

Interpreting Controversy

A TEL Learning Opportunity
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Semi-organized thoughts from Kim Sikoryak

Parks and Controversy

The National Park Service is a microcosm of the fundamental democratic axiom that drives the American experiment: People are happiest and society works best when everyone is accorded the maximum freedom to pursue their own, self-defined best interest to the limit that that freedom does not adversely impact the equal rights of others, including our descendants, to do the same.

Parks mean something to people—just not the same thing to all people. That’s why parks are controversial. Interpreters embrace controversy as an energizing force for personal exploration of multiple points of view. They recognize controversies as powerful engines for civic engagement. Broader perspectives make for better-informed decisions—a necessity for a successful democracy.

The Mission of the National Park Service

“...to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein, and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations....”
(from the enabling legislation, 1916)

Or, put another way,

“The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The [National] Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world.” (from the NPS Strategic Plan, 2000)

Interpretation is an important part of that enjoyment, education, and inspiration.

The Mission of Interpretation

The interpretation & education program provides enhanced opportunities for visitors to forge their own intellectual and emotional connections to the natural and cultural resources that comprise shared heritage.

Visitors' Rights

Park interpreters promote, protect, and respect the rights of all visitors. This is critical to the achievement of the mission. All visitors have the right:

To have their privacy and independence respected.

To retain and express their own values.

To be treated with courtesy and consideration.

To receive accurate and balanced information.

Point of View

What is a point of view—and why do we each have one (or many)?

**Morris Massey: “Who You Are Now is What You Were When”—
Values Formation and Significant Emotional Events**

Morris Massey is a social scientist who has produced training materials for the NPS and was on the faculty of the University of Colorado before becoming a private consultant. He observed that at around age 10, people identify “heroes” around which they model their beliefs and views. These figures don’t necessarily have to be actual people, or even fictional ones. They can be animals, plants, natural or cultural features, etc. By about age 14, Massey contends, this internal process of modeling heroes results in a person establishing a world view or philosophical perspective about what is right/wrong, good/bad, normal/not-normal that is very strongly set and resistant to change.

People are most susceptible to change, Massey feels, when they experience what he calls a “significant emotional event.” Such traumatically pleasant or unpleasant experiences as getting married, getting divorced, narrowly escaping death, etc. destabilize a person’s world view (for a time) and make him or her much more likely to modify that characteristically rigid mind set. Visiting an impressive heritage resource, like a national

park, can be such an emotional event. Visitors are already destabilized: They are away from home, eating strange food, sleeping in a strange bed (or tent), and otherwise out of their normal routine. In addition, the sights, sounds, and overall experience of a park environment offer perspectives likely to be different from the norm for them. So, interpreting to park visitors is more likely than many other forms of communication to effect change. That offers interpreters a rare opportunity to broaden visitors' perspectives—at the same time that it presents us with a serious responsibility to respect their fundamental beliefs at a time when they are vulnerable.

Point of View: Luke and Obi-Wan

The Star Wars movies offer a contemporary example of the power of point of view. Luke is outraged when he finally accepts that Darth Vader is his father (a significant emotional event), but is invited to broaden his understanding of the nature of belief by Obi-Wan.

Luke: You lied to me. You said that Darth Vader killed my father.

Obi: When Anakin Skywalker turned to the Dark Side of the Force, the good man that was your father ceased to exist. So, what I told you was the truth—from a certain point of view.

Luke: A certain point of view!

Obi: Luke, you're going to learn that many of the truths we cling to are only true when looked at from a certain point of view.

A Few Rhetorical Questions

What did Freeman Tilden mean when he said that Interpretation is Provocation? Do interpreters deliberately provoke visitors? Is that wise?

Do we encourage multiple points of view, or just tolerate them?

Are there reasonable points of view and unreasonable points of view? If so, how do we tell the difference? And what do we do about it?

Interpreters also have personal points of view. How do we police ourselves to keep our personal perspectives on specific resource issues from becoming the "agenda" for our interpretive efforts? Do we? Should we?

Policy Regarding Interpretation

Management Policies 2001; Chapter 7 (Read it. Hey, it's only 4 pages!)

7.1: "Interpretation will encourage dialogue, and accept that visitors have their own individual points of view. Factual information presented will be current, accurate, based on current scholarship and science, and delivered so as to convey park meanings, with the understanding that audience members will draw their own conclusions."

