

A S E N S E O F P L A C E

A N I N T E R P R E T I V E
P L A N N I N G
Handbook

A Sense of Place
An interpretive planning handbook

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James Carter

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Introduction

Managers of local museums, battlefield sites, nature reserves, historic houses, whisky distilleries, ruined castles and nuclear power stations all have something in common. They have things of interest to show to visitors, and they all have something to say about them. Interpretation is the tool they use to do this.

Producing interpretation which balances the needs of the visitors who will use it, the conservation of the place which is its subject, the desires of those who produce it, and the interests of those who will live with it is not a simple matter. If interpretation is

Chapter 3 looks in more detail at the different sorts of plan you can prepare, while chapter 4 is a guide to working with others on a plan, perhaps in a community group. Chapter 6 introduces ways to check whether you have got your point across. Chapter 7 gives a brief guide to some principles of interpretation and to the commonest media, with their strengths and weaknesses.

One word of warning before you start!

Interpretation is a very personal thing. The questions in this book will help guide you towards a solution



Stirling Castle.

to be really effective, it needs to be planned with both sensitivity and creativity. This handbook is an introduction to doing that.

The handbook was produced in Scotland as part of the Tourism and the Environment Initiative. Within Scotland, and particularly in the Highlands and Islands, there are many projects which aim to present local heritage to visitors. The examples and case studies included in the book reflect this, but they are relevant to projects anywhere in the world.

If you already have some ideas about what you want to do, try reading chapters 1 and 2, then chapter 5. They should help you think your project through, and make it more effective.

which is right for you, the place, your visitors, and for the time you make the decision, but interpretation is not a scientific process with only one answer. The real test is that your visitors go away with some new thoughts and ideas: which means that there are as many ways of interpreting somewhere as there are people who visit it!

1 What is interpretation?

1.1 INTERPRETATION IS ABOUT SPECIAL PLACES

Interpretation is all about helping people appreciate something that you feel is special. Throughout this handbook we refer to interpretation being about 'places', but it can be about

- ✶ a building,
- ✶ an area of countryside,
- ✶ an aspect of cultural life, for example a traditional celebration,
- ✶ a town,
- ✶ an object, or a collection of objects,
- ✶ an industry,
- ✶ an historical event or period,
- ✶ an activity, for example working with a sheep dog.

The principles covered in this book apply to all of these; we have simply used 'place' in most of the examples to save repeating the list each time. The handbook aims to help you both to plan interpretation which will be effective, and to involve local people as much as possible in the process.



At Grizedale Forest, these sculptures focus the stillness and privacy of the woods: a subtle form of interpretation.

them interesting. Regency gentlemen making their Grand Tour of Europe in the eighteenth century were probably offered the services of local guides. But interpretation was first established as a subject in its own right by the United States National Parks Service.

Freeman Tilden, who was involved in the early interpretation work of the US National Park Service, and who wrote the first book on the subject, described it as:

'...the work of revealing, to such visitors as desire the service, something of the beauty and wonder, the inspiration and spiritual meaning that lie behind what the visitor can with his senses perceive.'

Tilden was writing about interpreting landscapes like the Grand Canyon, or Yosemite National Park. His love for them, and his clear sense of how important it is that other people care about them too, are worth remembering. The early National Parks had a mission to persuade a sometimes sceptical public that the Parks were worth conserving. You may not have such grand landscapes to deal with, nor such an urgent conservation message, but all good interpretation needs at its heart an enthusiasm and a love for a place, and a desire to share that with others.

Interpretation can take various forms – it may involve walks or tours with a guide, publications, or panels at features of interest. Perhaps a series of arts events can celebrate the wildlife of a forest, or bring to life the history of a fishing village. Important sites or large collections may need a building of their own as a visitor centre or museum. You may already have ideas about the interpretation you would like to provide, but to make it successful you need to make sure that it is appropriate for the site, for the people who are coming there, and

for the organisations and individuals involved. That involves planning, which is what this handbook is about.

The heritage connection

Interpretation is a part of how we manage and understand our heritage – a wide ranging term which can include the songs and stories of an area, the grassy knolls marking the site of pre-historic settlements, the industries which give life to a town, or the mosses growing in an oak wood. Whatever it is, heritage is conserved because someone thinks it important. Interpretation is a way of helping others to appreciate that importance.

And if they appreciate it, people may support efforts to conserve or protect the place concerned. As Freeman Tilden described it, interpretation not only tells people what is interesting about a place, it aims to convince people of its value, and encourage them to want to conserve it. Some have seen this as an essential part of all interpretation. It is important when you are dealing with sensitive or threatened areas such as nature reserves. In other cases you may not want to directly encourage a 'conservation ethic' – interpretation in an historic town centre, for example, does not usually include anything about how visitors can care for the buildings. But behind all interpretation there is still a sense that what is being interpreted is valuable.

Interpreting a nature reserve can encourage support for conservation.



The tourism connection

Interpretation is also an important part of tourism developments. This is especially true in Scotland, where tourism relies more on the country's culture



and landscape than on the chance to sunbathe! Good interpretation helps visitors to explore and understand a little more about the places they visit. In doing so, it adds depth to tourists' experience, making a visit something more than just a trip to see

the sights. In some cases interpretation is essential if the site is to 'come alive' at all: most battlefield sites would be nothing but an empty field to most visitors without interpretation to evoke something of the atmosphere of the time, and to tell them how what happened there affected the country's history.

This makes interpretation as important a part of the tourism product as places to stay, a friendly welcome, and good food. If visitors feel that a place is interesting or exciting, they are more likely to recommend it to others. Good interpretation makes for satisfied customers, and satisfied customers are good for business.

Interpretation can also make money in its own right, through the sale of publications or admission fees to centres, but it's not always easy to combine this with a sustainable approach. In financial terms, it may be better to think of interpretation mainly as something which contributes to the

Tourist attractions like Deep Sea World use interpretation to increase customer satisfaction.

Speyside Cooperage: working industries can be as interesting as ancient castles.



There are many ways to define what interpretation is, but all definitions have at their heart the idea of sharing with others your enthusiasm for somewhere, or something, which is significant. It's also important that people will actually see or experience for themselves the place you are interpreting.

Interpretation has been happening ever since people have visited places because they thought



1 What is interpretation?

Tourism and the environment in harmony

Interpretation is an important part of sustainable tourism. The Tourism and the Environment Forum works with these principles for tourism development:

- ✱ The natural, built and cultural environment of Scotland is its greatest tourism asset.
- ✱ Tourism has the potential to bring benefits to the host community, the visitor, and the place itself.
- ✱ Education through the tourism industry is vital if people are to develop a responsible attitude to the natural environment, and a real commitment to reducing environmental impacts.
- ✱ Tourism activities and developments should be appropriate to the size and character of their location.
- ✱ Wherever possible, environmental initiatives should be run at a local level so that communities, individuals and local businesses participate as self-motivated stakeholders.
- ✱ The environment is a dynamic system. Change is inevitable and can have measurable benefits. We must be prepared to adapt to change, but not at the expense of our guiding principles.
- ✱ Public sector agencies must adopt a long term view of investment in tourism.
- ✱ All tourism development, now and in the future, must be environmentally sustainable.

overall sense of place, and to the quality of a visitor's experience, and thus to greater success in the business of tourism.

1.2 WHAT MAKES IT INTERPRETIVE?

However you define interpretation, it's all to do with communication. There are clear guidelines to what makes communication effective, established through years of research in cognitive psychology. What makes communication *interpretive* is less easy to define.

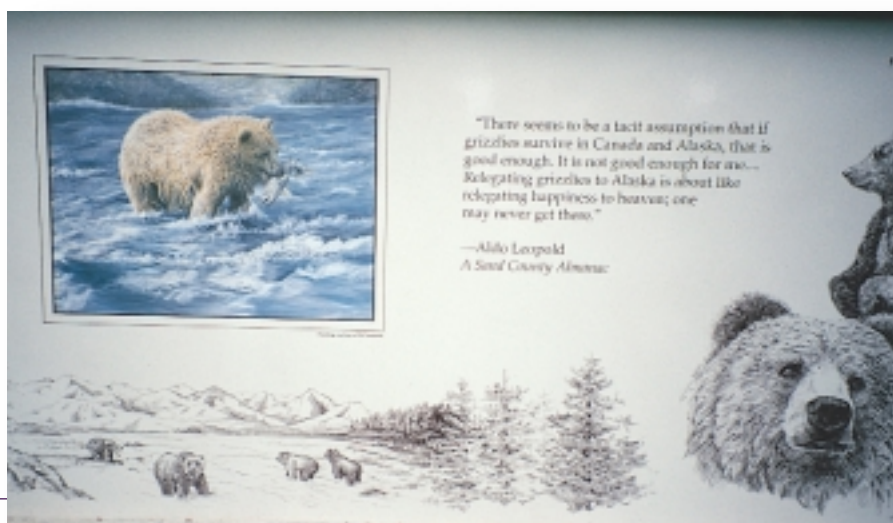
Freeman Tilden described what he considered to be six 'principles of interpretation'. Three of these are particularly important. They are that interpretation should *provoke*, *relate*, and *reveal*. Getting interpretation to *relate* to its audience is largely about good communication principles, and section 7.1 gives a review of these. *Provoke* has a lot in common with getting people to pay attention in the first place, but it can also mean that you try to provoke thought. This idea, and the

concept of *revealing* something, are what sets interpretation apart from other communication.

Provoke thought

There's an important difference between interpretation and information. Information just gives facts, but interpretation can provoke ideas, perhaps even jolt people into a completely new understanding of what they have come to see. This sometimes means being controversial, but if you send your visitors away buzzing with discussion about your place, that's no bad thing!

Interpretation about Grizzly bears on the North West Trek, Washington State, USA.



Reveal

The essence of good interpretation is that it reveals a new insight into what makes a place special. It gives people a new understanding. If you have ever visited an exhibition, or been on a guided walk, and come away saying 'Well I never realised that...' or thinking 'Aha! Now I understand', you've been an audience for some good interpretation.

Insight can be emotional too – remember Freeman Tilden's description of how interpretation is about revealing 'beauty and wonder'. A guide who manages to make their audience feel sorrow, empathy, or anger at the plight of the victims of the Highland clearances is a good interpreter; so is the leaflet writer who can bring alive the history of a derelict industrial area, and send visitors away thinking it a fascinating place.

It would be wrong to suggest that all interpretation can, or should, be like St Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Sometimes the ideas or insight visitors take away can be quite simple. The thing to remember is that interpretation does not involve simply giving visitors facts: it aims to give them new insights, ideas, and ways of looking at or appreciating a place. You may use facts to do this, but it's the ideas which are important.

There are no rules to follow which can guarantee that what you are doing is truly interpretive. It's also true that what is a new insight for some visitors will be familiar to others, but you should always aim to make the information you have support an interesting story or idea.

Themes

A theme organises your interpretation, and expresses the idea you want people to take away with them. This is different from the subject or 'topic' of your interpretation. For example, a naturalist might plan to take a guided walk in summer, looking at wild flowers. This is a huge subject, and could support a number of themes. She might decide that she wants people to leave the walk understanding that 'different flowers use different strategies to attract the insects which pollinate them'. This would be a theme for her walk.

The theme does not mean, of course, that if she suddenly sees a Golden Eagle during the walk she should ignore it because it does not fit the theme.



She can point out the eagle, let her audience marvel at it, and tell them a bit about it if she can. But she then returns to the theme of the walk.

Using a theme like this does a number of things:

1. It helps to focus the naturalist's work. From the masses of facts which she could give her audience, she can now concentrate only on those which support her theme.
2. It helps her to structure the walk, and choose where to stop. Without a theme, the walk could become a collection of random stops with no link.

The receptionist at Dunvegan Castle helps visitors to plan their stay.

1 What is interpretation?

3. It helps her audience by giving them a clear thread, rather than a series of unconnected facts. This makes it more interesting, and more memorable.

Many television documentary programmes use themes – they look at a number of different subjects or topics, but all of them support a central idea.

Rather than being limiting, themes expand the possibilities for interpretation. There would be dozens of possible themes which our naturalist could choose for her walk, giving her material for a whole programme of events! There is more about working with themes in chapter 5.

1.3 OTHER AIMS FOR COMMUNICATION

So far, we've concentrated on the heart of interpretation – sharing enthusiasm about a place so that your audience will find it interesting too. Strictly speaking, anything else is not interpretation, but you will almost certainly want to communicate with people to achieve other things. Here are some ideas about what you may need or want to do for your visitors:

Orientate

Before they can take an interest in what you want to tell them, visitors need to feel at home. You will almost always need to let them know what there is to do in your area or site, how to get to the places which interest them, and where important things like toilets and cafes are. This applies whether you are dealing with a building or an area of countryside. Remember that people like to know how long a particular activity will take as well as, say, how many miles they will be walking.

You must also point out any safety hazards, and places which people should not visit because they are dangerous.

Inform

There's a big difference between interpretation and just providing information (see above, section 1.2). Some visitors will want to know plain facts, but they are usually a minority of your audience. You can provide what they need cheaply and simply. For example, the keen bird watchers at a

bird hide might want to know what birds they might see today; some visitors to a distillery will be interested in how many bottles an hour it produces. You could meet the needs of these visitors, who often have a special interest in the subject, by a blackboard which you update weekly at the bird hide; and a photocopied fact-sheet at the distillery.

Entertain

If you are in the tourism business, you'll certainly want to send visitors away feeling satisfied. If you want to increase visits from tourists, you may well want to think about how to provide fun things for visitors to do as they explore your place. This doesn't mean that interpretation is superficial or trivial, but that it can play a part in schemes which are essentially about enjoyment. Some interpretation has a serious story to tell, such as the interpretation at Ann Frank's house in Amsterdam of how the Jews were persecuted by the fascists. Even here, however, interpretation must take account of the fact that visitors are at leisure: it should be accessible, rather than hard work.

Persuade

Some organisations have a clear objective to persuade people to do something or to influence what they think about something – remember the origins of interpretation, in the movement to establish the U.S. National Parks. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds might well want to encourage visitors to join the Society; the operator of a visitor centre at a nuclear power station will aim to tell people how safe it is. If this seems one sided, remember that what seems like common sense to you may be controversial to others!

Explain

Sometimes it's not possible for visitors to see the whole of a site, or it may be in a mess because of building or landscape work. Rather than just leaving it at that, try giving visitors some explanation of what's happening. While the new Museum of Scotland was being built in Edinburgh, the National Museums of Scotland provided windows in the high wooden fence around the site through which passers-by could see what was happening. Small notices by each window explained what stage the work had reached.

Promote an organisation

Any organisation which puts money into your interpretation is likely to want their contribution acknowledged. Like the business of persuasion, this is a perfectly valid aim, and it can be important for an organisation to be identified as caring for or managing a site.

Influence behaviour

Interpretation is often seen as a way of influencing what people do. This might include encouraging them to visit particular places, perhaps for

can help them find a new sense of pride in their own area. For some projects, this may be the most important thing of all, and any actual end product only secondary.

This chapter has looked at what interpretation is, at some principles which help to make interpretation effective, and at some other aspects of communicating with visitors which you may need to think about. You'll probably have realised that making interpretation work requires a bit of thought and planning. The next chapter looks at what's involved in that.



commercial reasons; diverting them away from other places such as the fragile areas of a nature reserve; or getting them to take their litter home. Again, these are valid aims, but remember that they are not the reason your visitor has come. You need a subtle approach to influence people, which recognises and meets their needs while at the same time getting your message across.

