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of the Association for Heritage Interpretation

Interpretation



What's going on?

News and views on heritage interpretation world-wide

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The next issue will feature
Water and waterscapes

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Using some of the talks given at the AHI Conference: *Planning for Interpretation: Taking the High Road* held in Glasgow September 2004 as a starting point, we look at what is happening world wide. Sam Ham offers a roundup of what he has recently seen in Australia, Canada, Costa Rica and USA, Susan Ashley gives an in-depth account of heritage interpretation policies in Canada, and Kira Gee reports that the Germans are at last getting their act together! Closer to home, Juliette Fritsch examines the history of audience-based interpretative planning which she says started in USA, while Ian Jardine looks at the challenges facing interpreters in Scotland.

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Individuals can join AHI as Associate or Student Members or can apply to be elected, subject to qualifications and experience, as Full Members or Fellows. Businesses can join as Corporate Members with the same rights as individual members.

All members receive *Interpretation Journal* and a bi-monthly Newsletter and other mailings. They can participate in AHI events and (if paid-up) can vote at the Annual General Meeting.

What's the future?

Ruth Taylor, incoming chair, looks at the future of interpretation

The last few years has seen interpretation as a discipline move on in leaps and bounds. One area reflected in this journal is the contribution interpretation makes to tourism. There is no doubt that good interpretation can add inspiration as well as understanding on a visit to a natural or built heritage site or collection. Sam Ham discusses the importance of thematic interpretation and the use the tourism industry makes of this technique. The Tasmanian tourism strategy states: 'it is interpretation and engagement that make the difference between a pleasant break and an unforgettable experience', Australia has elevated interpretation 'from a park nicety to core business'. Germany now recognises the potential of interpretation for developing sustainable tourism although there are many issues to be dealt with according to Kira Gee. In the USA – the home of interpretation, courses and accreditation are at an advanced level with the National Association for Interpretation's certification completed by almost 3,000 people and an on-line Masters of Science course in Resource Interpretation available from Stephen F. Austin State University.

So where does this leave the United Kingdom and the AHI? Agencies in Scotland have joined together to support development in good practice in interpretation through their excellent newsletter 'Interpret Scotland' – recognising the important contribution to the tourism industry. Interpretation is now seen as a public benefit by the funding agencies in the UK, contributing to opening up heritage and making it available to a wider audience. Ian Jardine chief executive of Scottish Natural Heritage shows in

his article how interpretation contributes to the protection of our natural heritage by helping to foster an informed and caring public. A new Masters level course is due to start in September 2005 at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) aiming to meet the need for skilled and innovative professionals in the 21st century, critically exploring interpretive principles and techniques using sites and experience from around the world. The National Trust has produced a new learning vision and interpretation philosophy taking forward the work of this key heritage organisation in a planned and innovative way.

It is the role of AHI to promote good practice in interpretation and over the next few weeks your committee will be discussing the vision of the organisation for the future. One of the areas we will be looking at is the proposal by David Masters to look at the need to research the economic benefits of interpretation. Should we be more pro-active in evaluating the public and economic benefit of what we do? Has it been done anywhere already, is there a model we could repeat? We will also be planning training sessions to promote good practice, building on the success of the latest course on 'knowing your audiences and interpreting for them' at the Galleries of Justice, Nottingham. We would welcome suggestions for courses, or offers of help or venues to run them. We will also be looking at accreditation. We need your views as members – what do you think are the priorities for the Association in the next few years? Let us know by e-mailing admin@heritage-interpretation.org.uk.

Ruth Taylor is Learning Adviser – Interpretation at the National Trust

Check it out!

Sam Ham reports on a selection of new initiatives that has involved him outside the UK during the past year

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What follows is certainly not a world report, but rather a selection of new initiatives my work has involved me in during the past twelve months or so. There's a lot of innovative work going on around the world, but I've chosen here to feature just a few examples I've seen in four non-UK countries (in alphabetical order) – Australia, Canada, Costa Rica, and the USA.

Australia

Tourism Tasmania is launching perhaps the world's single greatest effort to make thematic interpretation not only standard operating procedure, but a central part of its brand. Working in close collaboration with

about their ongoing implementation of the Experience Strategy and development of a truly impressive professional development programme in thematic interpretation, contact Deb Lewis at Deb.Lewis@tourism.tas.gov.au or Kathy Gatenby at Kathy.Gatenby@tourism.tas.gov.au. When I was there recently, former Interpretation Australia Association (IAA) president, Peter Grant Peter.Grant@parks.tas.gov.au and others were even talking about Tasmania hosting a world conference on excellence in thematic interpretation someday. If you like the idea, let Peter, Deb or Kathy know.

Speaking of IAA, its website www.interpretationaustralia.asn.au/ is one of my most used bookmarks these days. The 'members only' section is easily worth the price of membership (currently just £23). In terms of my own professional development, I'd have to say that IAA's annual conferences are among the best I attend each year. Word on the street is that the next one will be held in Tasmania. Stay tuned to the IAA website for further announcements.

In the state of Victoria, Sovereign Hill (the well-known outdoor museum commemorating Australia's 1850s Gold Rush years) has established one of the strongest thematic interpretation traditions anywhere in Australia, if not the world. Blending strong themes in street theatre 'activations' and a host of demonstrations, tours and a state-of-the-art light & sound show, Sovereign Hill is capitalizing on the vision and creative energy of Deputy CEO and Museums Director, Tim Sullivan, and Interpretive Theatre Manager, Barry (Baz) Kay, in showcasing a truly impressive example of how powerful themes contribute to powerful experiences. For more information on this award-winning interpretive site, contact Tim at tsullivan@sovereignhill.com.au or Baz at bkay@sovereignhill.com.au or check out Sovereign Hill at www.sovereignhill.com.au/

Many other Australian organizations, including Zoos Victoria, the Perth Zoo, the Greater City of Bendigo, and tourism operators nationwide, are making Australia a world leader in the practice of thematic interpretation. Backed by solid research provided by universities such as Monash University's Tourism Research Unit (www.buseco.monash.edu.au/units/tru/) and the Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism (www.crctourism.com.au).

'Australia has elevated interpretation from a "park nicety" to core business'

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Above: Koala rehabilitation programme, Cleland Wildlife park, Adelaide, Australia

sister governmental organisations in Parks & Wildlife, Forestry, and Heritage, along with dozens of private operators, Tourism Tasmania has invested three years in developing advanced thematic interpretation 'know-how' across the state's entire tourism

industry (from national parks and state forests, to heritage sites, wildlife parks, botanical gardens, wineries, breweries, farms and cheese makers, and to river cruise, rail, coach and walking tour operators). Tasmania's strategic application of thematic interpretation to branding and development of experiential products is unprecedented. If you'd like to see how they've wrapped their state-wide strategic tourism plan around a core of thematic interpretation, download the *Tasmanian Experience Strategy* at http://www.tourismtasmania.com.au/tasind/t_experience/ If you want more information

Below: Guided jungle tour, Tortuguero National Park, Costa Rica



com.au/), Australia has elevated interpretation from a 'park nicety' to core business. You might want to bookmark these websites to stay abreast of new research coming out of TRU and the STCRC. Some of Australia's latest interpretive research is published in *Interpreting the Land Down Under*, edited by Rosemary Black and Betty Weiler: www.fulcrum-books.com/html/intepreting_the_land_down_unde.html

