

# Interpretation as strategic communication in protected area management

**Sam H. Ham**, University of Idaho, USA, sham@uidaho.edu;  
**Eva K. Sandberg**, Swedish Centre for Nature Interpretation, Sweden

A strategic view of interpretation's role in protected area management is presented. Communication is "strategic" when choice and delivery of messages are based on an empirical understanding of the influence communication can have on protected area visitors. Drawing on communication theory supported by research conducted in the USA and Australia, we highlight three roles for strategic interpretation in protected area management: enhancing visitor experiences, purposefully influencing attitudes, and shaping on-site behavior in fragile settings.

## Enhancing experiences

Numerous social scientists in the parks and tourism fields have argued that good interpretation makes a positive impact on visitor experiences. Examples include Arnould & Price (1993), Beck & Cable (2011); Brochu & Merriman (2008), Cameron & Gatewood (2000), Cohen (1985), Geva & Goldman (1991), Ham (2007, 2009), Ham, Housego & Weiler (2005), Powell & Ham (2008), Ward & Wilkinson (2006), and Weiler & Ham (2001).

Two lines of reasoning support the claim of these writers. In experiential psychology, "experience" is seen as residing in the thoughts that human beings think. Obviously, when interpretation succeeds in provoking a person to have personal thoughts and to make personal meanings about a place or thing, it helps to shape that person's experience with the place or thing. The meanings made are themselves central to the experience. And if these thoughts are pleasing or gratifying in some way, "experience," by definition, has been enhanced.

Another line of reasoning comes from studies that specifically examined interpretation's role in tourists' experiences. Findings reported by Pearce & Moscardo (1998) showed that the interpretive aspects of an Australian rainforest visit contributed positively to visitors' overall satisfaction with their experience. Hwang, Lee, and Chen (2005) found that visitors' satisfaction with interpretive services contributed in positive ways to their sense of place attachment in Taiwanese national parks. Powell & Ham (2008) reported that the most highly rated experiences by Galapagos National Park visitors resulted largely from guests' enjoyment of the interpretive aspects of their trip. Of eight different aspects of visitors' experiences compared, "quality of interpretation" and "quality of my guides" were two of the top three associated with high satisfaction ratings. And finally, a study of international tourists in Panama (Ham & Weiler, 2007) found that not only did the interpretive dimensions of tourists' experiences add to visitors' satisfaction, they were the *main* contributors among eleven different criteria examined.

## Promoting appreciative attitudes

Dozens of studies from social and cognitive psychology (see reviews in Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010 and Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) support the claim that interpretation can succeed in promoting positive attitudes about a place if it is specifically designed to do so. Three decades of research on the theory of reasoned action (TRA), theory of planned behavior (TPB) and the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (ELM) have produced an impressive record of consistent findings showing that when communication provokes thinking about attitude-relevant beliefs, an impact on corresponding attitudes is likely to result. ELM studies, in particular, demonstrate that the more thinking an interpretive encounter provokes, the stronger and more enduring the resulting attitudes can be. According to these studies, communication that succeeds in provoking audiences to think stands a greater likelihood of impacting attitudes than communication that fails to provoke thinking. Interpretation that is perceived by its audience to be both relevant and easy to process stands the greatest chance of provoking effortful thought (which is called the "central route" to persuasion in ELM vernacular). However, shorter-lived attitudinal impacts are possible even when thinking is less effortful (the so-called "peripheral route" to persuasion).

## Influencing visitor behavior

Interpreters today are often interested in using interpretation as a management tool aimed at deterring or eliminating certain visitor behaviors. Recent research has dealt with a wide range of problems including proper food storage by campers, reducing wildlife feeding, persuading visitors to pick up litter, keeping dogs on leashes, and convincing tourists to donate to local conservation funds. See Brown, Ham & Hughes (2010), Ham (2004), Ham & Ham (2010), Ham, et al. (2008), Hughes, Ham, & Brown (2009), Lackey & Ham (2003, 2004), Powell & Ham (2008), Widner & Roggenbuck (2003), and Winter (2006).

The two most successful approaches to influencing behavior have been the "normative" approach and the "reasoned action" approach. The normative approach is often seen as a "peripheral route" to influencing behavior wherein interpretation appeals to an audience's desire to be socially correct and to avoid social ridicule. In other words, normative approaches apply social pressure to encourage appropriate or desirable behavior. As such, normative messages usually stress what most other people "normally" do, and/or what important others approve or disapprove of (that is, whether they think the behavior is good or bad). Normative messages have been especially effective in reducing littering and deterring off-trail hiking, as well as in influencing other environmentally relevant behaviors such as curbside recycling.

See Cialdini (1996) and Cialdini, Kallgren & Reno (1991) for discussions of the theoretical bases of normative appeals.

The reasoned action approach comes from studies showing that our behavior is consistent with a small set of truly pertinent beliefs we have about the behavior. According to this approach, to convince visitors to behave in a given way, an interpretive encounter must influence their beliefs about that specific behavior. If their beliefs about the consequences of engaging in the behavior are predominantly positive, it will lead them to have a positive attitude about the behavior, which in turn increases the likelihood they will behave as managers want. Unlike the normative approach, the reasoned action approach assumes a “central route” persuasive impact. See Fishbein & Ajzen (2010) and Ajzen & Fishbein (2005) for reviews of research on the reasoned-action approach.

Studies (see Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) have indeed shown that when communication succeeds in impacting an attitude

de about a behavior in a positive way, the desired behavior is more likely to occur. Studies, however, do not support the idea that general attitudes about something will lead to specific behaviors with respect to it. According to reasoned action research, for interpretation to purposefully influence a given behavior it must first succeed in influencing people's beliefs about that specific behavior.