Develop a local sense of place

Most interpretation is aimed at visitors from outside the immediate area. But involving local people in thinking about what makes their place special, and how they might tell others about it,

Mount Rainier, Washington State, USA: a sense of humour helps when you're trying to influence peoples' behaviour.

2 Why plan interpretation?

Whether you are a group of individuals with a common interest in a site or a subject, or whether you are thinking of interpreting a place as part of a community initiative, you need to plan what you will do. An interpretive plan is a clearly written statement to which you can refer when you need reminding what you need to do, or when you are in danger of being blown off track. You can use it to encourage others to join you; and to show others that

you know what you are doing. This is important when you apply for funding from agencies or sponsors: most of them will need to see that the projects they are being asked to support are well planned.

At its simplest, interpretive planning helps to make your communication more effective. It also means that you think about what else is happening around your place: this can lead to interesting links between sites in the area, and helps to avoid the same story being offered several times over. Interpretive plans can be part of larger plans – for tourism or economic development, or for the physical management of a site. Planning involves thinking about:

- ★ Why you want to communicate with visitors;
- ★ Who your visitors are;
- ★ What your place is like, and what it has to offer;
- ★ What else is happening around;
- ★ What you want to say about your place;
- ★ How, and where, you are going to say it.

2.1 HOW A PLAN WILL HELP YOU

Going through this process, and writing down your decisions as a clear set of statements will help you because:

- ★ You will have determined whether or not interpretation of your subject is appropriate, and what level of development you want.
- ★ You will have set yourself some clear objectives, and know why you've embarked on the project. You can refer back to this if or when confusion creeps in.

- ★ You will know who your audience is, and more importantly who it is not, so that you can plan your interpretation with a clear picture in your mind of the people and groups you are addressing. Many projects disappoint the people who implement them because they fail to communicate with large numbers of the 'general public', or because they were subconsciously designed to interest fellow professionals, few of whom are in the actual audience.
- ★ You will have thought about where you want to encourage visitors to go, and where you do not want them to go, so that any fragile areas are protected.
- ★ You will have considered what other interpretation is offered in your area, and planned your initiative to complement this rather than duplicate or compete with it.
- ★ You will know what your themes are, so that you, your committee and your helpers don't have to sit for days recording every snippet of potentially useful information about every aspect of your place. You will also be forewarned and forearmed when someone tries to offer you a prized collection of objects which clearly don't relate to the themes you want to present.
- ★ You will have a clear understanding of which media are appropriate given the characteristics of your place and its sensitivity; your likely audience and how many of them you expect; the themes you are presenting; and the resources you have or can raise. Armed with this you should be able to deflect or dissuade the assertive member of your committee who has their heart set on the latest in elaborate multi-media shows.

2.2 FLOW THROUGH IT

Interpretive planning is a process in which the information you gather, or the decisions you make, about one issue will influence other issues and decisions. The diagram opposite shows how this works.

Start with some clear thinking about *why* you want to provide interpretation: this will affect everything else. Then decide *who* the interpretation is to be for, and *what* it is about your place that you want to interpret. You can then make informed decisions about *how* you're going to do it. Chapter 5 will help you work your way through this process.

At some point you will also need to ask whether the interpretation is working as planned, and make any changes necessary to improve it.

Interpretation at Cromarty Courthouse was planned to complement other developments in the area.



It's not all logic

The diagram looks like a computer flow chart in which each step leads logically to the next. As you work on your plan, remember that good interpretation is as much about creativity and intuition as it is about logical decisions. You might decide that a publication you can sell is the best medium for your aims, your audience, and the messages you want to get across. But to make it work you will need some lively ideas about the themes you will use, some sensitivity towards what your audience will find interesting, and a creative approach to what the publication looks like.

What if we already know what we want to do?

Many groups start with an idea for something in the *what?* box. It's quite possible to short circuit the process like this, and for the idea to be perfectly right for your situation. But you do need to think about the issues in the other boxes of the diagram, and to do some honest appraisal of whether your idea really fits with the information you gather.

This can only help your project. Thinking about themes, for example (see pages 7 and 24), will always make your interpretation more focused. In addition, any agencies which you approach for funding will expect you to show that you have thought things through.

2.3 WHAT SORT OF PLAN?

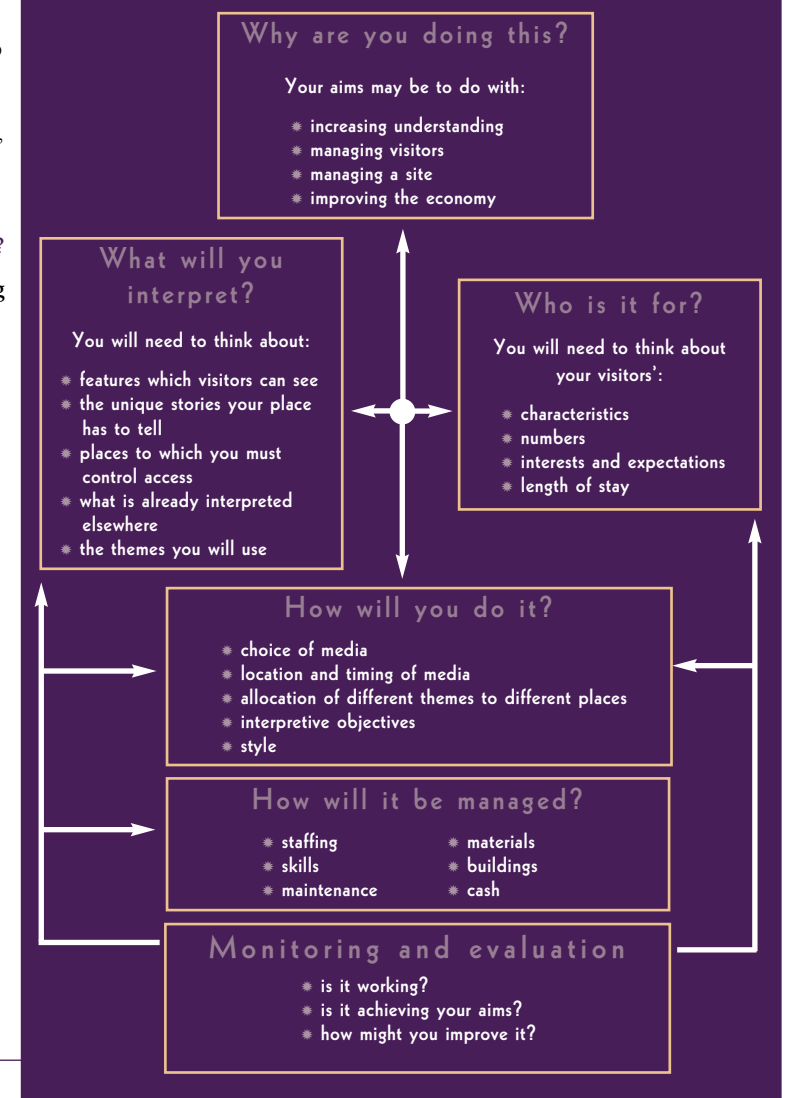
Some plans are blueprints for action. They identify what is needed, and set out how it will be achieved. Others may be a strategic framework for building consensus on your objectives, for assessing and agreeing the significance of sites, for applying for funding or other resources, and for agreeing how finance and staff are allocated. Chapter 3 gives more detail on the types of plan which are possible.

Most interpretive plans cover more than just communication with your visitors. You're not only planning for better communication, you're planning a development and management process, a visitor management programme and a visitor financial programme. You may also be trying to achieve other benefits related to conservation, sustainable tourism or community development. Chapter 1 gives more detail about these other issues.

A good plan is a public declaration of your intentions. It will help you find out where you are, where you want to be and how you are going to get there.

How the issues connect

Planning interpretation means balancing many different issues. This diagram shows how they can link together. You might enter this process at any point, but you must be sure that your decisions about the issues in one box are consistent with those in the others.



3 What sort of plan?

Before you start work, think about what sort of plan you need. You can choose to plan at one of two levels: to produce a *strategic statement*; or a *detailed plan* which will guide practical work. And your plan can cover a *specific site*, or a *wider area*. But you can't write an interpretive plan unless you have something to interpret! Interpretation helps visitors to experience a place, to understand a topic or simply to enjoy a view. If there is no story to tell, interpretive planning becomes theoretical. It must be a practical exercise with real benefits.

3.1 STRATEGIC OR DETAILED?

Interpretation strategies

Strategies set out clear aims and objectives, but with limited detail. They give broad funding arrangements and budgets, overall priorities and timescales, and describe general management responsibilities. This demands clear vision and avoids a clutter of detail. Strategies are statements of intent which can gain support for a course of action. They are not programmes of work with detailed costings.

A strategic plan aims to:

- ★ guide and co-ordinate the efforts of all those who want to play a part;
- ★ ensure comprehensive coverage of a large area or broadly-based topic;
- ★ establish guidelines for local, or subject-specific, detailed plans;
- ★ prevent duplication of effort;
- ★ encourage appropriate networks.

A strategic plan is the best way of dealing with a large area or a big subject. It gets everything in perspective and gives everyone a chance to consider the implications. It can provide an agreed structure within which several organisations can work, each



developing their own interpretation. Alternatively, it can pull together existing plans to develop a cohesive approach and minimise duplication. It can also provide a framework for detailed plans which deal with particular sites or themes.

Detailed plans

For less extensive schemes or areas, a single site, or individual projects within a strategic plan, you will need a detailed interpretive plan which sets out a programme of work. The plan should give enough information to focus the proposals tightly so that they can be put into practice. This means:

- ★ giving clear objectives, with targets for achievement;
- ★ specifying precise interpretive themes, content, methods and media - see Chapters 5 and 7;
- ★ estimating all capital and running costs, and sources of funds and revenue;
- ★ setting schedules for action within agreed priorities;

The Western Isles Interpretation Strategy provides guidelines for appropriate development at sites such as Castlebay and Barra.

Planning for the stones

Urras nan Tursachan (The Standing Stones Trust) was formed in 1994 to promote archaeological tourism around the monuments on the west side of the Isle of Lewis. The trust has used an interpretive plan for the Calanais Stone Circle which outlined where a new visitor centre should be located, and the themes for its exhibition. Simon Fraser, chairman of the trust, says:

'The Interpretation Plan proved to be extremely beneficial to Urras nan Tursachan. As the trust embarked upon the implementation of long term objectives for the development of the Calanais Visitor Centre the plan provided an excellent framework for better management and public understanding. It also provided a focus for co-ordination on key interpretive topics. The document was and continues to be a useful and effective guide for the trust.'

- ★ determining responsibilities for implementation, management and staffing;
- ★ deciding how you will know whether you have succeeded - see Chapter 6.

When it comes to setting objectives, and especially when identifying targets, make sure they are realistic – can you achieve them? – and acceptable to all those involved – do you all agree? But don't be faint hearted! Go for a little more than you think you can achieve.

settlements, for example the Mearns or the East Neuk. See the inset box on the West Lochaber Interpretive Plan on page 14.

- ★ A *site-specific plan* is self-explanatory. It will be a detailed document for an existing or a new attraction or site, for example a historic house, a wildlife reserve or a place like New Lanark. See the inset box on the St. Andrews plan on page 17.

The visitor centre at Calanais, developed as part of an interpretive plan for the site.

3.2 PLANS FOR DIFFERENT AREAS

The objectives and targets you adopt will depend, of course, upon the scale of your plan – or where your work fits into a larger-scale plan. Plans can be drawn up at various levels:

- ★ A *regional plan* is likely to be strategic and should be based on a region which visitors and communities can recognise. Geographical regions work better than those following local authority boundaries unless these echo the geography, for example Fife, or the island council areas. See the inset box on the Highland Interpretive Strategy opposite.
- ★ An *area or local plan* will deal with an area easily identified by visitors and residents and will usually be detailed. It could cover a single community, e.g. Kelso, Kirkcudbright or Fordyce, or an area which includes several



The Highland Interpretive Strategy Project

Communities often want to plan interpretation so as to attract and enlighten visitors. They may also wish to learn more about their own environment. The Highland Interpretive Strategy Project (HISP) is a community-based programme that helps local people to develop interpretive facilities that may be as much for the benefit of local people as for their visitors.

The project itself is a prime example of strategic interpretive planning. HISP has completed several detailed local interpretive plans and a series of strategic area frameworks for interpretation across the Highland Council area. The frameworks give guidance and networking opportunities to the agencies and organisations involved and now, along with the local plans, aim to provide a comprehensive approach to interpretive planning throughout the Highlands.



3 What sort of plan?



Camas nan
Geall in
Lochaber.

- ☀ An interpretive plan for a city or large town should be strategic, with detailed plans for districts such as Stockbridge in Edinburgh, Old Aberdeen, or Glasgow's Merchant City.

- ☀ proposed budgets and funding arrangements - who might pay what for it;
- ☀ priorities and timescales - when you hope it will happen;
- ☀ organisation - the best way of managing it, and who is going to do what to take it forward.

3.4 WHAT'S NEEDED IN A DETAILED INTERPRETIVE PLAN?

There are no definite rules about what an interpretive plan must contain. Its content will depend on what you want it to achieve. The following sections give some guidelines to what you may need to include.

West Lochaber Interpretive Plan

The West Lochaber Local Interpretive Plan, covering Ardnamurchan, Ardgour and Morvern on the west coast of Scotland, sets out a detailed approach to interpreting a large area with a small population and fragile economy.

Consultation with the local community, including visits to schools, identified the heritage resources of the area that local people felt were important through 'voting' for them. This led to agreement on some key sites, which were then assessed for their suitability for interpretation. The natural and cultural character of West Lochaber, the infrastructure of roads and accommodation, and patterns of visitor movement were also recorded before a main interpretive theme and sub-themes were agreed.

This plan has been incorporated into the Area Framework for Interpretation and this in turn acts as the tool for delivery within the Tourism Action Plan for Lochaber.

3.3 WHAT'S NEEDED IN AN INTERPRETIVE STRATEGY?

Stick to principles and broad tasks. Always remember that its main purpose is to provide a framework, not a completely detailed approach.

An interpretive strategy should include:

- ☀ your aim - what you want to achieve - the 'mission statement';
- ☀ your objectives - why you want to achieve it and for whom;
- ☀ proposed mechanisms - how and where you could achieve it;

Your aim and objectives

Your *aim* should include your aspirations and expectations, but temper realism with inspiration! (and vice versa). You might want to determine how to increase understanding of a famous local person's contribution to medicine, the arts, or engineering – and how and why he or she achieved distinction. Or you might want to set out how interpretation could lead to more interest in conserving a local area of great importance for wildlife. Your *objectives* as sponsors should give the reasons for your plan, the various outcomes or changes you want to achieve, and clearly identified targets. You might want to include, for example, how developing an interpretive plan could draw the community together, or retain visitors longer, or contribute to a

wider environmental improvement programme. You might set targets for increased numbers of people staying overnight, or taking part in local events, or asking for more information at the Tourist Information Centre.

Your audience

Consider the differences between day visitors and those who stay longer, local people, children and those with special interests (see chapter 5).

Your resources

Include an inventory of the resources you wish to interpret (see chapter 5). You should set out all the things which make your area or community distinctive, important or interesting, at least as a locality; why they should be described appealingly to visitors; and how they could relate to visitors' own experience.

