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INTERPRETATION AT COASTAL BIRD SITES

Series of training resources for bird-related tourism

The Art of Interpretation

Providing interpretation for educational and awareness purposes requires combining knowledge and skills in various disciplines: natural sciences, psychology, communication, and design, among others. Executing a good interpretive program that achieves the objective of educating visitors and enriching their experience in conservation sites and protected natural areas is quite an art. According to the National Association for

Interpretation (USA), interpretation is "a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and meanings inherent in the resource".¹ Interpretation goes beyond simply presenting data and information; it demands achieving a memorable experience and heightened awareness for the visitor.

Interpretation should be:

1

Enjoyable

Visitors will more easily remember activities and approaches that engage the use of their senses and enable their active participation and interaction.

3

Topical

Focusing on a key topic helps visitors understand complex issues. The topic is presented and explained through an engaging story so that the audience truly relates to the wildlife and nature they are observing.

Relevant and significant

It is important to provide context and inspire the audience to personally identify with something with which they are familiar.

2

Organized

Presenting the stories and activities in a simple and logical sequence facilitates understanding.

4



A good interpretive program can increase visitors' understanding of such fundamental topics as the fragility of coastal bird habitats and the wonder of hemispheric bird migrations. It can also increase

visitor appreciation of birds and thus encourage behaviour that will reduce the chance of harmful impacts from visitors in protected areas and at important bird sites.

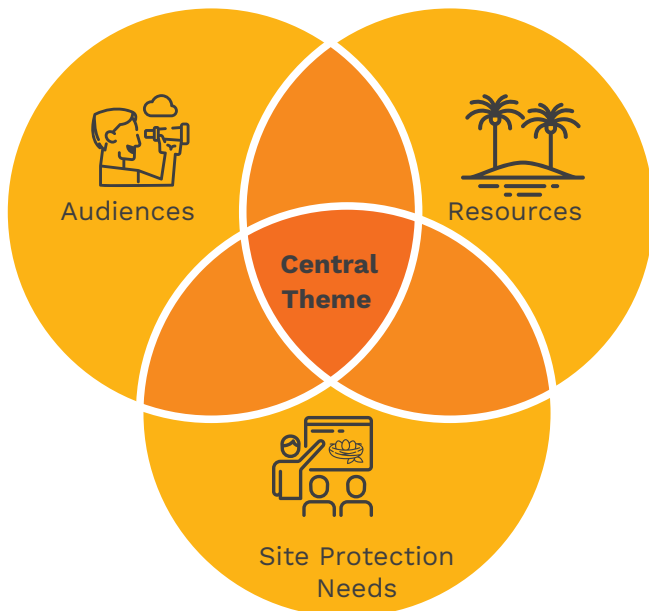
Know your Audience

Before starting an interpretative program, consider the intended audience, i.e., visitors and users of natural areas. Are they local, regional, national or international? Why are they visiting the site? In what principal activities do they engage? How do they get to the area in question? Knowing the audience allows you to consider their different interests when planning the interpretative program and helps make it more relevant.

Establish the Program's Objectives





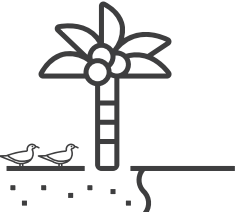
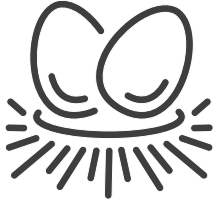




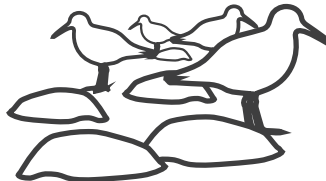

The interpretative program can respond to visitors' interests and educate them while fulfilling management objectives. For example, site managers may be interested in reducing visitor impacts on bird mating rituals or resting habitats, or on some other species or natural feature. To achieve real change in behaviour, it is important to show why such changes matter, through stories of interest to visitors rather than by simply providing information.

Identify the Main Theme



Once the program's objectives have been established, you should identify the main theme and key issues to address. The main theme should respond to the audience's interests and to the needs of the wildlife or natural features at the site, as well as to the requirements for site management and protection.