7.5.3: "Resource Issue Interpretation and Education

Park managers are increasingly called upon to make difficult resource decisions, some of which may be highly controversial. Interpretive and educational programs can build public understanding of, and support for, such decisions and initiatives, and for the NPS mission in general. Therefore, parks should, in balanced and appropriate ways, thoroughly integrate resource issues and initiatives of local and Service-wide importance into their interpretive and educational programs."

7.5.5 Consultation

The national Park Service will present factual and balanced presentation of the many American cultures, heritages, and histories. Consultation with diverse constituencies is essential to the development of effective and meaningful interpretive and educational programs, because it (1) ensures appropriate content and accuracy, and (2) identifies multiple points of view and potentially sensitive issues.... Acknowledging multiple points of view does not require interpretive and educational programs to provide equal time, or to disregard the weight of scientific or historical evidence.

"...Cooperative programs will be developed with tribal governments and cultural groups to help the NPS present accurate perspectives on their cultures. Ethnographic or cultural anthropological data and concepts will also be used in interpretive programs, as appropriate."

Knowledge, Belief, and Scholarship

Some interesting reading about beliefs:

Michael Shermer: How We Believe—The Search for God in an Age of Science
Why People Believe Weird Things

Scholarship:

Scholarship seeks to increase a body of knowledge;
routinely considers multiple explanations for resources and meanings;
is juried (it undergoes peer review);
is disseminated (in peer-reviewed journals, with data open to examination);
is perpetually subject to revision and updating as new information becomes available.

Things to know about Scholarship:

Knowledge of resources. (Know what you think you know.)

Knowledge of scholarship regarding resources. (Know what experts think they know.)

Know the level of scholarly confidence. (Know to what degree experts think they know what they think they know.)

Knowledge of legal and Constitutional constraints (such as First Amendment responsibilities).

Knowledge of policy (How and why we manage and interpret resources as we do.)

Careful use of language and jargon: Phrases such as “Abandoned Anasazi Ruins” may be historically accepted language among archeologists (and the general public familiar with archeological writing) but may be offensive to those contemporary Pueblo people who consider such references disparaging of their ancestors. Interpreters have a responsibility to explain the perspectives of both groups, and seek ways of making visitors aware of both perspectives—and the tension between them.

Attribution: “Radiometric dating of this rock indicates an age between...” can be much more respectful of multiple perspectives (as well as more scientifically informative) than just saying, “This rock is 10 million years old.” Depending on context, a lead-in message of attribution can relate to an individual sentence, a whole exhibit, or an entire set of exhibitry. Attribution is not an excuse or an apology—it’s just more precise language, and better interpretation.

Know the difference between explaining a perspective and advocating it: There are very few instances where there is an “official, government explanation” of specific events or causes. Care should be taken not to mislead the public into thinking we are presenting the “authorized, final version” of history or science. We are presenting multiple perspectives—and our understanding of the context of those views vis-à-vis sound scholarship.

Know that non-mainstream ideas may be supported by small, but vocal, groups. Be careful about ascribing certain assumed belief sets to diverse groups of people mischaracterized by such loose terms as “Northerner,” “Creationist,” “Conservative,” “Environmentalist,” etc.

Is there a difference between interpreting controversial resource significances and explaining controversial management actions? What are the similarities and differences between these two sets of possibly controversial issues?

Science and History

What is Science?

Science can be thought of as a family of methodologies for exploring and explaining the world. Scientific explanations (theories) are:

- Guided by natural law. (Let's focus on what our senses tell us and try to explain what we perceive without resorting to miracles or supernatural causes.)
- Explanatory by reference to natural law. (Let's assume that the world is something we can figure out by examining it and talking about what we perceive.)
- Testable against the empirical world. (Let's use our tentative explanations to make some predictions and measure the real world to see how our predictions hold up.)
- Tentative, and subject to revision. (Let's perpetually recheck our observations and ideas against what we perceive to check their validity, accuracy, and precision—and let's do this forever and never feel that we are “done.”)
- Falsifiable. (Let's design our tentative explanations of the world in such a way that there is some observation out there, that if we perceived it, we would be forced to rethink and/or refine our original idea.)