Your interpretive objectives and theme

Interpretive objectives are different from your objectives for the process as a whole. They include what you want people to know, to do, and to feel about your place as a result of your interpretation (see chapters 5 and 6 for more about this). The plan must also record your chosen theme or themes. Show how you intend to make the interpretation cohesive.

Your methods

How will you communicate with your visitors? Identify the different media that will bring the interpretation to life: don't forget the role people can play! (See chapters 4, 5 and 7).

Who will you involve?

The plan can record your consultation and liaison arrangements. Include everyone you will need to contact for information, collaboration, co-operation, support and approval (see chapter 4).

How will you manage it?

Decide on your priorities and timescale. Show what must be done, by when, if the plan is to succeed, as well as what else could be done. Draw up a schedule for implementation. Match this with your priorities, funding and management arrangements.

Include your procedures for monitoring and evaluating the interpretation when it is implemented (see chapter 6).

Your organisational framework will need to show who will be responsible for policy decisions, overall direction, implementation, on-going management and maintenance, as well as any staffing needs.

Remember that features you take for granted, like these rigs on the Cromarty Firth, may be impressive and unusual to visitors.



3 What sort of plan?

Case study: Parish of Abernethy Local Interpretive Plan

Under the guidance of the Highland Interpretive Strategy Project, local resident Elspeth Grant was commissioned to produce a local interpretive plan for the Parish of Abernethy which straddles Badenoch and Strathspey.

'Explore Abernethy', as it is now called, is a community initiative to record and interpret the cultural heritage of the area and its unique association with the surrounding forest of native Scots Pine. It also aims to increase recreational opportunities, provide a focus and orientation for visitors, and increase understanding of land management practices.

In 1997 the project registered as a Company Limited by Guarantee. Since then they have developed 35km of woodland footpath network, signage, a walks leaflet, car parking and an All Abilities trail along the River Nethy. The Explore Abernethy Room in the Community Centre provides visitor and local information, displays, a community corner with seating, reference books, and displays of children's work. A seasonal ranger staffs the Room and takes guided walks.

A fund has been established to cover running costs, which include annual footpath maintenance, building running costs and project management. Funds are raised through sales of the walk leaflet, a donation box and holding dances and other events.

Your costs

You will need to estimate costs for your proposals. Include start up (capital) costs, all the running costs, and sensible estimates of revenue you will generate.

3.5 USING INTERPRETIVE CONSULTANTS

If you don't want to do the whole plan yourself, there are interpretation consultants who can help. Consultants can provide advice and recommendations at a number of levels. You may wish simply to discuss your approach and methodology, and gain confidence from professional guidance. Alternatively, you may want consultants to prepare a framework into which you can slot local knowledge on specific sites and topics and develop your choice of media.

If you wish, consultants can produce the complete plan in consultation with you and the community, leaving you to implement it. Whatever route you choose, you must set the agenda and prepare a clear brief.

3.6 HOW DOES INTERPRETIVE PLANNING LINK WITH OTHER INITIATIVES?

Interpretation is a means to an end. It can contribute to visitor management, conservation, the

local economy, education, community pride and so on. Where possible, therefore, an interpretive plan should dovetail with other activities and initiatives to enhance their success, or gain from their operation.

For example, interpretive planning and interpretation should:

- ✦ share objectives, markets, themes and mechanisms with the *marketing plan* for a site, an area or a region – to ensure a consistency of message;
- ✦ be an integral part of strategic *tourism development* and promotion initiatives;

Local schools can be involved in planning interpretation, as well as benefiting from the end result.



Good interpretation helps tourist attractions to succeed, and thus to contribute to the local economy.

- ✦ be linked to the planning, development and operation of commercial heritage sites. Interpretive planning and interpretation can also contribute to:
 - school curriculum work, and to wider education at all stages of life;
 - the development of recreation and the arts locally or more widely;
 - the economic development of an area through increased tourism, more jobs, and a better environment;
 - strategic and local planning policies by widening perceptions and introducing a thematic approach; the process of urban or environmental renewal.

St Andrews Interpretive and Visitor Management Plan

The historic town of St Andrews is a busy community of around 15,000 people, but it is often swamped by seaside visitors and golf enthusiasts. A number of agencies commissioned a detailed interpretive plan from a consortium of consultants in which visitor management was a major element. The aim was to encourage visitors to move around the town, to discover aspects they didn't know about and, of course, to stay longer and spend more.

A Tourism Management Programme has subsequently implemented many of the recommendations which form a closely-integrated approach linking marketing, information and interpretation. An innovative series of orientation points is supported by a specially-drawn map, new leaflets, a number of interpretive panels, guided walks and 'living history'.

St Andrews is now part of a European Union partnership for sustainable tourism, using its interpretive and visitor management plan as a working example of an approved approach.

4 Working with others

The first two chapters discussed what interpretation was, and the benefits of interpretive planning. The previous one outlined different approaches to planning. But all of this work relies on people. People are the participants in interpretation – the senders and the receivers of the interpretive message. The relationship between people and the places they live is often crucial to the message itself. And most importantly, drawing up an interpretive plan means working with people. This chapter looks at things to think about as you do this.

If a plan is to have enough support to lead to successful implementation, you will need to work with a wide range of people. They will include:



- Representatives of agencies with a statutory remit relevant to your work, and perhaps with the ability to fund it. Examples include Scottish Natural Heritage and Historic Scotland;

- Representatives of voluntary groups and societies with an interest in your area or expertise in the subject you want to interpret;

- The plan and its outcomes will be more sustainable. People will be more interested in seeing that the work is continued and developed.
- Interpretation can benefit from the vast amount of local knowledge and skills which exist.
- The plan can contribute to community development. People may feel a greater sense of self worth as a result of their involvement, and there will be the opportunity to develop new skills.

Working with agencies is important because:

- you will need the expertise and knowledge of statutory bodies to produce a meaningful plan.
- Many projects will need approval from councils and other bodies before they can be implemented.
- Agencies can provide an important overview of what is happening on a regional scale.

This chapter gives some advice about how to actively involve communities and agencies to produce a plan which everyone can support. The chapter assumes that you are an individual with a particular interest in interpretation, and that you have taken on the task of getting the plan going. The approach you take, and the sections which are relevant, will vary depending on whether you are yourself a member of the community, or whether you represent an agency.

4.1 WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES

There are two vital principles in working with communities: invite as many groups and individuals as possible to take part; and make sure that people can see the point in being involved. Community involvement which is just a token gesture leads to resentment and apathy.

All community groups; all providers of interpretation, both public and private; and all those who are likely to be approached for funding have to be part of the process. Ignoring or failing to involve any of them may cause problems later. Include people rather than exclude them, in spite of

local tensions, and the fact that they may seem peripheral to what you want to do. You may know people who are already influential and active in the community – the key players. Involve them as much as possible, and help them feel that the process is theirs. Where people have economic influence, provide an economic justification for what you are doing.

Groups are often cautious about adopting new ideas and new approaches. You may need to spend some time talking to people, and convincing them that they have something to gain from a planning exercise.

Even with this effort, there will be situations where groups or individuals who apparently should be involved stay on the outside. This is the nature of communities everywhere. It is often nothing to do with the plan, or the process itself, but is due to other factors such as past history, or other agendas. There is no such thing as a clean sheet when it comes to the relationship of a community to its heritage resources. The more you know about the past history of the community the better you will understand it when people sometimes do inexplicable things.

The reality of community work is that few members of the community get actively involved – the majority are happy to leave things to others, unless they are particularly affected by a specific

proposal. People are usually fully involved in their own lives. It is important, though, to give everyone in the community the chance to contribute.

What about you?

One key player in all this is – you! If you come from a different part of the country, this may also affect how willing people are to respond to your ideas. If you represent the local council, or a statutory agency, the way people respond to you may well be coloured by their experience with the organisation you represent.

This has nothing to do with you personally: it's again simply part of the way communities work. The only way to deal with it is through patience, a lot of listening and an honest, open approach.

4.2 WORKING WITH AGENCIES

Find out the responsibilities of the local agencies. The less you waste their time the more likely they are to be positive towards your ideas. You will tend to receive a friendlier response if you can provide a concise outline of what you want, and how you think the agency can help.

Agencies will only get fully involved if they can see some merit to your approaches, and if your

Shops are often good places through which to contact as many people in the community as possible.



Involve guest house owners in the plan: visitors often look to them for information about the area.

- Representatives of the communities in the area 'Communities' include groups of people with a common interest (for example fishermen and hoteliers) as well as the people who live in a place;
- Individuals, including experts on particular subjects, landowners, and business people.

Working with a local community and with a range of agencies to develop an interpretive plan is not always easy, and it can be a slow and frustrating business. But it is important. Working successfully with your community means that:

- Local people will have some collective ownership of the plan, and will support it rather than oppose it.



4 Working with others

proposals are relevant to their work. The areas covered by individual staff within each agency are far wider than just your local community, so you will have to sell the worth of what you propose. Try to establish contact with the person in the agency who is directly involved in your area, and be clear how your proposals relate to their work.

Agency Initiatives

Often the impetus for a plan will come from an agency, and involve other agencies in the process. These plans may concern land or buildings owned by the agency, and for which it has a legal responsibility. Plans based on this approach often run to a time scale that makes it difficult to establish local community involvement. The result is a top-down approach, rather than the developing of projects from the community up.

Be inclusive here, just as at the community level. Consultation is still important, because heritage resources that are being interpreted are seen by the community as theirs. If you do not address this, there may be problems in the future. Find whatever mechanisms you can to let the community know what is happening, and get comment from them even if you cannot set up a full consultation process.

4.3 WORKING STRUCTURES

You will need to establish a planning group that develops a common understanding of the process and a collective ownership of the outcomes. Everyone in the group must know why the plan is being produced, where the initiative has come from, and how it relates to their particular interests. You may need to spend some time discussing this before everyone commits themselves to the process.

The group will function far more smoothly if it is led by someone. This person doesn't necessarily need to understand the full complexity of the situation, but does need to be seen as non-threatening and without significant biases. Think of this person as an honest broker or a local champion. Without this leadership, managing the group can be difficult as everyone will bring a degree of bias, and a personal agenda to the debate. There may be someone in an existing group, such as the Community Council, who can take on this role, but beware of existing group tensions that may be under the surface.

Encourage individuals, or establish sub-groups, to deal with particular aspects in which they have skills or a specific interest. Remind them, however,

that what they produce is part of the overall process. Their work may be chopped and changed by the collective will of the group, and everyone must accept this.

4.4 TIMESCALE

Allow plenty of time for both producing the plan and implementing it. Failure to provide this inevitably results in corners being cut and important contacts and discussions being missed. All of these short-cuts can lead to blocks in the process, and result in a flawed product which may not address the objectives of key players.

It is difficult to suggest the time necessary for an interpretive plan as they vary so much in scale and complexity, but an exercise in community involvement will take at least three months. Before this you will need perhaps one month to speak to the key agencies and groups. At the other end of the process, give those involved adequate time to consider the proposals before the plan is finalised – at least two months.

As a rough guide, if you want to involve the community and all relevant groups in the process, you will need at least six months to produce a meaningful plan. You may need longer in areas where communities are very remote or dispersed.

4.5 AFTER THE PLAN

Working with people doesn't stop when your plan is finished. The point is not to produce a plan, but some interpretation! As you reach the end of the planning process, think about how you can keep some impetus going, and ensure that the plan is used as a working document which really does guide and shape what happens.

You may need to establish a working group who will keep the project moving. It need not include everyone who has been involved in preparing the plan, but it should represent those who are most



concerned with, or most likely to be affected by, its outcomes. This group has a vital role to play, for they must see that projects which are implemented reflect the decisions made in the plan, rather than being carried out in an ad hoc way. Obviously there must be some flexibility as you deal with the realities of getting work done, but the plan must provide a point of reference for checking that what you are doing really does fulfil the needs you identified.

Information from specialists will be important in your research.

Six tips for working with the community

- ✳ Get a feel for the community – go in with your eyes and mind open. There will be agendas of which you are not aware and some elements within the community may use the plan to achieve their particular aims, which may be different from yours. Be open, and aim to build confidence and trust between groups and agencies.
- ✳ Be clear as to what the plan can achieve. It will not solve the problems of the universe – issues like employment, housing and land ownership cannot be actively addressed by an interpretive plan, but the plan may help to develop a greater sense of collective ownership of cultural, historical and natural resources in the community. A greater degree of self-belief in a community's ability to influence events in the future may be an outcome of a well structured planning process.
- ✳ Make sure that everyone involved is clear about what they wish to achieve from the process. Asking each player to identify what they hope to achieve will help to develop common objectives that everyone can endorse. The areas where difficulty can arise are where protection of heritage resources is seen by some to be compromised by economic development, or vice versa. Aim to maintain an open dialogue about these issues, and to build confidence and understanding.
- ✳ Encourage people to be involved in the developing plan. Use their skills to work on specific tasks: this will help them feel part of the process and build their commitment to its outcome.
- ✳ Keep people informed at all stages of the progress of the plan. Perhaps you can produce a brief newsletter every couple of months. If people do not know what is going on, they will quickly lose interest.
- ✳ Think about providing transport, or at least travel expenses for people to attend meetings, especially in remote areas.



A plan for Nairn

The Nairn Tourism Management Programme is managed by a partnership of 12 public, private, community and voluntary organisations. The partnership set up an Interpretive Working Group to pursue an interpretive plan prepared by consultants in 1994. The plan set out clear objectives and established a theme. "The past and future of Nairn is the story of its relationship with the sea".

The Working Group was able to set up a European funding package to implement the plan and by 1996 most of the recommended elements were in place (leaflets, panels, themed play equipment, reduced signage clutter etc). The Group still meets and is involved in evaluation and in supporting the final element of the plan – a bid from a private operator to build a visitor centre incorporating the local museum and TIC on the harbour front.

5 Putting the plan together

This chapter covers what you need to do to produce your interpretive plan. This will vary depending on the type of plan you need, what you want it to achieve, and who is involved (see chapters 3 and 4), but there are some questions which almost all plans need to address. They will help you to produce better interpretation, help other people to understand what you want to do, and help to get support for your projects. Chapter 3 suggests the possible contents of a plan. Those contents involve getting answers to the following questions:

- ☀ Why do you want to provide interpretation?
- ☀ What are you going to interpret?
- ☀ Who is it for?
- ☀ How are you going to do it?
- ☀ Who will own the interpretation, and make sure it is properly maintained or delivered?
- ☀ How will you know if you have achieved what you wanted to do?

As the diagram on page 11 shows, the questions are linked, and it may help to bear this diagram in mind as you read this chapter.

5.1 WHY DO YOU WANT TO PROVIDE INTERPRETATION?

This is the most important question of all. Interpretation can play a part in heritage management, tourism, and community development schemes. It's essential that all those involved agree what a project is for, and who will benefit from it. State your aims as clearly as possible, and spend as much time as you need to get a set of aims which everyone can agree. Aims are like the foundations of



Interpretation at Discovery Point in Dundee must attract as many visitors as possible.

a house: if they are ambiguous, or if people have differing views which have not been discussed, you could find yourself facing major structural repair bills later on! Your aims are also important as part of the baseline for checking that your interpretation is doing what you want it to do (see chapter 6).

If you aren't sure what your aims are, check back to 8 and 9 for a description of the things you could be thinking about. You will need to think about aims for visitor management – where people can be encouraged to go, at what times and in what numbers, as well as about what sort of services you want to provide and why these are necessary. Remember that all interpretation needs to be about something interesting. If you haven't got a good story to tell, perhaps you need other solutions to your needs.