Canada

The only really personal news I have to report is that I had a great time at this year's Interpretation Canada (IC) conference, held in beautiful Lethbridge, Alberta. About 150 delegates, including some of Canada's brightest and most talented interpreters, showed up for the three-day event. Along with Betty Weiler from my sister institution, Monash University in Australia, I was honoured to present one of the keynote presentations on the latest theory and practice of thematic interpretation, and what I've been calling 'meaning making' since I first used the term in my address to the 2002 *Scotching the Myth Conference* on interpretation in Edinburgh. Along with many Canadian colleagues, my friends, Tim Merriman and Lisa Brochu from NAI were also there to conduct a workshop on management and interpretation. So it was a bit like 'old home week' for me. I don't get to spend as much time in North America as I used to, and I thoroughly enjoyed being inspired by the Canadians (Ben Gadd and Kevin Van

interpretation periodicals anywhere. You can read more about *InterpScan* at <http://www.interpcan.ca/interpscan.html> or contact Sue Ellen directly at editor@interpcan.ca

Costa Rica

Horizontes Nature Tours in San José, Costa Rica is beginning to take centre stage in thematic interpretation professionalism, not only in Costa Rica, but worldwide. Led by owner, Tamara Budowski (daughter of sustainable development guru, Geraldo Budowski), Horizontes is arguably one of the most advanced nature tour operators anywhere when it comes to thematic interpretation. The company's expressed philosophy is that human beings are capable of being touched deeply by nature and that guides are key to making it happen. Toward that end, Horizontes has undertaken the task of training every guide it employees, whether full-time or free-lance, in both the theory and practise of thematic interpretation. Eventually, they want to spread what they're learning to other like-minded companies in Costa Rica and elsewhere in Central America. According to Tamara, if one company can make a difference in how tourists connect to natural places, imagine what a whole industry could do. Having had the honour to deliver this training to the Horizontes guides the past two years, I can attest to the high level of their work. Any interpreter would be heartened by the way these particular guides get

'Horizontes has undertaken the task of training every guide it employees, whether full-time or free-lance, in both the theory and practise of thematic interpretation'

JORGE SORIANO

Right: Horizontes Tours, guides in training at Laguna Lodge, Tortuguero, Costa Rica

Tighem were riveting!) and catching up with many friends and colleagues. You'll find a brief report on this very successful conference and an update on IC's very active professional development programme at <http://www.interpcan.ca/>.

Stay tuned! Sue Ellen Fast is turning IC's journal, *InterpScan*, into one of the best professional





Above: Entrance station, Tortuguero National Park, Costa Rica

hearts pumping. If you get to Costa Rica, I urge you to visit them. They're among the best I've worked with in 40 some countries. You can learn more about Horizontes' commitment to professionalism and thematic interpretation at www.horizontes.com/. Be sure to check out my student and guide *extraordinaire*, Gastón Trujillo, who is Horizontes' 'featured guide of the month' http://www.horizontes.com/our_services/guide_month.htm

USA

Tim Merriman, Executive Director of the National Association for Interpretation (NAI), reports that NAI now has 5,000 members in 32 countries. Almost 3,000 individuals in six countries have completed one or more of NAI's certification credentials, and 14 US universities now incorporate NAI's Certified Interpretive Guide course into their undergraduate curricula. NAI's InterPress has published four important books in the past three years, including *Personal Interpretation* by Lisa Brochu and Tim Merriman, *Interpretive Planning* by Lisa Brochu, *Creating Nature Centers* by Brent and Carolyn Evans, and *Management of Interpretive Sites* by Tim Merriman and Lisa Brochu. In April 2006, NAI will host a new spring conference in Puerto Rico (its first ever in a non-US state). A call for papers for that ground-breaking conference will be available on NAI's website (www.interpnet.com) in January 2005.

Behind the editorship of Dr. Carolyn Ward, the *Journal of Interpretation Research* (JIR) is fast-becoming a model for bringing researchers and practitioners together. Carolyn has reshaped both the look and focus of JIR to improve its ability to make rigorous research both relevant and accessible to practising interpreters. Learn more about JIR at <http://www.interpnet.com/JIR/>

The US National Park Service (USNPS) continues the forward-thinking evolution of its Interpretive

Development Program (IDP) which brings the best thinking in interpretation squarely into the core competencies and reward system for rangers in that agency. Branded with the tagline 'Aiming for High Ground', the IDP is the outgrowth of an unusual collection of visionaries led by Chief of Interpretation Corky Mayo and lead Interpretive Trainer, Dave Larsen. The IDP features some of the most imaginative thinking about interpretation to come out of the USNPS in my professional lifetime. Check it out at <http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp/>

Speaking of the USNPS, some of you will be aware of the terrific theme-driven interpretive planning process that Richard Kohen and Kim Sikoryak in the USNPS's Denver office have developed over the years. I've just read an advance copy of their latest manual, *Interp Guide – The Philosophy and Practice of Connecting People to Heritage*. Like Richard's and Kim's prior publications, it's going to be a great addition to the literature on thematic interpretation. *Interp Guide* is due to be released right after the first of the year. You can learn more about its availability by contacting Richard at Richard_Kohen@nps.gov and Kim at Kim_Sikoryak@nps.gov

In conjunction with the USNPS, Stephen F. Austin State University (behind the leadership of brainchild, Dr. Mike Legg), has launched a web-based Masters of Science degree program in resource interpretation (MSRI) that is open to academically-eligible interpreters anywhere. For more information on this innovative postgraduate program, contact Dr. Mike Legg at mlegg@sfasu.edu or Theresa Coble at tcoble@sfasu.edu. I gave a couple of on-line lectures to their current crop of students just last week and was thoroughly impressed with the professionalism and academic rigour Mike and Theresa have injected into the MSRI programme.

You can read a full description of the programme at <http://www.sfasu.edu/msri/>

I've had the great pleasure to help facilitate a new co-branding (really brand-synergy) process between the well-know New York-based travel operator, Lindblad Expeditions (LEX), and the National Geographic Society (NGS). This is an exciting new concept based on a thematic view of



Above: Guided whale watching trip, Linblad, Sea of Cortez, Mexico

'The IDP features some of the most imaginative thinking about interpretation to come out of the USNPS in my professional lifetime'

branding and interpretation that will bring the best of LEX's expedition cruising legacy to NGS's global exploration and scientific discovery tradition. You can read more about the new LEX-NGS partnership and how it stands to strengthen both organisations' conservation missions at www.expeditions.com/ng/index.asp.

LEX, as many of you know, is one of the world's leading tour operators in what has come to be called 'travellers' philanthropy'. What you may not know is that LEX has achieved this status through no less than the strategic application of thematic interpretation on its cruises (which take people to some of the most incredible places on earth). Through its Galapagos Conservation Fund (read about the GCF at http://www.solutions-site.org/cat1_sol116.htm), LEX guests have already raised nearly US \$3 million (enough to eradicate the introduced goats and pigs from Santiago Island!). I was proud to have had the chance to lead the research and design of the GCF campaign, and even prouder to be asked back to do the same for the new Baja Forever! Campaign which LEX and the Mexican Fund for Nature Conservation (in collaboration with World Wildlife Fund Mexico) have recently unveiled on LEX boats in the Sea of Cortez. With a three-way match, the campaign produced nearly US \$200,000 in just its first 14 weeks. The Sea of Cortez (of John Steinbeck fame) protects some of the most important whale waters in the world. LEX's leadership (behind owner-president, Sven Lindblad, and an amazing staff) is showing the world that making a difference through thematic interpretation also makes business sense. Keep your eye on Lindblad Expeditions in world conservation news. Better yet, shout hello to them as they pass by the British Isles and off the coast of Scotland every year between May and September.

