Natural interpretation: a brief guide to the interpretation of nature and wildlife

Jim Mitchell and Dr. Philip Ryland

AHI Best Practice Guidelines 13. September 2017

So, why is the interpretation of nature and wildlife important?

We are frequently reminded of how ‘modern life’ has resulted in many people becoming ‘out of touch’ or even ‘completely disconnected’ from the natural world, interpretation can play a pivotal role in bridging this gap – at its best; it can engage, educate, inform and inspire us (Shackley, 1996).

Newsome, Moore & Dowling (2013:295) identify three core roles for the interpretation of natural areas, namely: education, recreation and behavioural change. They expand on these three roles as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. The interpretation of natural areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Educational activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Provide information about the site and orientate visitors on arrival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Use of a range of activities can increase visitor knowledge and skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Activities can be designed to promote a greater understanding of local as well as global environmental issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Recreational activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Activities offered can increase levels of visitor enjoyment and thus build visitor numbers as well as encouraging repeat visitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Activities can be immersive, emotionally stimulating and lead to a more rewarding visitor experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Exposure to nature through activities can support benefits to the mental and physical health as well as the wellbeing of visitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Activities can establish an enhanced ‘sense of place’ for the site and its local setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Conservation-supporting behaviours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Visitor awareness of human impacts upon the natural environment at a local as well as global level can be increased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Visitors can be encouraged to adopt minimal and/or positive impact behaviours whilst on-site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Visitor support for environmental protection initiatives can be increased</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Table based on the work of: Higginbottom, 2004; Newsome, Moore & Dowling, 2013:295 and Sharpe, 1976)
The principles underpinning the interpretation of nature and wildlife

Based on the work of Higginbottom (2004), Newsome, Moore & Dowling (2013), Shackley (1996) and SNH/FCS (2015) the principles would include:

1. **Nature and wildlife interpretation should encourage active involvement based upon first-hand experiences**
   
   Your visitors should be actively involved rather than merely listening, you should consider the range of possible 'hands-on' as well as potentially powerful, immersive experiences which could be available to them whilst on-site.

2. **Nature and wildlife interpretation should facilitate the maximum use of the senses**
   
   Bring the ‘experience’ to life by encouraging your visitors to look around carefully for signs of life, to smell things and feel textures and perhaps even taste things (where this is possible), this will deepen your visitors experience.

3. **Nature and wildlife interpretation should seek to encourage moments of self-discovery**
   
   Your visitors should be encouraged to actively search for wildlife and/or the signs of its presence, inviting your visitors to engage in a personal journey of self-discovery whilst on-site can be hugely powerful.

4. **Nature and wildlife interpretation should be tailored to your visitors**
   
   It is important that the interpretation is pitched at the right level for your visitors and reflects their interests, motivations as well as their prior knowledge, this is particularly important with wildlife interpretation where the level of prior knowledge can be significantly variable. So, ask yourself:
   
   ~ Do you know how visitors currently engage with your site?
   
   ~ What species or natural phenomena are they most interested in seeing or learning about?
   
   ~ Do they visit regularly and know your site well or, do they generally just visit the once?
   
   ~ What interpretation do they current make most use of on your site?
   
   ~ What comments do you get from your visitors about the site and the services offered?
Media and techniques used in the delivery of interpretation in natural areas

A wide range of approaches and techniques can be applied when delivering interpretation in natural areas, they are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Media and techniques for the interpretation of nature and wildlife