5.2 WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO INTERPRET?

At any one place, your interpretation could cover a vast number of subjects. An interpretive plan must define what is worth interpreting for your place. To do this, you need to find out what is significant about it, select the features which you feel visitors will find interesting, and decide what it is you want to tell them about those features. As part of this, you must also consider how much, and where and when, to encourage access to the features you select.

What is significant?

The first step in answering the question 'what are you going to interpret?' is to ask 'what is significant about this place?' There may be obvious things: it may have a spectacular geological feature; perhaps it was the centre of a large medieval religious community; or there may be a building which is a

rare survivor of its type. You will certainly want to interpret these, and they are the sort of thing which visitors will be curious about too.

But whether something is significant or not can depend on your viewpoint. You can find out what others think is significant from books, and through consulting some of the organisations listed in the appendix. But if you ask local children what they think is significant about a place, you'll probably come up with some very different answers. Old folk who have lived all their lives in a village will have other stories to tell. If you want your interpretation to reflect the real character of a place, it's worth getting opinions from those who live there about what they would like to show visitors. Pages 32 and 33 describe a way to do this.

You will not be able to include every suggestion which is made, but if your interpretation can include something of what local people regard as special, it will give them a sense of ownership of what the visitors are told. It may also give visitors a

greater sense of the unique character of that place.

Research

As you investigate what is significant, try to do as much research in 'primary' sources as you can. This

means going back to original documents: letters written at the time you are researching; estate archives; old publications. Doing this will give you more insight into the people concerned, and may produce interesting quotations or pictures which you can use in the interpretation. It also means that



Try to find out what makes a special place for all age groups.



you can start to add your own conclusions about what happened in history to the viewpoint given in books.

What is worth looking at?

As you draw up your list of possible resources to interpret, keep asking yourself the question *Will visitors really find this interesting?* There must be evidence for people to see which can support your story. If there isn't anything to see, it's hard to get people interested. If you do have a strong story to tell without much evidence, you may be able to bring it alive by using replica artefacts, pictures to look at, theatre, or live demonstrations.

Look after the site

As you think about what to interpret, be aware that your visitors will probably want to go and explore the place for themselves. As you draw up a list of places which you would like to interpret, check:

- ☀ can people get there easily? If not, can you provide access? Be sensitive about this: it doesn't mean driving a tarmac road to within three feet of every feature! You will, however, need to think about how people will arrive, and in what numbers. If necessary provide parking space and paths.

Original historical texts are powerful: at Cromarty Courthouse, Sir Thomas Urquhart 'speaks' extracts from his writings.

A plan for this nature reserve must take account of its conservation needs.



A significant muddy bank

English Nature wanted to raise public awareness of Earth science SSSIs – sites protected because of their special geology. They selected a number of sites they thought were particularly exciting, and planned to put up a panel at each. One of the sites was an old railway cutting, used as a cycleway, where studies of an exposed bank of shale had helped to establish important principles of modern geology. To a geologist, the site was unique. But to anyone else, it looked like a muddy bank. A personal guide could have brought the importance of the place alive, but it would have been difficult to do this with a panel. In addition, the bank was overgrown with bushes, which would have needed cutting back every year. English Nature decided that it was not worth interpreting this site to the general public, but that they would produce notes for students and teachers instead.

5 Putting the plan together

Do not interpret this site!

Imagine what it would be like if every viewpoint in the Highlands had a panel describing the features you could see, or if signs pointed the way to every abandoned croft, with a leaflet dispenser providing brief histories of the Clearances.

As you look at your list of fascinating places, and start to dream of all the exciting interpretation you could provide, remember how much fun it is to discover a place which feels as if no-one else has ever been there. Be sensitive to the atmosphere of your place, and leave plenty for people to discover for themselves.

- Are there sensitive areas of your site which are interesting, but which are too fragile for you to encourage visitors there? You will need to consult the agencies listed in the appendix to help you here. If there are areas like this, can you find a way to interpret them without people going there?

Make an inventory

You may find it useful to record the features you could interpret. Making an inventory of features can help you to see connections between them. It can help you see where you need to do more research. The inventory can also act as a record which is open to everyone involved: it means that the plan isn't all in one person's head.

What else is happening?

Good interpretation complements, rather than duplicates, other initiatives. So think about what else is happening in your area. It may be that some interpretation already exists about your place. If you have control over it, do you want to replace it completely, or plan something to add to it? If you don't have control over it, try to involve those who do. You can agree a co-ordinated approach, so that you both present different aspects or themes about the place. Perhaps a new display of farming tools at a museum can be linked with a programme of open days at a local farm, and a series of guided walks, led by a ranger service, looking at how the landscape has been shaped by farming.

You also need to look at the wider area. Many visitors will see your place as just one spot in their tour of a region. Many places in that region may have similar stories to tell. For example, most villages along the south coast of Fife have features which tell the story of their history as fishing ports. But there would be no point in every village trying to set up a visitor centre about the history of fishing. An interpretive strategy for this area would need to identify where particular aspects of the story could best be told, and which media would work best in which places. It might also identify a completely different story for some places.

5.3 MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

At the end of this process, you will probably end up with enough possible subjects to fill several small books. If you try to present every interesting aspect of your place, your visitors will be overwhelmed, or bored, and probably both. The essence of interpretation is to capture the essence of a place, not to tell people everything there is to know. You must make choices about what you will interpret, and this will involve some drastic editing from all the material you could gather.

Planning interpretation across a whole area like this needs creative thought, and good co-operation between those involved. The end result, however, is better for both the visitors and the communities providing the interpretation.

Themes

You also need to think about the *themes* which will express what you want to say about your place. Chapter 1 looked at themes: they are statements which unite different strands of information, and use an idea or concept as a way of understanding a place. Themes help you to organise and edit your material, and they make sure that you have thought about what you want visitors to understand, rather than just giving them unconnected facts.

Themes should:

- be stated as a complete sentence;
- contain one main idea;
- reveal what the interpretation is about;
- be as interesting as possible;
- be as specific as possible.

Themes for interpretation of a wide area usually need to be general. For example, the group managing interpretation for Nairn Seafront wanted to interpret various topics: the town's natural heritage, the fishing history, and the development of tourism in Victorian times. The interpretive plan suggests that all interpretation along the seafront should support this main theme:

'The past and future of Nairn is the story of its relationship with the sea'

This unites all the subjects which the group wanted to interpret. It forms an overall idea which visitors should take away with them. Within this, specific sites have individual themes. For example, a series of panels along the seafront includes these themes:

- Nairn developed as a fashionable resort for rich people in Victorian times.
- The rock pools here are an unusual environment along this otherwise sandy coast.
- The coastline around Nairn is changing rapidly as sand is moved by currents, tides, and storms.

The atmosphere of Rackwick Bay on Hoy can speak for itself. Do not try to interpret everything.



Themes take practice

Working with themes can take a bit of practice. Try these ideas to help you get the hang of it.

The Theme Generator

1. Start by completing the sentence 'Generally, my presentation (talk, exhibit, etc) is about _____. This will be a general topic, like a library classification, for example 'birds'.

2. Write another sentence, this time beginning 'Specifically, I want to tell my audience about _____. Perhaps you might write 'nocturnal birds'.

3. Do the same again, this time completing the sentence 'After hearing my presentation (or reading my exhibit, etc.), I want my audience to understand that _____'.

This time, what you write is a theme; a sentence in its own right, for example: 'because they're rarely seen, nocturnal birds are the subject of many superstitions'

(From 'Environmental Interpretation', by Sam Ham)

What about it?

If you've written a good theme, you shouldn't have to ask the question 'So what?' or 'What about it?' Try it on the examples above. 'Birds' or 'Nocturnal Birds' are not themes, because you can still ask 'What about them?' The third sentence gives the answer, and the real point of what the interpretation is about.

(There's more about themes in many books in the reading list, particularly those by Bill Lewis, Sam Ham and John Veverka.)



5 Putting the plan together

These themes are about facts, but themes can cover ideas or attitudes as well. For example:

- ☀ Life for the children working in this factory was hard.
- ☀ If this butterfly is to survive, it will need our help.

Try to find themes which are special to your area. A theme like 'This landscape has been shaped by millions of years of erosion and thousands of years of human activity' is all very well, but it could apply to anywhere in the United Kingdom. If you feel that your theme is too general, try breaking it down into a number of sub themes which are more individual.

Agree to disagree

As you think about the themes which you could use, you may find that different people have different views. Sometimes these might be quite opposed. For example, here are two possible themes about a wind turbine:

'Wind generated power is the answer to society's energy needs.'

'Wind generated power will litter the countryside with ugly towers.'

If you find that you come up with differing approaches like these, think about presenting both sides of the story. Remember that interpretation can aim to provoke discussion! A museum in Lowell, a large cotton mill town in Massachusetts, USA, did this by featuring two blocks of text on each of their interpretation panels. One block was accompanied with a picture of a man in a top hat: text beside this told the story of how magnates had built the town. The other showed a workman in shirtsleeves:

text by these explained what it was like to work in the mills.

5.4 WHO IS IT FOR?

This question is easily overlooked in your enthusiasm to tell visitors all about a subject or a place in which you are passionately interested. The trouble is, your visitors may not share your passion – yet. Remember that, for most visitors, you are providing something for their leisure time, not because they want to study your place. People who visit because they do have to study it, such as school children or students, may well use interpretation, but the main audience is people who come to a place because they think it will be part of an enjoyable day out.

Drusilla's, in East Sussex, has a lot of family visits and provides exhibits specially for children. Adults enjoy them too!



This has vital implications for what you offer, and how you offer it. Visitors come with expectations of their own: you need to meet these before you can hope that they will take an interest in what you have to tell them. At a basic level, this means providing information about where they are,



The old parish church, Bettyhill, now Srathnaver museum.

what they can do, and where the toilets are. It also means matching what you provide to the sort of experiences they are looking for. Someone going to an internationally famous historic site like Culloden

portrait as you can of your visitors. You may find it useful to think about them in relation to these questions:

- ☀ Who are they?
- ☀ What are they expecting?
- ☀ What do they already know about your place?
- ☀ How long will they stay?
- ☀ Who do they come with?
- ☀ Where will they go after they leave your place? Or where would you like them to go?

Who are they?

Think about simple characteristics of your visitors such as whether they are young or old; locals or visitors from elsewhere; and which country they come from. This may lead you to provide different

Special Places

Some places have a special significance. Churches and battlefields are examples of places which can have a deep emotional meaning for visitors, and you need to be sensitive to this. Your themes will need to respect this aspect of the place, but those who have come on some kind of pilgrimage will probably not want to be told much about it: they already know why it is special. If you are dealing with a place like this, consider how you can provide for those who simply want to absorb the atmosphere, and for whom interpretation might be an intrusion. Many churches provide an area where people who want to use the church for prayer and meditation can sit, away from the tourists who have come to see the church as a cultural monument.

would expect a large, fully equipped visitor centre. In a small market town they might appreciate a few simple information panels on buildings of interest. At a picnic spot on a quiet country road, they might feel that they simply want to appreciate the atmosphere of remoteness and peace: a panel about the plants by the roadside could spoil that experience.

Since most visitors haven't come to study your place in depth, you also need to make sure that your interpretation is pitched at the right level – something which is interesting, but not too specialised or detailed.

What are your visitors like?

If you want to get your message across, you must fit your interpretation to your visitors' needs, characteristics and interests. Build as detailed a

interpretation for different categories: either different media, such as activity games designed for children, or publications in other languages; but you may also find that you can present different aspects of your place so as to interest various categories of visitor.

What are they expecting?

It's essential to know why visitors are coming to your place. It may be that they come because they know it's interesting, and that they have a general idea why – visitors to Stirling Castle know that they are visiting a place which has played a part in Scotland's history over hundreds of years. They may not know much about exactly what that part was, but many of them will expect to be told something about it.

Many visitors, though, don't have a particular interest in what a place is apparently about – they simply want a day out. The interpretive plan for the

Interpretation and local people

Sometimes it's important to encourage local people to take an interest in your place. You might have a country park on the edge of a city which you'd like people to care for, or you might feel that a shared sense of local heritage would help the community feel strong.

In this case, you will need different approaches from those you might use for visitors. Local people are regular visitors, so interpretation media such as panels will quickly be ignored. Instead, think about ways to involve people in discovering and recording their heritage for themselves, perhaps through putting together a booklet of local stories. Or plan a series of events which will encourage people to meet, and explore the place. You might, for example, work on a village or community 'map' to show local stories and plan favourite places.



5 Putting the plan together

Nairn Seafront Tourism Management Programme had to address this. Most visitors to Nairn were coming for a day out by the sea, and weren't

But you may also get visitors who know very little. In this case, you need to think about two separate projects, one to suit the keen bird watchers, and

How do you feel about creepy-crawlies?

Curators at the Natural History Museum in London wanted to put on a new exhibition about arthropods (insects, spiders and crustaceans). They talked to 145 visitors to get an idea of how much people knew about these creatures, and held discussion groups about what people felt about them.

They found that, in general, people either didn't really care about arthropods, or felt hostile towards them. Far from putting the team off, this led them to plan the exhibition as an accessible, high profile event, which aimed to make arthropods interesting, and to get away from their 'creepy-crawly' image.

expecting any interpretation. The organisations involved in the programme wanted to add to the town's appeal by raising awareness of its history and of the wildlife in the Moray Firth, and to encourage people to explore a little in the countryside around the town. So the interpretive plan suggested ways of introducing these subjects while visitors were doing what they had come for: strolling along eating an ice cream, or playing seaside games. The plan proposed a series of panels on the promenade, with very little text, and crazy golf hazards which included rock pool shapes and marine life. The golf hazards don't need to include any text giving facts about wildlife, they simply remind people about the sea and what lives in it. A visitor centre would not have been appropriate, because the nature of the site, and visitors' expectations, did not justify it.

Another factor to think about is how people find out about your place. If they have read about it in a book or a leaflet, they may well have expectations of what it will be like and what they will be able to do. You need to meet those expectations if they are to go away satisfied; you also need to meet their expectations before you can get across any messages you may have.

What do they already know about your place?

If your place is somewhere to which people come because they know it's interesting, think about the level of interpretation and information which they might want. If you have a site which is famous for bird watching, you will probably have many visitors who know a lot about birds. They will want information rather than interpretation: what birds have been seen this week, where there are other good sites, how many reed buntings are breeding on the site this year.

one for more casual visitors. Perhaps you can provide photocopied sheets or a white board listing the species seen for the birders, and a display which explains migration patterns for others. Remember to tell people where they can find more information if they are interested: good interpretation might lead them into a life-long hobby.

Before they put up large exhibitions, some museums carry out research on what visitors know and feel about the subject. This helps them plan the content, and the style of the interpretation. You may not have the resources to do a major survey, but it's worth thinking about the amount of background you may need to give to your subject, and how you can cater for different levels of interest.

How long will they stay?

It may seem obvious, but there is no point in providing an exhibition which takes three hours to get round if people tend only to visit your site for half an hour. Of course, one of your aims may be to encourage people to stay longer, but you need to be realistic about what you can achieve. A typical 'time budget' for most visitors at any one site is an hour and three quarters. This includes time to have a cup of tea; the most they will spend looking round an exhibition is about an hour to an hour and fifteen minutes.

