

AHI article (Spring 2018)

Reporting Research 4 – experience versus expectations: interpretation in natural settings.

A study in 2016 from the Kruger National Park, South Africa explored the importance of interpretation to the visitor experience but in so doing also specifically focused upon visitor expectations and whether or not the on-site interpretation offered actually met their needs. It is already recognised that high quality on-site interpretation can not only add value to the visitors' experience but increasingly can deepen their understanding of the site and potentially the need for them to respect it (Ham, 2013; SNH, 2015; Ward & Wilkinson, 2006). A number of recent studies have shown that this increased awareness can also translate into a broader environmental understanding generally, increased support directly or indirectly for conservation initiatives and for the protection of individual species or indeed whole systems (Ham, 2013). In a recent study by Kruger *et al.* (2017) in the Kruger National Park, 'secondary and tertiary interpretation' scored $m=4.11$ (mean) as factors which supported a 'memorable visitor experience' although the two most important factors were 'amazement' [in the viewing opportunities] ($m=4.29$) and 'variety of species' ($m=4.27$). Botha *et al.* (2016) also suggest that ensuring 'personal relevance' is particularly important if you are attempting to inform and educate visitors about the rarity of certain species and the efforts being put in place to conserve them.

The Kruger National Park is situated in the Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces of South Africa and is arguably the most high profile of the 21 parks managed by South African National Parks (Botha *et al.*, 2016; SANParks, 2018). It receives upwards of 1.4 million visitors per year with approximately 350,000 of these spending at least one night in the park itself (Kruger *et al.*, 2017). Visitors are hugely important to the Kruger National Park where some 80% of its core funding comes directly from visitor revenue notably through accommodation and admission fees (Kruger *et al.*, 2017; SANParks, 2018). In terms of attractiveness of the park itself 'biodiversity' (mean=4.29) was the most important competitive advantage factor followed by 'eminence' ($m=4.18$) and then 'accommodation' ($m=4.05$) (Kruger *et al.*, 2017:323). The profile of regional and international visitors to the park is relatively stable (Kruger *et al.*, 2017) and is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of visitors to the Kruger National Park, South Africa
(adapted from Botha *et al.*, 2016; Kruger *et al.*, 2017; SANParks, 2018).

Language: Afrikaans (48%); English (35%)	Gender: Male (56%); Female (44%)
Average age: 46 years	Marital status: Married (70-80%)
Province of residence: Gauteng (57%); Mpumalanga (13%); RSA (87%)	International visitors: Netherlands (19%); USA (14%); Germany (12%); UK (10%); Australia (9%); New Zealand (9%)
Level of education: Diploma/Degree (36%); PG Degree (21%)	Length of stay: average 8.19 nights

The park itself is approximately 2 million hectares in extent and is managed for the conservation of its rich biodiversity, to provide human benefits and to 'preserve as far

as possible the wilderness qualities and cultural resources associated with the park' (SANParks, 2018). The flagship animal species found in the park which are perhaps most attractive to visitors are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Profile of flagship animal species located in the Kruger National Park, South Africa (Adapted from SANParks, 2018).

Chacma Baboon; Bushbaby Vervet & Samango Monkey;	Pangolin; Porcupine; Aardvark; Cape & Scrub Hare; Hyena	Elephant; Zebra; Giraffe; Warthog; Hippopotamus
Bat-eared Fox; Jackal; Wild Dog; Serval; Cheetah; Lion; Leopard	Otter; Honey Badger; Mongoose; Genet; Civet	Black & White Rhinoceros
Buffalo; Eland; Kudu; Nyala; Duiker; Roan & Sable Antelope; Waterbuck; Wildebeest; Impala		

Sightings of the "Big Five" remain something of an imperative for many visitors and the Kruger National Park currently has good opportunities for these species with an estimated 1,500 lion, 17,000 elephant, 48,000 buffalo, 1,000 leopards, 8,000 white and 300 black rhino (SANParks, 2018).

Currently, no formal interpretation strategy exists within the park however educational programmes are offered which focus principally on outreach into the local communities (Botha *et al.*, 2016; SANParks, 2018). The current management plan for the park was updated in 2008 and is due for review in 2018. The role of interpretation is therefore somewhat variable currently but is broadly stated as being to 'create a memorable experience' leading to 'increased loyalty', 'competitive advantage' and 'contributing to the sustainability' of the park (Botha *et al.*, 2016:163; SAN Parks, 2018).

Botha *et al.* (2016) in investigating visitor expectations, used as a guide, the categories of interpretative service outlined by Stewart *et al.* (1998) in their study of Mount Cook National Park, New Zealand where they identified: **primary services** (the visitor centre and its associated displays, panels, models and staff); **secondary services** (written or verbal commentaries during on-site activities) **and tertiary services** (marketing materials, merchandise and informal conversations with on-site staff) (Stewart *et al.*, 1998). Botha *et al.*'s research was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire which was issued in the rest camps within the park, distribution took place in the evenings which ensured respondents had ample time to complete the survey. 855 questionnaires were duly completed. The design of the questionnaire included a Section A which captured the demographic data and a Section B which contained statements about 24 interpretative services offered within the park. For the 'expected' services, respondents were measured on the importance they placed against them on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = extremely important / 5 = not important at all) and for the 'actual experience' of the service, a 5-point Likert scale (1 = excellent / 5 = very poor). Factor analysis was applied to the resulting data and services with a loading value (weighting) of more than 0.2 were identified as contributing to the overall factor. A summary of the key results are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean results: expectations and experiences of respondents (Botha *et al.*, 2016:170-171).