(See [Overton, William R.], “Creationism in Schools: The Decision in McLean versus the Arkansas Board of Education,” *Science*, Vol.215 (February 19, 1982), pp. 934-943.

Are there historical sciences?

Not all sciences rely on experimentation to develop scientific explanations (hypotheses and theories). Astronomy, for instance, is almost totally descriptive and observational. That does not prevent its practitioners from using inductive reasoning to make useful and testable predictions about the workings of the cosmos. Inductive reasoning is the process of using a finite number of observations to formulate general statements of relationship (scientific laws) and tentative explanations of natural processes (scientific hypotheses and theories). The very fact that no researcher, or team of researchers, can make all observations of a phenomenon (now, and in the past and future) means that all scientific explanations are tentative. No knowledgeable scientist would ever suggest that any scientific explanation can be proved to be absolutely true beyond any doubt. This is not a weakness in science—it just recognizes science's limits.

Is History Scientific?

Historians usually do not consider their field a science. But science and history share the same characteristics of sound scholarship. A scientific approach to historical questions can be very helpful in proposing answers to many of the questions that history asks. For a good example of a scientific approach to history, see the book, **Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies**, by Jared Diamond.

Are their questions that science cannot address?

There are many questions and ideas that cannot be verified or disproved using the methods of science. Moral, ethical, and metaphysical questions, for instance, are beyond the realm of scientific inquiry. Scientists could accurately predict the physical consequences (and perhaps even the psychological effects) of dropping a bomb on a major city, but could never scientifically determine whether it would be moral to do so.

Communication, Conversation, and Story

What is story—and how does it work?

Stories work by linking tangibles things with which we are familiar, to intangible ideas, meaning, beliefs, and values. That allows us to use simple, familiar constructs to examine, explore, and share esoteric concepts that distinguish us and bind us as individuals, families, communities, and societies. The most relevant and enduring stories are those that explore universally relevant “big ideas” that almost everyone can connect with on both an intellectual and emotional level.

As an example in contemporary culture, consider the following tangibles:

- Death Star
- Wookie
- Light Saber

Almost all of us can immediately identify these with the story of “Star Wars.” But are these really what the Star Wars movies are about? Most of us would agree that the real “meat” of the Star Wars story has to do with intangible ideas like:

- Intergenerational Conflict
- Good and Evil
- The Corrupting Potential of Great Power
- Etc.

The “Etc.” part is particularly important here, since we could probably go on to make an almost infinite list of intangible meanings and ideas that people see in the Star Wars story. That’s another aspect of great stories—they mean many things to many people. And the essentially universal relevance of many of the meanings (such as the three examples above) ensures that almost everyone will find the story personally compelling at a fundamental level.

(An amusing sidelight on this story is that two of the main characters, Luke and the Emperor, actually tell each other what the story means to them toward the end of Chapter 6: Return of the Jedi. In a climactic scene on the new Death Star, Luke baits the Emperor by exclaiming, “Your overconfidence is your weakness.” The Emperor sneers back, “Your faith in your friends is yours!” It’s easy to see which idea George Lukas favors: the Emperor meets a grisly end while Luke goes on to reunite with his friends, both those living in flesh and those living in spirit.)

How do we tell stories well?

- Practice!

“I like talking to a man who likes to talk. No closed-mouthed man for me sir, no sir. A closed-mouthed man, when he does talk, is likely to do so at the wrong time and to say the wrong thing. No sir, talking is something that one cannot do judiciously if one is out of practice.” –Sidney Greenstreet in *The Maltese Falcon*

- Pacing

A conversation can be thought of as a story that two or more people are telling each other, and making up as they go along. Parks, as forums for civic discourse, are arguably some of the most important places for meaningful conversations in our nation. But for a conversation to endure, the participants must adhere to a set of social conventions about mutual respect and equal opportunity that are so deeply ingrained in most of us (at least by the time that we are adults) that we respect those conventions almost unconsciously.

- Sharing versus Domination

Most all communication is intended to be persuasive. It's a matter of defining the objective: to advocate a particular point of view or to advocate exploring multiple points of view. The latter is to some degree not habitual, and so must be learned and practiced to be done well. An interpreter who approaches communication as a "contest" to "win" will likely have little success in facilitating others' finding their own connections to resources and their meanings. For interesting reading about usefully managing the energy of controversy in conversation, read **The Magic of Conflict** by Thomas Crum (an aikido master who was the teacher, confidante, and bodyguard of the late John Denver.)