If you are planning facilities for a whole area, and you want to encourage visitors to stay for a day or two, work together with other places in the area and try to provide things to do which range from a half-hour visit to a whole day excursion. Make sure that interpretation at different sites has some variety in its subject and theme. Different sites should complement each other rather than duplicating effort.

Another thing to think about here is *when* people come. Don't plan your guided walks programme for Saturdays if you're in a tourist area, where most visitors leave or arrive on Saturdays. If you have a high proportion of regular or repeat visitors, you'll need to think of ways to provide interpretation



At Mount St Helens in Washington State, USA, Ranger Bill Putaansuu can provide more varied and flexible interpretation than the panels.

which changes every now and then. No matter how interesting an exhibition is, people won't read it more than a couple of times!

Who do they come with?

If you can, plan interpretation which takes account of the sort of groups in which your visitors arrive, and which encourages them to interact with that group. This means dividing your visitors into market segments, and thinking about what each grouping is likely to enjoy. As a broad guideline, consider providing:

- ☀ something which involves social interaction for visitors who arrive in large groups;
- ☀ activities for families which involve children as

well as adults. Adults often explain things to their children, but if the family groups include a lot of teenagers, it might be a good idea (though a challenge) to provide something for them to do without accompanying adults;

- ☀ things to study in more depth if your visitors are individuals, or small groups without children.

How many visitors?

The characteristics of your visitors will lead you to decisions about the style and approach of your interpretation. How many of them you expect, or want, will influence what sort of facilities you provide, the size of any buildings, and how many leaflets to have printed. If you expect large numbers, especially large numbers at any one time, you will need to do some detailed thinking about how to manage people so that the site does not feel too crowded, and so that there enough toilets, seats in the cafe, and so on.

You also will need to think about how visitors arrive at your site. Many will come by car, and you will need adequate parking space for them. But sustainable tourism needs to encourage other forms of transport: how can you encourage people to use something other than the car as they explore?

Sources of information

If you want accurate and detailed information about the characteristics of the visitors who come to your place, you will need to do some survey work. In most cases you will be able to make a start by asking around. Local hoteliers and guest house keepers will know their visitors well. Ask several of them for their opinions to avoid the possibility of bias from only one.

Your local tourist board should have statistics on how many visitors come to your area, and when.

Walking from the train to tea

The Tarka project in Devon wanted to stimulate tourist use of stations along the Tarka Line, a branch railway line between Exeter and Barnstaple. They also wanted to encourage visitors to explore, on foot, some of the small villages which lie just a few miles either side of the line.

A walk was devised which links a station to one of the villages, and the route details were made available from a tea room near the station. These details were produced very cheaply – a map and route description were simply photocopied, and encapsulated in PVC.

The tea room owners charge a small deposit for this route card: this encourages people to return it for others to use. It also means the tea room can satisfy the by now thirsty and hungry walkers!



5 Putting the plan together

Identifiable audience group	What interests or expectations do they have?	What background knowledge about your place do they have?	How often do they visit?	How long do they stay?
Local families on a day out	open air play, a picnic	know the area well, though not its wildlife importance	weekly	c. 1 1/2 hours
Holiday makers without children	viewpoint over city, a short stroll amongst trees	none	one-off or yearly	c. 45 minutes
Group from bird watching clubs	check for seasonal species, see visiting rarities	high	every 3 months	up to four hours

Different people, different interpretation

You will have realised by now that not all your visitors will fall conveniently into one category, and that one piece of interpretation, for example a leaflet, cannot cater for all possible visitors. In an ideal world, each individual would find interpretation that was just right for their interests, for the length of time they wanted to spend, and which meant they had an enjoyable time with their companions. Personal interpretation, by guides or demonstrators, can come close to achieving this (see chapter 7).

Most of the time, however, you will need to decide which groups are important, and plan interpretation for them. If you have a complex mix of visitor characteristics, use a chart like the one at the end of the book to help you identify the different groups, and to decide which ones are your priorities. Part of the chart might look something like the example above for a country park on the edge of a large town, which includes a viewpoint over the town and a good bird watching area.

5.5 HOW ARE YOU GOING TO INTERPRET?

Your plan needs to include decisions about what media you will use. A strategic statement on interpretation may make broad suggestions to guide future developments; while a detailed site plan will include specifications for what each different medium should achieve, together with budgets and schemes for how the interpretation will be managed.

Media

Chapter 7 gives an outline guide to some common media. What you choose must balance what you feel is appropriate for your audience, for your budget, for the story you want to tell, and most importantly for the site. Remember, the media you choose will become a part of the place. If you feel that the ruined castle on the loch has an atmosphere of mystery which would be spoiled by an interpretive panel, have the courage to leave it undisturbed. Perhaps the local pub could put up a picture of the castle, with a brief note about its history. That way the castle remains a place for visitors to discover for themselves; its history is easily available; and the publican has a good talking point with their customers.

Remember that for some media you must choose where they will go. If you are writing a detailed site plan, be as precise as you can about this. In the case of publications, make sure that you think about how you will store, distribute and display them. For media which are time based, such as programmes of guided walks, decide when they will be offered.

Themes and objectives

A final detailed plan should also specify what message each piece of interpretation should communicate: its theme (see above). In programmes of guided walks, you need to leave room for the leaders to plan their own approach, but for panels and leaflets the copy writer and designer need a clear brief as to what you want to achieve. This applies even if you, or someone else in the community, is the writer and designer!

Be creative with interpretation

Interpretation doesn't have to be something tangible, like panels or leaflets. The Crossings, or Cuirm Cuain, festival involved events such as storytelling, music, and talks, which were offered to passengers on the ferries running between the Scottish mainland and the islands during the summer. The events all had a focus on the relationship between people and the land – providing an unobtrusive way of interpreting the place to which people were travelling, and an insight into its culture.

Bug boxes or feathers – different interpretation for different groups

Fiona Mathieson, a ranger with the National Trust for Scotland at Crathes Castle, takes very different approaches to her walks depending on who is coming on them.

'I think about who the participants will be and what prior knowledge and experience they have. I also think carefully about my aims, and what I want the group to do after the walk.

For a walk aimed at families, who may only have a passing interest in birds, I try to get them involved in activities which allow them to discover more about familiar birds, and which may give them more of an interest in other birds. For example, most people have seen blackbirds search for food amongst dead leaves, but they don't know what they are actually finding. I might give out bug boxes, and ask people to look for the creatures that are hidden in the leaf litter.

Local RSPB members have a good knowledge of birds. For this group, my approach would be to get them thinking about where birds fit in to the wider scheme of things. For example, they could try to discover what the local birds of prey are eating by trying to identify the feathers left by sparrowhawks, or by examining the contents of owl pellets. This group might also be interested in the conservation work we are involved in, and with their expertise might be able to offer some constructive advice!'

Objectives

Each piece of interpretation also needs specific objectives for what it is to achieve. Objectives are important when it comes to checking whether your interpretation is working or not – you won't be able to find out unless you know exactly what you are trying to do! Objectives can cover any one, or any combination, of these things:

- what you want people to *know* as a result of your interpretation;
- what you want people to *feel* as a result of your interpretation;
- what you want people to *do* as a result of your interpretation.

In many cases your objectives will include, or be the same as, your themes. Since the theme is the overall idea which you want people to take away with them, your objectives may also be more detailed. For example, the panel in Nairn mentioned above, about the development of tourism in Victorian times, might have the following theme and objectives:

Theme

- Nairn developed as a fashionable resort for rich people in Victorian times.

Objectives

- People reading the panel will understand that:
- Nairn developed as a fashionable resort for rich people;

- they wanted large houses to stay in;
- stone from the quarry by this panel was used to build them.
- At least 30% of people reading the panel will be interested in seeing the Victorian villas in the town.

There is more about objectives in the following chapter.

You may want to devise themes and objectives for all the media yourself, but most interpretation writers and designers can help you with this when you come to implementing the scheme. This can be useful, since they bring an outside perspective which is closer to that of a visitor. For major projects, most designers will want to have some flexibility, so that they can contribute their own ideas and strengths to the project. Be sure, however, that you build in time to talk through and approve their ideas.

Management

You should also consider how your projects will be managed. This will include where the money is going to come from, and who is responsible for supervising

Musicians embarking for the Crossings Festival: more harmonious than a panel.



5 Putting the plan together



Interpretation which is not maintained is worse than providing nothing.

progress. Most importantly, the plan must include a scheme for maintaining the project once it is complete. If you want to have leaflets on display in the local shop, who will make sure that the leaflet rack is kept full? If there is to be a panel, who will check it

every couple of weeks, and repair any damage? If you want a visitor centre, who will staff it, clean it, and be responsible for the bills? Who will be responsible for repairs and redecorating?

5.6 HOW WILL YOU KNOW IF YOU HAVE ACHIEVED WHAT YOU WANTED TO DO?

You started your plan by deciding on clear aims for what you wanted to achieve through interpretation. By the time you produce your interpretation, you will have put in a lot of effort and thought, and you may well have spent a considerable amount of money. It makes sense to check whether you have got the result you were hoping for. Perhaps the most important thing is to check whether you are on course before you finally commit your money – to test the text of panels, leaflets and exhibitions before they are made up. The next chapter looks at ways to do this.

Think about this from the start, so that the interpretive plan includes some ideas of how you will evaluate what you are doing, and so that you allow time, and perhaps money, to do it.

5.7 LINKS BETWEEN QUESTIONS

You will have guessed that all these questions can't really be considered in isolation. The answers to one influence the decisions you take for another. If you have a patch of the Caledonian Forest next to your village, with masses of wildflowers in summer, you could provide a trail through it if you have a small number of visitors who come in small groups. But if you want to attract thousands of visitors to help the local economy, that wouldn't be an option.

Remember the diagram on page 11 which showed links between the questions. The process isn't a regular logical progression: you need to weigh up all the information, consider how it all fits together, and be prepared to change your mind about ideas which seemed good at the beginning but which don't make sense once you've thought about other factors.

5.8 INVOLVING THE COMMUNITY

Ideally, local interpretive plans should involve your community as much as possible. This ensures that future developments are, as much as possible,

Community participation – identifying issues

At the same public meetings, and in addition to undertaking the map exercise, participants can be given a hand-out. This gives a list of suggested key issues related to visitors and tourism in the study area. Participants are asked to show how concerned they are about the various issues by using a graded scale – for example marking them from 1 (very concerned) to 4 (of no concern) – and to comment on them.

It is important to identify these key 'tourism' issues, as they help to determine the aims and objectives of the plan. Interpretation can then be used as an aid to addressing certain issues, perhaps through the careful siting of signs, or by trail routes which manage visitor congestion and avoid disturbing wildlife.

Each 'level of concern' (1-4) can be given a value, so that the relative importance of each issue can be assessed:

1 (very concerned) = 4 points

2 (fairly concerned) = 3 points

3 (fairly happy with present situation) = 2 points

4 (not a problem) = 1 point

Issues about which to consult people include:

Access to the area in general, Access to particular sites, Visitor Information, Length of tourist season, Tourist numbers, Parking, Visitor accommodation, Wildlife disturbance, Character of the area, Litter.

fulfilling their wishes and taking into account their concerns. Local people are also often the best sources of knowledge about their area. If you are involving community members in your plan, there are some techniques you can use to involve as many people as possible in identifying their concerns, and what is worth interpreting.

Community participation work can allow each individual to contribute, and give enough data to allow an objective appraisal of the value a community places on its multi-faceted heritage resources. This helps avoid the possibility of one group or one individual being overly assertive.

Often community consultation will confirm what experts might say, but by involving the community your plan will have more support, and agencies may feel more able to support it. This process can be time consuming, but it will be worthwhile in the long term.

the interpretive planning process, so that the final recommendations can be set within their proper context.

For local groups and individuals a condensed version may be more appropriate. This can outline the public consultation results, the principal heritage resources identified, the themes for the interpretation and the recommendations.

5.10 IMPLEMENTATION

Some rural areas have been the subject of many studies in an effort to address important issues of rural development. Often the community's view of these studies is that in most cases the outcome has been little or nothing. A local interpretive plan can be seen as just another report that sits on the shelf. Instead, the plan should be a working document for people to keep referring to, a framework within which you can work towards achieving projects.

Don't expect one person or agency to take on the burden of co-ordinating the plan. There will often be a complex range of issues to be addressed, and a good way to do this is often to establish some sort of implementation group.

Such a group needs to take a collective approach to ensure that the projects which are implemented by agencies, groups and individuals are continually referred back to the planned framework. It is easy for individual projects to build up such a momentum that the plan seems irrelevant. A degree of self discipline is needed from everyone to ensure that developments do not occur out of context and undermine the whole process.

Community participation – identifying resources

This is how the Highland Interpretive Strategy used a community participation exercise. You could adapt this for your own circumstances.

Members of the community, including school groups, are invited to attend meetings within identifiable areas. At these meetings they are asked to identify their heritage resources, within the area of the project.

Each person is given a set of 18 coloured cards, with three cards of each of six colours. The colours correspond to a general heritage topic. The Highland Interpretive Strategy used these, but you could devise others:

Uses of the Land and Sea, Wildlife, Manmade Remains, Natural Features, People and the Past, Miscellaneous

Within each colour group the cards are numbered 1, 2 and 3, indicating the participant's priority score for the feature to be identified.

Ask people to write on the cards the features they want to identify, and to pin the cards on a large scale map. Participants don't have to use all their cards, but they must not remove any cards from the map.

The card priority (1, 2, or 3), and the total number of cards placed on each heritage feature can be used to give the site a 'score'.

After each meeting record the features identified with a grid reference, and use the list as a basis for further investigation of how suitable the features are for interpretation.



5.9 PRODUCING THE PLAN

Producing and distributing the plan's findings is an important part of the whole process. Keep the plan simple and jargon free wherever possible, and avoid being too critical or confrontational: someone reading the final report will go straight to the bits that directly affect them, and may read these sections out of context.

Who will see the report

The final report will probably be relevant to several different audiences, and you may need to present it in various forms. The planning group and the main funding agencies will need a full report of

6 Is it working?

Having put in the amount of effort needed to produce a plan and get it implemented, you will want to know whether you have achieved what you set out to do: you will need to evaluate your interpretation. Evaluation is a systematic assessment of whether something works or performs appropriately. This means that you must have set criteria for performance in advance, usually in the form of objectives.

Evaluation should tell you whether or not you are meeting these objectives, and provide sound evidence for this, rather than personal opinion or impressions. You may feel that a project is working well, and be able to cite things such as visitor comments to support this feeling, but this is anecdotal evidence. You cannot draw firm conclusions from it about what to do next.

6.1 WHY EVALUATE INTERPRETATION?

The main reasons for evaluating interpretation are to:

- ★ determine its success
- ★ improve it.

Since evaluation is about checking performance against known objectives, it is important that these objectives are set precisely. Much interpretation has no clear objectives, or else they are so vague that subsequent evaluation is difficult.

To be useful, objectives should be 'SMART', that is they should be:

- ★ **Specific:** you know exactly what you want to happen
- ★ **Measurable:** you know how you will measure it
- ★ **Appropriate:** to site and audience
- ★ **Realistic:** you have a reasonable chance of achieving it
- ★ **Timetabled:** you know by when you want it to happen

It can be helpful to classify objectives into *management objectives* and *interpretive objectives*.

