UNDERSTANDING HERITAGE SITES, TOURISTS, SPECIALISTS, MANAGERS AND POLITICIANS: THEN PROVIDING INTERPRETATION

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Introduction
Interpretation is a special form of communication, that can be used to assist visitors to understand and appreciate heritage sites. Before discussing how interpretation can be employed for these areas, I would like to examine the meaning of the word, the people involved with a heritage site, the visitors that the interpretation aims to reach and the resource that is being interpreted.

Interpretation – a communication technique
Most of the audience will be familiar with the word Interpretation. Perhaps many of you would use the word in another context, where you interpret or translate what occurred at a particular site by looking at results of excavations or previous layers within a building. The interpretation that I am discussing is a communication technique, which is frequently mentioned in report recommendations and conservation and management plans in relation to visitor information about sites. I wonder how many people here know what this type of communication interpretation means? Interpretation as a communication technique is poorly understood by the majority of heritage specialists, managers and politicians, yet it is usually recommended to assist tourists to understand heritage sites. Because interpretation is not understood, it is rarely implemented in these sites. To discover why this happens, I would like to explore what interpretation is, who it is intended for and why it should be used instead of Information or Education.

Interpretation defined
The origin of the word Interpretation as a communication technique is attributed to North America, where one of its early supporters, Freeman Tilden (1967) described it as an education activity that aims ‘... to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experiences and by illustrative media’. According to Tilden, interpretation should be provocative and not instructional. The British interpreter Don Aldridge (1972) supports this provocative role and emphasises that interpretation is an art, not a science. For Aldridge, it is ‘... the art of explaining the significance of a place to the people who visit it, with the object of pointing a conservation message’.

Australian interpreters follow the models set by Tilden and Aldridge, recognising the need for visitor involvement through direct experience, and the need to explain concepts in a language understood by visitors (O’Brien 1988). Visitor involvement is not always easy to achieve. Involvement implies a commitment, for which many visitors are not prepared. Becoming involved in a site through interpretation is like learning to walk. There is a development pathway which includes time, interest, curiosity, motivation and even a certain level of knowledge. Good interpreters will be aware of the need to ease visitors into involvement with the site through interpretation. In most heritage sites no interpreters have been employed in the planning or implementation stages, so visitors are often expected to engage in the equivalent of a marathon run, when they are still staggering over their first few unstable steps in discovering the significance of a particular site.

Understanding visitors
The techniques used to interpret heritage sites should be based on an understanding of visitors’ needs. Most visitors to such sites will probably be tourists or family groups out for leisure rather than education purposes (Miles 1982). When an interpreter prepares material for the interpretation of a site, allowance is made for all visitors, who may be at the stage of ‘toddling’, ‘walking’, or ‘running’. This usually means that the concepts being interpreted are offered at different levels or tiers, starting with the general and ending with the specific. All too often specialists such as historians, archaeologists, conservation architects and managers will ignore the subtleties of ‘easing’ visitors into involvement with the site. Too many specialists expect immediate and total visitor immersion in the site. The specialists are not aware that their own level of education, expertise, interest and understanding is shared by possibly less than 10 per cent of visitors to the site.

The relationship between the views of managers and those of tourists towards resources in a heritage site has been studied by Pearce (1988). Visitors and managers were asked to rank their feelings towards different interpretive activities conducted in various areas. The response was related to perceptions of such things as enjoyment, excitement, information.
boredom and naturalness. An analysis of the results showed that the activities ranked as exciting and enjoyable by the visitors, were scored as unexciting or not enjoyable by the managers. The visitors seemed to emphasise and positively score their experiences in the heritage settings, while the managers placed greater concern and interest on management issues. According to Pearce, just because an individual has worked in a particular site, does not necessarily mean that they relate to the visitor experience. Thus, managers of heritage sites need to look closely at visitor expectations and interests when assessing activities and resources for interpretation at their sites.

To achieve involvement, an interpreter will employ a particular technique such as self-guiding signs along a walk or guided tours. As mentioned above, interpretation should provoke as well as use a language that can be understood by visitors. The language spoken, written and read by specialists rarely coincides with that understood by visitors. Yet how many times do specialists become instant ‘interpretive experts’ when they write or style edit language intended for the general public. Gale & Jacobs (1987) comment about the language level on signs that they reviewed in their study on tourists and the National Estate. The two researchers criticised ‘... signwriters at cultural sites ... (who) are often professional people who feel that they must give precise scientific information. Such material is read by only a few and thus negates its major usefulness’.