How do we voice and respect multiple points of view?

Know the difference between misunderstanding and disagreement. We sometimes do not apprehend that the visitor understands quite well what we are saying—but simply does not agree with what we're saying. Under such circumstances, explaining what you mean “one more time” is likely to do little more than anger visitors—and confirm their suspicion that you are not a very perceptive individual.

Know the difference between interpreting resources and explaining management decisions. When we interpret multiple resource meanings, we are inviting visitors to explore multiple points of view, without representing any as “official.” When explaining management decisions, the perspective and action of management IS the official decision about what is the best course of action for the park to take. Again, that doesn't necessarily mean that this is the only course of action, or that management will never revise its decision in the future if circumstances change.

Finding common ground: It's usually best to show that you understand the perspective of visitors, and respect their right to hold that perspective, before you invite them to explore other perspectives.

Embrace pragmatic idealism. Be realistic about your expectations to effect change. Your goal should be to broaden the visitor's point of view, not replace his with yours.

When appropriate, agree to disagree. When it's clear that the visitor disagrees with your line of reasoning (rather than misunderstanding it) you may be wise to reaffirm her right to hold her own perspective—even though you (and park management) may not agree with it.

Hearing the real question.

Imagine this scene. An interpreter (Keesha) is leading an interpretive walk through a redwood forest. As Keesha and the group of visitors move along the trail, she identifies the flowers in bloom and talks about forest ecology. They round a bend in the trail and see a bench. The bench is made of wood. A visitor asks, “What kind of wood is that bench made of?”

Keesha says, “I'm not sure what kind of wood they used for that,” and she continues to lead them along the trail. Oops, an interpretive moment — perhaps the most significant opportunity of the entire walk — may have just been missed by the interpreter. What happened?

Keesha, it turns out, is very comfortable identifying flowers, animals, and trees. She's comfortable talking about how the components of the larger forest system all interrelate. She is not, however, comfortable discussing anything that might be controversial, like different values people place on these resources. Because of this, she chose not to pursue the golden opportunity that occurred when the visitor asked about the bench.

Now imagine the conversation that could have taken place:

“What kind of wood is that bench made of?” a visitor asks.

“This bench is made of redwood,” Keesha responds. “We didn't cut down a healthy tree to make this bench, though. Redwoods, mostly through the action of winter storms, are

sometimes uprooted and fall down. Sometimes they fall in the middle of the forest, where they are left to decompose naturally and recycle nutrients into the forest environment. Sometimes, though, they fall onto roads or across trails like this one. When that happens, we remove a portion of them to continue to provide visitor access on established trails.” As Keesha speaks, she makes sure to engage the visitor group, her eyes roaming from one face to another.

“In fact, I think the tree used for this bench fell last year across the trailhead where we assembled this morning. Anyway, we use removed portions of downed trees in the park for trail signs and benches like this. In this way, we’re managing the park so that visitors like you can get around and see this magnificent stand of redwoods, and we’re also able to show what a beautiful wood this is when crafted into a bench.”

In this version, Keesha was exhibiting the mindset of an interpreter. She was ready to respond in a meaningful way when an interpretive opportunity presented itself. Some people have this mindset naturally, other interpreters must cultivate it. It’s not unlike how someone entering a police force may have a different level of attentiveness after receiving training. Cadets become more aware of their surroundings, of people, of circumstances and, in so doing, are better equipped to perform their duties. Similarly, interpreters ready to capitalize on interpretive moments like this visitor’s question about the bench inevitably provide richer experiences for visitors, better performing their duties as interpreters.

Sometimes it’s important for the interpreter to hear the questions underlying what the visitor literally asks. Was the visitor really asking: “How can you use a redwood tree for something as mundane as a bench? Doesn’t that conflict with what the park is supposed to do, ya’ know, conserve the forest? Or keep it from being harvested for commercial use?” Keesha was challenged to determine what questions were on the mind of the visitor asking “What kind of wood is the bench made of?” — and probably on the minds of others in the group, too. So, her answer should address both the literal question and the potential questions.

Ignoring the real question.

