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## A. Introduction for the interpreter

**What is interpretation?** Interpretation is an explanation of the natural, cultural or historic values attached to places. It enables visitors to gain insight and understanding about the reasons for protection of our heritage.

Interpretation is all about helping people appreciate something that you feel is unique and deserves to be treasured. Interpretation can refer to a place or:

- an area of countryside
- a rock formation
- a natural habitat
- plant or animal species
- an aspect of traditional culture
- a historical event or period
- an activity, for example fishing by fish traps

### Information and interpretation

Where information provides facts, interpretation provides a story. All interpretation includes information and is based on sound knowledge of factual information. Good interpretation however takes facts and puts them into context, explains and expands their meaning, and weaves them into stories. For example:

#### *Information:*

As many other toponyms, the origin of the name of the Black Sea is difficult to trace. Its modern version in writing dates from the 13th century but there are indications it may be much older. Strabo's Geography reports that in antiquity, the Black Sea was often simply called "the Sea" (Pontos). For the most part, Graeco-Roman tradition refers to the Black Sea as the "Hospitable Sea", Pontos Euxinos. This is a euphemism replacing an earlier "Inhospitable sea," Pontos Axeinos, first attested in Pindar (early fifth century B.C.). It is also possible that the name Axeinos arose by popular etymology from the ancient Persian word axšaina - "dark", "black" referring to colour symbolism of the cardinal points of the world; the designation "Black Sea" may thus date from Antiquity.



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### *Interpretation:*

One of the little known facts about the Black Sea is how it came to be called 'black'. The earliest mention of this name used nowadays by all nations living along its coasts was in a 13th century manuscript but there are indications it may be much older. The ancient Greeks several centuries B.C. used to call it Pontos Axeinos "Inhospitable Sea" probably because of difficult navigation and hostile inhabitants on its shores. Later with the progress of colonization and trade that harsh sounding name was changed to Pontos Euxeinos, "Hospitable Sea". But it is also possible that the name Axeinos arose from the ancient Persian word axšaina meaning "dark" or "black". The cardinal points of the world in ancient times used to have colour symbols so black used to signify north. Therefore the name Black Sea may date back to antiquity.

### *Information:*

*The Southern Alps have formed along a tectonic plate boundary and are eroded by weather. The erosion rate and the uplift rate are very similar.*

### *Interpretation:*

*Colliding plates on the earth's surface created the Southern Alps. Just as when you push two pieces of paper together they buckle, fold and rise, so does the earth. Weather is working to slow the rise of the mountains, by tearing away at them with wind, rain and snow. As much as the Southern Alps get pushed up each year, the weather wears them back down again*

*so they stay a fairly constant height.*

### **What are the benefits from interpretation for visitors?**

Why spend your precious leisure time reading panels or on a guided walk to spot Dalmatian Pelicans? Visitors participate in interpretive activities for lots of reasons. Learning more about a place and its features can be stimulating and interesting and help make you feel good. It can:

- satisfy curiosity and thirst for knowledge
- add depth to the experience of places
- entertain
- provide insight and add meaning
- heighten sensory awareness
- inspire
- make the unfamiliar familiar
- be an opportunity to meet and talk with experts
- help you meet other people who share your interests
- be a good activity on holiday or school trips
- make you want to return to the site again



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Interpretation also provides deeper less tangible benefits to individuals and to society. The underlying human desire for meaning and connections to communities and places underpins interpretation work. Identifying with unique places and culture helps people develop a personal and collective sense of being and value.

### Principles of interpretation

- Enjoyable
- Relevant
- Organised
- Thematic
- Reaching visitors through different learning styles

#### *Enjoyable*

To hold people's attention any form of communication has to entertain to some degree.

Some of the following approaches can help make your tour more enjoyable for visitors:

#### *Provide means of interaction*

Keep people actively involved in the tour to make it more fun for them and you. Engage as many of their senses as possible. Ask questions or organise group discussions to make people form their own opinions and share them. Demonstrations and activities also stimulate people to interact with the environment and each other.

#### *Vary your style*

Changing the tone and volume of your voice can dramatically increase the effect of your words on the listeners. Silence, used at the right moment, can be very powerful too. It may help you emphasise the importance of something you just stated or help build suspense.

#### *Embrace the unexpected*

If something unplanned occurs, like a sudden storm, make use of the opportunity it provides and talk about it. For example, how local people using traditional clothing dealt with such conditions. If a small lizard passes by while you are talking about something different, don't be afraid to change your focus to it. Try to catch the opportunities that nature provides sometimes.



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### ***Relevant***

If visitors can relate to what they see this may help them establish a personal connection to the place. When visitors can establish a link between new information and something they already know or have experienced, then it is more easily understood and may leave a lasting impression.

