# Interpretation and Sustainable Tourism: The Potential and the Pitfalls

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**ABSTRACT**. From the outset, proponents of sustainable tourism have, consciously or not, set great store by interpretation, and gradually the linkages between sustainable tourism and interpretation have begun to he developed. This discussion examines the potential benefits of linking interpretation and sustainable tourism and assesses a number of the pitfalls or difficulties which are involved. The potential benefits include improved visitor management, local economic and environmental gains and fuller community involvement. Among the several pitfalls of linking interpretation and sustainable tourism which are considered are the dangers of over-interpretation, intrusion, creating 'quaint' tourist landscapes, and those of elitism.

**RESUMEN:** Desde sus inicios, proponentes del turismo sustentable, conscientemente o no, definieron una gran base interpretativa, y gradualmente las relaciones entre turismo sustentable e interpretación han empezado a desarrollarse. Este artículo examina el potencial beneficio de ligar la interpretación y el turismo sustentable y examina los errores o dificultades involucradas. Entre los errores de relacionar la interpretación y el turismo sustentable se incluyen los peligros de la sobre interpretación, intrusión, creación "pintoresca" de paisaje turístico, y el elitismo.

**(This article is a reprint from the Journal of Sustainable Tourism, Volume 1, No. 2, 1993)**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

On March 1st, 1872, President Ulysses Simpson Grant of America signed an Act of Congress which was to have worldwide significance. Grant was a distinguished general, civil war victor and international statesman. But the Act he signed on that early spring day attracted little controversy or attention at the time. it brought into being the American National Park system. It was the first venture of its kind in the world. The National Park concept brought together the ideas of conservation, managed development, and visitor use for pleasure and recreation, The concept's success has since been enormous: few nations in the world do not now possess one or more National Parks of various kinds (Knudson, 1984).

In some ways, National Parks presaged many of the ideas of sustainable tourism, Sustainable tourism also involves managed development, conservation and visitor use. But in 1872, modem tourism was in its infancy. Although a number of railway companies were to use national parks as tourism development tools (Route, 1990), the worlds of tourism and of the national parks grew relatively separately for many years. Tourism was and is likely to remain a market-driven system. The National Park movement must always be a system driven by conservation, But their respective worlds have grown very much in parallel, and from time to time each has borrowed and used ideas from the other. Interpretation of both the natural and man-made heritage is one of those ideas.

Modern ideas about interpretation owe much to the pioneering work of Freeman Tilden, whose book interpreting our Heritage was written to guide the American National Park Service in 1957. Even then, tourism in America was already assuming enormous proportions: visits to State and National Parks were approaching 300 millions per year. Tilden hoped that better interpretation would provide a more satisfying recreational experience; he also linked greater knowledge of a subject or an area with a greater likelihood of care for that subject or area.

From the outset, proponents of sustainable tourism have, consciously or not, set great store by interpretation. Take the now well known checklists setting the parameters of what were then called 'hard' and 'soft' tourism, issued by Robert Jungk in 1980, and developed later by Jost Krippendorf and others. Many of the key points involved better interpretation of the natural and man-made heritage. 'Counseling and advice' was preferred to 'hard selling', 'tourist education' was to replace 'publicity cliches'. Historic and natural features were to be retained wherever possible, not swept away by new developments. The tourists themselves were envisaged eschewing 'sights' in favour of experiences', and often experiences which involved the learning of new knowledge, local languages, and were intellectually demanding. The introduction of more 'educational experiences' was felt to be one way in which many would obtain a more satisfying holiday (Jungk, 1980; Krippendorf, Zimmer & Glauber, 1988).

These early hopes are echoed in the name of one of Britain's pressure groups for more sustainable tourism, 'Tourism Concern'. If tourists understand the areas they visit, they will it is hoped — become concerned and will act responsibly towards local people, local lifestyles and natural features and habitats.

Gradually the linkages between interpretation and sustainable tourism have grown and they have begun to be turned from being theoretical ideals into practical reality. In this issue of the Journal of Sustainable' Tourism, C. Michael Hall outlines some important experiments in establishing those links which are being made in New Zealand. The intention of this present discussion is to assess more generally the potential benefits of linking interpretation and sustainable tourism and to consider some of the pitfalls which are involved.