The most embarrassing question I get – literally

almost once a day from someone – is 'when is the second edition of *Environmental Interpretation* hitting the streets?' My answer is 'soon!' However, to convince the heritage interpretation folks that the communication principles underlying effective thematic interpretation don't differ when one moves from green stuff to old stuff, I've convinced my publisher (Fulcrum Publishing) to run the second edition with a new title. It will be called simply, *Interpretation* or alternatively, *Thematic Interpretation*. We haven't yet decided whether to keep or drop the subtitle (*A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets*). If you have an opinion, I'd love to hear it. Please to send it directly to me at sham@uidaho.edu or contact Fulcrum Publishing at fulcrum@fulcrum-books.com. Also, you can look for a great new text on interpretation in the USA by co-authors Carolyn Ward and Alan Wilkinson (due out in 2005 from Fulcrum Publishing). As executive editor of this and a number of other books on applied communication, I think Carolyn's and Alan's book is going to be one of the best volumes on the practice of interpretation written in a while. You can contact Carolyn at cjw5@humboldt.edu or Alan at awilk@humboldt1.com for more information.

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Where do we all fit in?

Susan Ashley explains social cohesion policies in Canada and their impact on heritage interpretation

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I have worked for many years as a front-line interpreter, as an interpretive media planner and as a consultant, charged with the role of inspiring, entertaining and changing the attitudes of people towards their natural and cultural surroundings. But a new vocation as university academic has led me to explore the theoretical underpinnings of how people go about developing their identity and the identity of the communities they live in. And to question, where does heritage, both natural and cultural, fit into that identity?

A multicultural nation

Canadians take pride in their international identity as a multicultural nation. In cities such as Toronto, more than 40% of its population has cultural roots somewhere else in the world. Popular media increasingly present stories and images reflecting the 'invisible minorities' of Canada.

But what do immigrants to Canada think about heritage as they find it in our museums, historic sites and parks? When planning publications, exhibits and programs for agencies like Parks Canada, mention is always made of 'new Canadians' as an audience group but we rarely define what that meant or how to best reach them with our programs. Any visit to a national historic site, for instance, reveals a sea of white faces – the history of Canada means something to old white folks, but what does it mean or should it mean to new Canadians?

'Canadians take pride in their international identity as a multicultural nation'

Canadian cohesion policies

In the late 1990s, Canadian historic sites and museums increasing came under pressure to rethink their policies and programming in light of the multicultural profile of Canadians, especially recently-arrived visible minorities. Federal policy planners began to frame arguments for the support of the arts, culture and heritage by identifying them as

social goods that support cohesion in society. Social cohesion has an uncertain definition – federal policy researchers are framing the notion as "how to build a sense of connectedness and belonging in Canadian society.'

But lurking behind social cohesion, and similarly the British drive for social inclusion, is an underlying suspicion that what we are really discussing is unification or assimilation or social engineering, and that issues of social justice are ignored. Or, cohesion is seen as a kind of 'team spirit' exercise whose outward-looking face of national identity is really an inward-looking policy of social control. But proponents argue this is not the case, that social cohesion tries to set a different tone – not only are we inviting immigrants to play in our game, but we are redesigning the game itself.

The act of coming together within the public sphere is a central component of the idea of social cohesion. In Canada, the move to come together in the national public sphere to celebrate a shared purpose and shared identity is a complex issue, driven by a desire to ensure a political unity between the French and English core while asserting sovereignty in the face of American cultural domination. But is this shared space equally accessible to all? The concept of social cohesion with talk of 'shared values and traditions' does not convey the same awareness of exclusion or inequity as policy concerns like social justice.

Articulating Canadianess

So where do historic sites and museums fit in this discussion of social cohesion? Both are tools Canadian governments use to articulate policies of 'Canadianess'.

In the 1990s, a range of new global issues stirred up by international flows of people, money and information forced the Canadian government to think about human rights and the nature of its national community, especially related to the multiculturalism and Aboriginal issues. Both rights and diversity were encompassed in a new policy called social cohesion. Canadian Heritage, the umbrella department for arts, culture, heritage and multicultural programs on the federal level, was reoriented in 2001 with the mission statement



Above: The Underground Railroad was a metaphor for the secret system used to smuggle African slaves out of the U.S. into Canada. Refugees were urged to follow the North Star to find their way into Canada

'Federal policy researchers are framing the notion as how to build a sense of connectedness and belonging in Canadian society'

'towards a more cohesive and creative Canada'. The strategic policy objectives focus on four essential elements of cohesion: contact and connections; stories and symbols; inclusion and participation; and values.

But critics argued that despite these new cohesion statements, they continue to exclude non-dominant cultures. Cohesion was called a means of 'managing' visible minorities. Cohesion policies had to do more than offer surface change, and not just mask growing social inequalities.

What does it take, on the ground, to change how programs and agencies do business to truly act in an equitable manner – and is it being done? How can museum and heritage policies help to implement these goals in real ways? Or do museum and heritage exhibition policies continue to function in ways that satisfy dominant-culture ideas of Canadian identity?

Policy into interpretive practice

In 2000, I was involved in the planning of an interpretive exhibit on the Underground Railroad (UGRR) in Toronto for Canada's National Historic Sites. A neglected part of Canadian history, the UGRR was one of the means by which African slaves in 19th century escaped from bondage in the U.S. into Canada. It was not a real railroad but a metaphoric one by which whites and free blacks secretly smuggled slaves over the border. The history of the exhibit's development illustrates how this federal agency was dragged into confronting the substantive issues of participation and belonging, with the potential of contributing in a small way to the long-term issue of equality.

The actor who dragged National Historic Sites into the real world was the U.S. government who, in

Right: Black Creek Pioneer Village, current host of Parks Canada's Underground Railroad exhibit, offers a chance for school children of all ethnicities a taste of life in early Upper Canada



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What evolved in this production was a very real and very precarious relationship of power as the project became politicized and its creation became a thing of negotiation.

While National Historic Sites is used to intergovernmental committee work, here was a committee of 'civilians' – people not accustomed to governmental culture. On top of that they were people from minority cultures – black activists, Jamaican historians, and descendants of slaves. So they weren't even playing the same game as the white government workers. But while the group frequently bogged down with misunderstandings, the raw fighting out of process in committee was a learning experience for all.

