

Environmental Interpretation and Forests: Perspectives of Managers and Agencies

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Beyond their ecological and commodity functions, forests are natural settings of scenic beauty, recreational activity and symbolic meaning. Peoples' attachments to forest settings and landscapes are fostered—discursively, and experientially—by resource management agencies, communities, non-profit organizations, business entrepreneurs, and others. Within these contexts, the services of environmental interpretation have been used to enhance personal and collective experiences of forest places.

Environmental interpretation is a term that refers to a variety of mediated and personal communicative services provided by resource managers to “reveal meanings and relationships of our natural and cultural heritage to various publics” (Tilden 1977). Agencies offer interpretation services and programs to educate and entertain visitors, accomplish management goals, and promote positive images. More than just information presentation or educational techniques, environmental interpretation personalizes meaning using stories, revelation, provocation, examples, imagery, and other linguistic and visual devices. Interpretive presentations are found in brochures, museum exhibits, guided and self-guided tours, on-site signage, and other personal and mediated communications.

Interpretive messages about forested landscapes are strategic, persuasive communication efforts intended to influence how people think about and value natural resource places. Though there has been considerable research about changes in visitors' perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge as a result of exposure to messages at natural resource places, much of the research on message *receptivity* has ignored issues about how and why certain types of messages are produced. The research presented here thus focuses on the *production* of interpretive messages, addressing questions about the interpretive goals and practices of agencies and organizations.

Three research questions guided this analysis: (1) how widespread are agency efforts to produce forest-related interpretive materials?; (2) what goals do managers seek in presenting and representing forests in their interpretive educational programming?; and (3) how are Vermont's forests and landscapes actually presented in the interpretive materials created by agencies?

Methods

The overall research project focused on how forested landscapes are portrayed in interpretive messages and media, and evaluated the intentions of agencies, organizations, and businesses in creating interpretive materials about forests. The study was conducted in northern and central Vermont, USA, an area that is about 75% forested, and which has numerous publicly- and privately-managed outdoor recreation and tourism sites oriented to and situated within forested landscapes (including the

Green Mountain National Forest, National and State parks and forests, and tourist sites emphasizing agricultural, forestry, and nature-based recreation).

The study was primarily qualitative, using multiple methods to collect and analyze data: discursive analysis of printed textual and visual educational and interpretive materials (websites, brochures, on-site signage); a mail survey of managers in regional agencies and organizations; and telephone interviews with several agency managers. The discursive analysis of textual and visual materials has previously been discussed (Derrien & Stokowski, forthcoming; Stokowski & Derrien, 2014); this presentation focuses specifically on results of the mail survey and telephone interviews. Questionnaires explored respondents' understandings of interpretation, the goals of interpretive programming, and managers' on-site interpretive practices. Interviews with a small sample of managers (n=6) solicited more lengthy explanations about the reasons for and practices of environmental interpretation. Interview data were recorded and transcribed; data were analyzed using content and thematic analyses.

Results

Discourse analysis of brochures and signage had suggested that many agencies and organizations were engaged in environmental interpretation work – thus, a comprehensive list of public, private and non-profit agencies and organizations in forest recreation and tourism was developed for the survey. But, only 36 of 87 questionnaires were returned (41.4%); about a quarter of these (n=10; primarily non-profit organizations and businesses) reported little involvement in or need for interpretive programming. Given the small sample size and the lack of a reasonable sampling frame, results are not generalizable. Rather, our intent is to observe patterns in the data and raise issues for future research.

The remaining 26 completed questionnaires represented primarily non-profit organizations (n=14) and federal or state agencies (n=10). Data revealed a wide disparity in definitions and meanings of environmental interpretation. In open-ended questions, respondents conflated environmental interpretation with environmental education, often describing top-down agency communicative practices (“conveying information”; “explaining to visitors”) as the function of their interpretation/education efforts. Only one respondent mentioned “inspiring” visitors, though several commented on increasing public “appreciation, consciousness and love of the natural environment.” Respondents used an array of traditional mass media sources to facilitate their communication with publics. Funding problems were cited as the key impediment to interpretive success. Few respondents could identify suitable measures for assessing interpretive effectiveness.

In telephone conversations, managers spoke eloquently about the use of environmental interpretation as a managerial practice, and expressed considerable support for this form of visitor engagement. Notably, though, they aggregated multiple forms of public outreach activities and communication methods and messages under this concept. Consequently, the unique qualities and contributions of environmental interpretation to resource agencies and organizations seemed under-developed, even when they stated considerable support for interpretive programming. The demands

of agency management practices seemed to favor, in many instances, more passive and philosophical support for environmental interpretation, rather than active investments in these activities.

Discussion

Public, private and non-profit groups concerned about forested landscapes communicate with citizens and visitors for purposes of education, promoting conservation understanding, and stimulating senses of place. Some goals are accomplished using practices of environmental interpretation – though the research findings presented here suggest that some opportunities may also be missed. This study suggests that environmental interpretation, while generally viewed positively by managers, has several potential concerns. The practice of interpretation sometimes over-emphasizes methods of communication; it may introduce tensions between education and entertainment; and it may present uncritically certain types of messages (i.e., activist). These characteristics call into question fundamental conceptualizations about environmental interpretation, and challenge managers and researchers to more carefully consider theoretical and practical aspects of public communications related to protected areas.



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