## 2. POTENTIALLY POSITIVE EFFECTS

There are at least five areas where interpretation could assist in the develop - merit of more sustainable forms of tourism:

### 2.1 Visitor management

One of the more obvious connections between interpretation and sustainable tourism is the use of interpretation to influence visitor movement in both time and space for such reasons as directing visitors away from fragile environments (Cooper, 1991). This can be done by revealing alternative attractions, routes and areas and by subtle exhortation and suggestion. In Cluvelly' in South West England, an interpretation centre acts as a 'filter' through most tourists pass to gain access to the village. This explains the story of Clovelly to the nearly 400,000 visitors who come to this village of 400people, and has partially relieved the pressure of intrusion on its inhabitants (ETB, 1991).

Interpretation can also be a key to developing alternative under-used visitor destinations. A number of small towns in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan are successfully playing this card. •To the passing motorist there seems little of interest in man Prairie communities, often scarcely a century old and already finding times hard. But skilled interpretation can bring out the numerous fascinating stories of that last century. Rosthern, north of Saskatoon, has capitalised on its Mennonite heritage, and its links with the plant breeder, Seager Wheeler, who did so much to develop modem approaches to grain farming in North America. The grain story is developed in many different ways, not least by the sale of different types of high quality home-made bread and cakes in the local Arts Centre restaurant. Rosthem is now a small town to visit, not pass by. Further north, Duck Lake has celebrated its short story by painting murals on gable ends to tell of Is past, and opening a visitor centre to attract tourists off the main highway. West of Saskatoon, the tiny town of Hafford has interpreted the pelican nesting sites at nearby Redberry Lake, to show how skilled use of nature interpretation tan make an apparently feature-less landscape, fauna and flora, come alive. Incited the real test for the skilled interpreter is perhaps to be found in the hat lands of the world, whose many charms and delights are hidden from the average traveller. Hawkes & Williams (1993) look in more detail at some of these projects, which are attracting tourists to under—used destinations, and can have considerable importance to local economies as discussed below.

### 2.2 Local economic benefit

Interpretive facilities and activities can bring local economic benefit by, in the first instance, attracting visitors to a place which they may not otherwise have visited, and also by encouraging them to stay longer at a destination. Both effects offer potential for the place to generate enhanced income from visitor spending which can then be used for local economic development. By these means interpreted resources for visitors can help diversify and strengthen a declining or otherwise weak local economy and create jobs for the unemployed or underemployed. Skilled interpretation can also be used to direct visitors and their spending to those local businesses and services which are economically marginal but which are important elements of the local economy and community. These may be local post offices, food shops, craft workshops, establishtnents providing refreshment and food, or little-used local bus services, all of which offer valuable services for residents but might have to close without the additional expenditure of visitors, Interpretation can also be directed at specific features within the local community which are heritage and community assets but are regarded as having little economic value. These may he physical artefacts (such as street signs, post boxes and stone walls), facilities (such as little-used footpaths or a poorly used branch rail line), or cultural and heritage features (such as local festivals, longstanding customs and traditional industries). Interpretation can draw these local features to the attention of the visitor, explain them, and encourage their use if appropriate. This new valorisation of often small local assets can provide an additional justification to value and maintain them. In a world of economies of scale, fast, thoughtless travel and multi-national uniformity, locals and visitors alike will thank interpretation if it helps conserve amenity, heritage and the spirit of place.

### 2.3 Local environmental benefit

The use of Interpretation with the specific intention of securing conservation benefit has a long tradition and was a central principle of interpretation for Freeman Tilden. It has been suggested that when interpretation is sensitive and effective it may produce the following consequences. First it can enhance visitors' understanding of the places that they visit and of the people that live there. This may then encourage the visitors to be impressed by the qualities of the place and to value them, which in turn can encourage the visitors to want to assist and sustain the place, such as by altering their own behaviour during their visit so that it is more considerate arid sustainable (Herbert 1989; Lee, 1991). This model of the consequences of interpretation in changing attitudes and behaviour has appeal through its intuitive logic, and it has been widely assumed to apply. In practice, however, it may not happen. Certainly more research needs to be done to see if it Is a valid proposition and, if it is, then to what extent and in what circumstances it is valid.

