

## **NAEE article (Spring 2019)**

### **Interpretation: creating memorable moments through informal education**

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Environmental interpretation is widely accepted as a process of communication which aims to deliver meaningful information in an informal, relaxed way to visitors (Benton, 2009; Brochu, 2003). The type of information provided varies considerably between sites but will typically include a range of carefully selected themes and/or messages which are designed to increase the visitor's understanding, experience and appreciation of the site's wildlife, geology, landscape and peoples. However, information provisioning is only one aspect of interpretation, for as Tilden (1977:8) stated:

*'interpretation should capitalise on mere curiosity for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit.'*

One of the most widely recognised forms of on-site interpretation is where a guide, volunteer or ranger leads a group of visitors on an informal guided walk around the site stopping at various points of interest on the way (Ham, 2013; Ward and Wilkinson, 2006). In studies from 2015 and 2018 by one of the author's, the reasons for visitor engagement with a guided walk on The Jurassic Coast included:

- ~ 'it is an enjoyable activity' (85%, 2018 / 79%, 2015);
- ~ 'to view wildlife' (72%, 2018 / 67%, 2015);
- ~ 'to learn more about the site' (67%, 2018 / 65%, 2015);
- ~ 'to spend time with the family' (24%, 2018).

and in terms of the wildlife, the visitors wished to see:

- ~ birds (85%, 2018 / 79%, 2015);
- ~ butterflies (68%, 2018 / 70%, 2015);
- ~ flowers (65%, 2018 / 68%, 2015);
- ~ marine life (42%, 2018 / 46%, 2015);
- ~ geology (38%, 2018 / 29%, 2015);
- ~ 'general wildlife' (36%, 2018 / 17%, 2015).

Visitor participation is a very important part of a guided walk and typically may include handling and smelling objects, spotting the signs and tracks of animals as well as sharing opinions and feelings about the site and most importantly the wildlife seen. Indeed as Lewis (1980:27) reminded us, visitors remember about *'10% of what they hear, 30% of what they read; 50% of what they see and 90% of what they do'*. Encouraging the establishment of an emotional connection with the site is an important aspect of interpretation and this can be facilitated on a guided walk in a variety of ways including: the passion and emotion of the

guide's commentary; the direct participation of the visitors as well as the use of 'teachable moments' (Brochu and Merriman, 2002; Ham, 2013). 'Teachable moments' provide the opportunity for the guide to engage with the group on an individual basis and 'moments of reflection' allow for the potential development of a stronger 'personalised experience' (Ward and Wilkinson, 2006). The use of 'spirit of place' in particular can also often be highly effective in simulating a strong association and connection with the site.

A model which has been widely adopted in order to develop effective and successful interpretation is the TORE model (Ham 2013) where TORE stands for 'Thematic, Organised, Relevant and Enjoyable'. In applying this model to a guided walk, the leader of the walk should consider the following points.

**Thematic** – Develop an interesting theme for your walk. How does the theme support your overall on-site goals? What story are you going to tell? Use your theme or key message to help weave and reveal a fascinating tale during the walk.

**Organised** - Present your information in a way that is easy to follow. Keep the information linked to your theme. Don't jump in 'at the deep end' with detailed facts, but build the story as you go.

**Relevant** – Relate your content to your audience's interests and experience, for example by using *universal concepts*. These are things that all people relate to: emotions, needs and desires, fascinations with mystery, suspense and our wider place in history, culture and the universe.

**Enjoyable**- This doesn't mean that the walk has to be laugh-a-minute. But, it does need to be something the audience wants to spend their leisure time doing. The subject matter could be dark, but people can still 'enjoy' a scary or haunting experience. In a nutshell – avoid being boring or dull by keeping things moving and lively during the walk.

The following comments reflect recent research undertaken by the authors to capture feedback from visitors who undertook informal guided activities in two locations across Dorset and Hampshire, UK.

### **Guided walks undertaken on a World Heritage site, the Jurassic Coast, UK.**

Two comments illustrating the use of 'teachable moments' are:

*'He spotted the Green Woodpecker in flight and we all followed it to get a closer look, what a beautiful bird it was'* (Respondent 509, 2017);

*'We were looking at the rock pools when a small crab appeared, the guide picked it up for us and talked about the life of a crab in the Cove, it was great'* (Respondent 586, 2017).