Re-thinking interpretive planning

I offer two observations of things we learned, from an interpretive planning standpoint, about the practical implications of social cohesion.

of Black Canadians with so many different points of view was fascinating. Simply put, what I might have thought was important or appropriate had to give way to other points of view. This project was highly symbolic for all committee members. It was their shot to get their story on the stage. And each had his or her own interpretive agenda. Their ideas on what was interesting, what should be communicated and what methods would gel with the audience were revealing and the result unexpected – they wanted an 'object theatre', that is, a multimedia theatre-like show with film, objects, lighting and visuals that all came together to tell a story. They sought an interpretation that was human, rooted in the everyday, and offering a face-to-face negotiation of narrative both for the producers and the audience.

Secondly, how to frame the story was THE major decision the committee had to face from the beginning. Many wanted the tone of the show to

reflect the pain and hardship of the Underground Railroad story. Several others wanted it to look at the positive side of the accomplishments of Black

refugees in Toronto. In the end, a positive point of view was adopted and one committee member actually quit the group over that issue.

'So where do historic sites and museums fit in this discussion of social cohesion?'

First was the whole idea of negotiation of storyline. While I am used to institutional discussions of exhibit narratives, the dynamic on this committee

The theatre tells the story of one woman, Deborah Brown, who really did escape for the U.S. in the 1830s. Much like cinema or stage theatre, the object theatre employs attention-grabbing enthrallment. The UGRR presentation offers another element – the use of a narrator, Deborah Brown, who, as a hologram, seems to address the audience as individuals. This draws the audience into a sensation of reality through dialogue. She is, in effect, a costumed interpreter standing in front of the audience.

The multimedia exhibit technique succeeds in achieving not only a recognition of a minority group, but engenders in a cross section of visitors a sense that the story told is one belonging to all Canadians.

‘The project forced National Historic Sites to address their internal practices of planning and designations’

The use of a female narrator and story-telling media with emphasis on theatre and drama was pushed by the consultative committee to convey this story, and it draws all segments of the audience into the narrative. The audience not only gives the UGRR presentation its undivided attention (they sit there for 25 minutes), they leave the theatre intensely moved.

Old structures, new thinking

The project forced National Historic Sites to address their internal practices of planning and designations. The project contributed to a reassessment of the agency’s official Systems Plan, which sets thematic criteria for commemorations. Published subsequently in 2000, the plan displays a radical, inclusive new sense of Canadian history. A specific internal result of the project was the hiring of several African-Canadian historians on staff and as consultants to work on this and other projects.

It is impossible to maintain that a small measure such as this will exact equality and justice. It was a tiny, one-time part of the overall budget of National Historic Sites. The push for cohesion under the new Systems Plan is still project-oriented with a small

portion of the budget mostly devoted to huge, operational-heavy historic sites such as Louisbourg in Nova Scotia. Whether those large sites themselves are reframing their way of doing business to reflect a multicultural Canadian society in true cohesion is a question for further research.

A negotiated interpretation of identity

The justness of social cohesion in all its dimensions is obvious to all of us in the heritage field. But dominant ways of interpreting cultural identity, and practices that reflect old ideologies, continue at all levels. Efforts, such as the Underground Railroad exhibit, to represent diversity require changes in policy and practice. But it is much easier to deal with a small, semi-independent capital project and ensure that objectives are met, than to change bureaucracy. Changes will need to permeate the system at individual museums and historic sites, as well as at the agency

level, not just be undertaken on a project-by-project basis. Projects such as the UGRR exhibit demonstrate that museum and heritage policies and methodologies have the potential to be egalitarian and cohesive, and in the long term will result in a negotiated interpretation of Canadian identity.

The Underground Railroad Exhibit has had two installations to date: the first at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto from May 2002 to March 2003, and at Black Creek Pioneer Village, Toronto from June 2003 onward.

Susan Ashley is an MA student in the York/Ryerson Joint Programme in Communication and Culture in Toronto, Canada

Close to take-off?

Kira Gee sketches out the current debate surrounding heritage interpretation in Germany

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Until recently, Germany has had an uneasy relationship with heritage interpretation. Many conservationists argued that it did not sit comfortably with the established practice of environmental education and the subject in its broader context remained little known. In addition, such interpretation that did exist was often poorly executed. Slowly however, things are changing. Many rural areas now recognise the potential of heritage interpretation for developing sustainable tourism, and a growing number of practitioners and academics are beginning to discover that there is more to heritage interpretation than panels and guided walks.

No plain sailing

For a long time, only a handful of individuals were concerned with heritage interpretation in Germany. They had all discovered interpretation for themselves – through experiencing visitor centres, exhibitions and personal interpretation in the US, through personal contact with other interpreters in the UK, through the former Centre for Environmental Interpretation in Manchester or through attending training courses. Taking this initial spark to Germany in the early 1990s, they began to look for ways of spreading the word – through planning and implementing first interpretation projects in Germany, through developing first training courses, and through looking for ways of anchoring interpretation to university teaching. A number of regional ‘hubs’ became established as a result: small centres of interest that often used applied geography as a context for talking about interpretation. At present, Freiburg, Tübingen and Göttingen Universities offer some undergraduate courses in heritage interpretation, whereas the ‘Bildungswerk Interpretation’, run by an NAI-accredited interpreter, offers practical courses and seminars for a wide range of professionals.

Somewhat surprisingly however, heritage interpretation has not become established practice in Germany, comparable for instance to its popularity in the UK or France. So why does it still struggle to be taken on board? This author would argue that two factors are responsible: Firstly, many people are still having trouble with the actual meaning of ‘heritage

interpretation’. What exactly is heritage interpretation, and what sets it apart from environmental education and tourism planning? Germany has not yet engaged in a whole-hearted discourse on the nature of interpretation, its potential benefits and criteria for success. Although some interpretive techniques such as guided walks and interpretive trails are popular methods of ‘environmental communication’, the wider potential of interpretation in community development, fostering local identity and supporting sustainable tourism strategies is only rarely considered.

Secondly, interpretation still lacks living ‘proof’ of its worth. Good practice is few and far between, and only a few studies have assessed self-guided walks and panels in practice¹. There is a need to communicate the benefits of good practice to local authorities, tourism planners and conservation agencies, together with the need for proper interpretive planning.

The following gives an idea of some of the obstacles we need to overcome before heritage interpretation can really take root.

Heritage interpretation is different from landscape interpretation

One of the most difficult stumbling blocks is that ‘heritage interpretation’ has no direct equivalent in the German language. ‘Landschaftsinterpretation’, ‘Natur-und Kulturinterpretation’ and ‘informelle Umweltbildung’ represent the most frequently employed terms, but none of these adequately convey a sense of heritage interpretation in its original Tilden² sense. ‘Landschaftsinterpretation’ in particular has always stood for the scientific interpretation of a landscape, as might be carried out by geographers to understand the forces that lead to the current shape of a landscape. Thus there is a need to clearly set heritage interpretation apart as a distinct methodology and toolbox, designed to communicate the essence of ‘landscape’ to the public: a toolbox employed to engender care and to protect the heritage it presents.

Interpretation, identity and authenticity

Then there is the academic debate of what reality interpretation actually represents. Can interpretation

'Many people still have trouble with the meaning of 'heritage interpretation'. What exactly is heritage interpretation, and what sets it apart from environmental education and tourism planning?'



Above left: Investing in the future: training geography students in interpretation during a field trip to the Swiss Alps, Freiburg University, October 2004



Above right: Guided walks at the Border Museum in Duderstadt, near Göttingen

bridge the gap between the 'real' place and the 'tourist image', or is it itself just a tool for constructing yet another artificial reality? And can interpretation successfully present an authentic image of a place?