### ***Use comparisons***

Comparisons can highlight differences and similarities. This allows people to form connections to new places, animals, plants, landforms and local traditions by seeing them in relation to what they know.

### ***Know your audience***

Find out where visitors come from, learn their names, if possible and find out their level of knowledge on your topic. If someone is already very well informed you can try to include them and encourage them to share their knowledge with the group.

### ***Avoid technical terms***

Scientific language and complex terms do not bring a clear message to an audience without previous knowledge on the topic. Use analogies and comparisons to explain things your audience is not familiar with.

### ***Organised***

Information has to be presented in a logical order to be understood easily.

### ***Objectives***

If you know what you are trying to achieve, then it is easier to reach the end. Think about why you are running this tour and what you would like your audience to learn and experience during the tour. This will help you formulate objectives and will provide the framework and themes to build your task or tours around.

### ***Planning***

Plan the structure of the tour. A helpful approach is to follow the structure of a story with a beginning, middle part and end. This can be put to a draft or outline of the main facts. Make sure you have researched your topic well and can include stories about places and people that give liveliness to the story without too many terms, dates and figures. Check that your ideas and topics form an interrupted storyline. Then they will make sense to the audience too.



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### *Thematic*

People may quickly forget facts and figures but they will remember elements of a presentation based on a theme. A theme is the main message of the story you are telling. Themes provoke visitors to think and wonder, and these are first steps to changes in attitudes and behaviour.

The theme contains the message you would like people to go away with and provides the thread for linking the presented information in a meaningful way. A theme is usually expressed in a sentence and has an element of action. To create themes for your topics, ask yourself, “So what?” about your topic.

Topic: Sea cliffs

Theme: Sea cliffs can reveal past changes in sea level.

Topic: Old trees

Theme: Old trees are home for many creatures and are vital for a stable forest ecosystem.

### *Learning styles*

People process information and learn in different ways. Probably the most popular approach is to rely on *visual information*. This includes text, graphics, art, maps, sculpture or video. Another common way of acquiring knowledge is through *sounds*, speech, music and songs. *Action, movement* and touch enrich the senses and may leave a lasting impression on visitors. Finally, the establishment of *emotional connections* can change attitudes and enrich the experience of visiting a place.

Our own learning preferences influence the way we present information and interpret facts. We often communicate information the way we like to receive it. To reach a diverse audience use different interpretation approaches based on a variety of learning styles. Learning continues long after the visit. That’s why a story about the place should intensify a visitor’s experience and trigger reaction and participation.

### **Personal interpretation**

- Techniques
- Delivery skills
- Distractions and emergencies - dealing with them
- Props / Materials
- Drama
- Associates and partners



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## ***Personal interpretation techniques***

### ***Meet and greet***

Make a brief introduction then allow visitors to make their own way through a site. This is an effective way to make contact with a large group for a short time.

### ***Guided tours by foot or vehicle***

Guiding provides an opportunity to visit remote or less accessible places, see wildlife, or view landscapes in a different light. Tours can be easily tailored to different audiences with general or special interests.

### ***Talks or presentations***

They can be delivered at a scheduled time and place or can take place informally, such as a talk at an entry point to a site or at remarkable points of interest.

### ***Open days and events***

This can be a cost-effective way to reach bigger audiences. Good planning and promotion is essential to attract people.

### ***Volunteer programmes***

Mix active conservation work with interpretation to provide a deeper more meaningful experience. Include time on volunteer programmes for interpretative talks.

### ***Seasonal programmes***

On many sites summer programmes can be specially tailored for different audiences. Interpretation can be provided on short guided walks, river trips or special tours. The activities can be effective and memorable for those involved when you take into account their interests, background and way of learning. A few tourism operators are interpretation focused, for instance on culture trips, some include interpretation as an item in their programme, while others focus just on an activity.

## ***Delivery skills***

### ***Body***

First impressions are important. Wear clean and tidy clothes. Don't forget a name badge and hat for the sun.

Smile to help everyone relax and feel welcome.



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Think about your posture and body language. Stand solid and firm to show confidence and competence. Avoid playing with objects, such as pens and keys.

Use natural gestures and always face your group.

### *Voice*

Speak with enthusiasm and passion

Vary tone and rhythm. Remember to pause for emphasis, to collect your thoughts, to let your story be absorbed or to indicate a change in topic.

Replace “um” and “ah” with a pause.

### *Language*

Use simple language and speak clearly with short sentences.

Avoid scientific and technical jargon - it turns visitors off.

Create images in people’s minds

Use humour. If your audience is laughing then everyone is relaxed. Make jokes or stories relevant to your subject.

