AHI

# NATURAL INTERPRETATION: A GUIDE TO THE INTERPRETATION OF NATURE AND WILDLIFE

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# INTRODUCTION

We are frequently reminded of how our 'modern lives' have resulted in many of us becoming 'out of touch' or even 'completely disconnected' from the natural world, interpretation can play a pivotal role in bridging this gap – at its best; it can engage, educate, inform and inspire us[1].



New Forest © NFNPA

Richmond Park in autumn © Alexey Fedorenko / Adobe

# WHY IS THE INTERPRETATION OF NATURE AND WILDLIFE IMPORTANT?

Newsome, Moore & Dowling (2013:295) identify three core roles for the interpretation of natural areas, namely: education, recreation and behavioural change. They expand on these three roles as follows:

## Table 1. **The interpretation of natural areas**

| 1<br>**Educational activities** | Provide information about the site and orientate visitors on arrival |
| --- | --- |
| | The use of a range of media and activities can enhance visitor knowledge and increase their skills |
| | Media and activities can be designed to specifically promote a greater understanding of local, national as well as global environmental issues |
| 2<br>**Recreational activities** | Media and activities offered can enhance visitor enjoyment of the area and thus build visitor numbers as well as encouraging repeat visitation |
| | Media and activities can be immersive, emotionally stimulating and lead to a more rewarding overall visitor experience |
| | Exposure to nature through media and activities can support benefits to the mental and physical health as well as the overall wellbeing of visitors |
| | Media and activities can establish an enhanced 'sense of place' for the area and its surroundings |
| 3<br>**Conservation-supporting behaviours** | Visitor awareness of human impacts upon the natural environment at a local, national as well as global level can be enhanced |
| | Visitors can be encouraged to adopt minimal impact and/or positive impact behaviours whilst on-site |
| | Visitor support for environmental protection initiatives can be increased. |

(Table based on the work of: Higginbottom, 2004; Newsome, Moore & Dowling, 2013:295 and Sharpe, 1976)

# THE PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING THE INTERPRETATION OF NATURE AND WILDLIFE

## 1

### Nature and wildlife interpretation should encourage active involvement based upon first-hand experiences

Your visitors should be actively involved rather than merely listening, you should explore the range of possible 'hands-on' as well as potentially powerful, immersive experiences which could be available to them whilst on-site.

## 2

### Nature and wildlife interpretation should facilitate and maximise the use of their senses

Bring their 'experience' to life by encouraging your visitors to look around carefully for signs of life, to smell things, to feel textures and surfaces – perhaps even to taste things (where this is possible), this will enhance but also greatly deepen their experience of the natural world.

## 3

### Nature and wildlife interpretation should seek to encourage moments of self-discovery

Your visitors should be encouraged to actively search for wildlife and/or the signs of its presence, inviting your visitors to engage in a personal journey of self-discovery whilst on-site can be hugely powerful and stimulating.

## 4

### Nature and wildlife interpretation should be tailored to your visitors

It is important that the interpretation is pitched at the right level for your visitors and reflects their interests, motivations as well as their prior knowledge, this is particularly important with wildlife interpretation where the level of prior knowledge can be significantly variable.

So, ask yourself:

■ Do you know how visitors currently engage with your site?

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■ What species and/or natural features are they most interested in seeing or learning more about?

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■ What questions about these species and/or natural features are most commonly or frequently asked by your visitors?

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■ Do they visit regularly and know your site quite well or, do they generally just visit the once?

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■ What interpretative media and/or activities do they currently make most use of on your site?

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■ What comments do you get from your visitors about the site and the interpretive media and/or activities you offer?

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Based on the work of Higginbottom (2004), Newsome, Moore & Dowling (2013), Shackley (1996) and SNH/FCS (2015)

# MEDIA AND TECHNIQUES USED IN THE DELIVERY OF INTERPRETATION IN NATURAL AREAS

A wide range of approaches and techniques can be applied when delivering interpretation in natural areas, they are summarised in Table 2 below.

