

Nature Interpretation in Protected Areas: Connecting with Gen Y

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Introduction

With decreasing government funding and increasing threats to protected areas (PAs), Watson, Dudley, Segan and Hockings (2014) argue for better engagement with the public to secure the long-term protection of these natural areas. In particular, international and intergovernmental declarations have drawn attention to the need to reach out to younger generations such as Generation Y, also commonly referred to as *millennials*, to ensure they value and reap the benefits from visiting protected areas (UNESCO, 1997). On-site communication (interpretation) continues to be a principal vehicle by which protected areas communicate their values and deliver benefits. As such, it is important not only to get Gen Y into protected areas but to ensure that this generation engages with and is impacted by interpretation.

Generational cohorts such as Gen Y tend to share a collective memory and persona as a result of their time of birth, approximately the late 1970s to the late 1990s (Strauss and Howe, 2007). For example, they may share a common response to social changes and events (Donnison, 2007). Although there is disagreement on characteristics that are widely shared by Gen Y, there seems to be consensus on this cohort being technologically aware and connected (Strauss & Howe, 1997; Black, 2012; McQueen, 2010) and even highly dependent on technology, particularly communication technology including social media (Rainer & Rainer, 2011). Importantly for this paper, Gen Y may share particular views and behaviours regarding nature, protected areas and communication that may make their receptiveness to, engagement with, and responses to interpretation different to previous generations of young people.

Some have suggested that Gen Y is detached from or disengaged with the natural world (Taylor, Gray & Birrell, 2015) including being alienated by natural experiences in national parks and protected areas. Notwithstanding anecdotal evidence of low levels of engagement with nature, it is not clear how nature, experiences in nature, and protected areas are viewed and valued by Gen Y (Shultis & More, 2011). In a rare but localised study of a university-based Gen Y cohort by Ruiz (2017), 4 out of 5 respondents had visited a national park, two-thirds stated they were likely to visit a national park within the next 12 months, and 4 out of 5 view parks as valuable and important. The results of studies to date, however, fall short of determining whether Gen Y's interest in and responses to natural environments differ from previous generations when they were of a comparable age. Moreover, very little is known about Gen Y's engagement with interpretation.

This paper draws on a scoping study of literature from 1977 to 2017 together with a case study undertaken by Australia's New South Wales (NSW) National Parks & Wildlife Service (2011) to illuminate how Gen Y experiences, views and is influenced by protected areas. In

particular, this paper focuses on research findings that have implications for communicating with Gen Y about and in protected areas.

Methods

The scoping study reviewed peer-reviewed articles published up to and including 2017 using search terms associated with Gen Y in combination with nature, parks and protected areas. Of the 51 full-text articles accessed and analysed using our inclusion criteria, just eight empirical studies were found in the scholarly literature with empirical data relating to Gen Y and protected areas. Thus a key finding of the review was that the body of empirical and theoretical research examining Generation Y's engagement with national parks and protected areas is very small. The NSW study included a questionnaire-based survey of 401 Gen Y respondents, a 5-day online discussion forum with 28 participants, four 2-hour focus groups of visitors and non-visitors to NSW national parks, and two 2-hour accompanied visits with a friendship pair and a professional couple.

Selected findings

A key finding of one South African study was that a higher proportion of Gen Y respondents were unaware they were visiting a national park compared to other generations, suggesting the need for educational programs (Cini & Saayman, 2014). Ruiz's (2017) study also highlighted the need for educating Gen Y about national parks vs other protected areas.

Both Cini and Saayman (2014) and Roberts (2010) found that hands-on projects were effective communication vehicles, helping to connect Gen Y participants with national parks and promote environmentally responsible behaviour. In our case study, Gen Y responded particularly well to interactive engagement with them such as competitions and prizes to leverage interest. Our case study also revealed that respondents seek communication via experiential offerings and that park management agencies need to convey the versatility of these, as Gen Y participants only had limited experience with national parks. Importantly, once Gen Y have experienced national parks, they feel strongly positive towards them. This highlights the importance of communicating the benefits of parks to Gen Y and encouraging visitation.

Our case study results also point to the importance of social media and particularly the opportunity to share photos during a national park experience. However, in a study undertaken in Colorado, Gen Y respondents acknowledged that 'time was squandered on electronic devices such as television or social media Web sites like Facebook' which directly interfered with potential nature-based experiences (Barton, 2012). Similarly, respondents in an Australian-based study responded favourably to the opportunity to disconnect with "the real world" and reported feelings of wellbeing and a sense of belonging to the natural world as a result of being separated from communication technology (Taylor, Gray & Birrell, 2015). These results present a challenging dilemma regarding the use vs non-use of high-tech communication to engage Gen Y with nature and its conservation.

Implications and conclusions

What comes across from the scoping study is the following:

- Compared to other generations, Gen Y may have a particular need for communication about what is a national park, why protected areas are important and that they are in a protected area
- Gen Y may be particularly receptive to hands-on and interactive activities in protected areas
- Gen Y may be responsive to structured nature-based experiences that enforce a disconnection from technology

- Gen Y may want access to communication technology to share their experiences in nature in real time

The implications of these and other findings for interpretation are presented through the lens of best practice interpretation principles as reported in Skibins, Powell and Stern's (2012) meta-analyses (Skibins et al., 2012).

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