Use silence for impact and focus.

Analyse your performance - what worked best, what did visitors really like? Ask for feedback. To calm down your nerves and improve your public speaking practice, join a presentation skills course and keep practising. Practice your presentation delivery on other colleagues and prepare variations for different audiences and group sizes.

### *Answering questions*

Buy time to answer to audience questions or remarks:

- rephrase the question
- acknowledge the point
- ask for clarification
- ask for an example
- agree





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### *Develop your own style*

Enthusiasm is the most highly valued attribute interpreters can have. Credibility and professionalism are also appreciated. While a sense of humour always helps relate to a visitor, don't force humour if it doesn't come naturally.

### *Managing large groups*

Determine a maximum size to suit the talk and site; eight to twelve is often optimum but this would be determined by the number of interpreters involved - 30 people is a good maximum for 4 interpreters.

Stay at the front and appoint someone to bring up the rear.

Allow time to deal with obstacles.

Talk to your group once everyone has arrived.

Be visible and audible at all times, stand above your group if necessary, and project your voice to the person at the back

Provide children with tasks or games along the route and periodically count your group - safety first!

### *Talks*

If your talk is longer than 30 minutes (the average adult attention span) take a break.

Have good images. Few talks are effective without visual aids.

Use sound to maintain interest and attention.

Present in a pleasant setting free of other distractions.

### *Distraction and emergencies*

*Distractions* can come in many forms: a crying baby, a loud talker in the back of the group or an overly energetic child. Sometimes you can anticipate a problem and prevent it before it comes disruptive. Ask the hyperactive child to assist in a task, such as counting the number of people in the group or lead a song during a walk between two points. Invite the loud visitors to come closer, so they can "see well". Deal with distractions in a professional manner; don't let them ruin the experience for the majority of the visitors.

*Accidents and emergencies* do happen and they will test your efficiency. Preparation and contingency planning is the best approach to dealing with such situations. If someone becomes ill or injured during a visit you have to major responsibilities: assist the injured and direct the rest of the group.



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## **Props**

Every visitor's centre, museum or a protected area office is full of potential props. Props explain things, gain attention and engage a group.

People respond to familiar objects used in innovative ways.

Involve different senses with props - smell, noise and touch.

Pass around a sample of a smelly leaf or twig, feel the touch of a local bird feather. Use a whistle to imitate an animal's call.

Try using historic artefacts as they were originally. Lifting or using a tool for a minute can give an insight into people's life in times past.

Props can also be distracting and you can lose visitors' attention when it is their turn to have a go. When passing a prop around, stay on the topic until visitors have finished with it then put it away

### Possible props:

- skins
- skeletons
- pressed plants
- rocks
- artefacts
- tools
- replicas
- costumes
- equipment
- traps
- laminated photos and sketches
- models and replicas
- books
- music
- instruments

## **Drama**

Dramatisation of a history related to an event or period is a popular technique which takes visitors to another time. Theatrical skills are required to make this interpretation work well - interpreters need to stay in role at all times and be historically accurate.



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*Costumed guides* who do not play a part are not limited to staying in character. The costume is part of the story and provides context. Tours of buildings and historic sites benefit from personalised stories or a political context to bring the architectural forms and features to life.

Re-enactment of real events provides the opportunity to immerse the audience mentally and emotionally. The resources, planning and the skills required of participants will depend on the scale and nature of the re-enactment, and can provide good opportunities for volunteer involvement.

Demonstrations of cultural practices involve visitors and provide a relaxed environment to talk about the activity and other cultural information.

Performing arts - music and theatre events often take place in outdoor sites and sometimes draw on the site for the story line.

#### *Non-costumed guides*

Costumes and characterisation are not essential to create great interpretation. Once the theme has been established, the story can become more specific as points of interest are reached. A historic house can offer lots of engaging stories (mysterious deaths, ghosts, character people, and odd things) and plenty of opportunities to 'do things' with well placed props. Grab visitor attention.

#### ***Associates and partners***

##### *Tour operators, volunteers, museums, community groups, schools and others*

Partners from the tourism sector and associates such as museums, community groups, schools and others, play a significant role in delivering interpretation to visitors and providing satisfying recreation experiences. The responsibility for visitors becoming informed is shared by the interpreters, tour operators, other partners and associates in delivery, and by all people who choose to visit protected areas.

##### *Volunteers, communities and schools*

The work of volunteers and schools education is integral to achieving long term conservation and social benefits. The volunteer, community and schools education programmes provide information about opportunities for involvement and a public events calendar. They also incorporate policies, standards and procedures to direct, guide and support interpretation.

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