

TOP TEN INGREDIENTS FOR CREATING AND MAINTAINING A SUCCESSFUL INTERPRETATIVE PROGRAM IN ONTARIO PARKS

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ABSTRACT

Ontario Parks has the largest and most successful interpretative program in Canada. Ten years ago Ontario Parks was in fourth place. There have been a number of initiatives that have led to the successful program offered today. This presentation will examine ten 'ingredients' needed to create and maintain a successful program. These ten ingredients include: 1) Strategic Planning – developing a framework for interpretation; 2) Rationalizing the Program – evaluating which parks should offer interpretation; 3) Visitor Surveys – determining what our visitors want in an interpretative program; 4) Program Audits – ensuring individual park programs are effective; 5) Annual Collection of Statistics and Reporting – collecting statistics, monitoring trends and reporting back to staff; 6) Staffing – consistency in staffing classifications; 7) Strong Policies – updated and directional policies to lead the program; 8) Operating Standards – direction for each park on level of staff and type of program to present; 9) Permanent Staff – encouraging the creation of permanent National Heritage Education (NHE) leaders in parks; and, 10) Staff Training – standardized training for all seasonal and permanent staff. With this recipe for success, Ontario Parks will continue to offer visitors the opportunity to learn about Ontario's rich natural and cultural heritage.

TOP TEN INGREDIENTS FOR CREATING AND MAINTAINING A SUCCESSFUL INTERPRETATIVE PROGRAM IN ONTARIO PARKS

Ontario Parks has the largest and most successful interpretative program in Canada. This success is based on a number of initiatives that have been developed since 1992. The following paper discusses these initiatives.

1. A Strategic Plan for Natural Heritage Education

A strategic planning process was undertaken beginning in the fall of 1992. The strategy was developed as a collaborative effort through a three-day workshop of permanent and long-term seasonal Ontario Park interpreters, as well as interested superintendents. It has become a framework from which to lead the natural heritage education programs. The strategic plan contains a vision, goals, objectives and strategies that are updated annually. The plan was revised in 1997 and will be revised in 2004.

2. Rationalization of the Visitor Services Program in Ontario Parks

During the strategic planning exercise we discovered some inconsistencies in the interpretative program. Some of the programs were purely entertainment, and were not based on park resources. As well, there were many inconsistencies apparent in the existing levels of service. In the past, the designation of levels of service for each park has been somewhat subjective and for the most part based on tradition.

It was decided to do a methodical evaluation of each park in terms of its interpretative potential in order to rationalize the program. The goal of the project was to develop methods to help structure and guide the program.

We wanted to determine:

- which parks merit the continuation of an interpretative program for visitors;
- how do we rate parks in terms of their potential and ability to support an interpretative program;
- how do we develop and improve the quality of the program for visitors; and,
- what are the goals of the interpretative program in terms of the goals and objectives of the parks system and the wants and needs of the visitor.

The project included four steps:

- establishing criteria for ranking parks, including the significance of natural resources, significance of cultural resources, markets, total visitation, located on a major tourist route, existing program, per cent of visitors that attend programs;
- developing three new levels of service for the delivery of the interpretative program;
- evaluating the name 'Visitor Services'; and,
- establishing operating standards for the program.

After this process, we went from 76 parks with interpretation to 44 parks, changed the name from visitor services to natural heritage education, changed the levels of service and established new operating standards.

3. Policies

It was important to have up-to-date policies for the program. With the rationalization process, the main policy for interpretation, PM6.02, was revised to reflect the new levels of service, and the new name of the program, incorporating words from the strategic plan and listing the new level of service of each operating park.

4. Operating Standards

Operating standards were updated to reflect changes in policy, new levels of service and staffing standards. The operating standards are used to guide the length and type of program in each park.

5. Consistency in Staffing

The operating standards were used as a tool to ensure consistency in staffing. Before the new operat-

ing standards were developed, there were 11 different classifications for park interpretative staff. There was no consistency in classification or in length of contact. The new operating standard set out job descriptions based on level of service of the park, recommended classifications and lengths of contract. There are now only four categories of seasonal staff in the Natural Heritage Education Program (NHE).

6. Program Audits

A program audit for the park NHE program was developed and implemented across the province. The audit generally takes one day and is conducted during the operating season (usually July or August). It is recommended that each park receive an audit every three years. It is a tool to help park staff offer the best programming with staff and resources and is usually conducted by the zone specialist and main office coordinator. The zone manager reviews the results of all audits.

7. Visitor Surveys

A Natural Heritage Education Survey was developed in 1996 to look at visitor preference in park programming and reasons for not participating in programs. The survey, which is implemented by park staff, also presents a profile of park uses and helps staff better meet visitor needs.

8. Annual Report

An annual report is compiled based on information from NHE Year-End Reports that each park completes. The report monitors statistics, trends and staffing levels and provides a tool to report on new and innovative initiatives.

9. Permanent Staff

Since 1992, eight permanent NHE parks leader positions have been created and filled. These permanent, in-park positions provide consistency and leadership in the program for both the individual park and the system.

10. Training Opportunities for NHE Staff

Training opportunities for staff have enriched the program and improved the quality of the product. Some of the training opportunities are as follows:

- Spring NHE training session for 180 staff (largest in Canada);
- Fall meeting for permanent and long-term seasonal staff (approx. 60 staff);
- Conferences and Workshops (NAI, Interpretation Canada, OMA);
- Ontario Parks Learning Modules; and,
- Staff Conferences.

CONCLUSIONS

In 2003, three million visitors participated in the *Natural Heritage Education Program* in Ontario Parks. Through staff led programs, hundreds of kilometres of trails, and innovative visitor centres, park visitors learned about the natural and cultural features of the park system. The goal of the NHE program is to help visitors to recognize, to use and to enjoy the educational opportunities in our provincial parks. Through the ten initiatives discussed, and the hard work of park staff, visitors have the oppor-

tunity to better understand the meanings and significance of the significant natural and cultural features of Ontario Parks.

REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL READINGS

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