

PLANNING EFFECTIVE NATURAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE INTERPRETATION STRATEGIES

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Planning is not the science of nuclear fusion or astro-physics!

On one level, planning is very easy –

It is a *systematic* approach to answering **three** questions:

- What resources are needed/involved?
- What processes are needed/involved?
- What are the desired outcomes?

However, while planning might be a relatively simple concept, what goes into the planning process is critical and dealing with ‘real world’ phenomena is not so easy.

What are the *inputs* in strategic heritage interpretation planning?

There are many and we only want to highlight **four** in this presentation.

A. A Clear Understanding of Interpretation

Interpretation is not signs, brochures, guided walks, demonstrations, information centres and so forth.

Here is ONE explanation of interpretation that we have recently written.

Heritage interpretation at the beginning of the 21st century CE is about the discovery, appreciation and awareness of the natural and cultural systems vital to the present-future. Heritage interpretation is a creative process that encompasses the lived

experiences of all visitors, no matter what their backgrounds, and fosters a deep attachment to heritage and heritage conservation. Heritage interpretation is sensitive to both the content that is being interpreted and the techniques used to communicate that content. In the 21st century CE heritage interpretation is about making connections through the many ways the cultural /natural landscape manifests itself to custodians and local communities and visitors.

Note the following points –

- Discovery/appreciation/awareness/attachment = the present/future & heritage conservation literacy.
- Creativity.
- Visitors are not empty vessels to be filled.
- There are issues about the content and the techniques of communication.
- Multiplicity of attachments to cultural & natural landscapes.
- There are many stakeholders – eg custodians, local communities and visitors.

B. A Clear Understanding of Heritage Interpretation Issues

In an age of global travel and in an era when heritage has a very high profile (for many reasons), there are a number of issues that impinge on interpretation planning. Here is just **one** - the issues relating to the content of interpretation.

Content Selection/Development

Content is at the heart of interpretation and at the most prosaic is the knowledge imparted at a heritage site about the phenomena being viewed/experienced by the visitor.

But how is content to be selected/generated? From a text-book?

We have devised a simple model about heritage content development. The model breaks content development into three vital stages –

Stage 1: Primary Interpretation – information/understandings that pertain directly to the object being observed.

Stage 2: Secondary Interpretation – information/understandings that pertain to the wider context within which the object exists.

Stage 3: Tertiary Interpretation – information/understandings that pertain to the contemporary world of the visitor/viewer.

In addition, there is a template of *critical questions* that lays across all three stages:

- Who ‘owns’ or has custodial rights over the objects or collections or places?
- How are the objects or collections or landscapes represented and/or displayed?
- Who speaks (or has the right to speak) for the objects or collections or landscapes and what is spoken?
- Who is looking at the objects or landscapes and who is listening to the speaking?

If a fundamental aim heritage interpretation is to communicate an understanding of heritage values, then an informed and critical understanding of content is required.

Cross-cultural Translation

It's not simply a matter of translating the signs and brochures into foreign languages.

“The foreign visitors (*farang*) can only see how it is beautiful but cannot appreciate and learn about what is inside the Wat”.

Heritage Architecture Management postgraduate student, Silpakorn University, Bangkok. The comment arose from his observation of foreign tourists visiting Wat Phrea Singh in Chiang Mai. He noted that the international tourists were spending about 5 minutes inside each building of the monastic complex. His concern, as a Thai Buddhist and a heritage

architecture student, was the effect of not understanding the architecture, the sculpture, the murals, the symbolism, the devotional practices and so on.

But having signage does not ensure comprehension. The following is an extract from a sign at Wat Mahathat, Sukhothai World Heritage Site.

Wat Mahathat is situated within the Sukhothai city center. It is a grand and very important temple of Sukhothai. It consists of more than 200 chedis. The lotus-bud shaped chedi is the main one of this temple and is surrounded with 8 minor chedis, one at each of the four sides. The characteristics of this chedi demonstrate the influence of Khmer art that existed before the diffusion of Ceylonese art to this region... the decoration of the chedis in the corners represents the influence of Pukham-Lanna art.

The following questions arise –

- What is a *chedi*?
- What is Khmer art?
- How does it differ from Ceylonese art?
- What is Pukham-Lanna art?

Cultural translation is complex because it attempts to make the unfamiliar, familiar by transforming the cultural forms of the destination into something understandable to the visitor from another culture.

What is lost in the translation?

C. Knowing the Visitor

All heritage interpretation research acknowledges the absolute importance of knowing who the visitors are so that the interpretation experience can be targeted towards them.

Visitor surveys are the most common method of describing and understanding the profile of visitors. There has been some excellent work done in this area, for example, Fraser Island World Heritage Site in Australia.

There are many other ways to analyse the visitor including social and cultural analysis.

D. Understanding the Operating Environment of a Heritage Site

For maximum heritage interpretation effectiveness, we believe it is essential that there be an in-depth understanding of the operating environment of the site as an *input* into interpretation planning.

These may include any, or all, of the following:

- Situation analysis.
- Organizational context of the site.
- Socio-political context of the site.
- Funding and economic issues.
- Management priorities and issues.
- Staffing issues.
- Visitation.
- Local community characteristics and relationships.
- And so forth.