## Table 2. Media and techniques for the interpretation of nature and wildlife

| Media and Technique | Application | Strengths | Limitations |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1. Publications and websites** | Supply pre-arrival information<br>Support planning for the visit including site maps, range of media & activities offered, best routes etc.<br>Orientate visitors whilst on site<br>Provide information about the site, its landscape & wildlife (incl. streaming)<br>Provide site-specific and/or broader environmental messages, Codes of Conduct etc.<br>Support on-site interpretation through apps and a range of downloadable materials | Portable & convenient<br>Multiple access points<br>Cost effective<br>Wide dissemination<br>Profile raising of the site<br>Can help manage visitor expectations of the site in advance of their arrival | Needs regular updating<br>Balance the offering with the 'feel' of the site<br>Paper-based materials can become on-site 'litter'<br>Is the Wi-Fi connectivity on site good enough?<br>Visitor engagement can be limited |
| **2. Visitor centres, viewing points and roadside exhibits** | A focal point for the visitor and a base location for the rangers / volunteers<br>Provide information about the site as well as planned activities and events<br>Provide integrated content: static, audio, paper-based, displays and live exhibits<br>Encourage personal connections with feely boxes, cabinets and touch tables<br>Provide information on the management of the site, relevant Codes of Conduct etc. | A recognisable location where the visitors can get information and advice about the site<br>Scope for the offering of a wide range of media | Can be expensive to set up if it does not already exist<br>Needs regular updating or a 'rolling programme' if you wish to encourage repeat visitation<br>May not suit all visitors |
| **3. Wildlife viewing hides** | Can provide a reason to go to a site and a focus for the visit<br>Provides a real experience of looking for / looking at wildlife<br>Can host a variety of media but often uses static graphic panels<br>Can be a location for rangers or volunteers to meet and greet visitors<br>Need to consider whether or not to provide optical equipment for visitor use | Can help visitors get closer to nature<br>Adds value to the visitor experience through self-discovery<br>Can manage visitor interest and minimise disturbance to wildlife | Views of wildlife can be unpredictable<br>The best places may be in remote and unstaffed locations<br>Enclosed hides can be intimidating for some people<br>Visitors may need their own optical equipment to get good views |

| Media and Technique | Application | Strengths | Limitations |
|---|---|---|---|
| **4. Role of rangers, guides and volunteers: Guided Tours and face-to-face interpretation** | Rangers provide information, orientation, explanation, manage expectations, raise awareness, manage on-site behaviour<br><br>Rangers can offer drama, music, poetry as well as walks and events<br><br>Roving rangers can 'walk the site', and meet and greet visitors as well as being on 'information duty'<br><br>Tours can cover a wide range of topics, tailored to visitors with different levels of interest and knowledge<br><br>Rangers can lead 'working parties' where visitors can engage at a more personal level with the site. | Powerful and highly effective<br><br>Rangers can respond quickly to visitor needs and questions<br><br>Information supplied can be constantly updated and tailored to the needs of the visitors<br><br>Can easily facilitate the active involvement and engagement of visitors | Requires experienced and well trained rangers and volunteers<br><br>May not suit all types of visitor groups<br><br>A good range of tour topics need to be offered<br><br>Roving rangers is less practical on large and/or remote sites. |
| **5. Self-Guided Trails** | Visitors can follow a designated trail using a leaflet, signs, panels and/or audio commentary<br><br>A family-friendly activity with great opportunities for self-discovery<br><br>Provides excellent opportunities for site management messages within the trail materials. | Always available<br><br>Visitors can explore the site at their own pace<br><br>Visitor movement around the site can be managed effectively (in sensitive areas)<br><br>Trails can be tailored to different visitor groups | A 'fixed message' is given to the visitor<br><br>Trails need to be regularly checked and maintained<br><br>Trail signage needs to be regularly checked, it can be attractive to vandals |
| **6. Electronic tools** | Use of mobile devices and apps, podcasts, interactive maps and downloadable audio trails<br><br>Use of spy and web cams, with a live feed or edited highlights. Important for sensitive, potentially dangerous or inaccessible species<br><br>Use of these technologies to support other interpretive media and/or activities on the site. | Portable and convenient<br><br>Visitors are able to access the material they are interested in<br><br>Updating can be simple and easy<br><br>Visitors can add their own comments and even post photos. | Can be expensive to update and may need regular maintenance<br><br>High technical skills may be required<br><br>Cams in particular often rely on on-site explanation<br><br>Not appropriate on all sites and in specific locations<br><br>Quality of Wi-Fi / mobile connectivity may be an issue on some sites. |