### 2.4 Community involvement

Interpretation for visitors can be much more beneficial and sustainable if the local community is actively involved (Sinks, 1992). Wherever possible local people should be involved in helping to decide whether or not to interpret, what to interpret, wh0 to interpret to, as well as how to interpret. Local residents can take an active part in all the processes of interpretation, including the research and the presentation and celebration of place and people. Such community

participation can foster a sense of place, help empower individuals and the wider community, and assist in the forging of individual and group identities (Machin, 1989). More 5Pecifically, it can encourage communities to understand, to value and then to sustain their own environment, cultural resources and heritage.

### 2.5 Attitudes and values

If interpretation succeeds in increasing visitors' understanding and respect of the places they visit, including the culture of the people who live there, then it may go some Way to bringing less exploitative and more rewarding interactions between visitors and the host communities. If visitors appreciate the cultural heritage and the present patterns of life of the destination, this may also stimulate the hosts' pride in their heritage and their present way of life. The effects of this could include more preservation of local crafts, traditions and customs and a reduction in the 'demonstration effect' the effect whereby locals imitate the behaviour of tourists producing ever-greater global uniformity and sameness. Good interpretation has the potential for other beneficial effects. It might, for example, give at least a little encouragement to people's own personal development and self—realisation, which then may encourage the emergence in the long—term of personal life—styles and behavioural patterns which are more supportive of sustainable tourism (Krippendorf, 1987).

These are some of the ways in which interpretation has the potential to promote more sustainable tourism. Unfortunately, these desirable linkages to greater sustainability may prove elusive. Certainly there is a dearth of objective research on the effectiveness of interpretation, including effectiveness in market terms (Prentice 1993). There are a number of difficulties which can reduce the effectiveness of even the most well—intentioned interpretation, and some of these will now be considered.

## 3. THE PITFALLS

Inevitably in practicethere are a number of difficulties that constrain what can he achieved 'with interpretation. This discussion focuses on some of the potential problems for interpretation which may limit the extent to which it promotes sustainable forms of tourism. It is very important to recognise and understand these. Both their recognition and understanding would be greatly assisted by further sound research and an informed debate. Only then will interpreters, planners and industry leaders be able to begin to develop much more effective and sustainable interpretive policies and programmes.

### 3.1 Economic imperatives

A commonly voiced concern about interpretation for visitors is that too often it is driven largely by economic objectives, particularly as a means for economic development, rather than by a concern for the broader well-being of the community and of the environment. In such circumstances, the danger is that any version of the qualities of place that is compatible with profits and economic growth will he accepted (Alfrey & Putnam, 1992; Hewison, 1987; West, 1988). Such exploitation of interpretation can lead to both the compromise of the favoured interpreted themes and the serious neglect of resources which are less easily exploited for tourism. It is essential to be alert to this danger, although it is not necessarily an inevitable consequence of looking for economic benefits from interpretation.

A second concern is that small community assets which may gain enhanced economic valorisation by being interpreted to visitors may begin to be valued by he community largely in terms of their exchange value in the context of trade to an external public. There is a fear that when a community or heritage asset is commoditised then the meaning has gone' (Harrison, 1992). Certainly great care needs to taken to avoid the destruction of the cultural meanings of community and heritage assets, but again, this cannot be assumed to be an inevitable consequence of commoditisation, although it may happen under certain conditions. Cohen, for example, has argued that tourist-oriented community assets frequently acquire new meanings for the locals but contends that the old meanings do not thereby necessarily disappear (Cohen, 1988). Consequently, here needs to more research to determine the conditions under which the interpretation of small community assets leads to cultural meanings being destroyed, adjusted, added to or preserved.

### 3.2 Selection and simplification

The interpretation of a place has to deal not only with a physical landscape hut also with a place for living and working, shaped and apprehended through different patterns of use and through memories and individual and collective identities. It has to encompass both the complex physical and social interrelationships

established at any one time and also the modification of these patterns over time. Because of this complexity, interpretation must involve selection and inevitably this process will simplify and in some cases it will also distort. It is helpful to consider some of the constraints which lead to selection, simplification and also to possible distortion.

