

What is interpretation?

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Interpretation is a “process of communication” (MacFarlane, 1994: cited in Hall & McArthur, 1993). To understand communication we must describe firstly this process through a commonly used and simple communication model with its basic elements: the communication source, the encoder, the message, the channel, the decoder, the communication receiver (Berlo, 1960). In the following paragraphs I will define each of the elements of the communication process and make an analogy with the elements of interpretation. This analogy will show that there are three fundamental elements in interpretation which are: the setting, the visitor and the agency. Understanding the relationship of these three elements of interpretation will help define what interpretation is, and the importance interpretation has for recreation, tourism and conservation management.

The communication *source* as Berlo (1960) says is "some person or group of persons with a purpose, a reason for engaging in communication". In terms of interpretation there are two sources when talking of nature interpretation: the natural setting (encountered by the visitor) and the agency (i.e. Department of Conservation in New Zealand). The agency is a group of people trying to inform, provoke an action in the visitor. In addition, the setting while it is not a person communicates and provokes an experience or feeling in the visitor. The importance of these two sources is that they have direct relationship with the visitor. The visitor experiences the setting directly, but interpretation by the agency can enhance this experience through a communication process with the agency. These two relationships have different purposes and outcomes, the object of later discussion.

The second element in the process is the *encoder* which is defined by Berlo (1960) as being "responsible for taking the ideas of the *source* and putting them in a code". The

encoder in interpretation is the 'interpreter', a person who verbally, visually or through any other means "serves as translators of the natural and cultural environment" (Knudson, Cable and Beck, 1995). The interpreter, as an encoder, has a relationship with the visitor, and is part of the agency.

The third element is the *message*, is the purpose of the source (Berlo, 1960). The *message* is then the interpretation itself and interpretation can have several goals depending on the perspective: as they relate to the Setting, as they relate to the Agency, and as they relate to the Visitor. If the message is the objective of the source, the agency has clear objectives to transmit to the visitor, and the visitor can respond to these objectives, and therefore establish communication. The setting, on the other hand, we said that it could be considered a source. The setting does not have a message, a purpose, to send to the visitor, but the visitor is the one that gives the setting a meaning, it makes it a source of inspiration, relaxation, self-discovery.

A message must use a *channel*, or the means by which the message is delivered. The channel can be, for example, an interpreter's oral presentation, a sign, or an interactive on-site display. The channel is an important element in interpretation. The channel with its planning, construction and execution is an important element to persuade the visitor.

If we stop here in the model, as Berlo (1960) underlines, no communication has taken place, and for our purpose nor has interpretation. We need to include the "target of communication" (Berlo, 1960), the *receiver*, the visitor. There is an important element that the *receiver* is missing, a *decoder*. "The *decoder* can be thought of as the senses" (Berlo, 1960). This definition of decoder can further support our view of the setting as the *source*, because the visitor senses, experiences the mountain or river he/she is visiting. The senses are the front line of how we perceive reality.

Interpretation is a communication process that interrelates a setting through an agency with a visitor, and "aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects" (Tilden, 1977). This communication process has its purposes transmitted

through a message and are related to the setting. An agency can promote an adequate use, and search for advocates for the setting; related to the agency to improve its outside image and encourage participation of the public in the management; and finally related to the visitor providing recreation, promoting awareness and understanding of the natural environment (Reigner, Gross & Zimmerman, 1994).

Following the interactions of the **Agency-Interpreter** (management of the park, dedicated to the conservation management perspective), the **Setting** (natural site used for recreation and tourism purposes) and the **Visitor** (recreationist and/or tourist) proposed by the communication model, a three element model is presented in Diagram 1, which does not overlap the Setting and the Agency as the *source*.