One of the greatest difficulties in this context is the definition of identity and authenticity. Despite the existence of objective landscape features, such as geomorphology or land use, landscapes, regions and places are complex constructs that constantly shift and continue to be constructed for a number of reasons including political ones. Clearly, there is no definitive 'authentic' place, just as there is no definitive or fixed identity of place. Authenticity or the essence of place can only emerge as a joint voice of the physical landscape, history, present land use and the collective memory of the local people. Germany is learning that it is the job of the interpreter to carefully listen and make this voice heard.

Interpretation, tourism development and local communities

The question of identity and authenticity in heritage interpretation is closely linked to the basic objectives of heritage interpretation. Why are we interpreting, and who is it really for? And is interpreting to tourists inherently different to interpreting to local people?

In Germany, as probably elsewhere, sceptics view interpretation as nothing more than a convenient marketing tool, offering new attractions, light entertainment and perhaps some new sources of income to rural communities. Clearly, there is a danger for interpretation to become overly

commercial, bearing little or no relevance to the surrounding landscape or communities. Quick-fix installations and fake heritage do not seek to educate, they merely aim to entertain, and could be described as examples of edutainment, not of interpretation. Here too, a clear distinction needs to be made in order to demonstrate just what heritage interpretation is not.

To get the message across, there is a need to focus on the basic purpose of heritage interpretation, which is the sensitive use and preservation of heritage. As initially described by Tilden, heritage interpretation is concerned with raising awareness, leading on to appreciation and lastly preservation.³ It is this inherent reasoning, together with a special toolbox for communication, that sets interpretation apart from, say, tourism marketing.

So what are we doing to get this message across?

Currently, attempts are under way to engage in a much wider debate on the exact nature and applications of heritage interpretation. Taking the above issues as a starting point, this debate includes both academics and practitioners and closely scrutinises the US and UK examples for comparison. In a sense, we are developing our own 'philosophy' of heritage interpretation, which means a challenging discourse on the relationships between environmental education, sustainable development and tourism planning. Germany may have had a late start with heritage interpretation, but is certainly scrutinising the concept thoroughly – an advantage perhaps since

'There is a need to clearly set heritage interpretation apart as a distinct methodology and toolbox, designed to communicate the essence of "landscape" to the public'

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Below: Nice packaging, but . . .



© KIRA GEE
Above: Who would want to read this? Old-fashioned interpretation panel at the entrance to Müritznationalpark

this might lead to a clearer idea of potentials and limitations. This development is accompanied by developing German-language literature on interpretation, possibly leading up to a German translation of Tilden and some other key texts.

At the same time, there is a growing range of studies and projects looking at interpretation in practice. Often, these are carried out by students writing Diploma or Masters theses, working closely with National Parks, tourism planners or local communities. Increasingly, cities are being discovered as a setting for interpretation, as are zoos, arboreta or the seashore. There is also growing recognition for the need to plan interpretation on a regional scale, with the recently established Eifel National Park in North Rhine Westphalia acting as a forerunner.

Potentially the most exciting area of work is the establishment of quality criteria for interpretation. Interpretive products – primarily trails and brochures – are springing up everywhere, but could readily be improved if some basic principles of planning and communication were adhered to. Hence, defining 'good' and demonstrating the benefits of good interpretation are two areas where German interpreters are currently pushing ahead. Leading the charge is a group of interpreters at Freiburg University, who have successfully established a LEADER+ funded project called TRANSINTERPRET (www.transinterpret.de). Here, several rural regions are co-operating within the EU LEADER+ initiative to successfully implement and market good ideas in heritage interpretation. The focal point of the project however is the establishment of quality criteria for interpretive products and the provision of a decision-support tool which helps planners in designing trails, panels or exhibitions.

Where is it all heading?

Taking all these developments together, Germany can be said to be on the verge of really 'discovering' heritage interpretation. What is interesting is the close meshing together of a more academic debate and the practical application of interpretation. What is also interesting is the careful scrutiny of the concept, questioning its relevance, benefits and very

foundations. This is forcing interpreters to be very clear about their job: What it is they do, what they strive to achieve and what can be expected as a result.

To date, although there are some excellent examples of interpretation, we are still lacking exemplary projects we could point at to show just what are benefits. We also need to work harder to convince people working for conservation agencies, local authorities or tourism of the need for good interpretive planning. Here, practical courses, awareness-raising and a wider exchange with colleagues abroad would be important steps. We look forward to tackling these challenges through our growing network of creative, and skilled interpreters.

For more information and links to German interpreters, contact me at k.gee@gmx.de.

Useful websites:

www.transinterpret.de

(Transinterpret project in English)

www.interp.com

(Bildungswerk Interpretation in German)

www.zelt-goettingen.de

(Centre for Heritage Interpretation and Tourism, in German)

Kira Gee has established the 'Centre for Heritage Interpretation and Tourism' in Göttingen, Germany. She works closely with Göttingen and Freiburg Universities and currently lives in Berlin.

¹ Contributions by Patrick Lehnies and Heidi Megerle in the proceedings of the 2002 national conference (in English), available from info@zelt-goettingen.de

² TILDEN, Freeman (1977): *Interpreting Our Heritage*. Chapel Hill – North Carolina.

³ Tilden (1977), see above

In the beginning...

Juliette Fritsch examines the history of audience-focused interpretive planning through visitor studies

The integration of visitor studies into the planning and management structure of museums and heritage sites began in the late nineteenth century when institutions first began to be perceived as for the general public. However, looking over the history and influence of this integration, it is evident that implementation has been relatively slow, and the field has only recently become recognised as a discipline in its own right.

Key stages of development

Work in the field of visitor studies can be traced back primarily to museums in the US who have been required to justify their funding and make grant applications since the 1920s, resulting in accountability of the educational value of their programs (Lawrence, G. 1993 p. 117). After World War II, methodology from established disciplines such as applied sociology and social policy research were gradually integrated, and this combined with the emphasis on education to bring to the fore the use of Bloom's mutually exclusive taxonomy of educational objectives into the three domains of *cognitive*, *affective* and *psychomotor*. Cognitive is concerned with facts and concepts, remembering, combining and synthesising information, *affective* with attitudes, beliefs and feeling, emotions, values, and *psychomotor* with hand-eye co-ordination, manipulation, and muscular skills (Falk and Dierking, 1992 p. 99). This has exerted a long and powerful influence over the development of visitor studies in museums and heritage sites. Until it started to emerge as a discipline in its own right, milestones in

including Great Britain, and here too, visitor studies began to be regarded as being a tool to justify grants and public funding. Scientific disciplines were looked to as models, resulting in an approach that was rooted in empirical data collection and statistical analysis. The publication of reports of these studies proved to be the catalyst for a core group of museum and heritage professionals to investigate further methods through increasing numbers of studies throughout the 1970s. The 1980s saw the beginnings of the consolidation of the field as a discipline in its own right as a professional role of 'evaluator' started to develop. The 1990s have seen establishment of visitor studies as profession, with journals, conferences, and a history and a historiography. Overall, the stages of this professional development are closely linked to stages of progress in the methodology of visitor studies, that can be broadly divided into three phases: exhibit orientated/focused; individual visitor orientated/focused; and finally investigating the wider social/physical context of museum and site visiting.

