

## AHI article (Spring 2023)

### Bitesize 3 – Visitor experiences on a self-guided trail

One respondent described a recent experience on a self-guided trail as:  
*'I loved feeling completely lost in glorious countryside'* (Respondent 36, 2022).

Whilst this feeling may not be what most visitors wish, self-guided trails do provide a brilliant opportunity for visitors to explore a location in a safe, yet managed way, via a trail leading them through a sequence of stops or 'stations'. Trails are widely offered across natural and heritage sites. Traditionally, they were associated with a leaflet or booklet and waymarked signs, panels and posts; today many are linked to mobile phone and app technology. Following a self-guided trail can inform and inspire, but also challenge the visitor, allowing them to make direct connections with the site and what they can see around them, but beyond that, trails can create new experiences, stimulate special moments and create meaningful memories.

This piece of research undertaken by Philip Ryland asked visitors at a range of natural sites the question 'What do you want from a self-guided trail?'

Fifty groups of visitors were approached, of these: none were visiting on their own; 21 were with a partner and 29 were with family and/or friends. They were asked if this was their first visit to the site and for 38 groups it was. A breakdown of this information as it links to their social grouping is detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Profile of visitors**

<b>Social grouping</b>	<b>Is this your first visit to the site?</b>
With partner = 21 (42%)	Yes = 11 (52%)
With family &/or friends = 29 (58%)	Yes = 27 (93%)
Total = 50 groups	Total = 38 groups

In exploring the style of self-guided trail which they had most recently undertaken, the following information emerged, in Table 2.

**Table 2. Profile of visitors' trail experience**

<b>Style of trail</b>		
<b>Format for trail</b>	Paper-based (18 = 36%)	Audio-based (32 = 64%)
<b>Length</b>	Under 1 hour (38 = 76%)	More than 1 hour (12 = 24%)
<b>Stations or Panels</b>	Yes (42 = 84%)	No (8 = 16%)
<b>Reassurance markers</b>	Yes (28 = 56%)	No (22 = 44%)
<b>Designed for families</b>	Yes (32 = 64%)	No (18 = 36%)

Trapp, Gross & Zimmerman (1994) suggest there are three principal elements in the design of a self-guided trail, namely: creating mystery, variety and beauty. Mystery provokes visitor curiosity, whilst variety provides contrast and diversity. Beauty, they suggest focuses on the spectacle of the landscape; its colours, textures but also timeliness quality. But what did the visitors say about their experience? In terms of their views of the purpose and features of a self-guided trail, nine main themes emerged, which are summarised in Table 3 below:

**Table 3. What do you want from a self-guided trail: main themes identified**

Provide scenic view points (43 = 86% / 8+35)*	Provide places to see wildlife where they congregate – deer and a range of birds were mentioned, notably waders, birds of prey, tits and woodpeckers (41 = 82% / 10+31)	Provide places to stop, rest and relax (38 = 76% / 4+34)
Ensure the trail is well signed – use of reassurance markers was mentioned as being important (34 = 68% / 2+32)	Provide informative and memorable information – family orientated material was mentioned repeatedly (29 = 58% / 6+23)	Provide opportunities to undertake activities during the trail – looking for specific things was mentioned (26 = 52% / 7+19)
At each station, make direct connections with the site – history and wildlife were specifically mentioned (24 = 48% / 4+20)	Create some form of mystery and/or surprise to the trail and its route (21 = 42% / 2+19)	Provide opportunities to make choices on the route taken (15 = 30% / 3+12)

\*: Clarification of figures: Total number and percentage out of the 50 groups who mentioned the theme. 8+35, where 8 refers to repeat visitors and 35 to first-time visitors.

So, what do these results suggest about the design of a self-guided trail?

1. *'Making direct connections', 'Seeing wildlife' and 'Providing memorable information'* proved to be important features. The information provided on a trail should of course be relevant to your audience but most importantly it should capture their attention, provoke questions and encourage active engagement with the site, its landscape and wildlife. Memorable information about the site can be enhanced through effectively layered messages delivered in a logical sequence and tightly focused around an overall theme. The making of connections is nicely illustrated by a respondent who described part of their experience as: *'We stopped at the lake and were encouraged to look around for any birds, it was such a special moment when Ben spotted a heron'* (Respondent 21, 2022).
2. *'Provide opportunities to undertake activities'* also proved to be a popular response. Asking questions and provoking discussion within and even between visitor groups can be highly effective. Many trails also incorporate various forms of scavenger-type hunt to encourage interaction and a more dynamic experience. Sniff or touch boxes are also popular. Ham (1992) suggests that the design of each station should focus upon 'look – listen – compare' as a way of encouraging visitors to engage directly with the site, and ask themselves the question 'What do you feel about it?' A good example of interaction came from Respondent 12 (2022) who said: *'We had never hugged a tree before – and, its smell was amazing!'*
3. *'Use mystery or surprise to enhance the experience'*. A simple technique is to ensure stations cannot be viewed from one another and where possible natural features are used to obscure the view along the trail. Try and create a situation where visitor curiosity over 'what comes next' is maintained throughout the trail. Curves in the route can also be used to achieve the same effect, although this approach can sometimes fail, as Respondent 5

(2022) said: *'The trail was quite curvy so we just cut across it, in some places'*.

4. The value of carefully design messages at each station is also critical. It is important that the messages focus on observable features, avoid unfamiliar or complex language and encourage active visitor involvement. The development of a thematic map for the whole trail can help to ensure that each station's messages link directly to the overall theme and where layering of information is used, this is sequenced correctly. Respondent 41 (2022) said: *'The geology was quite complicated, but I think we sort of got it, by the end of the trail'*.

In conclusion, I defer to Ham (1992) who in discussing the development of a successful thematic map for a trail suggested that the designer should follow the mantra: 'focus – explain – connect', which I think is nicely encapsulated by the comment from Respondent 28 (2002) who said: *'We knew little about the site when we arrived, but the trail was amazing, we shall certainly now be coming back again'*.

## **References**

Trapp, S., Gross, M. and Zimmerman, R. 1994. *Signs, trails and wayside exhibits: connecting people and places*. Stevens Point, WI; University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Foundation Press Inc.

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

Sharpe, G.W. 1976. *Interpreting the environment*. New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

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**Next issue: What do visitors want from exhibit labels in a museum.**