Management objectives

These state what you want to achieve as managers of a site or representatives of an organisation. They tend to be the sort of objectives you have for the whole plan, and include things like:

- ★ Financial objectives - e.g. increasing visitor spend
- ★ Visitor management objectives - e.g. influencing where people go and what they do
- ★ Corporate objectives - e.g. promoting the managing agency's identity
- ★ Marketing objectives - e.g. promoting a site effectively to attract more visitors



Examples of 'SMART' management objectives might include:

- ★ to increase visitor spend in the shop/cafe by 5% per annum for the next five years;
- ★ to increase the total number of visitors to 50,000 per annum within 3 years;
- ★ to reduce the number of visitors picking bluebells in Kirk Braes wood by 75% this year.

You can assess such objectives by some form of counting, for example through direct observation of numbers, or till receipts. Of course, interpretation is only one way of working towards these objectives: you might also address them by marketing schemes, or physical landscape alterations.

Interpretive or communication objectives

These are concerned with the kind of visitor experience you want to create, or how you want to influence your visitors' perceptions. They are particularly useful in guiding the writing and design of specific pieces of interpretation.

John Veverka, the author of 'Interpretive Master Planning', suggests a useful way of dividing them into categories suggested by educational theory.

This exhibit at Monterey Bay Aquarium, USA, has a clear objective: to explain how turtles choke on plastic bags because they look like jelly fish, their usual food.

Examples of interpretive objectives

80% of visitors who look at the interpretive panel at Kilmuir will leave knowing that burning heather is an important management technique for maintaining the moor in good condition. (A learning objective)

75% of visitors to the Kirkpatrick Bay visitor centre will leave feeling angry at the increasing amount of pollution from offshore oil spillages. (An emotional objective)

30% of visitors will take and use the herb meadow trail leaflet available in the visitor centre. (A behavioural objective)

These are:

- ★ Learning objectives - what do you want visitors to know or learn as a result of your interpretation?
- ★ Emotional objectives - what do you want visitors to feel as a result of your interpretation?
- ★ Behavioural objectives - what do you want visitors to do as a result of your interpretation?

Learning and behavioural objectives could in principle be evaluated fairly simply. Emotional objectives are more difficult to assess, since they involve the complex of emotions, opinions, attitudes and values which make up what we call 'feelings'. Section 6.3 has some suggestions for how you might evaluate such objectives.

6.2 WHEN DO I EVALUATE?

Evaluation should be a part of interpretive planning right from the start, rather than being thought of as something to be done (if at all) after a project has been completed. The type of evaluation you do will depend on the stage you have reached.

Before you start

Evaluation can be useful before anything has been set up, particularly where you are researching topics and themes, and deciding on your interpretive objectives. At this stage you are trying to answer questions such as 'What do our audience already feel or think about this topic, what misconceptions do they have about it, how interested are they likely to be in it, and how do they behave in relation to it?'

It may be that the answers to such questions will change your interpretive objectives. The more you know about your audience's beliefs, attitudes and feelings about the topic, the more successfully you will be able to communicate effectively with them through interpretation.

While you prepare your interpretation

Once you have established your interpretive themes and objectives you will start designing the media which will get them across. The purpose of assessing audience reactions at this stage is to check that your design ideas work. Mock-ups of exhibits, draft versions of text, and illustrations for labels, leaflets and panels can all be used to answer questions such as 'Are your visitors picking up a clear theme?' 'Do they understand the concepts and terminology?' 'Are the graphics clear?' 'Does the exhibit attract and hold their attention?'

Checking visitor responses and revising designs can ensure that your final version is as effective as it can be.

After you've finished

Once you have designed and produced your interpretation you can ask the question



'How successful are we?' Evaluation at this stage is the final assessment of how well or otherwise the interpretation meets its objectives. However, by this stage it's usually too late to do anything about it if you are not meeting them! This is why you need to build in some form of evaluation from the start.

You can collect responses from visitors by leaving questionnaires for them to complete themselves.

6 Is it working?

6.3 HOW DO YOU DO IT?

The way you do your evaluation will depend on what questions you need to answer, the nature of the interpretation you are evaluating, your budget and what technical expertise is required in data gathering and/or analysis. Evaluation methodologies can be divided into:

- ★ **Indirect methods** - visitor behaviour is observed unobtrusively without their knowledge
- ★ **Direct methods** - visitors are involved through interviews or questionnaires
- ★ **Quantitative methods** - providing numerical data in the form of counts, time spent, coded questionnaire data etc. Such data can be analysed statistically.
- ★ **Qualitative methods** - providing data in the form of opinions, attitudes, perceptions and feelings, or descriptions of behaviour.

Indirect methods

These involve collecting data in the form of observations of visitor behaviour, or their conversations. This can be either quantitative or qualitative.

Observational methods involve defining certain behaviours which interest you, and then counting or timing them. It's easiest to do this if the observer has a checklist of behaviours which can be ticked off for each visitor observed. It is important that behaviours are specific and unambiguous, such as 'touches exhibit'; 'reads text aloud to others'; 'steps off path'; 'tries out model spinning wheel' etc. Observations may be made from one place, and usually focus on one exhibit. Other behavioural mapping studies may look at how visitors use the space available, such as in a gallery, by counting the



number of visitors in particular locations at particular times. Alternatively visitors can be tracked, that is followed unobtrusively and their path through the space mapped, with the time they spend and their behaviour noted at particular spots. The importance of these methods is that they provide information about what people actually do. They do not tell us what people think or feel, and it can be dangerous to infer this from what people do.

If people look at this panel at Nairn seafront for a long time, are they interested in it, struggling to understand it, or just daydreaming?

Listen to your visitors

Eavesdropping (discreetly!) on what your visitors say to one another can be an effective way of finding out how they respond to your interpretation. It can give you clues to the thoughts and feelings you have inspired: it can also tell you about misconceptions and misunderstandings you need to correct. For example, visitors at a viewpoint which overlooked a spectacular river gorge in southern France were often heard saying things like 'It must have been the glaciers that carved this out'. In fact, the glaciers never reached this part of France. New interpretation here would need to emphasise the power of the river itself in gouging out the valley.

How attractive is this exhibit?

Two well known numerical indices of exhibit performance are derived from simple observations of number of visitors and time spent.

Attraction power (of an exhibit) – the number of people who stop at an exhibit, divided by the total number who pass it (including those who stop), expressed as a percentage. This is a simple measure of how successfully an exhibit catches people's attention. For example, suppose that 60 people walk past an exhibit on wool spinning, and 15 of them stop to look at it. The attraction power of the exhibit is $15 \div 60 \times 100 = 25\%$.

Holding power (of an exhibit) – the average time people spend at an exhibit, divided by the actual time required to read or review it, expressed as a percentage. This gives a measure of how well an exhibit holds people's interest once they have stopped at it. For example, suppose you need 10 minutes to read all the text on a panel, and to operate a small model attached to it. If the average time people spend at the panel is $1\frac{1}{2}$ minutes, its holding power is $1.5 \div 10 \times 100 = 15\%$.

Direct Methods

If you want to find out what visitors think or feel about something, you need to ask them. There are two main methods here: questionnaires and interviews.

Questionnaires

These can be given to visitors to complete themselves, or form the basis of a structured interview. They can contain a mixture of closed and open questions. Closed questions have a limited range of possible responses: the simplest example is one to which the answer is yes or no. Other questions may have a number of possible answers, but only from a given range, as in a multiple choice question. Closed questions provide data which can be easily coded, and counted or otherwise treated numerically.

In open questions the answer is not specified in advance and the interviewer usually writes down the response. This may be coded later, or it may be treated as qualitative data. Open questions allow interviewees to express feelings, opinions and attitudes.

Variations on questions may involve the use of rankings. For example:

Rank the following types of countryside in order of your preference for visiting them:

Mountains
Moorlands
Sandy coasts
Rivers and lakes
Rocky coasts
Lowland farmed landscapes

Another variation is to use statements and ask interviewees to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with them. This is one way in which you can assess visitors' opinions or feelings, for example:

Please tell me which number on the scale corresponds to your feelings about the statement 'The herring fishing industry will never return to its former strength'.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Agree

Such methods often involve the use of show cards. The interviewee is presented with cards which have the alternative responses or ratings printed on them; they tell the interviewer what their response is; and the interviewer records it.

Questionnaires for visitors to complete themselves may be given or posted out to people, and returned at their discretion. A problem here can be a poor rate of return, especially if the content is not of particular interest to the respondent. Interviewer administered questionnaires are more time consuming, but most people will be pleased to answer questions about interpretive facilities if the interviewer is pleasant, and the interview does not take too long. They should only take five to ten minutes to complete.

Questionnaires design can be a complex issue, and this chapter cannot do justice to all of the considerations involved in it. You can find suggestions for further reading in the book list.

Qualitative methods

These methods involve gathering data such as comments, opinions, attitudes, conversation, or behaviour. This data is not treated numerically, but is usually described, organised and carefully interpreted



by the evaluator. Qualitative methods can involve semi-structured interviews with one person at a time, or more usually, with a group – often called a focus group. Such interviews are usually tape recorded and analysed later. The interviewer's job is to provide a structure of prompts and open ended questions aimed at exploring a topic in some depth; and to explore the experiences, perceptions and feelings

Focus groups are an informal way to gauge reactions.

6 Is it working?

that people have in relation to the topic.

If you are setting up a focus group it is important to decide what areas need to be explored, and draw up a discussion check list to ensure that they are covered. You must also decide on your target audience, and on how you will recruit people to the group. It is usual to recruit fairly homogenous groups to reflect particular target audience segments, and if necessary run several groups of different compositions. Groups should consist of 8-10 people, be arranged in a comfortable venue with refreshments, and last a maximum of one and a half hours. You are asking people to give up quite a long time, so consider giving them some sort of incentive such as a payment or a gift.

During the focus group the interviewer should try to generate a relaxed, informal atmosphere, and keep the discussion flowing to cover all topics. The interviewer needs to manage the group without hindering its activity and without biasing it in any particular direction. They should also make sure everyone has a say.

Analysis of the focus group discussion should be by tape or transcript and involves picking out the key issues relating to the overall objectives of the evaluation. Points of agreement and disagreement should be noted. How strongly do people hold various attitudes, how interested are they in the topic discussed?

6.4 MATCHING EVALUATION PHASE AND TECHNIQUE

Different evaluation methods are useful at different stages in interpretive planning. This table gives some guidelines on which methods are most useful at which stage, together with an indication of the time involved in each.

PHASE	METHOD	TIME REQUIRED
Before you start	Focus groups	3 person days each
	Questionnaire survey	8 person days plus
As you prepare interpretation	Observation plus simple interviewer administered questionnaires	2 person days per item of interpretation
After you've finished	All methods but primarily observation study and questionnaire survey	7 person days plus

6.5 MEASUREMENT AND SAMPLING ISSUES

Is your method valid?

All evaluators need to consider certain issues in relation to their techniques. The first issue is that of *validity* – is your technique appropriate to that which you are trying to measure? Remember the example of somebody looking at a panel for a long time. Such a person would contribute a score that would increase the overall 'holding power' score of that panel, but you can't infer from that simple measure that the panel is really interesting, based on the assumption that the amount of time spent in front of the panel is a valid measure of interest.

Is your method reliable?

Another, related, issue is that of *reliability* or consistency. Does your measurement technique produce scores that are consistent across time and the people using it? If a technique is reliable across time it will produce the same score (within limits) when used to measure the same thing on repeated occasions, assuming no other changes. Consistency among observers is important for techniques using checklists of behaviour. The technique will not be reliable if different observers interpret items on the checklist, such as 'visitor reads the text on the panel' in different ways.

Is your sample representative?

Sampling issues are important in relation to the conclusions we wish to draw from any evaluation. If you are interested in finding out whether visitors learned something from a particular piece of interpretation, you are unlikely to be able to interview all your visitors. Instead you will have to

interview a manageable proportion of the total number: a sample. If you are to draw conclusions from the data you obtain from your sample that can apply to the whole population of visitors, this sample must be *representative* of the whole population. This means that the sample will need to have the same proportions of different sub-groups as exist in the whole population of visitors, for example the same proportions of men and women, of family groups, of first time and repeat visitors and so on.

apart from Scotland, travelling independently, and without children under 16 living at home. Several focus groups may be needed to reflect the visitor profile of the site.

Further reading

This chapter cannot deal comprehensively with all aspects of setting up an evaluation study. It aims to give some starting points, but if you want to do

Are they interested, or just warm?

If a behavioural mapping study showed that a lot of people spent more time in a particular museum gallery displaying Neolithic stone artefacts, you might infer that people are really attracted by this gallery and spend a long time there because of its interest value. But then you might discover that the evaluation was conducted in winter, that this gallery was significantly warmer than any of the others, and that people stayed longer there while walking briskly through the others.

The usual way of achieving this is to select a *random* sample. This means that every one of your visitors should have an equal chance of ending up in your sample. If you don't do this, your sample might only contain attractive looking people, or people who look as if they won't say no if you approach them! Other biases could be introduced if you only interview at weekends or weekdays, or only during the summer. This is acceptable if you are clear that your data only represents summer or weekend visitors; that is, a specific sub-set of your total population of visitors.

How many is enough?

There is always a trade off between time and money on the one hand, and statistical accuracy on the other. If you want to compare data between different sub-groups of your population, then numbers in each sub-group should not be less than 50.

Exceptions to the rules

Evaluation as you prepare your interpretation does not need large numbers of carefully selected individuals, because your aim is to find out whether something works or not, and then change it. A small sample of people, typically five to ten, will be enough to indicate where improvements are required.

For *focus groups* which have only eight to ten participants, it is important that the groups are as homogenous as possible. This means that each group should consist of members of one sub-group of visitors, for example tourists who come from the UK

some in depth evaluation, and in particular if you want to use statistical analyses, you will need to follow up these issues in the books suggested in the reading list.



Questionnaires provide data which can be analysed statistically.

7 Designing & producing interpretation

This chapter offers help with designing and producing interpretation. The first two sections give some ground rules for making your interpretation as effective as possible: these apply whether you are planning a guided walk, a leaflet, or an exhibition.

The other sections give some practical guidelines on different media: talking to someone is usually the best method of interpretation, but leaflets, panels and other methods often have to stand in to greet, guide and entertain visitors. The guidelines apply whether you are taking on this work alone, and need to liaise with manufacturers and printers; or whether you are going to work with a team, perhaps employing consultants and designers, or training guides.

7.1 WHAT MAKES COMMUNICATION WORK?

Communication principles

For interpretation to work well, it needs to follow the principles of all good communication. Research has established guidelines to what helps human beings pay attention to, take an interest in, and remember new information or ideas. There are four important principles which achieve this:

- ✱ getting attention;
- ✱ making it enjoyable;
- ✱ making your communication relevant to your audience;
- ✱ giving it a structure.

Getting attention

You can't get your message across unless your audience takes an interest in it. So the first thing you need to do is to catch people's attention. An example of this would be a leaflet with an attractive or brightly coloured cover to make it stand out from others in a display. Or you might use a large title on a panel to grab the interest of passers-by. Rather like a newspaper headline, it can both intrigue your

visitor and summarise the main point of the message. Along the Water of Leith Walkway in Edinburgh, a panel in a patch of trees used the title 'Are you on the right platform?' Nothing is left of the station that used to be there, so the title aims to surprise walkers into stopping and reading more.

You also need to hold people's attention, especially if you've got a long or complex story to



tell. You can't keep on using surprises and tricks - your interpretation would be very tiresome if you did. But you can make sure that you write any text in an easy to read style, or provide cliff-hangers at the end of each section of a guided tour: 'If you follow me to the next building, we'll see what happened next...'