(Table based on the work of: Newsome, Moore & Dowling, 2013; SNH/FCS, 2015; Ward & Wilkinson, 2006.)

# THE CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH INTERPRETING NATURE AND WILDLIFE

A number of challenges exist and the most common of them are commented on below:

### ■ *Wildlife / nature is unpredictable*

Your interpretation needs to be flexible to reflect the seasons, the weather conditions that day and the fact that the wildlife will not necessarily appear on cue. The key to wildlife and/or nature viewing is generally not to 'over promise', thus the ranger or volunteer should focus on the discovery of what *is* about as opposed to what *might* be about. You can use the unpredictability of wildlife viewing to remind your visitors about the rarity of many species. It is also advisable to focus on the wider 'natural' experience on a guided activity where you can, rather than concentrating on the sightings of a single or small group of species.

### ■ *Viewing wildlife is not like watching wildlife programmes on television*

You will almost certainly need to remind your visitors that it is not always possible to get up close to wildlife in a natural setting. Many visitors will arrive on-site with completely unrealistic expectations of how close they can get and how many species they will see, but any sort of direct and personal experience with nature can alleviate this and become a powerful and memorable encounter for them.

### ■ *Lack of experience*

Remember that many of your visitors may not be experienced in being 'in the wild' so give them time to become accustomed to it – do not under-estimate the novelty and excitement for them of simply being in the 'great outdoors'. Encourage them to ask questions and teach them how to 'stop, wait, look and listen'. For some of your visitors, simply walking quietly in a natural setting will prove to be challenging, think about fun ways in which you might introduce this idea to them.

## Some key tips with interpreting wildlife

Based upon the work of Higginbottom, 2004 and SNH/FCS, 2015:

■ Interpret a range of species which are likely to be easily visible (or at least easily audible) for your visitors;

■ Always interpret a good mix of species, not just the iconic ones (which they may have come to see);

■ Use your passion and enthusiasm to introduce species which they may be less familiar with, or possibly even less interested in;

■ Develop a range of activities, experiences and interesting facts and stories to reflect the locally abundant species which you are most likely to see with your visitors;

■ Keep the experience simple and focus upon visitor self-discovery whenever possible;

■ Provide regular updates on local sightings to keep your visitors engaged, notably with those species they are less likely to see;

■ Discuss the work being done locally to support the conservation of wildlife on-site and where possible, link it to national and even global conservation initiatives and strategies.

Looking out of a bird hide on a Scottish loch © ystewarthenderson / Adobe

# CASE STUDIES

Two case studies are presented here to illustrate the media and techniques which can be used.



Heathland in the New Forest © Phil / Adobe

## Case study 1. **A date with nature in the New Forest**

This project has run for over 10 years and is a partnership between the RSPB, New Forest National Park Authority, Forestry England and Carnyx Wild (filmmakers). Visitors are welcomed and introduced to the New Forest's wildlife through conversations with volunteers, live viewing of reptiles in specially designed 'pods', live streamed footage from bird of prey nests, models, films and a short visitor trail. Facilities are basic but include parking, toilets, picnic areas and a small hut where displays and information is housed. Volunteers are trained to assist the visitor to see native snakes, lizards and frogs in the pods, and to tell the story of the nesting success (or not) of the bird of prey. They also talk about the New Forest's ground nesting birds using a touchscreen activated film, bird models and a nature table, and thus share how visitors can help ground nesting birds when out in the National Park.

