

# Interpretation program perceptions: A comparison of Alberta Parks staff views of visitor trends, program opportunities, challenges, and outcomes

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## Introduction

The mandate of most park systems is to “inspire people to discover value, protect, and enjoy the natural world” (e.g., Government of Alberta 2009, p. 3). Interpretation and environmental education efforts (called interpretive activities) are key management tools to help visitors discover, value, conserve, and enjoy parks. Interpretive activities can achieve many goals in parks and protected areas, including increased public action to protect the environment, reduced negative visitor impacts, fewer enforcement and public safety problems, and redistribution of visitors (Sharpe 1982; Marion and Reid 2007). Park interpretation should “offer an opportunity to learn about, appreciate, and care for natural and cultural heritage” (e.g., Government of Alberta 2009, p. 17). However, there are often inconsistencies among interpretive goals, planning, delivery, and outcomes. For example, the perceptions of practitioners may differ from those of planners; similarly, the outcomes for visitors may differ from the agency goals (Machnik et al. 2006). These differences in perceptions and outcomes are critical today as many provincial park systems implement results-based planning approaches.

Research can help inform park practitioner efforts to assess performance of and improve interpretation programs. This paper reports on the first stage of a multi-year study designed to assess the outcomes of a provincial park agency’s in-person interpretive programs, and the factors that shape their performance. More specifically, we report data from interviews with park staff, to reveal similarities and differences in their perceptions regarding the agency’s interpretive programs.

## Methods

To understand perceptions of interpretation program outcomes, challenges and opportunities, we conducted short, semi-structured qualitative interviews with a sample of the 50 policy-makers, planners, managers, and practitioners associated with interpretive programs conducted by a Canadian provincial park agency, Alberta Parks. Alberta Parks manages 2.9 million hectares of protected areas landscapes, ranging from wilderness parks and strict ecological reserves to heritage rangelands and provincial recreation areas. It conducts extensive in-person interpretive programs in approximately 10 of its most heavily visited parks.

Through the survey questionnaire, administered via telephone and in person interviews, we asked about interpretation’s mandate, roles, strategies, outcomes, and future possibilities. We also asked staff about their past experiences with personal interpretation and their personal demographic characteristics. We will present thematic analyses of open-ended questions (Braun & Clark, 2006). SPSS (v. 23) will be employed for statistical analyses (i.e., ANOVAs, t-tests, and MANOVAs) of closed-ended questions to compare perceptions about interpretation among these staff groups (front-line interpreters, supervisors, coordinators, managers, planners, and executives).

## Anticipated Results

Based on similar studies which have compared conservation agency staff program and policy perceptions (Machnik et al., 2006; Seva & Jagers, 2013; Sheikheldin et al., 2010), we anticipate differences in perceptions will be observed based on category and level of employment within the agency, education (degree completed and discipline), past experience with interpretive programming, and degree of interaction with visitors. Interviews are nearly complete, and final analysis will commence in June. Preliminary analysis suggest interpretation at Alberta Parks interpretation programs emphasizes entertainment and experiences for visitors with the goal of making memories and increasing enjoyment rather than simply delivering education and management messages. This advocated approach to interpretation (Stern et al., 2013) has been embraced by some but not all Alberta Parks staff. Differences within types of interpretation may also be expected as some programs are heavily focused on cultural or heritage interpretation while others are centred around physical or natural science elements. Inter-regional systems of communication and provincial interpretive planning appear to be under developed, allowing for different regions, areas, and parks to operate under the same mandate (as stated above) but not with consistent management or strategic direction.

## References

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