The use of 'spirit of place' to encourage an emotional experience can be deliberately stimulated through the enhanced use of the visitor's senses (Davidson and Black, 2007), two examples are:

*'We sat there and felt the cool water on our feet and imagined what it was like to be a crab' (Respondent 586, 2017);*

*'We sat there in the sunshine and I felt I could hear the earth breathing' (Respondent 549, 2017).*

Davidson and Black (2007) also suggest that two-way communication where knowledge is shared and where visitors listen to one another as well as the guide can be powerful in establishing a connection, such as:

*'We all shared our knowledge and experiences, it was wonderful' (Respondent 510, 2017).*

For visitors being able to 'take part' and 'get involved' can make a walk really special. Sharing wildlife identification tips is commonly mentioned by visitors as an example of this, such as:

*'During the walk, we collected some empty shells and laid them on a rock, xxx then identified them for us' (Respondent 589, 2017);*

*'I shall always remember the sound of that skylark ..... we learnt so many birds songs that morning' (Respondent 529, 2017).*

### **Guided activity undertaken in the New Forest National Park, UK.**

Feedback from the New Forest National Park Walking Festival (2016 and 2017) gives further support to the need to create activities to explore and experience nature using several senses, such as:

*'Very lovely walk, feeling, listening seeing, touching, smelling, using all your senses. The guide was very good and explained everything, what we doing, why and when' (Nature Connection walk, 2017)*

*'The guide was fabulous! Great with the kids. Lots of fun activities and challenges. She gave us some amazing food and drink to sample and all from foraging' (Wild Foods of the Forest walk, 2016)*

It is also important to involve the whole group, and not ignore younger participants. This is often commented upon in visitor feedback, such as:

*'I really appreciated those leading events - they were good at involving youngsters' (Wild Play walk, 2017)*

It is also wise not to underestimate the effect a good guide can have, even to those who might know the subject or area well:

*I enjoyed this walk immensely even though I know the history of the area extremely well. The guide was excellent, informative, friendly, very knowledgeable and approachable. I especially liked the snippets about the flora and fauna, and I saw a kingfisher for the first time in this area (well organised!!) (Guided walk, 2017)*

In summary, guided walks should show visitors, as Ham (1992:131) stated, *'things that they'd otherwise not see or that the untrained eye probably wouldn't notice'* and beyond that should inspire the visitor and awaken a sense of interest and potentially a personal connection to the site. Ultimately, as Diment (1992) stated, the success of the walk will be based upon the guide's passion and 'imagination' to inspire the visitors as illustrated by this comment:

*'Her infectious enthusiasm and interactive style made it a truly memorable morning'*  
(Respondent 514, 2017).

(1300 words)

## **Background to the study locations**

### **The Jurassic Coast: Dorset and East Devon World Heritage Site, UK.**

The Jurassic Coast was designated a World Heritage natural site (criteria i) in December 2001 through meeting the World Heritage criterion that a nominated site should be 'an outstanding example representing a major stage in the earth's history' (Jurassic Coast Trust, 2019; UNESCO, 2002). The site, of approximately 2,550ha comprises 95 miles (155 km) of unspoilt coastline (described in the designation as being from low water mark to cliff top) from Studland Bay on Purbeck to Orcombe Rocks near Exmouth, in East Devon (Brunsden, 2003; Jurassic Coast Trust, 2019). The Jurassic Coast World Heritage site is both nationally and internationally important in terms of its geology, geomorphology and perhaps most notably its fossils, it represents an impressive 185 million years of earth history covering Triassic, Cretaceous and Jurassic periods as well as offering a scenic and unspoilt coastline, cliffs and beaches (Brunsden, 2003).

### **The New Forest National Park, UK**

The New Forest National Park (219 square miles) is one of the jewels in the British landscape – a world capital for wildlife in the busy south of England. The New Forest has long been recognised as a beautiful place, rich in history and wildlife habitats; the

landscape shaped by the traditional practice of grazing animals. Its designation as a National Park gives it the highest level of landscape protection. In addition, over half the national park is designated as being of international importance for nature. It's also an excellent place for people to reconnect with the natural world, to improve their health through outdoor activities and boost their wellbeing by getting outside. Over 15.2 million recreational visitor days are taken in the national park each year.

### **The Association for Heritage Interpretation (AHI)**

The Association for Heritage Interpretation is an invaluable group for anyone interested in the field of interpretation – the art of helping people explore and appreciate our world. Its mission is to support practitioners, celebrate excellence and raise the profile of interpretation generally, in order that lives are enriched by great interpretation. The AHI offers a forum for ideas, debate, networking and the sharing of good practice. In so doing, it brings together people actively involved or concerned with the interpretation of natural and cultural heritage.

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