Examples of Themes

Overarching Themes	Key Topics	Story	Key Message
 <p>Landscapes and diversity</p>	 <p>Intertidal zones and flooded habitats</p>	 <p>Lunar cycles, the sea, and how the birds react to tides</p>	 <p>Shorebirds use fragile and limited habitats</p>
 <p>Shorebird habitats</p>	 <p>Types of habitats that coastal birds use in mating and migration</p>	 <p>Who lives on the beach or visits throughout the year: birds, wildlife, and humans</p>	 <p>Birds, tourists, and other users can share the beach</p>
 <p>Migration</p>	 <p>Hemispheric migration and site connectivity</p>	 <p>The red knot's journey and its dependence on food and space at resting sites</p>	 <p>Migration is an amazing phenomenon. We are responsible for protecting migratory bird habitats</p>

Topics for interpretation may also vary with the resources to be interpreted. Providing information that is not related to the site, or which visitors can't experience, observe or feel first-hand, is not likely to produce the intended impact on the audience. Therefore, before defining the objectives, themes, and topics for an interpretative program, a list of site interpretation opportunities should

be prepared (based on the resources of the site, such as habitats, species and their tracks, or evidence of natural phenomena), listing the specific places where they can be observed. It is also important to develop an inventory of support materials and sources, such as historical information, legends and associated cultural practices, as well as experts, scientists and relevant publications.

Define Interpretative Tools and Techniques



Interpreter Support

The most entertaining and useful forms of interpretation often include activities and programs led by interpreters, using participatory methods to explore the public's knowledge (for example, by asking questions), and then using this knowledge to expand upon the topic in question. Interpreters may use images, objects, sounds and textures. They may also guide tours through the sites or protected natural areas to provide direct, on-site commentary.



Interpretative Paths and Panels

Interpretative paths are designed as tours that will help the public to enjoy and appreciate the sites resources, experiencing them directly and with the support of interpretative panels. These panels in natural, historical, and cultural sites can be of considerable variety. They might be organized as stations identified by numbers or colors; pose questions that are answered by an audio guide; or be presented in a printed brochure, on a mobile app or through interactive modules.



Interpretative Centers and Modules

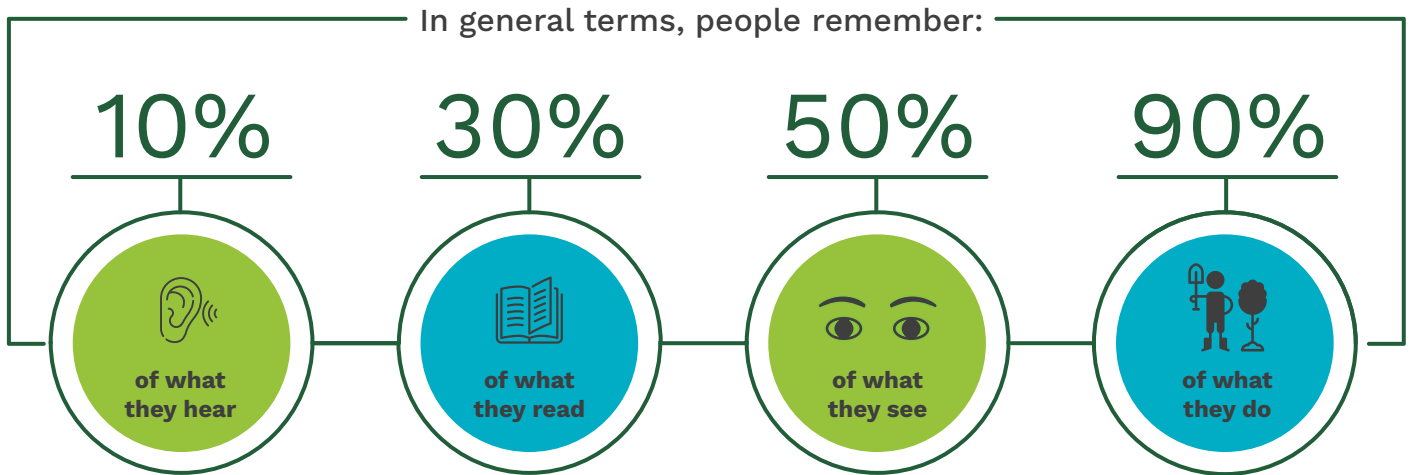
Interpretative centers and modules generally contain exhibition resources that are more comprehensive and may be interactive, in addition to providing other visitor orientation and management services. Their size and sophistication will vary according to the available resources and the number of users at the site.