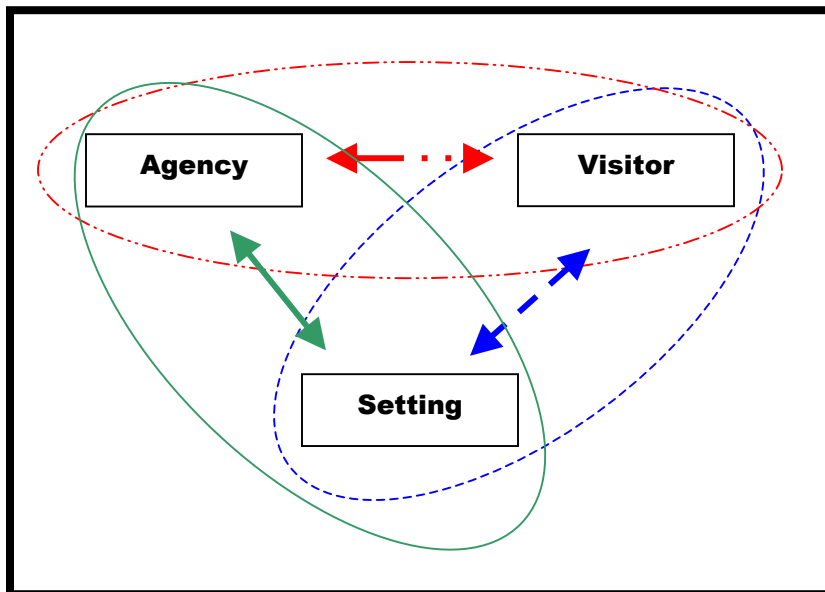


Diagram 1 - Allan Rhodes

Diagram 1 sketches the relationships (presented as ellipses) and communication processes (represented by two-way arrows) between the visitor who for recreational purposes travels to a setting to interact with it, and encounters different levels of interpretation presented by an agency in charge of conservation management. We can see this diagram firstly from a visitor perspective. The visitor can have a direct relationship with the setting with no interpretation, but his own; and on the other hand experience the setting through the interpretation given by an agency. This relationship

is also illustrated by Tilden when he recommends interpreters to remember “the visitor ultimately is seeing things through his own eyes, not those of the interpreter, and he is forever and finally translating your words as best he can into whatever he can refer to his own intimate knowledge and experience” (1977; 14). Looking interpretation from a visitor perspective we can then understand the importance of interpretation for the recreation-tourism context.

Benefits are a term that better defines outdoor recreation, interpretation that can enhance these benefits then becomes important for recreation. We know that visitors go to a national park for recreation, Manning (1995) presents principles of outdoor recreation and the sixth principles states: "outdoor recreation is most appropriately defined in terms of motivations and benefits rather than participation in activities". Interpretation as stated before has several goals if we relate them to recreation, then we can identify its importance, such goals are: provide recreation and inspire, and add perspective to their lives. (Reigner, Gross & Zimmerman, 1994) If recreation is benefits then a visitor which is inspired and adds perspective to its life, in this stressful modern society interpretation becomes very important to re-create one self.

The interpretation relationship can also be seen from the perspective of the agency (Diagram 1). The agency is responsible for the management of the place and must relate to its visitors (to the setting) to offer recreational opportunities while conserving the setting. "Managers want to provide high-quality outdoor recreation opportunities, and visitors want to have high-quality outdoor recreation experiences" (Manning, 1999; 8). An agency deal with a constant paradox, on one side interpreting the natural setting for the enhancement of the visitor experience (use of the setting) and on the other side the relationship with the setting to conserve it (S. Espiner, Resource-Based Recreation, February 24, 2003). Interpretation then becomes again of great importance for conservation management, “educating the visitors about how to live lightly...as well as self-serving goals such as reducing management and maintenance problems, promoting the agency’s image, and understanding resource management decisions” (Knudson, Cable and Beck, 1995).

Interpretation can be considered as a communication process, and through this approach it is possible to underline three vital actors (agency, setting, visitor) which, seen from two different perspectives (visitor and agency), show us the importance of interpretation for recreation, tourism and conservation management. In conclusion “interpretation, properly carried out, serves as an indispensable tool to achieve successful, intelligent cultural and natural resource stewardship [conservation management]. Interpretation lifts recreation beyond mundane fun to intelligent use of leisure time [recreation & tourism], and from appreciation to understanding of the cultural and natural environment” (Knudson, Cable and Beck, 1995).

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