The site is open from April through to end August and has around 30,000 face-to-face contacts with visitors each year. Start-up funding was grant aided and running costs are shared between the partners. Additional funding has been obtained from housing developers to mitigate recreation impact. The site is staffed primarily by volunteers.

### Why was the interpretation activity undertaken?

Visitor facilities in the New Forest are dispersed across a wide area, and tend to be modest in scale. There was no one place where visitors could easily experience wildlife and talk to people about nature in the New Forest every day throughout the summer – this project provides that focus. The organisations all have different but compatible reasons for involvement, including membership recruitment, communication of management messages such as keeping to tracks during the ground nesting bird season and promoting understanding of the National Park's special qualities. These different objectives coalesce around a theme of how the New Forest is great for nature due to its unique management – through forestry and dispersed grazing (commoning). The interpretation enables all of these things to happen and increases dwell time at this site which helps with recreational management objectives.

## What did the interpretation achieve?

Evaluation of the interpretation is carried out through visual observation and a questionnaire. Visitors are asked what they did and how they rated elements of interpretation (reptile viewing, bird of prey nest cam etc.). They are also asked how much they feel they have learned about the New Forest's wildlife and if they think their experience will influence them in helping ground nesting birds. Dwell time has increased and results point to high levels of visitor satisfaction and learning about the New Forest's wildlife. Partners are able to point towards a successful project that both increase visitor understanding and helps management of the protected landscape.

## What are the key learning points?

Multiple partner projects can be difficult to put together but help longevity and sharing of costs- and can draw in specific funding to interpret wildlife (such as the developer contributions).

A mix of media is well received by visitors – some relate more to the live footage, others to seeing the reptiles in the pods or the family friendly self-guided trail.

The pods and live web-cam reduce unpredictability (the wildlife is more likely to be there), but there are still times when viewing is limited, which is where the skill of the volunteers to tell the story with other items (recorded footage, props, models, a nature table) becomes very important.

The training of the volunteers takes place pre-season and during the season. It needs to provide them with some knowledge (e.g. resources on the key species, management and some important facts) but focuses mainly on the passion and enthusiasm as the most important things that a volunteer can bring, and introduces the idea of provoke, relate, reveal as shorthand for how to introduce objects or wildlife to visitors.

The project has benefitted from off-site interpretation via digital media – the live camera footage is broadcast on the web and through social media, allowing for follow up from visitors at home and interest from those who can't visit.

## Case study 2. **Fishnish Wildlife Hide, Isle of Mull**

In 2014, Forestry Commission Scotland (now Forestry and Land Scotland) agreed to host and manage a wildlife hide that had been given to them by the local community. The site chosen for the hide was at Fishnish; an easily accessible site very close to the Lochaline ferry. The site offers great views over the Sound of Mull and the potential to see a wide range of Mull's wildlife. Species seen in the area include otters, seals, cetaceans, white-tailed eagles plus a large range of coastal and sea birds.

### Why was the interpretation activity undertaken?

The position of the hide meant that there would be a lot of visitors passing close by, with the opportunity to attract non-specialist visitors and tourists as well as keen wildlife watchers. We felt that the hide could act as a positive introduction to the wildlife of Mull and the other wildlife watching opportunities that were available across the island. We also wanted to promote responsible wildlife watching. Our identified audiences included wildlife tourists, families on holiday, local residents and older and disabled visitors.

### What did we hope the interpretation would achieve?

We hoped that visitors would:

• feel welcome to the Fishnish wildlife hide;

• feel amazed and inspired by Mull's wildlife;

• feel Fishnish was a great place to watch for wildlife;

• understand that Mull was home to wide range of wildlife;

• understand that there are lots of ways to enjoy the wildlife of Mull;

• understand that some of this wildlife is sensitive to disturbance;

• watch wildlife responsibly on Mull;

• support the conservation of wildlife on Mull;

• have a great time and want to come back.