Conversely, sometimes it’s better for the interpreter to pretend that he or she *didn’t* hear the underlying question. If the interpreter thinks the underlying question will not serve any useful purpose — if the visitor wants to be argumentative or deliberately disrespectful — the interpreter can choose to interact with that visitor on a literal level only, answering the actual question asked instead of what the interpreter, and everyone else in the group, thinks is *really* being asked. It is important for the interpreter to understand both sides of this dynamic, recognize them as they occur, and make intelligent and productive choices when responding. The mission of interpretation should remain the foremost guide in making these choices: While respecting visitors’ rights and other tenets of the profession of interpretation, how can my response to the visitor’s question best facilitate opportunities for visitors to forge their own intellectual and emotional connections to the natural and cultural resources that comprise shared heritage.

Evolution of a theme statement at Devils Tower National Monument

Sometimes the ramifications of word choices and placement have dramatic implications for the meaning of a theme, and its ability to respect perspectives or generate controversy. Consider these three versions of an interpretive theme from Devils Tower in Wyoming.

1. The sacredness and spiritual power of this place, perpetuated by a wide range of Native American peoples in a diversity of ways, is key to their continuing sense of personal and cultural identity and responsibility.
2. An innate sacredness at this place has always been recognized by American Indian peoples—and respected in diverse ways that are socially and spiritually significant to their cultural identity and sense of personal responsibility.
3. This place has always been recognized as innately sacred by many American Indian peoples—and respected in diverse ways that are socially and spiritually significant to their cultural identity and their sense of responsibility.

Park staff and stakeholders wanted this primary park theme to capture the sacredness of Devils Tower as identified and respected by a wide range of American Indian tribes and nations. Yet, they were concerned to not represent the Tower as universally held to be sacred by all people (Who are we to make that judgment?). Their third try was successful, in their view, in stating that the Tower is considered sacred by many, but clarifying any suggestion that the NPS or the U.S. government was not bestowing some sort of “official” sacredness on the Tower—which could represent an establishment of religion not permitted by the First Amendment.

Authority

Because you are a National Park Service interpreter, some people will believe everything you say is true. On the other hand, some will believe that nothing you say is true for the very same reason. In real life, the former group can often be more challenging to deal with responsibly than the latter. Occasionally, we are tempted to use interpretive opportunities to voice and justify personal disagreement with management policies or decisions. That way lies hubris. Professional interpreters hold the line against grinding private axes in public.

Is the mission of interpretation about convincing people of something? If so, what? Certainly, it can't be anything as simplistic as the notion that wolves are good and sheep are bad (or that sheep are good and wolves are bad). It must be considerably higher up the cognitive ladder than that. Perhaps something like: The world is much more complex, mysterious, and sophisticated than any of us can fully imagine—and as long as we are alive, there's time to learn and appreciate more.

Do we provide opportunities for people to connect to heritage resources to ensure the protection of those resources? Or do we protect resources to ensure people's opportunity to connect to them in perpetuity? The answer to this koan appears to be—Yes!

Controversy—We've got it, now what do we do with it?

Interpreters serve as spirit guides for others—that's a weighty charge that we must not abuse. This is serious stuff—we're messing with people's minds here. As interpreters, we tend to have a strong emotional and intellectual investment in specific resources and specific meanings—and naturally seek to share and validate that with others. But ultimately, we can only offer opportunities for people to explore and find relevance in heritage resources—and **trust** that once they care about them, they will care for them. And trust is a scary thing when you are as dedicated to the protection and preservation of parks as most interpreters are. Part of moving toward that trust is training ourselves to embrace, rather than fear, the energy of controversy.

There's a great quote above Norland Library at the University of Colorado: "Who knows only his own generation remains always a child." (Cicero?) We could extend that to say that everyone who understands only his or her own perspective remains a child. We are the most powerful species on the planet. And the United States of America is the most powerful nation that has ever existed on Earth. That power brings with it an enormous responsibility. We can't afford to act like children. Now, perhaps more than ever before, interpretation is in a position to help people realize that diversity is a source of strength, not a threat. At least, that's my point of view.

Note: Many of these ideas are taken from **Interp Guide: The Philosophy and Practice of Connecting People to Heritage** by Kim Sikoryak and Richard Kohen, Intermountain Region, NPS. This publication will be available by late winter 2005 on the IMR Intranet Web Page or by emailing richard_kohen@nps.gov.