

Interpretation

Many people mistakenly label any form of Leaflet, guidebook, panel or tour as interpretive.

Facts and figures alone are not interpretive.

True interpretation follows an established philosophy which is supported by clear principles and guidelines.

The following, is a short introduction to the ideas and concepts employed in interpretive practice.

Definitions

“Interpretation enriches our lives through engaging emotions, enhancing experiences and deepening understanding of people, places events and objects from past and present”

Association of Heritage Interpretation U.K

“Interpretation is 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”

Freeman Tilden, 1957

“Interpretation is the translation of the language of the scientist, the voices of the past, and the significance of the places to help create meanings and connections with the people of the present”

Carolyn Widner Ward 2002

“Any communication process designed to reveal meanings and relationships of cultural and natural heritage to the public, through first hand involvement with an object, artifact, landscape or site”

Interpretation Canada

History

The roots of heritage Interpretation go back over 100 years.

Notable early naturalists in the United States like John Muir and Enos Mills , encouraged people to discover wild places. They helped visitors make deep and meaningful connections with nature.

Enos mills (1870 - 1922) became a well known nature guide and was the first to write about the art and science of interpretation.

Freeman Tilden (1883 - 1980) was a journalist, writer and poet who spent a number of years researching the effectiveness of public programs delivered by the National Park Service in The U.S. In 1957 he set down six guiding principles of interpretation that are still the bedrock of all interpretive media and programmes.

Tildens six principles:

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information.
3. interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural.
4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction but provocation.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part and must address itself to the whole person rather than any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to children should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach.

The National Association of Interpretation puts it more succinctly:

1. Relate. Compare, contrast, make personal
2. Reveal. help the visitor discover something new.
3. Arts. Employ multiple learning styles
4. Provoke. Inspire profound thought or action
5. Holistic. Give the resource context (the bigger story)
6. Appropriate. Consider the audience.

Or

Interpretation is entertaining
Interpretation is relevant
Interpretation is organised
Interpretation is thematic

Sam Ham (1992)

What interpreters have said

“ The thing to remember is that interpretation does not involve simply giving visitors facts, it aims to give them new insights, ideas and ways of looking at or appreciating a place. You may use facts to do this, but it is the ideas which are important”

James Carter

“We want to make an emotional connection as well, because when we experience feelings and emotions along with just facts and figures, we tend to store that information in different parts of our brain and we tend to keep it in longer term memory and it's there for us to access”

Bonnie Tippett

Read more:

Interpreting our Heritage.

Freeman Tilden
University Of North Carolina Press 2008
ISBN 978-0-8078-5867-7

Interpretation for the 21st century

Larry Beck & Ted Cable 2002
ISBN 1-57167-522-1

Personal Interpretation

Lisa Brochu & Tim Merriman
Interpress - National association of interpretation 2008
ISBN 1-879931-06-0

Making Visitors Mindful

Gianna Moscardo
Sagamore Publishing 1999
ISBN 1-57167-259-1

Applied Interpretation

Doug Knapp
Interpress 2007
ISBN 978-1-879931-23-0
Latest findings in interpretive research