

Geotourism: The Tourism of Geology and Landscape

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 Published by Goodfellow Publishers Limited, Woodeaton, Oxford, OX3 9TJ
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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

14 Interpretation rocks! Designing signs for geotourism sites

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Introduction

Nature-based tourism experiences are attracting increasing numbers of visitors worldwide, a phenomenon that has been attributed to a range of factors including greater flexibility in terms of leisure, mobility and disposable income; a growing public awareness of environment issues; and the desire to escape from 'everyday' routines (Waite, 2000). Researchers have termed the learning that occurs in these tourism settings 'free-choice learning' because people are free to choose what, where, when and with whom they learn (Falk, 2001).

Information and educational activities delivered during free-choice learning experiences are generally referred to as interpretation. A term originally coined by Tilden (1957), interpretation is a form of communication that presents ideas and concepts in a format that is designed to interest, entertain and inspire visitors (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2000). Unlike education in formal settings, interpretation does *not* consist of lists of facts, figures, and dates but rather, uses illustrative media, first-hand experiences and original objects to impart meaning and demonstrate relationships (Tilden, 1977).

The aim of this chapter is to outline the process of developing interpretive plans and signage for geotourism attractions. Discussion focuses on the importance of understanding and appealing to target markets and the principles and procedures underlying the development of interpretive materials. Wherever possible, examples are provided to illustrate concepts and techniques.

First things first: Developing an interpretive plan

Regardless of the site and/or content, interpretive signs and exhibits should always be guided and supported by an interpretive plan. There are many models and systems for developing interpretive plans (see Trapp *et al.*, 1994; Knudson *et al.*, 1995; Brochu, 2003; Ham *et al.*, 2005), but all have three steps or phases in common:

- ◆ Defining the objectives of the interpretation
- ◆ Turning objectives into themes
- ◆ Selecting the best interpretive medium

1. Defining the objectives

In order to scope out interpretive objectives, interpreters should ask themselves the following questions.

Who are the target audience?

The increasing popularity of nature-based tourism suggests that visitors are no longer likely to be people with specialist knowledge of, or interest in, the natural environment. Indeed, it is widely documented and accepted that visitors to ecotourism attractions (including geological sites) are heterogeneous comprising tour groups, independent travellers, older people travelling independently (grey nomads), backpackers, historians, archaeologists, families with young children, community groups, and school groups all having a wide range of interests, experiences, needs and expectations. Thus, any discussion of what should and should not be offered to visitors must first consider *who* actually visits these sites and *why*. In particular, interpreters need a clear understanding of their main visitor groups – their knowledge, motives, experiences and interests – prior to designing interpretive materials and experiences. If this initial step is ignored, considerable time and effort could be wasted designing materials that visitors are either already familiar with or have little interest in (Chhabra *et al.*, 2003).

Information about key target audiences can be obtained from commercial tourism statistics as well as in-house surveys. If these indicate that potential visitors have limited knowledge of the topics, features and/or processes being interpreted, introductory signs that provide sufficient background knowledge to understand the topics being discussed will be required. This particularly applies if the concepts and processes being interpreted are complex. While geologists can ‘read’ a landscape and explain the geological processes or events that created certain rock formations and features, most visitors will lack the knowledge and experience to appreciate the significance of the site’s features and formations. Thus, as geologists and interpreters we need to ‘paint pictures’ and create stories to help visitors ‘see’ and appreciate the significance of what created the landscapes around them. Techniques for achieving these outcomes will be addressed later in the chapter.

What is special about this place?

Answering this question requires ascertaining which features or properties make the geotourism site important, attractive or unique in some way. These could include elements such as geological formations or features, escarpments and views; landscape evolution; cultural traditions and celebrations; artefacts; historic events and/or stories (Ham *et al.*, 2005). This process will assist in identifying possible foci for interpretation.

What are the constraints of the setting or place for the interpretation?

While it might be tempting to interpret many features or rock formations at a site, this is often not practical or desirable. Issues that need considering in the selection of the most appropriate features or areas to interpret include:

1. Are there extreme weather conditions (e.g. harsh sunlight, severe winds) that make interpretation difficult? Could placing signs in a particular spot cause discomfort for visitors (e.g. reflective glare, sunburn, exposure to wind/rain/cold)?
2. If tour groups visit the site, is there enough space for large groups to see signs and/or the feature being interpreted?

Chapter extract

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