

AHI article (Summer 2022)

Bitesize 1 – What does Interpretation mean to you?

In the first of a new series of articles, Philip Ryland asked visitors at a range of natural and cultural sites the question ‘What does interpretation mean to you’?

Seventy-five groups of visitors were approached providing a total of 187 comments. Of the 75 respondents, 42 were visiting a heritage attraction and 33 a natural site. In terms of their social grouping: 12 were alone; 29 were with a partner and 34 with family and/or friends. A breakdown of this by site is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of visitors by site

At heritage sites	At natural sites
Alone = 5 (12%)	Alone = 7 (21%)
Partner = 14 (33%)	Partner = 15 (46%)
Family & Friends = 23 (55%)	Family & Friends = 11 (33%)

Asking this simple question felt timely with the release of a new definition of interpretation in August 2021 by the National Association for Interpretation (based in the USA). Their new definition states that interpretation is:

‘A purposeful approach to communication that facilitates meaningful, relevant, and inclusive experiences that deepen understanding, broaden perspectives, and inspire engagement with the world around us’.

Whilst historically, it was back in 1957 when Freeman Tilden, the son of a Boston newspaper publisher defined the profession and developed his own philosophy for interpretation in his book *‘Interpreting our Heritage’*. In this book, Tilden (1977:8) defined interpretation as:

‘An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.’

In developing his definition and therefore vision of 'interpretation', Tilden (1977) devised six principles. These have more recently been summarised in the form of three key components which together underpin the philosophy of modern interpretation:

- It is an educationally-orientated activity;
- Its purpose is to reveal the meanings and relationships between man and the environment, rather than merely delivering the facts about it,
- It needs a medium or range of media to illustrate these meanings and relationships.

This literature forms the background upon which this simple survey is based.

In answering the question posed, nine main themes emerged, which are summarised in Table 2 below:

Table 2. What does interpretation mean to you: main themes identified, as reported by actual number and overall %

Understand people / wildlife (n=32, 17%)
See things otherwise not available to the visitor (n=30, 16%)
Entertain the family (n=25, 13%)
Simplify the story (n=23, 12%)
Introduce the site (n=16, 8.5%)
Importance of the site (n=16, 8.5%)
Explore the site (n=16, 8.5%)
A souvenir (n=15, 8%)
Orientate the visitor (n=14, 7.5%)

'Understanding people or wildlife' proved the most popular theme (n=32, 17%) and whilst it applied to both types of sites, comments focused around bringing the past and/or wildlife 'to life' in a way which made them accessible for the visitor. Here are two examples of what visitors actually said:

'We felt the exhibition brought Victorian people to life' (Respondent 6, 2021)

'I felt I really appreciated the challenges they faced every day, scraping a living was really not easy, was it' (Respondent 15, 2021)

The second most popular theme was viewing areas of the site which were normally not open to the public for administrative, safety or resource protection reasons. As a result, visitors were asked to book access in advance and were typically accompanied by a guide. A number of visitors commented specifically on a feeling of privileged access which they liked and appreciated. Here are two examples of what visitors actually said:

'My daughter loved being able to go behind the scenes, she was thrilled by it' (Respondent 47, 2021)

'We got closer to the birds than we ever expected to be able to do' (Respondent 21, 2021)

The third most popular theme, perhaps somewhat inevitable given the proportion of visitors with families in the respondent group (n=45%) was 'to entertain the family'. Comments here focused on activities and experiences that involved and engaged the whole family. Two examples of comments made include:

'The clothes we tried on, were really itchy, my son didn't like them at all' (Respondent 71, 2021)

'The speed at which he wove the willow stems was incredible, we tried – it was really hard work' (Respondent 50, 2021)

In terms of themes which are missing from this data set, it is interesting to note that none specifically identified resource protection and its associated messages as a role for interpretation. Although within 'importance of the site' (n=16, 8,5%), two comments were made about 'rarity of species' and one comment about 'fragility of the site'.

Table 3. What does interpretation mean to you: main themes ranked by the different visitor groups and sites

	Heritage sites			Natural sites		
	Alone	Partner	Family & Friends	Alone	Partner	Family & Friends
Understand people or wildlife (n=32)	2 nd	3 rd	2 nd	2 nd	3 rd	2 nd
See things otherwise not available to the visitor (n=30)	1 st	1 st		3 rd	1 st	
Entertain the family (n=25)			1 st			
Simplify the story (n=23)		2 nd	3 rd		2 nd	3 rd
Importance of the site (n=16)	3 rd			1 st		1 st

In considering Table 3, for visitors 'on their own' or 'with a partner' at a heritage site, the two strongest responses were 'seeing things otherwise hidden' followed by 'understanding people / wildlife'. Whilst for 'visitors with family and/or friends', the strongest response was for 'entertaining the family', followed by 'simplifying the story'. At natural sites, 'importance of the site' was the strongest response for those visiting 'alone' and/or 'with family and/or friends'. For those visiting 'with a partner', the strongest preferences were identical for both natural and heritage sites.

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

1. *This survey demonstrates the importance of 'telling a good story' and 'revealing meanings'*. How well do you introduce your 'people and their history' or 'the species of wildlife' for your visitors? Do you have evidence that the stories you tell about them resonate and relate well with your visitors? Could you do more to bring the people, history or wildlife of your site 'to life'?
2. *Balancing education and entertainment through visitor experiences*. Enjoyment of their visit clearly remains critically important to visitors. Do you feel that you have the balance right on your site? Do your visitor surveys confirm this? Is there a greater opportunity for your visitors to engage with the messages of the site through a range of activities and experiences?
3. *Added value through experiences remains important*. This survey seems to suggest that going 'behind the scenes' with a guide is highly valued by visitors. Is this something you currently offer on your site? If not, what additional hands-on experiences can you offer? Are visitors encouraged to engage as a social group with these hands-on activities and experiences?

In concluding, Tilden (1977:13) said that '*successful interpretation should focus on the relationship between the visitors and the site*'. So, do you know your visitors and what they really think about your site?

(1,239 words)

References

National Association for Interpretation (2021). *Mission, Vision, and Core Values*. Available at https://www.interpnet.com/NAI/interp/About/About_NAI/What_We_Believe/nai/About/Mission_Vision_and_Core_Values.aspx?hkey=ef5896dc-53e4-4dbb-929e-96d45bdb1cc1), last accessed February 2022.

Tilden, F. 1977. *Interpreting our heritage* (3rd ed.). Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

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Next issue: What do visitors want from a visitor centre at a heritage site.