In addition to the language used in interpretation, there is also a vital need to match the medium with the number of messages or words presented. For example, the medium of interpretive signs along a self-guiding walking track is designed to interest and involve the visitor, as well as translate the significance of the area. This objective will not be achieved if 80 per cent of visitors do not read the signs. The strategy to ensure that signs are not read, is to produce a ‘book on the wall’ approach, where every message is included in the copy for each sign. Interpretive signs should be brief and to the point, except in areas where lookouts or track heads are located, as visitors will tend to spend slightly more time at these points. If specialists and managers want to provide more information to visitors than that presented in the signs, then other media should be considered such as publications or guided tours.

Interpreters use a special type of writing to interpret heritage sites, often utilising analogies to capture the interest of visitors. Thus, captions such as ‘Smoke House’ can be interpreted as ‘Smoking for Health?’. By making an unusual statement, attention is gained and visitors are then motivated to find out more information by reading the text that explains why food was ‘smoked’ and how the process of ‘smoking’ was carried out. Using this type of interpretive writing style is regarded by some specialists and managers as trivial and condescending. As Cameron-Smith (1989) states, the interpretive writing style is designed to build bridges to overcome gaps in visitor knowledge. This style is aimed at visitors, not the scientific specialists who do not need any explanations.

**Understanding tour operators**

Successful interpretation of a heritage site also requires that specialists and managers need to understand the tour operators that bring visitors to their site. Because visitor numbers and activities can adversely affect the resources within a site, many managers adopt the ‘fewer the better’ approach. This is in direct contrast with the tour operator, who needs to be economically viable so has ‘the more the merrier’ attitude towards visitor numbers (Carter 1984). Even though tour operators seek to visit heritage sites, it is essential that the manager realises their interests and needs are totally different, yet still very real. At a recent workshop in Uluru National Park, tour operators and park managers discussed their needs. The tour operators were interested in toilets, picnic spots, parking, sealed roads and information about Uluru, while the managers were concerned with protecting the culture of the traditional owners from the effects of tourism, managing the environmental resources of the park and ensuring that tourism could operate within the park (Watts 1987). It is one of the roles of an interpreter to ensure that the needs of managers, visitors and tour operators are adequately met. The messages that are interpreted to visitors can range from heritage significance to management precautions, or from location of toilets to the condition of the roads.

**Understanding politicians**

Once tour operators and visitors have been considered in the interpretive planning process for the site, the next target for discussion should be the politician. Due to the significance of heritage sites, attention and money are, or need to be focused on the area. This will sometimes involve local, state or federal politicians. Be prepared! Politicians in my experience usually demand interpretation for sites where little or no other efforts have been made to provide communication for a heritage area. In many cases the political drive is totally misguided, so that bronze statues dedicated to early European inland explorers such as Sturt, appear in the Hawkesbury sandstone country around Gosford just north of Sydney.

**Implementing interpretation through planning**

To avoid this type of wasted and inaccurate interpretation, all heritage sites should have a comprehensive interpretation plan. The plan should be based on the conservation and/or management plan for the site.
Other aspects of the interpretive plan should consider the resources in the site and region, the type of visitors expected or desired, the current pattern of visitation and visitor needs. The constraints that operate at the site should also be incorporated. These could include difficulty of access, climate, visitor safety, fragility of resource, lack of funding or special management issues such as lack of staff. Based on the significance of the site, the context of the management authority for the area and the constraints that affect the site, interpretive themes and appropriate interpretive media are recommended in the plan. The siting of the interpretive media, the costing and the implementation stages for the plan are also included. Competent interpreters will prepare interpretive plans with inputs from specialists, managers, tour operators, visitors and even politicians or their staff. Where appropriate, community groups or key members of the community would also be consulted. The end product of such work would ensure that a functional and logical approach to interpretation for a site or area would be achieved.

Conclusion
In conclusion, I would like to emphasise that interpretation is a special process of communication, that is based on an understanding of the site, the audience for the site and the appropriate methods needed to convey the messages relating to the area. Before interpretation can be provided, it is essential that visitors, tour operators, heritage specialists, managers and politicians understand what interpretation is and how it is applied. Interpretation aims to involve visitors in heritage sites in an enjoyable but educational manner. It is through their involvement, that visitors will understand and appreciate the significance and value of these sites.

References
Aldridge, D. 1972, *Upgrading Park Interpretation and Communication with the Public*, US National Park Service & IUCN.