The limited amount of time that visitors tend to spend in the destination and then in the specific attractions within that destination is an important constraint which encourages selection and simplification within an interpretation system. The need for simplification is even greater when addressing very diverse audiences bringing different cultural assumptions. It must be remembered that most tourists are pleasure seekers and may well not be inclined actively to seek out educational experiences or to dwell on the concerns of the host community (McKercher, 1993). It is a difficult but important challenge to reveal the spirit of the place to all audiences, which include the less receptive as well as the responsive visitor.

It is necessary to provide accessible ways for visitors to appreciate the character of the places they visit, such as by highlighting a few themes and stories and providing a simple narrative order to the local history. Visitors can he helped to understand the places they visit by the use of simple cognitive maps, which include such signposts as familiar events and recognisable landmarks, and by the clear and simple presentation ol messages. This can be particularly important for less interested visitors, who need to be catered for just as much as the more committed enthusiasts, Inevitably, this simplification provides only very limited scope for the presentation of the contradictions and complexities of places or for alternative interpretations

Selection also occurs in interpretation because of the differing views of each interpreter and of the prevailing ideologies within which they work (Ashworth & Tonbridge, 1990; Hall & McArthur, 1992). Individuals, groups and cultures will all hold different views which affect interpretation, and attitudes to the meaning of local resources also develop and change over time. Any single fixed attitude provided by interpretation reflects the interpreters own views of the world (Ehrentraut, 1993).

Recognition of these causes of selection and simplification in interpretation will help to make interpretation less prone to distortion and more likely to make tourism more sustainable.

### 3.3 The danger of over-interpretation

All individuals and groups involved in interpretation need to he very careful that their enthusiasm does not lead to the provision of interpretation at times and in places where it is unnecessary or intrusive. An over-zealous appetite for interpreted 'meaning' may, for example, diminish the sense of wonder or the strangeness of a place and may discourage more personal responses (Baylis, l983).

### 3.4 The danger of intrusion

Interpretation for visitors which is directed at the heritage and culture of a community is prone to being especially intrusive for the locals (Butler, 1989). Given the weight of mass tourism flows, a case can be made for compromises in order to protect the community from too much intrusion which involve the packaging or staging of events and certain aspects of historic attractions at times cut ii pl aces which are convenient to both visitors and residents. Historic and cultural staging may succeed in presenting the visitor with the salient features of community while also reducing the need for encroachment on the private space of the host population. Bob McKercher has argued that such staging will 'remain a necessary, if somewhat distasteful requisite for efficient tourism operations', even is part of attempts to develop more sustainable tourism (McKercher, 1993). It may be that if the community itself does not plan for staged events, together

With adequate controls, then it may be unwillingly imposed on the host community and environment by the tourism industry, often without satisfactory discussion or controls. Moreover, one might question whether all aspects of are staged. As Greenwood states, all cultures 'are in the process of "making themselves up" all the time. In a general sense all culture is "staged authenticity"' (Greenwood, 1982). If such staging is so widespread, then why is he staging involved in tourism regarded as so destructive? (Crick, 1989). It must also be remembered that most local communities were changing long before tourism, and their cultures may well be able to adapt to such new influences as the' staging of events and yet retain — and even reinforce — their vitality and 'coherence (Harron & Weiler, 1992; Harrison, 1992), However, if events or attractions are to be staged deliberately then visitors should be alerted to this and every effort should be made to give as 'authentic' a representation as possible. Any resulting effects on local culture should also be monitored and given due considerration,

