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Presentation: The guided walk experience: what do visitors think?

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Abstract

Researchers can unquestionably argue that interpretation as a visitor management tool is now well-established within the tourism industry, such that much of the current research now focuses specifically upon the evaluation of the various interpretive media adopted (Munro *et al.*, 2008). This presentation is based upon a current PhD study exploring whether the overall range of on-site interpretive experiences and most notably guided walks meets the needs and interests of the visitors at two locations on the Jurassic Coast World Heritage site, in Dorset.

Specifically, the presentation will report on the attitudes of visitors towards their on-site guided walk experience and in so doing will conclude by summarising good practice in terms of the design of guided walks which could be used to support the successful enhancement of the visitor experience at designated natural areas and notably, natural World Heritage sites.

Presentation

1.0 Background to the visitor survey

600 visitors were interviewed between April and October at two locations along 'The Jurassic Coast' World Heritage site, Dorset.

The survey explored the visitors;

- ~ choice of on-site activities,
- ~ interest in and demand for on-site interpretive facilities.

The demographics of the respondents were;

- ~ 45% local, 55% tourist, with 66.7% being repeat visitors,
- ~ 47.5% visiting with 'family and friends', 36.7% with their partner and 14% were alone,
- ~ 24.0% were aged 36-45, 21.9% were aged 45-55 and 23.2% were over 65,
- ~ 45.5% were in full-time employment and 23.5% retired,
- ~ 45.8% chose to stay for between 1-2hrs and 39.7% for 2-4hrs.

2.0 Demand for interpretation

Demand for:

- ~ a visitor centre
 - locals (63.7%) – first-time visitors (41.0%)
- ~ on-site staff
 - locals (74.7%) – first-time visitors (47.5%)
- ~ signs, panels, displays and exhibits
 - locals (71.8%) – first-time visitors (49.5%)
- ~ guided walks
 - repeat visitors (13.5%) – first-time visitors (10%)

3.0 Views on guided walks

3.1 Why undertake a guided walk?

- ~ an enjoyable activity (79.1%)
- ~ to view wildlife (67.3%) – (1st for 43.6%)
- ~ to learn more about the site (64.5%)
- ~ I wanted to ask questions (20.9%)
- ~ someone else made the choice for me (11.8%)

3.2 What are the problems you find with taking part?

- ~ 'takes too long' ('always finish late')
 - first-time visitors (36.8%) – locals (24.6%)
- ~ 'too many people' ('difficult to see' / 'people talking')
 - tourists (34.3%) – locals (25%)
- ~ 'too much knowledge assumed / expected'
 - first-time visitors (15.3%) – locals (7.6%)
- ~ 'attract experts'
 - first-time visitors (60.4%) – locals (43.6%)

3.3 What length of walk would you prefer?

- ~ up to 1 hr: first-time visitors (64.2%)
- ~ up to 2 hrs: alone (60.3%) / locals (53.2%)

3.4 Good practice in leading a guided walk

3.4.1. Promotion of the walk

- ~ agree a topic and theme and map to route, likely audience and goals
- ~ plan the route carefully considering; length, access, difficulty, numbers staging / end area, loop, number of stops etc.

3.4.2. Welcome and introduction (start on time)

- ~ welcome be visible, greet everyone (read your audience)
- ~ opening remarks - introduction + comments on the walk (route, time, physical demands, 'ground rules')
- ~ move to the first stop (selected to accommodate latecomers)

3.4.3. During the walk

- ~ lead from the front - watch your pace, keep to schedule but, watch out for 'teachable moments'
- ~ be a good host and involve everyone - keep monitoring the response of your audience, can they look for things?, use their senses, get involved at stops?
- ~ answer Qs as you walk - don't let individuals monopolise you!
repeat the Q and A at a relevant stop
- ~ managing each stop - position group half each side, use of arc/elevation?
face group, use friendly and relaxed style,
use pauses and silence to emphasize points

3.4.4 Closure

- ~ end on time, you can always leave them wanting more!
- ~ make any final announcements and thank them for coming
- ~ close with a clear, strong conclusion - the theme : the site : the experience, and, complete the closure before reaching the staging area!

Note for readers: it is hoped that the full results of this research study will be written up for publication next year.

4.0 Recommended further reading

Ham, S.H. 1992. Environmental interpretation: a practical guide for people with big ideas and small budgets. Ch. 5. How to prepare and present a guided tour or walk.

Regnier, K., Gross, M. and Zimmerman, R. 1994. The interpreter's guidebook: techniques for programs and presentations (3rd ed). Ch. 6. Trail techniques.

Sharpe, G.W. 1976. Interpreting the environment. Ch. 8. Conducted activities.

Widner Ward, C. and Wilkinson, A.E. 2006. Conducting meaningful interpretation: a field guide for success. Ch. 7. Taking the talk on the road.

+ articles from *Interpretation, Journal of Interpretation Research, Legacy*