Other devices to hold people's attention include activities which they can do as a group or a family, and providing variety in the media you use in an exhibition. Give people things to handle as well as pictures to look at and text to read; have someone offer a demonstration at particular times during the day.

Making it enjoyable

People will pay attention to something which pleases them, even if they know they *ought* to be paying attention to something else. Were you ever distracted from exam revision by a game of football,

Interpretation in this reconstructed Victorian chemist shop at Blists Hill, Ironbridge, can relate to modern experience of buying medicines.

or a chat with a friend? So getting and holding attention also means thinking of ways to make your interpretation enjoyable.

Making it relevant

If your interpretation is to have any effect, it must be relevant to the audience you are trying to reach. Sam Ham, in his book 'Environmental Interpretation', suggests that there are two aspects to this, and that if something is to be relevant to an audience it must be both meaningful and personal.

Make it meaningful

The idea of it being *meaningful* is quite straightforward: people cannot understand something which is outside their experience.

An extreme example of this is speaking to someone in a language they don't understand. You're unlikely to do this, but be careful you don't assume that your audience understands ideas or facts which are only familiar to you through long acquaintance with them. Remember that most interpretation can only give an introduction to a subject for people who are new to it, or who may only take an interest in it during their visit.

A good way to do this is to build bridges between what people already know, and the new information you want them to understand. Our minds work in such a way that we learn new things more quickly if we can attach them to knowledge we already have. Computer instruction manuals do this when they compare the way information is stored on a disk to a filing cabinet, in which the disk is like the filing cabinet, the computer directories are like drawers in the cabinet, and the data files like the paper files in the drawers.

It's not just new concepts which can cause problems. Watch out for words which you may have known for years, but which may be like a foreign language to your visitors. 'Primary woodland', 'architave' and 'presbytery' will be meaningful to an ecologist, an architect, and a church historian respectively, but not to the majority of visitors to a forest park, a castle, or an abbey. Get someone who doesn't know your subject to check what you're saying or writing, and explain specialist terms if you must use them.

Make it personal

Making interpretation personal means finding ways of linking it to your visitors' own lives. Things we feel are important are powerful triggers which can make us pay attention to something and remember it

Ranger Cynthia Harrell uses a set of Lego bricks as a 'prop' to explain the formation of the Grand Canyon.



even amongst many distractions. As an example, think about the power of your own name. If you've ever been in a crowded, noisy room, and someone starts talking about you, you hear your own name above all the hubbub and immediately start trying to listen to what is being said.

Obviously, you can't address all your visitors by name, but there are other things you can refer to which are almost as powerful. All human beings are driven to find shelter and food to eat, so linking your interpretation to these basic needs can build a link with your audience. If you know the nationality of the group you are dealing with, you can refer to that. A tour guide with a group of French visitors in a distillery, for example, might get across how important whisky is to Scotland by introducing the tour like this:

'I know that in France wine is something you get passionate about. Here in Scotland, we get just as excited by whisky, and there's as much difference between different malts as between different wines...'

You can also build links to your visitors through mentioning things they may have done which are connected to your subject. If you were describing how bacteria break down dead leaves, for example, you might write

'If you've ever kept a compost heap, you'll know how hot it gets in the middle. That heat is produced by millions of bacteria...'

Not everyone who reads that will have kept a compost heap, but for those who have you've made a subtle but real connection with their own experience which will help them both understand, and pay attention to what you want to tell them.

No dog lead? Take one of ours!

The unexpected or unusual is always a good way of catching attention. A project on the Norfolk Coast wanted to encourage walkers on the beach to put their dogs on a lead. They found that few people were reading the notices asking them to do this, so they made some makeshift leads from baler twine, and hung them from hooks beneath a notice which asked people to take a lead if they had forgotten to bring their own. More people stopped to read the notice, and though few of them used the leads provided, many more got the message and used their own.



7 Designing & producing interpretation

Give it structure

You may have heard the advice about public speaking that goes: 'Tell them what you're going to tell them; tell them; then tell them what you've told them'. Behind this apparent nonsense lies a useful truth: people find it easier to understand and remember information if it has a clear structure. If the introductory text of an exhibition says:

'This exhibition is about how different life was for the families of herring fishermen from the way we live today'

it gives visitors a mental structure for what's coming next, and this helps them to make sense of it. The text could go on to say:

'The first room looks at what life was like on board ship, and how the men looked after themselves. The second room tells the story of the wives who followed the fleets, and upstairs you can find out what it was like to be a herring fleet child'.

This does even more: it not only gives a structure to

isn't just about physical layout, though that is important in publications and panels as well as in exhibitions. It's also about giving visitors clues to the themes which the interpretation contains. As chapters 1 and 5 explain, themes are essential tools both for giving structure, and for making sure that what you provide is interpretation, rather than just information.

7.2 GROUND RULES

These ground rules apply to all interpretation, whatever the method. If you need to check your understanding of any of these, look back at chapters 1 and 5.

Be selective and concise. There is rarely a shortage of material, ideas and stories for an interpretive project. It is never possible or desirable to include all the possible material. Your task is to select and simplify, and to do this you will need a theme or themes. When you edit, reduce rather than expand text!

Be clear who you are talking to. A publication for primary school children will read differently and look different from one which will be used by holiday makers, although both publications are about the same place.

Use everyday language. So that young people and old people can understand, as well as people for whom English (or Scots) is not a first language. This means that specialist words (the language of experts and enthusiasts) and many local terms (dialect) will need explanation. Always test your draft with a non-specialist, non-local audience to see if they understand it as you intended.

Use stories and quotations. Refer to real people to give life and reinforce a genuine sense of place and culture.

Use metaphors and similes that relate to everyday experience. For example, describe the amount of timber removed from a forest every year by translating the volume into the equivalent number of double-decker buses, or how many three piece suites it would make.

Make all aspects of your project work together. Sensitive choices of colour, style and materials can add to a sense of place and help reveal its character. Or you may have a bold, dramatic story to tell: your design should reflect this.

Make route directions, instructions and warnings clear. Don't bury them within a narrative or descriptive text. Display them in a separate box or use another typeface or colour.

Test ideas as much as possible. Use mock-ups of your leaflets or displays to see if they work. Allow



At Beamish, guides provide the most lively and personal interpretation.

extra time and money for this.

7.3 PERSONAL INTERPRETATION

Being guided by an entertaining and kindly host is often the most successful form of interpretation.

Personal interpretation can involve:

- ☀ guided tours, on foot or using transport, around a site or a region;
- ☀ visiting places where people work or live e.g. a distillery tour, farm open day;
- ☀ watching demonstrations;
- ☀ hearing stories - real and mythical;
- ☀ taking part in organised activity e.g. learning how to identify birds;
- ☀ watching and/or taking part in performance e.g. battle re-enactments.

Advantages

The personal touch:

- ☀ can interpret complicated processes and help people understand issues or activities they would otherwise not approach;
- ☀ offers great flexibility. There is almost endless scope for experiment and for responding to your audience and their needs;

Panels can make ugly intrusions into the landscape, like these at Lawyers Canyon, Idaho, USA.



- ☀ can be cost effective, requiring little investment;
- ☀ can generate income;
- ☀ can provide employment;
- ☀ can offer ways of celebrating, sharing and enhancing aspects of community life.

Disadvantages

Personal interpretive programmes:

- ☀ usually require a lot of organising;
- ☀ involve teams of people who need support and nurture;
- ☀ are never finished as there is a need to be flexible to accommodate demands, foresee developments and be creative;
- ☀ need continuing commitment from everyone involved to maintain quality. This can also be a great advantage: it's a way of achieving satisfaction and delight for provider and visitor alike.

Training

Even if your guides or hosts are naturals and can speak about their subject without preparation, they are likely to need some training, perhaps for:

- ☀ speaking to large groups, indoors and outdoors, without shouting;
- ☀ structuring and timing their performance or tour for best effect;
- ☀ dealing with obstructive people and persistent questions;
- ☀ accommodating all comers, disabled people and non-English speakers.

Training should also cover how to deal with emergencies and cope with the unexpected, for example two groups arriving at the same time. No two days will be quite the same. Everyone involved with a site or programme needs to have the same ground rules and know about contingency plans.

A training course of a day or two, designed to suit your requirements and team should establish confidence and make all the difference.

Groups should ideally never be more than twenty people. This means that a coach party needs to be divided into three groups.

The panel at Mount St. Helens, USA, uses a clear hierarchy of text.



what the exhibition is about, it also explains its

physical layout, so they can easily find the part they are interested in. The exhibition has a logical order to it, which makes it easier for visitors to follow.

Notice that giving structure to interpretation



7 Designing & producing interpretation

7.4 OUTDOOR PANELS

Outdoor panels often do several tasks - they can stand in to welcome people; offer them directions; and give instructions, as well as interpretation.

Advantages

Outdoor panels can welcome visitors and show or explain:

- ☀ where they are *'This is the start of the heritage trail, but you need to cross the river to get to the castle'*;
- ☀ what is available for them to do and see, opening times etc.;
- ☀ the extent or limits of where they can go;
- ☀ the choice of routes that they can use.

All this information is essential to visitors who need to decide what they are going to do, and how to spend their time. It might encourage them to stay longer if they know, from the start, that they can call in at another attraction as part of their excursion, or return via another view point. Think of this as a menu of possibilities.

Outdoor panels are also useful for:

- ☀ providing interpretation at any hour of the day and on the spot that it is needed;
- ☀ focusing the

attention of visitors, perhaps to explain features in a view;

- ☀ integrating pictures and diagrams with text, perhaps to show how a castle was attacked or an iron-age settlement was inhabited.

Disadvantages

Outdoor panels are not so good:

- ☀ in landscapes or situations where the atmosphere would be destroyed by the intrusion. Sensitive choices of panel material, colour, size, location and support structure can help here, but there are some places where any new addition would spoil the feel of the place;
- ☀ when greeting large numbers of people at once. Three people from a bus party will stand in front of a panel while the rest walk past – and panels cannot answer spontaneous questions. You need a person to speak to large parties;
- ☀ at guiding people through large sites. Maps on panels show possibilities and aid decisions, but visitors need a map to carry with them and/or signs and a marked path to follow a specific route;
- ☀ for maintaining contact with regular or local visitors. Up-to-date information on temporary displays, and contact through the local press, will be appreciated more by regulars;
- ☀ at interpreting complicated stories on a single panel;
- ☀ for creating drama, invoking sound, smell and a sense of movement. Aural commentary and multi-media might do a better job of these;
- ☀ at surviving attack from persistent vandals and harsh weather, not to mention other hazards, such as cows looking for a scratching post, or bird droppings which obscure your lovingly crafted text.

Producing outdoor panels

Be concise! Restrict text to under 200 words per panel and, if appropriate, say where there is additional information or artefacts on display. A helpful approach is to decide on just two or three points you want to get across, and summarise them in a clear theme, e.g. *'Miners who worked here led hard and demanding lives, but their comradeship is still remembered and valued in the village two generations later'*. Keep this theme in mind as you plan your panel and make sure that all the words and images contribute to developing it.

Consider carefully how best to express your message – perhaps an annotated image is better than an account with words.

Don't use illustrations which simply duplicate what people can see for themselves, unless you

want to annotate a view. Use illustrations to show things they cannot see, or what things looked like at another time.

Don't use illustrations just to fill up space.

Too many panels are cluttered with wild flowers here and there. Good design needs space to breathe.

Many people find oblique views easier to read than conventional maps. These are not easy to draw and need careful thought about what to include. Leaving out unnecessary detail makes the essential parts clearer. Before drawing an oblique view or map you need to have decided how the panel will be oriented on site. Orientate your map the same way, so that people looking at the map are facing in the right direction.

Line drawings work well, especially to show reconstructions and how things worked. Use graphics to explain processes e.g. the build up of land by tidal deposits, but take care to keep it simple.

Consider the range of materials, manufacturing and printing techniques at the start and discuss with the manufacturers. This will avoid disappointments such as producing beautiful artwork only to discover that the detail cannot be reproduced. An experienced designer can help you here, since they will have an overview of what is available. If you are doing it yourself, talk to several manufacturers: companies who deal with one process will not necessarily tell you what is possible in others.

Display text needs to be big, with letters at least 8 mm. high. Arrange text in blocks or paragraphs of about 50 words. Use headings to attract attention and emphasise main points.

Always choose and check colours outdoors because they look quite different indoors. Be very careful about using a white background, it can glare and be too noticeable from far away.

Ensure that someone will check the panel regularly, and clean, repair, or remove it if necessary.

Sitting panels

Consider whether to use an upright or an angled panel – lectern style is best. If possible mount a panel onto an existing structure such as a ticket kiosk or a wall rather than make a separate structure. Extending the roof of a building to provide an overhang or verandah creates shelter for viewers and panels alike.

Do not put up panels which obscure the view. If possible site them against a wall, bank or foliage so that they do not stand above the horizon. On a very open site consider using a panel angled to the desired line of sight, but almost at ground level so

that visitors only come across it when they need it. This makes it easy for children to read too!

Avoid putting panels in full sunlight as this will speed up the deterioration of most materials.

Sample costings

Every panel is different. How much a panel costs will depend on the complexity of the design, how many colours you use, the panel material, and how you mount it, but you should be prepared to spend at least £2,500 for each one. This may seem expensive, but think of the numbers of people who will use the panel over a five year period.

The following guidelines are based on prices in December 2000 and exclude VAT. You need to think of three aspects when costing panels: origination, production, and display.

Origination

The major part of the cost is in the origination – writing and agreeing drafts, producing illustrations, design and final artwork. Good quality illustrations are essential, but allow for them in your budget. A reconstruction drawing of a castle, or an oblique view of hills and valleys, could cost £1,000 alone.

You need to invest time as well as money at this stage – perhaps to research and consult the experts about the subject, or to get your community to agree to the proposals. This needs to be done with the first sketch, well before any final design and artwork.

You could easily be paying for 40 hours work, done over several weeks, for research, drafting text, finding reference material and illustrations, and getting agreement to a rough before any final artwork can be produced. This will cost £1,000 to £1,500.

Production

The cost of panels varies considerably depending on the material you choose. A common approach is to encapsulate a full colour digital print in resin, reinforced with glass fibre. This allows a lot of flexibility in design and illustration and is reasonably durable, with a useful life of about eight years.

It will cost about £700 for a panel measuring 900mm x 700mm. Perstorp Waverite is more durable, but the image is screen printed so it cannot reproduce fine detail or subtle colouring. It is also more expensive, at about £900 for the same size panel. Remember that more durable isn't always better. Fashions and ideas change: after eight years, you may well feel it is time for a new approach!

Attractive illustrations on panels help visitors understand archaeological remains such as here at the Broch of Gurness in Orkney.



7 Designing & producing interpretation

Display

Panel manufacturers will be able to offer various designs of framing, integral fixings, and supports or legs. None of these might be suitable for your location and it is often preferable to use local materials that blend in and enhance the sense of place.

Display can be a significant part of your costs if you need to build a structure, or put in hard standing around the panel.

Typical costing for one panel (2000 prices)

Research, scripting and design	£1,350
Specially commissioned illustration	£500
Panel manufacture	£700
Frame and legs	£500
Total	£3,050

7.5 PUBLICATIONS

Leaflets, booklets and newsletters about a place can fulfil many needs such as:

- ✳ promoting the place;
- ✳ explaining what is on offer, where to go and how to get the most from a visit;
- ✳ guiding visitors around a planned route and adding information to what is experienced at specific stopping points – a self-guided trail;
- ✳ offering background information as well as stimulating visitors and explaining what they are seeing – a souvenir as well as guide.