Art and Technology

Interpretative techniques and tools can also include technological and artistic resources to facilitate the understanding and appreciation of the topics explored. Community or tourism spaces, such as gazebos and plazas, can be innovatively used for interpretation, by featuring relevant paintings, sculptures, or satellite images.

Recommendations for Interpretation



Therefore, interpretative tools should, to the extent possible, be interactive and stimulate the reflection and participation of site visitors. To ensure a successful interpretative talk, consider the following:

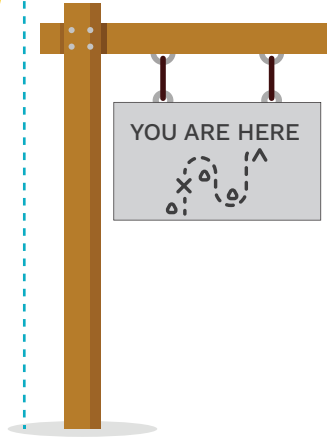
1	Use your voice	The tone, speed of delivery, and clarity of your voice are key elements in capturing the audience's attention. Changes in rhythm and intonation help keep the audience interested. And be sure you speak loudly enough for everyone to hear you!
2	Tell a story	Prepare a script for your talk and try to tell a story; if possible, include personal stories or local histories, legends, and myths. Ask the audience if they have had experiences in similar situations. Use analogies and metaphors that are meaningful to the participants.
3	Make use of props	Support your talk with bird-related props, such as beaks, eggs, nests, feathers, live specimens, textures, beach sand and mud samples, or migratory bird bands, among other things. Let visitors touch and observe up close. Photographs and recordings are also an excellent resource.
4	Introduce games and participatory dynamics	Hold a dynamic activity, in which people of any age can participate, as the basis for illustrating the topic and core messages. An example might be a game on the risks migratory birds face during migration or about the shared use of beaches by birds and visitors. Once the game ends, it is important to engage visitors in collective reflection.
5	Organize field activities	Field observations and first-hand experiences are always great tools. You should explain how to identify nests and how to avoid disturbing habitats. If available, binoculars and telescopes are excellent aids.

Recommendations for Interpretative Panels

Interpretative panels placed at entrances, paths, and in educational and interpretation centers are essential resources to transmit key messages.

Location and sequence

Develop a plan for the location and sequence of panels on the interpretative path. The sequence should be logical and have a guiding thread that helps visitors achieve an overall understanding based on the narrative. Include distances, orientation, and clear references on maps.



Text and graphics

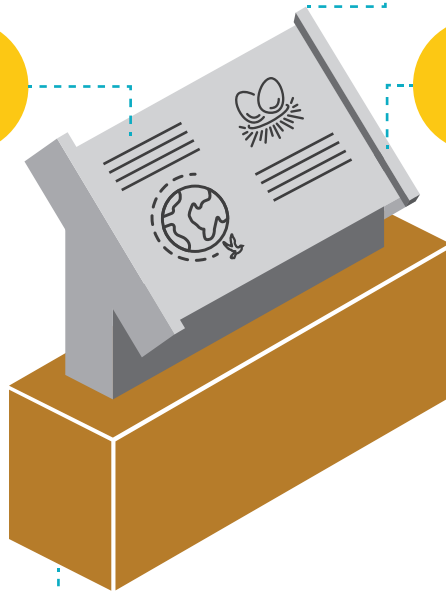
The balance between text and graphics is very important, the text should support the images and not vice versa. Panels with fewer words and clearer messages will be read more. The type should be clear and the lettering should be big enough to be legible from at least an arm's length away.



Color

Color, a key element in maintaining the storyline, acts as an indicator or reinforcement; i.e. different topics may be associated with certain colors. The typeface should clearly stand out against the panel's background color. Avoid color saturation and colors that will fade in sunlight.