What are visitor studies?

However, actual definition of the term 'visitor studies' is still hard to clarify. "Visitor Studies is a highly convenient portmanteau phrase under which absolutely everything to do with visitors, from their eating habits to their educational background, can be included" (Hudson, K. 1993 p. 34). It can be said that in general, and certainly until very recently, visitor studies were mainly seen either as demographic surveys or as being exclusively part of the exhibition

'Work in the field of visitor studies can be traced back primarily to museums in the US who have been required to justify their funding and make grant applications since the 1920s'

this development can be linked directly to two external (to the museums and heritage field) factors: developments in learning theory, and progress in other disciplines with more established research and evaluation processes.

The 1960s brought issues of more public accountability not just in the US, but also in Europe,

evaluation process. Recently, as the field has become more defined and accepted in its own right, it has opened up to include monitoring of all aspects of the visitors' experience of a museum or heritage site, from their motivation and impressions of the exhibits, to their snack breaks and use of facilities.

'Certainly until very recently, visitor studies were mainly seen either as demographic surveys or as being exclusively part of the exhibition evaluation process'

The right-turning tendency

In the US, the earliest published visitor studies are those of the psychologist Edward R. Robinson. He pioneered visitor research in the US in the 1920s and 30s, and even predicted that staff would eventually be working purely in the field of visitor studies (Loomis, R. 1988 p.13). His seminal work, *The Behaviour of the Museum Visitor*, was published in 1928. His interests lay in quantifying temporo-spatial visitor behaviour, by using such methods as concealed observation. He referred to methodology developed in behavioural psychology to support his theories, resulting in a very scientific approach. Along with his assistant, Arthur Melton – who in his *Studies of the Installation at the Pennsylvania Museum of Art* (1933) identified the 'right-turning tendency' of visitors – Robinson pioneered an early methodology that was hugely influential and prevailed for many years. "Similar studies of visitor behaviour constitute most of the small number of evaluations published before 1960" (Lawrence, G. 1993 p. 117).

Designing educational objectives into exhibitions

The continuing influence of Robinson, Melton and the methodology of behavioural psychology can be seen throughout the 1960s as the next phase of visitor studies began to develop. This is the phase that is mainly exhibit orientated, with researchers focusing on the performance of the exhibit by measuring the visitor's behavioural response to it. In 1968, a seminal report by Shettel (et al) published the results of visitor studies conducted on the US Office of Education exhibition *The Vision of Man*. Shettel systematically used a rigorous scientific research method to test previously formulated educational objectives. Shettel transformed the original objectives of *The Vision of Man* into measurable, almost exclusively knowledge-orientated objectives, because "for Shettel, exhibit effectiveness is demonstrated on the basis of a measurable change in the behaviour of the intended audience, produced by the exhibit and consistent with the stated aims or objectives of the exhibit" (Alt, 1977 p. 243). In conjunction with the emphasis on behavioural response, pre- and post-testing of knowledge gain became a favoured technique in addition to observational techniques.

Shettel's work epitomises the behavioural and knowledge gain theory behind visitor studies, but concentrates on visitor's impressions of individual exhibits, ignoring aspects of the visit such as ambience and orientation.

This approach was championed by Screven who in 1976 recommended basing visitor studies on educational and psychological research, in *Exhibit Evaluation: a Goal-referenced Approach* where "the term *goal* (sic) refers to measurable learning or performance outcomes shown by visitors as the result of exhibit exposure" (Screven, 1976 p. 273). He particularly recommended designing measurable objectives into exhibitions and then measuring and comparing visitors' reactions with the original goals.

The development of the theory of the 'attracting' and 'holding' power of exhibits is particularly linked to Melton's observational work of the 1930s. As late as 1979, in *Improving Audio Visual Presentations* Alt recommends applying these techniques to a modern audio-visual exhibition at the British Museum (Natural History) (BMNH).

This approach can be seen to be centred on museum professionals and what they expected the exhibition to communicate, a learning and communication model that assume objectivity on the part of the exhibit, and a passive accepting role for the visitor. The continued influence of the attracting and holding power theory, and of Bloom's three mutually exclusive educational objectives precluded investigation into explaining the nature of thought, memory and learning. Ultimately the visitor is seen to be learning in a vacuum created by the exhibition designers. Hence, by the mid to late 1970s, exhibitions were being designed with explicitly stated measurable objectives.

However, the visitor studies conducted at the BMNH were seminal in that an iterative program was launched that monitored the public over several years. This meant that on-going trends could be identified and monitored. Later, the results of these long term studies led to Alt questioning the validity of the attracting and holding power theory because "'good' exhibits make their point quickly and so have low holding power, but 'bad' exhibits also have low holding power since they lose their audience quickly...the results of these studies call into question the applicability of educational principles developed

in mainstream education to the design of museum exhibits" (Alt, 1984 p. 34). This type of critical observation made with hindsight was crucial to the development of visitor studies and was possible because the BMNH program steadily built up a picture, monitoring trends and thoroughly documenting the process.

The report *The Design of Educational Exhibits* by Alt and his colleagues Miles, Gosling, Lewis, Tout and Hyman was first published in 1988 and proved to be seminal. The book reveals that the program took its lead from cognitive not behaviourist psychology. However, the methodology concentrated on short-term recall, and did not really allow for different structures of knowledge. Ultimately, there was still strong emphasis placed on the exhibit as a didactic medium and the approach used was still goal orientated and scientific. Concentrated qualitative studies were dismissed because "it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a situation in which visitors would be prepared to devote upwards of an hour of their time to discussion with an interviewer when they had intended to look at exhibits" (Miles et al, 1988 p. 144).

Becoming visitor-focused

However, in a sense the aims of the program conflicted with the methodology used in that the latter was still rooted in educational psychology and a goal-orientated scientific approach whilst the former were more concerned with conceptual orientation. After the publication of the BMNH's work, a slow change in learning models began to be implemented in order to look at the intellectual context of visiting, taking its lead from the area of cognitive psychology. A small but pioneering study in this area was Marilyn Hood's *Staying Away: Why People choose not to Visit Museums* (1983). Hood turned the tables to find out why people do not visit museums, by looking out how people spend their leisure time and concentrating on people's psychographic motivations – their values, attitudes, perception, interests, expectations and satisfactions with regard to exhibition visiting. This involved qualitative studies that had previously been dismissed. Although the study was small, it was influential in that it opened up new areas for consideration in visitor studies.

Studies began to be individual visitor orientated

rather than exhibit focused, resulting in more qualitative studies. The communication model of this approach has a more pro-active visitor, because of the realisation that visitors bring their own pre-conceptions to an exhibition of whatever type: they are not visiting/learning in a vacuum. In terms of museum and site presentation, this led to an emphasis on the learning conditions for the visitor and a struggle to find a balance of emphasis between exhibition and visitor influence.

Around this time, the area of visitor studies was becoming a distinct field, with more and more reports being published, not only arousing wider interest in the subject, but also provoking questions as to the wider implications of these developments and discoveries. In the US, the first Annual Visitor Studies Conference was convened in 1988.

