to put them on a par with national parks, has been due in no small measure to the lack of awareness by the general public and policy makers that a problem exists. The need for a campaign to raise awareness of AONBs was noted in the Smart/Anderson report in 1990, as part of their proposals for securing more money for their management. During the 1990s some progress was made. Nationally, the Countryside Commission published the AONB Directory and a leaflet describing where and what they are and why they are important. More significant was the start of a process of preparing landscape assessments of each AONB in England, including clear statements of why a particular AONB was nationally important.

There is no doubt that these have proved useful, particularly in the preparation of management plans in some AONBs and in the development control process, when an understanding of the landscape has been important, particularly in public inquiries. They were also of considerable use in the designation of the most recent AONBs, the Blackdown Hills and Tamar Valley. However, while these initiatives were valuable, and indeed continue to be so, they did not add up to an awareness campaign.

Sadly there has been no national focus on AONBs



**'Why do these landscapes have a second-class status?'**

as there was for national parks, which were strengthened in 1974 and 1995 after reviews by government committees. The AONB Staff Forum and the AONB Association have been formed only recently. Furthermore, only a few AONB local authorities have appreciated the need for national action. There is little evidence of Members of Parliament actively supporting AONBs, apart from the Gower Peninsula and the Clwydian Range. In the former case, the local MP led a debate in the House of Commons, and in the latter all the MPs and Welsh Assembly Members have signed up to the spirit of the AONB Charter. However, the fact that the promised AONB legislation was not included in the Queen's Speech of November 1999 is indicative of their continuing relatively weak position.

#### **Local action**

Locally, a number of AONBs have been helped considerably by societies formed to promote the interest of the conservation of the area. Notable amongst these are the Chiltern Society, the Arnside & Silverdale Landscape Trust and the Mendip Society. Unlike the national parks, each of which has its own voluntary society, the majority of AONBs do not have such spirited support.

AONB managers have also taken a whole range of steps to raise awareness of the value of their area, though it has generally been on an ad hoc basis rather than to any preconceived plan. Considerable effort has been given to raising the awareness and enjoyment of visitors through the production of leaflets about the area and information about facilities and activities, such as guided walks. In one or two cases information is now provided on websites (eg the Blackdown Hills and High Weald).

Less obvious are attempts to raise awareness of what needs to be done to look after each area, although the majority of AONBs seem to have a logo, which helps to create an identity for an area. Quite a number now produce newsletters on a regular basis and annual reports of activities of AONB Units, where they exist, are now more frequent. In many instances the very process of preparing a management plan is being used to raise awareness amongst the local population. A few AONBs, for example the Chilterns and the Forest of Bowland, have erected road signs at

key entrance points to the AONB.

A number of AONBs have adopted a more strategic approach to this whole question. For example, in 1995 the Chilterns Conference adopted a promotional strategy, mindful of the need to make more information available to the 100,000 residents in the area and to its many visitors. The strategy embraced the production of an Annual Report, a new leaflet about the AONB, a summary of the management plan, a bi-annual newsletter - 'Chalk and Trees' - display boards, regular articles in local newspapers and other journals and a general newsletter for councillors. The use of the logo is promoted amongst the Conference partners and already 41 gateway signs have been erected.

Another example is the Purbeck Heritage Committee. This has developed a strategic approach, which was particularly valuable in its early years when longer-term political and therefore financial support was being sought. In preparing the strategy its target audience was clearly defined: existing and potential partners in the work of the Committee, the people of Purbeck, visitors, key regional and national opinion formers and the local and national media.

It was also very clear that the strategy had to address the partnership itself by encouraging ownership of the Committee's activities, as well as raise awareness of the area's special qualities amongst local people, hence the adoption of two key messages: 'Working together to keep Purbeck special' for the former group and 'Keep Purbeck special' for the latter group. The strategy embraced the design of a logo, the establishment of a Forum, the regular publication of a newsletter, the running of 'Purbeck Aware' weekends, member briefings, display material and leaflets, publicity materials such as posters, car stickers, a planned programme of press releases and local community projects.

All this local success has been due to the initiative of a few enlightened individuals within local authorities, despite the lack of an effective national framework and insufficient long-term resources. It is high time that AONBs are established alongside national parks at the pinnacle of landscape conservation in England and Wales. But what needs to be done to achieve this?



*Above: AONBs need to be managed for recreation, just like national parks*

*Below: Some of our finest landscapes are found in AONBs, like the Somerset Levels*

### **The role of legislation**

Legislation could provide formal recognition for the essential similarities between national parks and AONBs, by recognising purposes for the latter such as wildlife and cultural interests, the promotion of opportunities for understanding and enjoyment by the public and the economic wellbeing of local communities. It could also ensure that there is an organisation charged with the long-term care of each these areas and that long-term resources are made available by the nation.

The gap between AONBs and national parks has been narrowed by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, but only in those AONBs which have a Conservation Board, and in relation to equality of treatment by the statutory town and country planning system. For the majority, the new requirement to prepare a management plan is still a far cry from the statutory framework enjoyed by national parks.