Ben More on Mull © George Robertson / Adobe

## What did we do?

Apart from occasional ranger-led events, the hide was unstaffed. The interpretation needed to be robust, low-maintenance and inexpensive to produce. Because of this, we chose to use static graphic panels.

The tone we used was informative, but informal and friendly.

We used good quality images with minimal text: you don't need to read the text to understand what wildlife to look for.

As well as iconic species, we included images of the common birds which visitors were more likely to see.

We included Gaelic names (with a pronunciation guide) for cultural flavour.

We promoted other wildlife watching opportunities and organisations including Mull Eagle Watch, the Mull Otter Group and the Hebridean Whale & Dolphin Trust.

We promoted responsible wildlife watching and the availability of guided wildlife watching trips.

We included a white board for recent sightings here and elsewhere on Mull.

We included a map of the island for orientation.

We were able to produce the interpretation relatively cheaply using 3mm aluminium composite panels. We fitted these ourselves.

## What are the key learning points?

Accepting a 'free' wildlife hide cost us quite a lot, but the end result has been worth it.

It would have been good to help design the hide before we were given it: a significant amount of snagging was needed before we could fit the interpretation.

Writing up a plan for the interpretive fit-out helped everyone involved to understand what we were doing.

We are really lucky to have good in-house designers to work with.

Having local staff to call into the hide to check / clean / stock leaflets is important.

The interpretation here is just part of the wider visitor experience – it all needs to be managed and maintained.

Further support of the wildlife watching experience by fitting a telescope or binoculars would probably help visitors new to wildlife watching.

Assessing the effectiveness of an unstaffed facility like this is not easy – we have not yet done this.
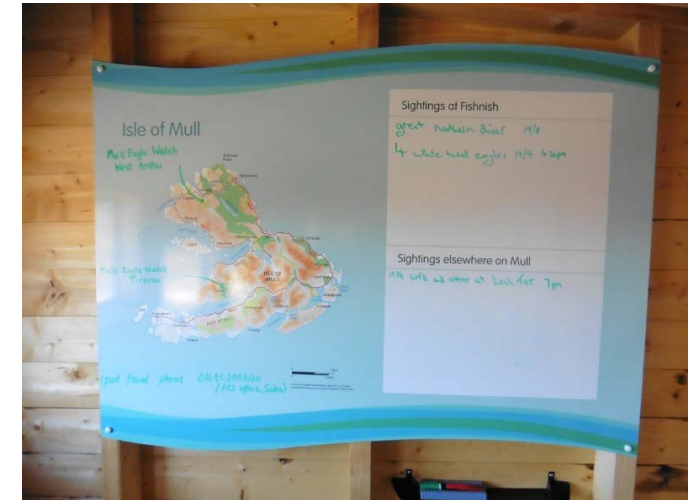




Images © Paul Hibberd

# CONCLUDING REMARK

The value of interpretation on natural sites in enhancing the visitor experience and potentially reducing visitor impacts has been widely accepted. Its importance in part lies in its ability to entertain, educate and inform but perhaps more importantly to inspire visitors about the beauty, complexity but above all the fragility of this natural world around us.

# SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

■ Higginbottom, K (ed.). 2004. *Wildlife tourism: impacts, management and planning.* Altona, VIC: Common Ground Publishing Ltd. Ch. 12. The role of interpretation in wildlife tourism.

■ Newsome, D., Moore, S. A. & Dowling, R. K. 2013. *Natural area tourism: ecology, impacts and management.* (second edition). Bristol: Channel View Publications. Ch. 6. Interpretation for nature tourism.

■ Scottish Natural Heritage & Forestry Commission Scotland. 2015. *Wildlife interpretation guidelines.* Available as PDF download here.

■ Shackley, M. 1996. *Wildlife tourism.* London: International Thomson Business Press

■ Sharpe, G. W. (ed.). 1976. *Interpreting the environment.* New York: John Wiley & Sons.

■ Ward, C. W. and Wilkinson, A. E. 2006. *Conducting meaningful interpretation: a field guide for success.* Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing.