

The Story of Parks: Reflections on Interpretation in Canada's National Parks

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Abstract

Sharpe (1976: 16) suggests that “the complete absence of interpretation may be preferable to a low-quality program”. How do we know when interpretative efforts are effective? How can interpretative efforts be evaluated? In many cases parks are experiencing increased visitor numbers without increased provisions for visitor services including interpretation. Within the past few decades increased attention has been given to formulating meaningful ways of evaluating interpretative programs for a variety of reasons including the continual need to justify (economically, socially and politically) the presence of interpretation within parks. This paper suggests that it is a lack of understanding and purpose, and not simply a lack of evaluation, which serves to confound the interpretative process.

Introduction

It cannot easily be measured, quantified, evaluated, or even described. So why write about it? This paper briefly chronicles the rationale behind my current research project, which has evolved in an effort to better understand the interpretative process within protected areas. The definition or purpose of interpretation is the focus of the research, rather than a prior requirement. Within the initial research phase it became evident that interpretation, despite a historical and continued presence in national (and some provincial) parks, remains significantly uncharted within Canada. The following are thoughts chosen to inspire discussion around the assumptions inherent in what I refer to as the interpretative process. Comments are welcome!

What is Interpretation?

Generally, interpretation is divided into two categories: personal, which refers to efforts that involve a human element of contact including guided tours or campfire talks, and non-personal efforts that are more static, such as park signs or museum exhibits. Tilden's influential text *Interpreting Our Heritage* (1977) continually advocated for personal interaction and experiential learning over non-personal endeavours. Recent interpretative efforts have come to rely on non-personal interpretation primarily citing lower costs and the ability to reach a wider audience as the main reasons for avoiding, reducing and/or eliminating personal interpretation from the park. The emphasis on cheaper non-personal methods is of concern as it is commonly accepted that personal interpretation "*probably offers the highest potential for achieving interpretive objectives*" (Parsons and Aldrich, 2004: 7). Moreover, lower cost non-personal initiatives raise concerns over the long-term impacts of these types of stories on individual parks as well as the park system as a whole.

Below are three common definitions of interpretation within a protected area context that have been selected to demonstrate generally accepted principles:

- 1) Interpretation: "*an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.*" (Tilden, 1977: 8).
- 2) Interpretation: "*to stimulate, facilitate and extend visitor's understanding of place so that empathy towards heritage, conservation, culture and landscape can be developed.*" (Stewart, 1998: 257).
- 3) Interpretation: "*is a specialized communication process designed to help connect people with their heritage through first-hand experience with the object, artifact, or landscape.*" (Curthoys and Cuthbertson, 2002: 224).

The emphasis is on interactive, experiential and participatory processes; however, these processes rarely surface in the majority of parks suffering chronic funding and staff shortages. Whether the interpretative programs are 'effective' is unknown, as 'what they are to achieve' is rarely addressed.

The Interpretative Process

The primary difficulty investigating interpretation is that it involves deconstructing the complicated relationship between the theory of interpretation (why or how it is done), the practice of interpretation (what and where it is done) and the profession (who does it). The term interpretation is often used to describe a tangible product such as a visitor centre as well as a process (for example, facilitating visitor understanding) and thus the differentiation between theory, practice, method, and context of interpretation becomes increasingly inexplicable. I refer collectively to this intersection of concepts as the interpretative process.

The idea that interpretation should be afforded increased attention specifically addressing issues of evaluation and accountability, is not new (Marsh, 1986). The majority of recent literature concerning interpretation continues to suggest that evaluation, such as short visitor surveys or questionnaires, is the missing link within the interpretative process. The prospect of having meaningful evaluation occurring remains improbable without a clear understanding of what we should evaluate as interpretation is thought to incorporate a wide array of activities. Interpretation alone cannot accomplish all the goals of the park system and an unfettered reliance on interpretative activities to achieve everything perpetuates overly broad, disorganized and short-sighted programs that accomplish little.

“Interpretation lifts recreation beyond mundane fun to intelligent use of leisure time, and from appreciation to understanding of the cultural and natural environment. It also represents good business sense by the public and private agencies and institutions that have an opportunity to use interpreters. Their success and public support may be directly or indirectly related to effective interpretation.” (Beck and Cable, 1999: 13).

The above quote illustrates the zealous and often romantic attitudes toward interpretation that are present in most protected areas in Canada, which no doubt contribute to why it often goes without critical examination. Interpretation is thought to relate directly to the success of a park system and as such remains a key component to park operations. What is not clear is how this could be the case when there is little research to suggest that interpretation does foster support for a park system or a sense of environmental stewardship.

Purpose of Interpretation

Increased staff and funding will allow for a necessary examination of interpretation, including the creation of plans with clearly stated objectives, but to merely increase the number of interpretative efforts will not fundamentally address the larger problem of what these plans should contain. The shortcomings within interpretation expose a larger incapacity to express ideas about the nature of protected area systems in Canada and our disjointed relationship with our environment.

The above definitions of interpretation are simplistic overviews of a complicated process that, at the core, attempt to reconnect humans with natural processes. Difficulty arises when a park system must decide what messages to convey to the desired audiences which may include: park staff, policy officials, park visitors, local residents, co-management groups, private partners, and international protected area agencies. Interpretation, as a profession, currently serves many complex functions including (but not limited to):

- 1) a forum for the exploration of issues pertaining to communication (for example, the increasingly inextricable link between marketing, 'outreach', 'education' and interpretation);
- 2) an instrument of social change (e.g., concerning how or why certain ideals are perpetuated through interpretative efforts);
- 3) a forum for understanding and facilitating visitor expectations, behaviour and experience pertaining to or within national parks (e.g., the examination of why people visit parks, what they do while they are there, and their overall understanding of the park context and operation);
- 4) a communication tool of national legislation/policy (e.g., to articulate or reflect socio-political views toward national parks and the environment);
- 5) a method of gauging social and economic change (e.g., the introduction of user fees for interpretative services); and,
- 6) a process of responsibility pertaining to park operations and safety (e.g., conveying basic information such as bear safety and route maps).

The difficulty for the national park system lies in the creation of interpretative programs that in practice accomplish a desired outcome as plans often include vague and/or unrealistic goals. Devising a system in which the monitoring of interpretation is possible (including the planning, implementation and evaluation of programs) will remain difficult without addressing a specific purpose.

Generating Environmental Concern

“Is interpretation just nice? Is it essential? Is it astute management and public relations? People have interpretive philosophies that relate to all of these opinions.” (Knudson et al., 1999: 12).

In one of the most highly regarded works on interpretative practice, Ham (1992) states:

“...if these [environmental] crises are to be solved, they will be solved in place by empowered and informed citizens who understand their relationship with nature. The craft of environmental interpretation can contribute to this empowerment”.

This is a philosophy echoed by the majority of those involved with national parks and the interpretative field (Tilden, 1977; Sharpe, 1976; Machlis, 1986; Regnier and Zimmerman, 1992; Veverka, 1998). Beck and Cable (1999) suggest:

“...interpretation, properly carried out, serves as an indispensable tool to achieve successful, intelligent cultural and natural resource stewardship”. (Beck and Cable, 1999: 12).

What is less clear is how this relationship between knowledge and action functions within national parks, a process referred to as “*ecological literacy*” (Curthoys and Cuthbertson, 2002: 225).

Within the national parks, interpretation is thought to function as a method of empowerment. However, Canada’s landscapes, including those within and surrounding national parks, are becoming increasingly degraded. The role of interpretation within parks and current societal attitudes toward natural processes has been insufficiently examined rendering the question of whether or

not the problem is poor interpretation or not enough interpretation trivial by comparison. It is hoped, as suggested within the Parks Canada (2001) document, *Engaging Canadians*, that improved communications would achieve the mandate of the park system by stating, “*communication is everyone’s business*”. Interpretative efforts remain one small part of a vast communication strategy that is increasingly pressured to work within a business model highlighting the needs of target markets, cost recovery and clients. Such needs are often diametrically opposed to the core principles of interpretation, which reflect the integration of people with natural processes.

The underlying assumption within Parks Canada is that information is a primary element in garnering public support as demonstrated through the desired linear process beginning with “*awareness*”, moving to “*understanding and enjoyment*”, and finalizing with a “*sense of ownership*” (Parks Canada, 2001: 24). Parks Canada has neither the resources nor the collective research to support the claim that current interpretative efforts do indeed follow this continuum, which raises questions regarding the legitimacy of interpretation within parks. This is not to suggest that interpretation should not occur within national parks, merely that interpretation should not continue without critical examination. Historical presence is a strong motivation for continuing interpretative efforts, however; it is time to re-address why interpretation is in parks. Curthoys and Cuthbertson (2002) suggest:

“...if experience, knowledge, and action are to become the result of good interpretive products, the planning processes must be an intentional reflection of the goal to reveal meaning and relationships”. (Curthoys and Cuthbertson, 2002: 237).

The inherent emphasis on meaning and relationships has been key to the perpetuation of interpretation however, what the meaning *is* and what the relationships *are* often present the principal obstacles to the interpretative process and ultimately to formulating an understanding of environmental processes for Canadians.

Visitor Behaviour

There has been increased attention afforded to evaluating the visitor response to interpretative efforts. Butler and Hvenegaard (2002: 179) go beyond the assumption that interpretation improves understanding and environmental

protection to also include improved visitor experiences. How interpretation improves visitor experiences is also a difficult area to assess, as there have been few comprehensive visitor studies (including experiences prior, during, and/or after the visit to the park) to suggest that visitor experience is improved by interpretative efforts.

It is possible to suggest that an interpretative program is successful based on positive visitor attitudes or behaviour; however, this does not acknowledge what the visitor is learning from the experience or how this will affect future behaviour. What the park (as a collective reflection of the federal government, Parks Canada and ultimately the park staff) desires a visitor to do may be different from what the visitor desires to do while in the park. Before any adequate studies of visitor behaviour and expectations pertaining to interpretation can be conducted it is necessary to explore what the park system is trying to accomplish. Butler and Hvenegaard (2002) may indeed be correct in asserting that interpretation improves visitor experience, and even environmental protection as suggested by Ham (1992); however, these assumptions must be critically examined prior to perpetuating current interpretative efforts which may or may not be responsible for the perceived increase in environmental protection or visitor satisfaction.

Concluding Thoughts

For Parks Canada (2001: 5) to suggest that interpretation is designed to “raise awareness... foster understanding and enjoyment... strengthen emotional connections to and the sense of ownership of heritage places...” without critical examination and action is fraught with difficulty as individual parks struggle to decide what their individual interpretive efforts should entail. Parks Canada is the most overt reflection of societies environmental values. A clear direction supporting ecological integrity is needed for interpretation in addition to a direction for other forms of communication involving the park system. The document *Engaging Canadians* (Parks Canada, 2001) currently governs all interpretation across the Canadian national park system. Ironically, the term interpretation is never used within this document further demonstrating the complexity in fleshing out how the stories of parks should be told. The multitudes of passionate and dedicated interpreters will certainly attest that the sharing of stories is firmly embedded in Canadian park culture. The weakness in the interpretative process may not lie in the evaluative process but in the stories themselves. Perhaps a park system that embodies a mandate that implies

natural landscapes belong to Canadians for enjoyment and ecological integrity will forever struggle with the problem of regarding them as distinct.

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