Factor: Expectations		Factor: Experiences	
Primary services (Mean Likert score: 2.42)	Loading value	Primary services (Mean Likert score: 2.92)	Loading Value
Interpretation activities, e.g. slide shows, informative sessions and specialist talks	.825	Geological and climatological displays	.821
Authenticity of interpretation	.825	Interpretation activities, e.g. slide shows, informative sessions and specialist talks	.817
Auditorium with nature videos	.780	Educational talks, activities and games for children	.810
Interactive field guides on game drives and guided walks	.780	Educational displays	.771
Geological and climatological displays	.716	Information boards regarding the fauna/flora in the park	.668
Educational displays	.527	Information regarding the history of the park	.656
Educational talks, activities and games for children	.513	Auditorium with nature videos	.637
Information regarding the history of the park	.401	Life-like examples of different animals, insects, birds and trees with descriptive data	.491
Information boards regarding the fauna/flora in the park	.388	Identification of trees, e.g. nameplates or information boards	.425
Life-like examples of different animals, insects, birds and trees with descriptive data	.366	Authenticity of interpretation	.421
Information centres and interpretation centres in specific rest camps	.264	Information centres and interpretation centres in specific rest camps	.407
Identification of trees, e.g. nameplates or information boards	.234	Interactive field guides on game drives and guided walks	.268
Secondary services (Mean Likert score: 1.74)	Loading value	Secondary services (Mean Likert score: 2.42)	Loading value
Clear directions to rest camps and picnic areas	.964	Clear directions to rest camps and picnic areas	.886
Available route maps with descriptive information	.951	Available route maps with descriptive information	.813
Enforcement of park rules and regulations	.764	Information regarding interpretation in the park available on the web	.457
Information regarding interpretation in the park available on the web	.626	Lookout points in the park	.450
Lookout points in the park	.567	Information boards with animal tracking	.429
Information boards with animal tracking	.515	Enforcement of park rules and regulations	.358
Bird hides in the park	.324	Bird hides in the park	.309
Knowledgeable staff (Mean Likert score: 1.74)	Loading value	Knowledgeable staff (Mean Likert score: 3.13)	Loading value
Informed staff who can handle any queries concerning the interpretation aspects in the park	.647	Informed staff who can handle any queries concerning the interpretation aspects in the park	.630

Based upon these results, it seems that the respondents regard 'primary interpretative services' (m=2.42), 'secondary interpretative services' (m=1.74) and 'knowledgeable staff' (1.74) as being 'important' or 'extremely important' to their visit. However only 'secondary services' met the respondents' expectations (m=1.74) since they appear to have scored their experience of these as being 'sufficient' (m=2.42). As a result, the visitors expectations of 'primary services' (m=2.42) and 'knowledgeable staff' (1.74) have not been fully met in the park since these two factors were only scored as being 'fair' (m=2.92 and 3.13 respectively) indicating that there is potential for improvement in the current provision (summarised from Botha *et al.*, 2016:169).

Interestingly, the data also indicates which services carry the strongest loading in relation to each of the three interpretative factors. Thus for 'primary services',

expectations about the 'visitor centre, its displays and accompanying slide shows' were rated as 'important' and this together with 'geology and climatological displays' was reinforced by the actual experience which based upon these results 'could be improved'. For 'secondary services', 'directional signs', 'route maps' and 'access' are all important in terms of expectations and again all three appear to be carrying the strongest loading in terms of the visitor's actual experience suggesting that the park has sufficient 'internal signage' and 'access' to meet current visitor needs. Despite levels of experience only being rated as 'fair', 'well-informed and knowledgeable staff' achieves a similar loading in terms of both visitor expectations and actual experience.

What might the implications of these results be on your site?

1. *'The research confirms the factors which are of most important to ecotourists visiting the Kruger National Park'*. In summary, 'primary interpretative services' and 'knowledgeable staff' clearly play a critically important role within the visitor experience as does a reliance on 'secondary services' (notably directional signage, maps and access). It seems reasonable to expect that these results could be applied to other natural locations. How do these results by factor correspond to the visitors' expectations and experiences on your site?
2. *'A second finding is the difference between expected and experienced services'*. This again bears critical consideration and reflection. What evidence do you have on your site that your visitors' expectations are regularly being met? How do you currently measure and subsequently analyse and evaluate your visitors' prior expectations as opposed to their actual on-site experiences?

In conclusion, the studies of both Botha *et al.* (2016) and Kruger *et al.* (2017) have revealed that visitors to the Kruger National Park are well educated, expect information-rich experiences and as a result the associated interpretative services to be of high quality. Locations like this which rely heavily on income from visitors to service their financial budget need to ensure that their on-site interpretative services deliver on both the expectations but also the actual experience of their visitors. Thus for a park manager, the planning, delivery and evaluation of interpretative services across the park should be a continuous activity within their overall visitor management strategy.

(1,391 words)

References

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For further information on the interpretation of nature and wildlife, please do consult the latest AHI Best Practice Guidelines, written by Jim Mitchell and Philip Ryland (*Natural interpretation: a brief guide to the interpretation of nature and wildlife. AHI Best Practice Guidelines no. 13*).