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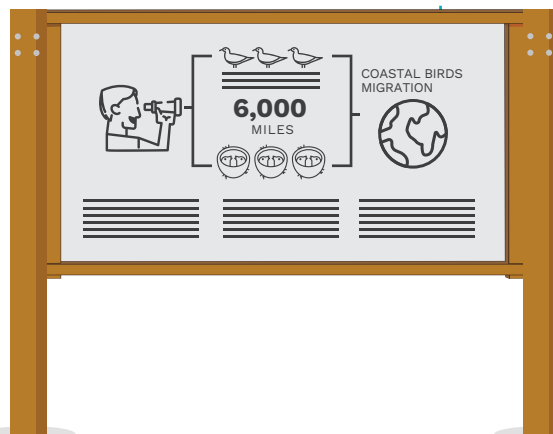


Messages and topics

Questions invite reading. Messages should be short and simple and avoid the use of technical terms. Titles should be evocative and attract interest. Use verbs to incite curiosity, such as “watch,” “feel,” “think,” “touch,” etc.

Panel orientation

The location of the panel is important. Look for places where the public can see or imagine what you want to communicate. Avoid reflecting light, and to the extent possible, avoid direct light that could affect the panel. Be sure the height at which the panel is placed is convenient for reading by the intended audience.



Materials

The choice of materials for the interpretative panels and other supporting elements will depend on the available budget. Choosing more durable materials, though it might imply a higher initial cost, will pay off in the long term. Panels are often made of fiberglass, glass, metal or wood, with print using resins.

Case study: Engaging Youth in Willapa Bay and Long Beach Peninsula²

In 2015-2016, the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) and the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN) invited youth to create artwork to be used as interpretative panels for shorebird conservation outreach.

Signage designed by youth is often seen as very engaging, and receives positive feedback from the public. It catches the attention of the beach user, while also prompting the reader to be more considerate of wildlife during their daily activities.



Youth signage works best when combined with other educational activities and approaches and when the artwork is displayed in multiple locations, such as local businesses and community centers, to maximize visibility.



For more examples of outreach materials and activities, check out the resources available on the WHSRN website: <https://whsrn.org/outreach-resources/student-and-informal-education/> or those of the "Share our Shores" initiative: <https://sos.atlanticflywayshorebirds.org/resources/>

Ecotourism series

1	Planning an Ecotourism Initiative	2	Marketing Ecotourism for Wildlife and Bird Watching	3	Community and Stakeholder Engagement in Ecotourism	4	Interpretation at Coastal Bird Sites
5	Cultural Values in Ecotourism	6	Birding Festivals as Ecotourism Experiences	7	Monitoring and Evaluation of Ecotourism Initiatives at Coastal Bird Sites	8	Bird-related Ecotourism Case Studies

About this Work



The Commission for Environmental Cooperation's (CEC) project "Conserving Shorebirds through Community Engagement" aimed to build capacity in communities along North American migration routes to conserve habitat and develop ecotourism linked to bird migration cycles. Bird-related ecotourism can be a significant source of additional income for local economies, and can incentivize communities to sustain conservation efforts. To this end, the project supported the development of education and outreach materials and training to improve knowledge, increase local support and strengthen the capacity of communities to deliver bird-related ecotourism activities such as bird watching, habitat conservation, and celebratory events. For more information visit: www.cec.org

References

1. National Association for Interpretation. "Mission, Vision, and Core Values". <www.interpnet.com/NAI/interp/About/About_NAI/What_We_Believe/nai/_About/Mission_Vision_and_Core_Values.aspx>. Accessed 18 December 2019.
2. WHSRN Executive Office. 2017. *WHSRN Nominations and Conservation Actions for Two Key Shorebird Sites: Willapa Bay and the Georgia Barrier Islands*. CEC, Unpublished report.

Photographs and images by:

- Cover: CEC
p. 2: Chelsea Haisman
p. 4: Rosa Maria Vidal, Ryan Finchum with artwork by MaryJo Koch.
p. 6: Terra Peninsular and Ryan Finchum-CPAM
p. 7: WHSRN