Make sure you know from the start which of these your publication needs to do.

Advantages

Publications are useful for:

- ✳ providing a lot of information. If they are well designed and laid out, the visitor does not have to read it all to find what is required at the right time;
- ✳ offering interpretation which can be enjoyed sometime after the visit;
- ✳ interpreting large areas at the same time as being able to focus on detail;
- ✳ showing what places look like at different times of the year, advertising forthcoming events and therefore encouraging return visits;
- ✳ generating income;



- ✳ providing a souvenir of a visit (which might encourage other people to visit as well, when they see it).

On the Knockan Trail, a guidebook helps visitors find their way and explains the features they see.

Disadvantages

Publications are not good at:

- ✳ appealing to people who do not enjoy reading – a large number of people;
- ✳ being available when needed, particularly if there is no immediate outlet/shop on site.

The best leaflet in the world is useless if it is not found and enjoyed by those who can make use of it. What outlets are there? Will your potential audience go there? Do you need to employ a distribution service? Is it necessary to build in a profit margin as an incentive for other distributors?

Producing Publications

Knowing your audience, getting the design right and making the leaflet attractive are especially important as the audience has to be encouraged to pick up or buy the leaflet to start with. Think about how the publication is going to be used. Does it need to fit into standard sized tourist literature racks? Does it need to be pocket-sized? If it is an on-site guide, arrange the content so that the thing does not fold out to become unwieldy in a breeze. Would a waterproof sleeve be useful?

Do not lay out a leaflet so that the map is on one side and all the information on the other so that users have to keep flipping back and forth. Integrate

the text with the map: perhaps you can use a small outline map to give an overview of the whole site, but put half the detailed map with the relevant information on one side and the other half on the reverse.

What theme or storyline needs emphasis? Write text in segments with sub-headings so that users can find the bit they want. Use headings that are interesting e.g.: 'Ships, sheep and riots' rather than 'Maritime trade, agriculture, and civil disturbance'. Do not duplicate what is said in words with illustrations but make them work together to support each other. You can usually communicate much more with images than with words, so use them as much as possible.

Try out a mock-up on strangers. This is especially valuable if your leaflet contains instructions and directions.

Large print runs reduce unit costs, but only print enough for a year or two at most. Visitor survey figures or sales figures from similar sites can help you decide on the quantity. A change of colour or cover image can stimulate new interest in a new edition.

If you plan to sell your publication, this may have implications for the sources of funding available to you. Public sector agencies are not always keen on supporting material which will be sold. If you do want to sell it, think about what people might be prepared to pay. Selling a booklet for £2.50 is different from getting sales for a 75p leaflet. Is there any competition? Work back from your desired selling price to see what is possible to produce for your budget that will also achieve what you want to do. This can encourage a disciplined approach to content and clarity!

Sample costings

Again, prices will vary according to what you want: a publication can be a substantial book, or a single piece of paper. As with panels, origination will cost more than production.

The following guidelines are based on 2000 prices, and exclude VAT.

1. An A5 size, full colour, 8 page booklet, containing photos supplied by you, with line drawings and a map produced by your contractor.

Origination

Research, writing and agreeing drafts, commissioning illustration, producing and agreeing design rough, producing final artwork on film or disk - £1,600 to £3,000.

Printing

5000 copies - £800 to £1,250.

Total cost

£2,400 to £4,250. This is 48p to 85p per copy.

2. A full colour glossy leaflet on A4 paper, folded twice; containing photos supplied by you and a map produced by your contractor.

Origination

Research, writing and agreeing drafts, producing and agreeing design rough including map, producing final artwork on film or disk - £1,000 to £1,250

Printing

10,000 copies - £800 to £1,000.

Total cost

£1,800 to £2,250. This is 18p to 23p per copy.

7.6 MULTI - MEDIA

Multi-media can mean audio-visual programmes shown in auditoria, sound and light shows, video programmes, or interactive computers using CD-Rom. These can be used to offer:

- ✳ masses of information. Touch screen gazetteers can tell visitors all about different aspects of a region, a large site or a collection of sites in as much depth as they are prepared to take in;
- ✳ programmes as sophisticated as television documentaries;
- ✳ stunning effects.

Advantages

Multi-media can:

- ✳ tell stories with excitement and drama, effects and music, smoke and smells!
- ✳ speed up (e.g. two hundred years of history) or slow down events (e.g. bird flight) so that the audience can take in the story;
- ✳ provide a consistently high quality performance;
- ✳ provide multi-lingual facilities.



7 Designing & producing interpretation



An interactive computer programme at the World Forestry Centre in Portland, USA guides visitors through the rights and wrongs of logging virgin forest.

Disadvantages

Multi-media:

- ✳ can make the interpretation more spectacular than the place itself.
- ✳ is sophisticated and needs professional quality material – poor images and incoherent sound will not be tolerated;
- ✳ is subject to the whims of fashion. What is the most exciting thing today can seem very dull tomorrow;
- ✳ can need regular maintenance;
- ✳ can cause disappointment when, if it breaks down, you have to wait for specialist help to reach you from distant parts;

Going multi-media?

Involve the experts and discuss your ideas. Few experts are familiar with all the possibilities so consider several options before deciding which of the numerous technical possibilities is going to meet

your needs best. Make sure there is time to do this, and go and see what is on offer. Computer interactives can be great fun and certainly attract the computer buffs. They are not good at occupying lots of people: only one or two can play. They can be useful for explaining complicated events or for simulating what would happen if... but sometimes it is easier to absorb less information, and it can be presented in other ways so that more people can gain access to it.

If put within an exhibition space or in a foyer, they can cause disturbance as groups gather round trying to see what is going on. If they include sound effects, the repeated sounds can drive staff mad!

Large screen and multi-screen projected shows can give you vivid and detailed effects and prompt emotional response - like cinema. For this you will need some sort of theatre, a special environment designed to suit the particular equipment used, and a good sound system. Large groups (a coach full) can be accommodated, and visitors often appreciate the opportunity to sit down and enjoy a show.

Using multi-media can make an important contribution to fulfilling a set of interpretive objectives. It is easy, though, to be beguiled by the possibilities and lose sight of the real purpose. Using multi-media to best effect requires considerable discipline and very clear ideas about what the objectives are (beyond enjoying the technology!)

7.7 VISITOR CENTRES

Visitor centres, great and small, can provide an overview of an area or region and enhance its identity. They can introduce a place, help protect it and provide additional facilities to develop tourism or educational use. They can be museums and entertainment centres and provide the only cup of tea for many miles.

Advantages

Visitor centres can:

- ✳ display artefacts and material on site;
- ✳ offer scope for several methods of interpretation to be used together or on different occasions to suit different requirements;
- ✳ provide all year round, all weather facilities;
- ✳ control access and the way visitors use a site;
- ✳ generate income;

Don't build a visitor centre!

Be very cautious if you are considering a visitor centre. They require huge amounts of money: not just to build, or to convert a building, but to run. It can be fairly easy to get the capital you need to build a centre; getting revenue funding later is very difficult.

Once you have opened a centre, you have created a business which will need continual marketing, management, re-thinking, and renewal if it is to remain an interesting, attractive place. High profile centres with spectacular exhibits can attract people to a place, but are they really compatible with the ideals of sustainable tourism, or with the goal of encouraging visitors to appreciate the place itself (rather than its visitor centre)?

If what you want to do is to stimulate economic activity through tourism, think about other, more cost effective ways of doing this before you decide on a visitor centre.

- ✳ create employment;
- ✳ become a focus for community involvement.

Disadvantages

Visitor centres:

- ✳ need major investment and planning;
- ✳ need staffing, opening and closing every day;
- ✳ are not available after hours;
- ✳ need maintenance and continuing investment;
- ✳ are becoming commonplace. Are there just too many centres on the tourist trail?

Visitor centers, like this one in Glen Trool, need careful planning and a long term commitment of time and money.

Planning visitor centres

Building a visitor centre can have a major impact on a community, create a tourism focus where there was none, and change the flow of traffic in a village.

Placing the building in relation to the site is critical. Is it useful to overlook the site from

windows or viewing galleries so you can interpret what you can see and help visitors to orientate themselves by looking at the real thing? Or does the visitor centre need to act as a transit space between the modern world and a special site with an atmosphere that needs protection?

When building a new visitor centre don't start with a design for a building. Think first about what tasks need to be accomplished, and what functions need to be accommodated. Start by imagining your visitors arriving. Where and how will they arrive? What information will they need immediately? Perhaps an overview of the place and what's on offer, so that they can decide whether to have lunch first or take a guided tour before lunch.

It's difficult to take in a lot of information at once and for several people, together, to decide what to do. Providing information at the right time in the sequence of arrival can help visitors get much more from their visit.

Integrate the interpretation at the planning stage. When is it most useful to see the video: before or after the tour of the site? How is the display material going to be presented? Too often visitor centres are built from plans with a space labelled exhibition and more consideration is given to making the catering space work well. Involve the 'exhibition' designers from the start.

A visitor centre will lead to change in a community and can become a focus for development. The principles of sustainable tourism (see page 6) offer guidance on how to make the best of this development. Take care that all the community are working with this change and benefiting from it. Visitor centres could offer scope for improving facilities for the community as well as for visitors.



7 Designing & producing interpretation

7.8 WORKING WITH CONTRACTORS

Your contractors might be design consultants or builders, map makers or performance artists. They might be taking on the production of your interpretation from research to product or they might be contributing a part.

Write your brief for the work and check it with others before using it. Doing this will clarify your own thoughts. A good brief will help everyone involved to integrate their roles more effectively and more accurately estimate costs.

Your brief should set out your objectives and requirements. The introduction should explain who you are, what organisation or partnership you represent and outline the whole project. Your objectives should summarise what you want to achieve with this project and, if appropriate with this particular piece of work, within the project.

Your brief or subsequent discussion should also be clear about:

- ✱ budgets and the scale of the work from the outset. Fitting out a visitor centre might be budgeted at £50,000 or £500,000;
- ✱ what you are going to do or provide and what you are expecting the contractor to do or provide. For instance, how much research material have you available? Who is paying any copyright and reproduction fees (for use of music or images from libraries etc.)?
- ✱ time scale and penalties for late delivery. Commitments to deadlines apply to all concerned, not just to the last person in the chain. It is important for everyone's sanity to acknowledge delays as they happen and agree what adjustments can be made!
- ✱ who has responsibility for what and which people are needed to take decisions. It might be necessary to plan well ahead to make sure that the necessary people are available when required for decisions. Make sure that you will be able to provide the materials and decisions which the contractor needs.

Competitive tendering

If you are organising competitive tendering then do not expect contenders to do half the job as their submission. Asking for just a sketch or two sounds

simple enough, but such sketches are useless if not based on appropriate research and thought. A better approach is to look at designers' previous work in brochures, and by visiting other sites, to find out how well expectations and objectives have been addressed. Then make a short list, say of three contenders. Ask them to comment on your brief and then discuss with them how they and you would work on your project, and what can be done for the budget available.

If there is no fixed budget, then you must be even more clear about your objectives so that contenders can understand them in detail and cost ideas for fulfilling them. At this conceptual stage, it can be difficult with a large project to compare one proposal with another unless you provide some framework with a brief and, perhaps, an imaginary 'ball park figure' budget.

Working together

Share any ideas you have about how you think your project will look, what materials you envisage using, or the tone of it. Good contractors will help you develop and improve your ideas through their experience and expertise. This is what you are paying for, as well as the end product. This process can start at the initial appointment interviews, but should be developed further once a contractor is chosen.

Remember to check all suggestions and developments against what you are trying to achieve. Carefully consider how these suggestions will help you communicate the messages you want to put across, and achieve your objectives. Do not let enthusiasm for proposals which look exciting or fashionable mask a failure to address your objectives.

Further reading

Interpretation and interpretive planning

Many of the practical books on interpretation are published in the United States.

You should be able to order them through on-line services such as Amazon.

Ham, S H *Environmental interpretation: a practical guide for people with big ideas and small budgets*. North American Press, 1992

Lewis, W J *Interpreting for park visitors*. Eastern Acorn Press, 1981

Pierssené, A *Explaining our world*. Routledge, 2000

Regnier, K, Gross, M, and Zimmerman, R *The interpreter's guidebook: techniques for programs and presentations*. University of Wisconsin, 1992

Tilden, F *Interpreting our heritage*. University of North Carolina Press, 1957

Veverka, J *Interpretive master planning*. Falcon Press, 1994

Out of print, but useful if you can track them down:

Aldridge, D *Principles of countryside interpretation and interpretive planning*. Guide to countryside interpretation, part I. HMSO, 1975

Aldridge, D *The monster book of environmental interpretation*.

Binks, G; Dyke, J; and Dagnall, P *Visitors welcome: a manual on the presentation and interpretation of archaeological excavations*. HMSO, 1988

Pennyfather, K *Interpretive media and facilities. Guide to countryside interpretation part II*. HMSO, 1975

Working with community and other groups

Harris V, (ed) *Community work skills manual*. The Association of Community Workers, 1994. (Price £15, available from ACW, Stephenson Building, Elswick Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE4 6SQ).

Visitor surveys and evaluation

Falk J., and Dierking L. *The museum experience*. Whalesback Books, Washington, 1992

Hague P. *Questionnaire design*. Kogan Page, London, 1993.

Scottish Natural Heritage *Visitor Monitoring Training Manual*. SNH, 1993.

Taylor S. (ed.) *Trying it? Improving exhibits through formative evaluation*. New York Hall of Science, 1991.

Writing interpretation

Cutts, M *The plain English guide*. Oxford University Press

Fairfax, J and Moat, J *The way to write*. Elm Tree Books, 1981

Gowers, E *The complete plain words*.

Heintzman, J *A guide for nature writers*. University of Wisconsin, 1988

Producing publications

Zehr, J, Gross, M, and Zimmerman, R *Creating environmental publications: a guide to writing and designing for interpreters and environmental educators*. University of Wisconsin, 1992

Outdoor panels

Trapp, S, Gross, M, and Zimmerman, R *Signs, trails and wayside exhibits: connecting people and places*. University of Wisconsin, 1992

Visitor Centres

Scottish Natural Heritage *Visitor centres: a practical guide to planning, design and operation*. SNH, 1996

Web resources

Organisations concerned with interpretation.

Association for Heritage Interpretation
www.heritage-interpretation.org.uk

Interpretation Australia Association
<http://home.vicnet.net.au/-interpoz>

Interpretation Canada
www.interpcan.ca/

National Association for Interpretation (USA)
www.interpnet.com

Scottish Interpreters Network
www.scotinterpnet.org.uk

Visitor Studies Association
<http://museum.cl.msu.edu/vsa/>

On-line bookshop listing many interpretation related publications
www.acorngroup.com/contents.htm

Sites dealing with interpretation

Carl Strang's site – an interesting site administered by a US based naturalist. Includes several thought provoking essays
<http://members.aol.com/Wildlifer/index.htm>

John Veverka's site. Includes several articles related to interpretation planning.
www.heritageinterp.com/library.htm

Examples of sites that 'interpret' a place or collection.

Kilmartin House Museum. An Argyll based independent museum
www.kht.org.uk/

The Natural History Museum
www.nhm.ac.uk/

The Smithsonian Institution. An interesting 'experimental' use of the web to interpret objects.
www.si.edu/revealingthings/