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media and Technique</th>
<th>Application</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Limitations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Publications     | ~ supply pre-arrival information  
~ support planning for the visit including site maps, range of activities offered, best routes etc.  
~ orientate visitors whilst on site  
~ provide information about the site, its environment & wildlife (incl. streaming)  
~ provide site-specific or broader environmental messages, Codes etc.  
~ support on-site interpretation through apps and a range of downloadable materials | ~ portable & convenient  
~ multiple access points  
~ cost effective  
~ wide dissemination  
~ profile raising of the site  
~ can help manage visitor expectations of the site | ~ needs regular updating  
~ balance the offering with the ‘feel’ of the site  
~ paper-based materials can become ‘litter’  
~ is the Wi-Fi connectivity on site good enough?  
~ visitor engagement can be limited |
| 2. Visitor centres, viewing points and roadside exhibits | ~ a focal point for the visitor and a base location for the rangers / volunteers  
~ provide information about the site as well as planned activities and events  
~ provide integrated content: static, audio, paper-based, displays and live exhibits  
~ encourage personal connections with feely boxes, cabinets and touch tables  
~ provide information on the management of the site, relevant Codes etc. | ~ a recognisable location where visitors can get information & advice  
~ scope for the offering of a wide range of media | ~ can be expensive to set up if it does not already exist  
~ the best places may be in remote and unstaffed locations  
~ enclosed hides can be intimidating to some people  
~ visitors may need their own optical equipment to get good views |
| 3. Wildlife viewing hides | ~ can provide a reason to go to a site and a focus for the visit  
~ provides a real experience of looking for / looking at wildlife  
~ can host a variety of media but often uses static graphic panels  
~ can be a location for rangers or volunteers to meet & greet visitors | ~ can help visitors get closer to nature  
~ adds value to the visitor experience  
~ can manage visitor interest and minimise disturbance to wildlife | ~ views of wildlife can be unpredictable  
~ the best places may be in remote and unstaffed locations  
~ enclosed hides can be intimidating to some people  
~ visitors may need their own optical equipment to get good views |
| 4. Role of rangers, guides and volunteers: Guided Tours and face to face interpretation | ~ rangers provide information, orientation, explanation, manage expectations, raise awareness, manage on-site behaviour  
~ rangers can offer drama, music, poetry as well as walks and events  
~ roving rangers can ‘walk the site’, and meet and greet visitors as well as being on ‘information duty’  
~ tours can cover a wide range of topics, tailored to visitors with different levels of interest and knowledge  
~ rangers can lead ‘working parties’ where visitors can engage at a more personal level with the site. | ~ powerful and highly effective  
~ rangers can respond quickly to visitor needs and questions  
~ information supplied can be constantly updated and tailored to the needs of the visitors  
~ can easily facilitate the active involvement and engagement of visitors | ~ requires experienced and well trained rangers  
~ may not suit all types of visitor groups  
~ a good range of tour topics need to be offered  
~ roving is less practical on large and/or remote sites. |
The challenges associated with interpreting nature and wildlife

A number of challenges exist and the most common of them are commented on below:

- **Wildlife / nature is unpredictable** – your interpretation needs to be flexible to reflect the seasons, the weather conditions that day and the fact that wildlife will not necessarily appear on cue. The key to wildlife/ nature viewing is generally not to ‘over promise’, thus the ranger or volunteer should focus on the discovery of what is about as opposed to what might be about. You can use the unpredictability of wildlife viewing to remind your visitors about the rarity of many species. It is also advisable to focus on the wider ‘natural’ experience on a guided tour where you can, rather than concentrating on the sightings of a single or small group of species.

- **viewing wildlife is not like watching wildlife programmes on television** – you will almost certainly need to remind your visitors that is not always possible to get up close to wildlife in a natural setting. Many visitors will arrive on-site with completely unrealistic expectations of how close they can get and how many species they will see, but any sort of direct and personal experience with nature can alleviate this and become a powerful and memorable encounter.
- **lack of experience** – remember that many of your visitors may not be experienced in being ‘in the wild’ so give them time to become accustomed to it – do not under-estimate the novelty and excitement for them of being in the ‘great outdoors’. Encourage them to ask questions and teach them how to ‘stop, wait, look and listen’. For some of your visitors, simply walking quietly will be challenging, think about fun ways in which you might introduce this, early on during your walk.

### Some key tips with interpreting wildlife

Based upon the work of Higginbottom, 2004 and SNH/FCS, 2015:

1. Interpret a range of species which are likely to be easily visible (or at least easily audible) for your visitors;
2. Always interpret a good mix of species, not just the iconic ones (which they may have come to see);
3. Use your passion and enthusiasm to introduce species they may be less familiar with, or possibly even less interested in;
4. Develop a range of activities, experiences and interesting facts and stories to reflect the local species you are most likely to see with your visitors;
5. Keep the experience simple and focus upon visitor self-discovery whenever possible;
6. Provide regular updates on local sightings to keep your visitors engaged, notably with those species they are less likely to see;
7. Discuss the work being done locally to support the conservation of wildlife on-site and where possible, link it to national; and even global conservation initiatives and strategies.

### Case studies

Two case studies are presented here to illustrate the media and techniques which can be used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study 1.</th>
<th>A date with nature in the New Forest (see photos 1 and 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
<td>This project has run for over 10 years and is a partnership between the RSPB, New Forest National Park Authority, Forestry Commission England and Carnyx Wild (filmmakers). Visitors are welcomed and introduced to New Forest wildlife through conversations with volunteers, live viewing of reptiles in specially designed ‘pods’, live streamed footage from bird of prey nests, models, films and a short trail. Facilities are basic but include parking, toilets, picnic areas and a small hut where displays and information is housed. Volunteers are trained to assist the public to see native snakes, lizards and frogs in the pods, and to tell the story of the nesting success (or not) of the bird of prey. They also talk about New Forest ground nesting birds using a touchscreen activated film, bird models and a nature table, sharing how visitors can help ground nesting birds when out in the National Park. The site is open from April through to end August and has around 30,000 face to face contacts with visitors each year. Start-up funding was grant aided and running costs are shared between the partners. Additional funding has been obtained from housing developers to mitigate recreation impact. The site is staffed primarily by volunteers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why was the interpretation activity undertaken?

Visitor facilities in the New Forest are dispersed across a wide area, and tend to be modest in scale. There was no one place where visitors could easily experience wildlife and talk to people about nature in the New Forest every day throughout the summer - the project provides this focus. The organisations all have different but compatible reasons for involvement, including membership recruitment, communication of management messages such as keeping to tracks during ground nesting bird season and promoting understanding of the National Park’s special qualities. These different objectives coalesce around a theme of how the New Forest is great for nature due to its unique management - through forestry and dispersed grazing (commoning). The interpretation enables all of these things to happen and increases dwell time at this site which helps with recreational management objectives.

What did the interpretation achieve?

Evaluation of the interpretation is carried out through visual observation and a questionnaire. Visitors are asked what they did and how they rated elements of interpretation (reptile viewing, bird of prey nest – cam etc.). They are also asked how much they feel they have learnt about New Forest wildlife and if they think their experience will influence them in helping ground nesting birds. Dwell time has increased and results point to high levels of visitor satisfaction and learning about New Forest wildlife. Partners are able to point towards a successful project that both increase visitor understanding and helps management of the protected landscape.

What are the key learning points?

- Multiple partner projects can be difficult to put together but help longevity and sharing of costs - and can draw in specific funding to interpret wildlife (such as the developer contributions)
- A mix of media is well received by visitors - some relate more to the live footage, others to seeing the reptiles in the pods or the family friendly self-guided trail
- The pods and live web-cam reduce unpredictability (the wildlife is more likely to be there), but there are still times when viewing is limited, which is where the skill of the volunteers to tell the story with other items (recorded footage, props, models, a nature table) becomes very important.
- The training of the volunteers takes place pre-season and during the season. It needs to provide them with some knowledge (e.g. resources on the key species, management and some important facts) but focusses on mainly on the passion and enthusiasm as the most important things that a volunteer can bring, and introduces the idea of provoke, relate, reveal as shorthand for how to introduce objects or wildlife to visitors.
- The project has benefitted from off-site interpretation via digital media - the live camera footage is broadcast on the web and through social media, allowing for follow up from visitors at home and interest from those who can’t visit.

Case study 2. Fishnish Wildlife Hide, Isle of Mull (see photos 3 & 4)

Description

In 2014, Forestry Commission Scotland agreed to host and manage a wildlife hide that had been given to the local community. The site chosen for the hide was at Fishnish; an easily accessible site very close to the Lochaline ferry. The site offers great views over the Sound of Mull and the potential to see a wide range of Mull’s wildlife. Species seen in the area include otters, seals, cetaceans, white-tailed eagles plus a large range of coastal and sea birds.

Why was the interpretation activity undertaken?

The position of the hide meant there would be a lot of visitors passing close by, with the opportunity to attract non-specialist visitors and tourists as well as keen wildlife watchers. We felt that the hide could act as a positive introduction to the wildlife of Mull and the other wildlife watching opportunities that were available across the island. We also wanted to promote responsible wildlife watching.

Our identified audiences included:
- Wildlife tourists
- Families on holiday
- Local residents
| What did we hope the interpretation would achieve? | We hoped that visitors would:
- feel welcome to the Fishnish wildlife hide;
- feel amazed and inspired by Mull's wildlife;
- feel Fishnish is a great place to watch for wildlife;
- understand that Mull is home to wide range of wildlife;
- understand that there are lots of ways to enjoy the wildlife of Mull;
- understand that some of this wildlife is sensitive to disturbance;
- watch wildlife responsibly on Mull;
- support the conservation of wildlife on Mull;
- have a great time and want to come back. |

| What did we do? | Apart from occasional ranger-led events, the hide was unstaffed. The interpretation needed to be robust, low-maintenance and inexpensive to produce. Because of this, we chose to use static graphic panels.
- The tone we used was informative, but informal and friendly.
- We used good quality images with minimal text: you don't need to read the text to understand what wildlife to look for.
- As well as iconic species, we included images of the common birds which visitors were more likely to see.
- We included Gaelic names (with a pronunciation guide) for cultural flavour.
- We promoted other wildlife watching opportunities and organisations including Mull Eagle Watch, the Mull Otter Group and the Hebridean Whale & Dolphin Trust.
- We promoted responsible wildlife watching and the availability of guided wildlife watching trips.
- We included a white board for recent sightings here and elsewhere on Mull.
- We included a map of the island for orientation.
- We were able to produce the interpretation relatively cheaply using 3mm aluminium composite panels. We fitted these ourselves. |

| What are the key learning points? | Accepting a 'free' wildlife hide cost us quite a lot!
- It would have been good to help design the hide before we were given it: a significant amount of snagging was needed before we could fit the interpretation.
- Writing up a plan for the interpretive fit-out helped everyone involved to understand what we were doing.
- We are really lucky to have good in-house designers to work with.
- Having local staff to call into the hide to check / clean / stock leaflets is important.
- The interpretation here is just part of the wider visitor experience – it all needs to be managed and maintained.
- Further support of the wildlife watching experience by fitting a telescope or binoculars would probably help visitors new to wildlife watching.
- Assessing the effectiveness of an unstaffed facility like this is not easy – we have not yet done this. |

**Concluding remark**
The value of interpretation on natural sites in enhancing the visitor experience and potentially reducing visitor impacts has been widely accepted. Its importance in part lies in its ability to entertain, educate and inform but perhaps more importantly to inspire visitors about the beauty, complexity but above all fragility of this natural world around us.
Suggestions for further reading


Text by:
Jim Mitchell, MAHI.
Interpretation Outreach Manager, New Forest National Park Authority.

Dr. Philip Ryland, MAHI.
Associate Dean (Student Experience), Faculty of Management, Bournemouth University.

Fishnish Wildlife Hide case study provided by:
Paul Hibberd, MAHI.
Interpretation Officer, Forestry Commission Scotland

**AHI Best Practice Guidelines 13.**
Association for Heritage Interpretation, 54 Balmoral Road, Gillingham, Kent.
ME7 4PG.
+44 (0)560 274 7737
[admin@ahi.org.uk](mailto:admin@ahi.org.uk)
[www.ahi.org.uk](http://www.ahi.org.uk)
September 2017.
Photographs 1 and 2 (courtesy of Jim Mitchell)
Photographs 3 and 4 (courtesy of Paul Hibberd)