Holistic visitor studies

Towards the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, visitor studies moved into a third phase investigating the wider social/physical context of museum and site visiting. The studies became more socio-cognitive oriented as there was interest in people's agendas in coming to museums and an increased acknowledgement that people do not operate in a vacuum, "they constantly monitor the thoughts and actions of others around them and moderate their thoughts accordingly" (Uzzell, D. 1993 p. 127).

Whereas previously, only the educational agenda of visiting was investigated, now pleasure agenda began to be considered as well. This was in terms of the physical context and needs, not just the intellectual process. Furthermore, the influence of projects such as Hood's meant that "audience analysis is focused more on non-visitors and also on perceptions of institutions in the community" (Loomis, R. J. 1993. 17).

Thus in *Museum Studies of the 90s*, Loomis recommends that "since visitor sites...are special, it would be helpful to look at sources that combine 'people' studies with 'space'" (Loomis, R. J. 1993 p.15). His ideal model incorporates:

- Visitor commitment dimension – demographic and psychological characteristics
- Visit process dimension – the fit between visitors and social and physical environment
- Visit outcomes – experiential as well as

'Currently, the ideal visitor studies model takes personal, social and physical spheres as being part of whole context of museum visiting'

behavioural outcome (Loomis, R. J. 1993 p. 16).

This model combines all three elements of Bloom's so-called mutually exclusive criteria. It reflects the influence of new learning models formulated within the field of educational psychology, such as Gardner's seven forms of intelligence, and McCarthy's 4MAT system. These learning models debunk Bloom's theory that learning only takes place in a pure cognitive sense, and advocate that learning is an amalgamation of all three elements of his taxonomy.

In lieu of this separation of the field cognitive, affective and psychomotor, distinct areas and types of visitor studies have evolved and emerged: audience research, front-end analysis, formative evaluation and summative evaluation. A notable factor is that implementation is earlier in planning: "one of the most dramatic trends is the acceptance and implementation of audience studies early in the planning process" (Loomis, R. J. 1993. 17). The 1990s saw a challenge of self sufficiency for non-profit organisations and museums and heritage sites placed increased emphasis on visitors and potential visitors in strategic planning exercises.

This wider remit of visitor studies was highlighted by Falk and Dierking, who highlight the growing interest in defining and understanding the visitor experience in their book *The Museum Experience* (1992), a review of published visitor studies. Their main observation is the recognition that visitors create their own individual museum experience, and ongoing process related to their personal and social context both before and after a visit. This directs their selection of what to view in exhibitions, in direct contradiction to the theory of 'attracting and holding' power of the exhibition, and of the possibility of discerning an exhibition's effectiveness through behavioural analysis and pre- and post-cognitive testing.

Visitor studies today

Increasingly, museums and heritage sites in the UK have to be publicly accountable and financially viable and there is a clear link between funding, grants, and project evaluation – visitors studies – as there was from the early 20th century in the USA. However, there are still many implementation problems as the process is resource heavy and often people are reluctant to implement findings and recommendations. Currently, the ideal visitor studies

model takes personal, social and physical spheres as being part of whole context of museum visiting.

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Challenges for the future in Scotland

Ian Jardine gave the following opening presentation at the AHI Annual Conference, held in Glasgow in September 2004

It is over 10 years since the AHI conference was last held in Scotland and a lot has happened in the intervening years. My presentation will consider some of these changes and consider what challenges are likely to face interpretation in Scotland in the future.

I will inevitably be speaking from an environmental perspective but I'm sure that our experiences at Scottish Natural Heritage are not unique and many of you will recognise the issues we have tried to address, and those that still face us in the future.

For those of you who do not know us, Scottish Natural Heritage is the government agency with responsibility for all aspects of the natural heritage in Scotland – its wildlife, habitats, and landscapes. We have a remit to conserve the natural heritage of Scotland, to foster its understanding and help people to enjoy it. The linking of enjoyment and understanding is important to us. While enjoyment doesn't necessarily lead to understanding we certainly believe it's a good starting point.

We cannot achieve our aims alone and so wherever possible we work in partnership with local communities and other organisations to deliver our conservation remit.

It is interpretation that provides the all-important link between the different parts of our remit. We believe that interpretation can help foster an informed and caring public, who will support the protection of the natural heritage. And just as we work with our partners to achieve our conservation remit, we also seek wherever possible to work with partners to develop and communicate a 'whole story' of which the natural heritage is one aspect.

At SNH we believe strongly that interpretive planning is essential to the success of any interpretive project and we have made it a pre-requisite for our own sites and where we provide grant aid to others. Through this route we hope to improve the overall provision of interpretation and this is a major driver for us in sharing good practice with others.

Taking stock

To understand the challenges of the future it is worth first considering how interpretation has developed recently in Scotland.

In the mid 1990s the number of organisations and local communities interested in promoting their heritage to a wider audience increased significantly, perhaps largely as a result of the increased funding opportunities that were available, notably through the National Lottery.

In the Highlands a number of partners set up the Highland Interpretive Strategy Project with the specific aim of supporting local communities to tell their story to the public.

The Project left behind a legacy of good work including an interpretive planning handbook called *A Sense of Place* which has been generally well received, and a guidance document called *What have we got and is it any good?* which shows people how to undertake an inventory of existing interpretation.

Although the Project has now finished there still remains an ongoing challenge to ensure interpretive principles and accepted good practice are widely known and used by those putting forward projects for public funding.

Throughout the 90s, experience of interpretation continued to grow in Scotland - some good and some bad. In common with many other parts of the UK, Scotland was gearing up to a wave of new high profile Millennium and Lottery funded projects.

Capital costs seemed relatively easy to acquire. Today it is the running costs, maintenance and upgrading of some of these facilities that is causing concern. The biggest challenge for all of us is now to consolidate and focus our efforts into renewing and promoting the interpretation in existing facilities rather than looking to continually develop new ones.

The power of partnerships

In 1997 a number of national agencies and non-government organisations had recognised there was a need to work more closely together to share knowledge and expertise, avoid duplication and to improve the quality and quantity of interpretation. As a result the Interpret Scotland group came into being.

The members of Interpret Scotland have done a great deal over the last seven years to promote good practice and if you are not familiar with their work I recommend you take time to look at the website and the latest edition of the Interpret Scotland journal. The journal has a circulation of 5,000 and a



Above: Disseminating good practice

readership that includes interpreters from across the UK and abroad. It has been doing a good job of showcasing interpretation in Scotland.

In 1998, the Scottish Interpretation Network (SIN) was created, and in 2002 the Network, assisted financially by members of Interpret Scotland, organised a major conference called *Scotching the Myth*. This profile raising event brought together about 250 interpreters from around the UK. International speakers as well as interpreters from closer to home shared their ideas and aspirations and the event was a great success.

That conference came about through a great deal of voluntary effort and hard work by members of the Network and it is that enthusiasm and commitment to interpretation that organisations like my own depend on.

The main challenges emanating from the conference were how to promote good practice and raise the profile and professionalism of interpretation. On this later point there has been a welcome initiative by the University of the Highlands and Islands to develop a post-graduate course in interpretation. It is being actively supported by practicing interpreters from both the public and private sector and is due to take its first intake of students in 2005. It will give people from a variety of professions a chance to turn their undoubted expertise in interpretation into a recognised qualification.