### **A challenge for interpreters**

Whilst legislation is essential, it will be equally important for all those involved with managing AONBs to enhance awareness and understanding among stakeholders of what these protected areas are all about, why they are so important and why they should be treated as equal to national parks. These stakeholders will include the general public, professional and scientific bodies, user and interest groups, local authorities, government departments and public agencies, businesses and politicians at all levels. Landscape is an emotive rallying point and could be

used to great effect in campaigns of this kind.

At national level, the recently formed AONB Association and the Staff Forum could be prime movers, together with the national agencies, in devising and implementing an awareness strategy. Locally it will be for the managers of AONBs to reach all parts of the local community as an integral part of their work, not as some optional extra. It will require commitment as well as significant resources.

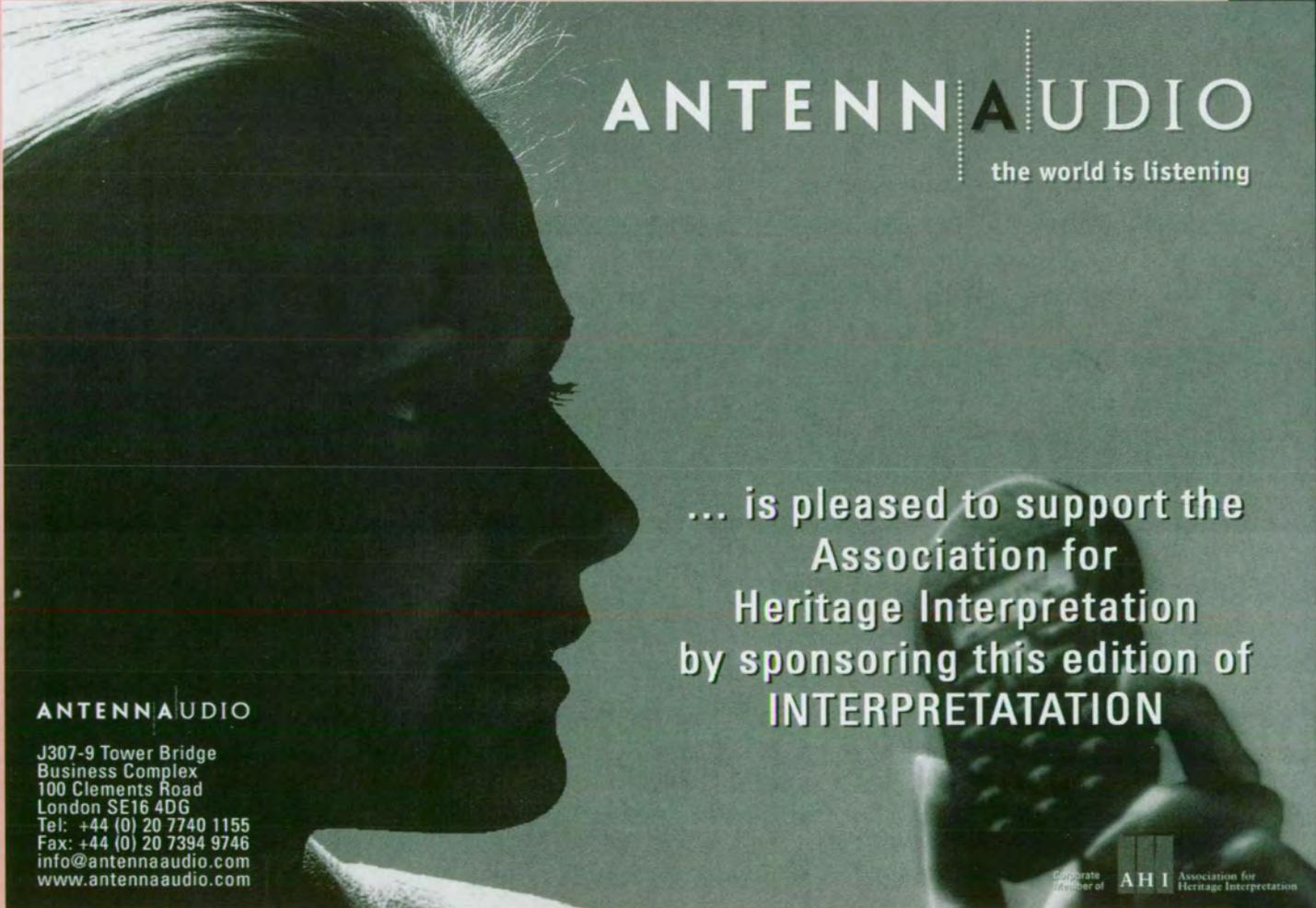
The use of interpretation techniques will be vital in helping to understand all elements of these complex areas if all the stakeholders are to appreciate the importance of AONBs, the role they should play in looking after them for future generations, and the potential for enhancing public enjoyment of these fine landscapes. This will be a real challenge for professional interpreters.

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