In 2010, the two approaches (normative and reasoned-action) were combined into a single model of human behavior and research continues to explore new and better ways interpretation can influence behavior, both within this new integrated model (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) and according to other theories. Virtually no study has shown 100% success in influencing behavior, but significant increases in preferred behaviors have been documented in so many studies that there seems little reason to question whether interpretation can make a strategic difference in how audiences behave.

- Ajzen, I., & Fishbein, M. (2005). The influence of attitudes on behavior. In Albarracín, D., Johnson, B., & Zanna, M. (Eds.), *The handbook of attitudes*. Mahwah, New Jersey, USA: Erlbaum, 173–221.
- Arnould, E. & Price, L. (1993). River magic – extraordinary experience and the extended service encounter. *Journal of Consumer Research* 20: 24–45.
- Beck, L. & Cable, T. (2011). *The gifts of interpretation – Fifteen guiding principles for interpreting nature and culture*. Champaign, Illinois, USA: Sagamore Publishing.
- Brochu, L. & Merriman, T. (2008). *Personal interpretation – connecting your audience to heritage resources*. Fort Collins, Colorado, USA: National Association for Interpretation.
- Brown, T., Ham, S. & Hughes, M. (2010). Picking up litter: An application of theory-based communication to influence tourist behaviour in protected areas. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 18(7): 879–900.
- Cameron, C. & Gatewood, J. (2000). Excursions into the unremembered past: what people want from visits to historical sites. *The Public Historian* 22(3): 107–127.
- Cialdini, R. (1996). Activating and aligning two kinds of norms in persuasive communication. *Journal of Interpretation Research* 1(1): 3–10.
- Cialdini, R., Kallgren, C., & Reno, R. (1991). A focus theory of normative conduct: A theoretical refinement and reevaluation of the role of norms in human behavior. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 24: 201–234.
- Cohen, E. (1985). The tourist guide: the origins, structure and dynamics of a role. *Annals of Tourism Research* 12(1): 5–2.
- Fishbein, M. & Ajzen, I. (2010). *Predicting and changing behavior – The reasoned action approach*. New York, USA: Psychology Press.
- Geva, A., & Goldman, A. (1991). Satisfaction measurement in guided tours. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 18: 177–185.
- Ham, S. (2004). *The psychology of giving: Lessons learned for travelers' philanthropy*. Presentation to the Conference on Travelers' Philanthropy. Palo Alto, USA: Stanford University, Institute for International Studies, April 14.
- Ham, S. (2007). Can interpretation really make a difference? Answers to four questions from cognitive and behavioral psychology. In *Proceedings, Interpreting World Heritage Conference*, March 25–29, Vancouver, Canada. Fort Collins, USA: National Association for Interpretation, 42–52.
- Ham, S. (2009). From interpretation to protection: Is there a theoretical basis? *Journal of Interpretation Research*, 14(2): 48–58.
- Ham, S. & Ham, B. (2010). *The 2010 LEX/NG Fund for Galapagos: Report of research findings and recommended communication strategy*. Final report to Lindblad Expeditions and National Geographic Society. New York, USA: Lindblad Expeditions.
- Ham, S., Housego, A., & Weiler, B. (2005). *Tasmanian thematic interpretation planning manual*. Hobart, Australia: Tourism Tasmania. <http://www.tourismtasmania.com.au/tasind/thematic/thematic.htm>
- Ham, S. & Weiler, B. (2007). Isolating the Role of On-site Interpretation in a Satisfying Experience. *Journal of Interpretation Research* 12(2): 5–24.
- Ham, S., Weiler, B., Hughes, M., Brown, T., Curtis, J., & Poll, M. (2008). *Asking visitors to help: Research to guide strategic communication for protected area management*. Final Technical Research Report (Project 80039). Gold Coast, Australia: Collaborative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism.
- Hughes, M., Ham, S., & Brown, T. (2009). Influencing park visitor behavior: A belief-based approach. *Journal of Parks and Recreation Administration* 27(4): 38–53.
- Hwang, S., Lee, C. & Chen, H. (2005). The relationship among tourists' involvement, place attachment and interpretation satisfaction in Taiwan's national parks. *Tourism Management* 26: 143–156.
- Lackey, B. & Ham, S. (2003). Contextual analysis of interpretation focused on human-black bear conflicts in Yosemite National Park. *Applied Environmental Education and Communication* 2(1): 11–21.
- Lackey, B. & Ham, S. (2004). Assessment of communication focused on human-black bear conflict at Yosemite National Park. *Journal of Interpretation Research* 8(1): 25–40.
- Pearce, P. & Moscardo, G. (1998). The role of interpretation in influencing visitor satisfaction: a rainforest case study. In Faulkner, W., Tidswell, C., & Weaver, D. (Eds.), *Progress in tourism and hospitality research, 1998, Part 1*. Proceedings of the Eighth Australian Tourism and Hospitality Research Conference, Gold Coast. Canberra: Bureau of Tourism Research, 309–319.
- Petty, R. & Cacioppo, J. (1986). *Communication and persuasion: central and peripheral routes to attitude change*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Powell, R. & Ham, S. (2008). Can ecotourism interpretation really lead to pro-conservation knowledge, attitudes and behaviors? Evidence from the Galapagos Islands. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 16(4): 467–489.
- Ward, C. & Wilkinson, A. (2006). *Conducting meaningful interpretation – a field guide for success*. Fulcrum Applied Communication Series. Golden, Colorado, USA: Fulcrum Books.

Contact the author for full reference list.