The 'media' maze

One of the opportunities for interpretation is that people have more leisure time than ever before. But the competition for that leisure time is becoming ever more intense – whether it be the growth of out of town shopping centres, computer games, the internet, satellite TV – and people's expectations from entertainment continues to grow.

This creates a constant challenge to deliver interpretation that can grab and hold the attention.

Just a few years ago, the trend in interpretation was to maximise the use of multi-media as the new state of the art communication tool. However, public expectation of these techniques outpaces the capability of most of us to deliver - the quality of computer generated animation in computer games and films, or the choice presented through digital TV, are now exceptional. These forms of high tech media are produced with immense budgets to meet a mass consumer market; all but the largest interpretive projects have more modest budgets and relatively small audiences making it hard to use these techniques effectively.

However, keeping abreast of the ever-changing array of communication techniques and media is essential. At Preston Grange near Edinburgh you can now use your mobile phone to call up information as you walk around the trail. Previously the high cost of hiring headsets or hand held wands meant that audio tours were generally restricted to sites with large visitor numbers such as Edinburgh Castle.

Being aware of the options does not mean we should adopt every new technique that comes along. I guess we have all been to places where the technology obscured the message rather than clarified it. Good interpretation is about selecting what is appropriate to delivering the message – the media should be the means and not the end. So as we go through the interpretive planning process we need to be aware of all the strengths and weaknesses associated with the different media at our disposal and relate those to our audience, the stories we want to tell and the characteristics of a site.

'We believe that interpretation can help foster an informed and caring public, who will support the protection of the natural heritage'

‘The biggest challenge for all of us is now to consolidate and focus our efforts into renewing and promoting the interpretation in existing facilities rather than looking to continually develop new ones’



Above from left:
Knockan Crag NNR – exploring the role of art in interpreting nature and landscapes;
Beinn Eighe NNR – providing access for all;
An interpretive panel at Beinn Eighe NNR

Opportunities for first hand experiences

We should also never underestimate how much better people are than machines at communicating. Having staff at our main interpretive sites who can convey both meaning and enthusiasm are, for my money, worth any fancy computer on offer. The tradition of storytelling is as old and strong in Scotland as in many parts of the world, and ties people emotionally to their heritage and often to the landscapes and the nature around them.

When the new South African government was elected following the end of apartheid, the National Parks Service organised visits into the bush for their new parliamentarians guided by both scientists and local people. They have secured a level of political commitment and sympathy for the environment that few lobbyists could equal.

In Scotland, we should not be shy of using marketing skills as well as educational skills to get our messages across to new audiences. SNH has not been as quick as others to utilize marketing to its full possibly because we do not charge for use of our facilities or entry to sites. However, in the last few years, and in partnership with other organisations, we have undertaken a concerted effort to raise awareness of Scotland’s National Nature Reserves. At the same time we have been up-grading visitor facilities on our most high profile Reserves with the intention being in the long run to make all Reserves more accessible and welcoming.

The interpretation plan for Knockan Crag NNR, a geological site to the north of Ullapool, identified a low tech, low maintenance approach to interpretation for this isolated site. One of the main management

aims was to encourage people to explore the Reserve on foot. Hands-on interactive models, a touch screen computer, a rocket men comic strip and tabloid-style newspapers are located in an open-sided building, complete with turf roof, that fits perfectly into the Knockan hillside. As an added incentive to walk the trail the interpretive planners decided to commission some sculptures and locate them at various locations along the trail. Art works such as these can be both distinctive and memorable, and often appeal to a wider audience than traditional interpretation.

A remote natural landscape

A visitor evaluation carried out in 2002 confirmed that 93% found their visit enjoyable and many positive comments were made about the artworks. Importantly for SNH the great majority of visitors were also able to identify the main themes that we had been trying to communicate. Visitor numbers to the Reserve have increased substantially and it is now playing a bigger role in supporting the local economy by keeping visitors in the area longer.

At Beinn Eighe NNR, in the northwest Highlands, four new trails were developed and again the idea was to upgrade the existing visitor centre and let it become part of the trail network. The concept was designed on the basis that it would provide physical and intellectual access for visitors of all abilities, thereby catering for as wide an audience as possible. Visitor feedback has been overwhelmingly positive and the site is now regularly referred to as a demonstration project for creating universal accessibility in rural areas.

The interpretation at Knockan Crag and Beinn

Eighe have both received Interpret Britain Awards from the Association of Heritage Interpretation; recognition that the approach adopted has resulted in some first rate interpretation.

For SNH, interpretation is not simply about promoting a specific site or facility – our remit

improve quality and increase effectiveness will go on. We must share our experiences so that we can all learn from successes and mistakes alike.

One of my main criticisms of much of the interpretation I see in Scotland is it seems to be preaching to the converted. It assumes a certain level of interest or knowledge and seems to accept that its job is to give people the information they already know they want. Much more satisfying is to reach out to sectors of society who maybe don't

'The skill of presenting to people who are not experts without patronising them is a rare and valuable one – but an essential quality'

covers the whole of Scotland. Some of our special sites are remote and inaccessible and so it is not always realistic or possible to expect people to come to the site. So if we can't take people to the site we can find ways of taking the place to the people.

This can be achieved in several ways, including publications, remote viewing cameras and the now prevalent web sites. But we still believe there is a strong role for hands on experiences and over the past few years there have been some highly successful examples.

Touring exhibitions, such as the National Museum of Scotland's *Discovery on the Move*, which helps to put people in touch with their past, and SNH's own *Wild, Wet and Wonderful exhibition*, about the wonders of bogs, have successfully taken their message out to the people and by so doing have reached a wider cross section of the population.

In partnership with Glasgow Museum Service, we even managed to bring St Kilda, a world heritage site located in one of the remotest parts of Scotland, into the heart of the city. A temporary exhibition, *St Kilda Explored*, gave visitors to the Museum an insight into why these islands were so amazing and worthy of protection.

So what next?

Having rightly highlighted some of our successes it is important not to get too complacent because for every good example I could show you I could also show you an equal number of projects, some quite recent, that have not met the same success.

So there is no room for complacency. The drive to

know about the subject and awaken their interest and concern. The skill of presenting to people who are not experts without patronising them is a rare and valuable one – but an essential quality.

The principles and practice that lie at the heart of good interpretation need to be communicated to as wide an audience as possible.

Interpret Scotland now has 15 members representing all sorts of organisations each with a common interest in interpretation. Until now it has existed as a loose affiliation of like-minded people but there are moves afoot to formalise these links and I am happy to endorse an advocacy document that should help to safeguard and strengthen the work of the group and urge other organisations to do the same.

At the same time I would encourage Interpret Scotland, Scottish Interpretation Network and AHI to clarify how they will work together in the future. Each seems to me to have a distinctive yet complementary role and if co-ordinated well it will be to the benefit of interpretation.

I hope that I have shown that achieving good practice in interpretation is about more than any one of us acting alone – we can all achieve more by sharing good practice – by working together we can each be more effective at delivering our own aims.

Ian Jardin is Chief Executive of Scottish Natural Heritage and has recently endorsed a new SNH wide Framework for Communication and Education



Above: 'St Kilda Explored' a temporary exhibition at the Kelvingrove Museum

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