### 3.5 The danger of creating quaint' tourist landscapes

John Urry has argued that people seek out differences when they travel to new places. 'they direct their attention to features of culture, heritage and landscape which separate them off from their own everyday experience (Urry, 1990). If this is so, then there is a danger that interpretation for visitors will focus almost exclusively on the special, the spectacular and the unusual as this is what the visitors are looking for and maybe disappointed if they do not find. In this way, interpretation may contribute to the ignoring of the mundane and the reality which lies beneath the facade. For example, interpretation may be directed to features of the landscape which are taken to be in some sense out of the ordinary. This may, in turn, promote what Relph has depicted as the stylising of regional differences into the cute, the quaint and the kitsch tourist landscape (Relph, 1987; Hough, 1990). Fossilised relicts, sterilised neat reconstructions, and aesthetic pretensions may be created for thu entertainment rather than the enlightenment of the visitor, and these are likely to discourage the expression of the local landscape of the time. Hence, tourist interpretation may help create new forms of landscape that arc physically isolated from their surrounding natural and working landscape (Harvey, 1989). The same may be true for the cultural landscape. It is important to he alert to these problems, but it should also be remembered that change, such as the creation of new landscapes is inevitable for places to stay viable and to have relevance to the people who live there.

### 3.6 Politics, beliefs and integrity

History is, by default or design, a political issue. The same applies to our perceived sense of place. Political issues crowd in on the wary and the naive interpreter. They cannot be avoided. At a domestic British level, the interpretation of quite recent times raises questions and eyebrows. Hewison (1987) discusses the alarming tendency to see the miseries of the industrial past through the rose-tinted spectacles of nostalgia. In North America, heritage sites connected with the winning of the West depict the triumphalist progress of the white man across the continent, while quietly ignoring acts of genocide and ecological destruction. This situation is now being slowly rectified: the changing exhibits and approaches to interpretation at the Custer Battlefield National Monument form a fascinating story in themselves, as the wisdom and morality of the history enacted there is re-examined and re-assessed. The whole question of how societies, and groups within society, define and construct their histories is elegantly discussed in the well known writings of the Australian cultural commentator Donald Home (Home, 1984, 1986).

### 3.7 The danger of elitism

Heritage interpreters tend to he clever people. They also tend to he enthusiasts for their subjects. And they can in some cases belong to a group in society which rejects mass tourism, rather than trying to work with it to make its impacts more sustainable. It is very easy to interpret for the educated and motivated elite. It is, however, vital that the difficult task of interpretation for the mass audience with little time or interest be tackled.

Two final points. The interpretation process begins at a very early stage. The travel programme, the travel articles and the brochure all set a scene which can he indelibly printed in the mind of the traveller. Any cliches peddled then can be hard to overcome. The proponents of marketing by counselling and advice (Jungk, 1980; Krippendorf, Zimmer & Glauber, 1988) had, however, more skill at marketing than they perhaps realised. One of the areas where [heir ideas have been successfully taken up has been in the Austrian Tyrol. The Tyrol's marketing has leapt ahead of its competitors, and changed the region's image for the better under the guiding hand of Andreas Braun, the general director of the Tyrol's 'Tourist Board. Much of the new promotion is a form of subliminal heritage interpretation. Andreas Braun speaks of 'introducing a new kind of communication', This must depart from "banana tourism" and lead to authentic signal. . . tourist advertising and information will have to be re-interpreted for visitors, thus perhaps highlighting new focuses of interest, and thereby relieving traditional holiday destinations' (Braun, 1992; Tyrol Marketing Materials, 1991-3).

Let the words rest with Freeman Tilden. Three chapter headings in his now 35-yr-old text on heritage interpretation speak vital volumes. There is Chapter 5, 'Not Instruction but Provocation'. There is Chapter 11, 'The Mystery of Beauty'. It begins "It is not good to gild the lily. Not only is the lily destroyed, but the painter has made a confession that he does not understand the nature of beauty'. But perhaps of most crucial value to readers of this journal is Chapter 10, 'Nothing in Excess'. It quotes an elderly carpenter watching Tilden nailing new wooden shingles on to the roof of his old wooden country house: Would ye like a little advice?

The way you're doing you'll split the shingles. Never give the nail that last tap.

The gentle approach within which there is ample scope to be gently provocative- could be a useful watchword for both the interpreter and the promoter of values of sustainable tourism. Enthusiasts for both skills should forget that, for the great majority, holidays are dream times, set aside from the reality of the everyday. In practice too much *realpotlitik* could destroy that dream and lead to an unproductive boycott of the product.

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