Conclusion

There is more than one way to cook an egg!

And so there is more than one way to approach effective heritage interpretation planning.

We will look at a case-study later on, and discuss with you our model of heritage interpretation planning.

In conclusion, let us highlight what we believe to be the critical characteristics of effective heritage interpretation planning:

- It is a process.
- It is research driven.
- It is collaborative.
- It acknowledges the issues (as I've discussed in this presentation).
- It is holistic.
- It requires time.
- It puts monitoring & evaluation at the heart of the process.

FIVE STAGES TO EFFECTIVE HERITAGE INTERPRETATION PLANNING.

Stage 1: Policy and Planning

1. What is the rationale of an interpretation program? How does it further the strategic plans of the organisation? How does it realise or embody the mission statement (or vision statement) of the organisation?
2. What are the aims of having an interpretation program?
 - What is the goal or mission statement for interpretation?
 - Who are the stakeholders (institutional & community & others)?
 - How will decisions be made?
 - What are the achievable objectives (performance criteria) of the interpretation program?
3. What models of interpretation are going to frame/contextualise/inform the interpretation program of the site?

Stage 2: Strategic Planning

4. Identify resource issues
 - What are the management issues of the resource/attraction that impinge on interpretation?
 - What are the visitor management issues of the site?
 - What is the funding/staff allocation?
 - Do the staff have appropriate training/skills/educational qualifications?
5. Identify and define the target audience.
 - What are the demographic characteristics (eg age, gender, education level, origin)?
 - What are the psychographic characteristics (eg motivation, level of interest, attitudes & beliefs, receptiveness)?
6. Identify current interpretation issues, practices and the 'competitive environment'.
 - Who is doing what, where (locally, nationally, globally)?
 - What are the contemporary issues in interpretation and how will the intended program respond to these?

Stage 3: Development of the Program

7. Content.
 - What concepts?
 - Which research/expertise?
 - What are the key issues/debates?
 - What themes/linkages will be used?
 - What are the key messages to be transmitted?
 - Who has editorial control over the content?
 - Are there 'ownership' or copyright issues to be resolved?
8. Structuring the Content.
 - What are the links between the content and the site?
 - What are the interests, background etc. of the audience/visitors?
 - What are the interests of site managers & stakeholders?
 - What are the interests of the interpretation team?
9. Communication Techniques.
 - What techniques best serve the content & the content issues?
 - What techniques best serve the site?
 - What techniques best serve the policy & planning issues?
 - What techniques best serve the target audiences?
 - What techniques reflect the strengths/experience of the interpretation team?
 - Are there emerging trends/issues in the use of particular techniques and media?
10. Design an Integrated Visitor Experience.
 - What types of experiences? Access? Duration? Activities? Which target audiences?
 - Target messages?
 - An interpretation centre?
 - Linking content (through concepts, themes & messages) with communication techniques.
 - Timing – short or long term programs (&/or activities)?
 - What are the environmental impacts of the program?
11. Devise a marketing strategy for the proposed interpretation program.
12. Devise an administrative structure to organise & run the program.

Stage 4: Implementation

13. Design & Produce a Draft Program.
 - Both design & production should be executed in the context of Stages 1-3.
 - Production includes all texts, all visuals, all media, & all the documentation (eg policy documents, bibliographical resources, planning documents etc.).
 - Design includes visual composition, guided tours/talks & itineraries, interpretation centre, layout, signage, displays, models, posters, diagrams, audio-visuals, brochures and/or guide-books, presentations, guide manuals etc.
14. Review draft design & production against the decisions made during stages 1-3.
15. Produce the Products & Implement the program.

Stage 5: Evaluation of the Program

16. Evaluation should ensure that –
 - All the stakeholders (eg organisation, community, interpretation team, visitors etc.) involved in the interpretation program understand the rationale and the nature of the evaluation;
 - That the evaluation involve measurable objectives/performance criteria;
 - That relevant material be collectable;
 - That results are balanced and reliable & recommendations be relevant, feasible, timely & accommodate the interests of the stakeholders and the organisation.
17. Evaluation must be on-going & assess the effectiveness of the interpretation program and determine whether –
 - The policies, rationale, aims and objectives of the interpretation program are being met and are appropriate;
 - Resources are optimally allocated and used within the program;
 - The strategic plan retains relevance to both the organisation and the market;
 - The design, the production & the implementation of the program is appropriate for & satisfies the target audiences.

Staiff, R. & Bushell, R. (2004) Strategic Planning Heritage Interpretation for Visitors: Issues and Process at Minnamurra Rainforest Centre, NSW.

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WORKSHOP 1

This exercise is to be done in pairs.

Assume you are heritage site managers.

Your site either has no interpretation or the existing interpretation is very poor.

Discuss the following two questions:

- What would you put in your interpretation plan?
- Who would be involved in the process of creating an interpretation plan?

WORKSHOP 2

Interpretation is more than signs, brochures, guided walks, demonstrations and information centres.

This exercise is to be done in groups of 3 or 4 people.

How can heritage interpretation.....

- Support biodiversity?
- Support cultural heritage conservation?
- Support local stories?
- Support the local economy?
- Support local culture?
- Support land rights?

- Support Indigenous people's knowledge systems?
- Support community development?