

THE RESOURCE AND THE STORYLINE:

AN INTERPRETIVE BALANCING ACT*

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The long era of "protection of natural resources through acquisition" is gradually drawing to a close. The budget-busting era of "protection through management" is forcing us to look for new funding mechanisms. But the idea of facilitating protection through enlightened self-interest is ripe for growth. Resource interpreters can provide the link with visitors and other constituents to influence "resource protective" behavior and develop a land ethic.

Trails without signs! Parks with unexplained origins! A battle field without battle plans or casualty lists! A poet's home without poetry! Whose failures are these? The most beautiful theater in the world doesn't merit more than one visit if it has no stage program. In fact, that theater would never be built without the guidance of producers, directors, set designers, lighting specialists, and dozens of other "interpreters". But, when was the last time you were asked to participate in the development and design of a park, trail, beach, wildlife refuge or historic area? Have you ever suggested that the park's "storyline" might be enhanced by park design; or that park interpretation might be compromised by the wrong design? Or does your role begin later on? Are you an "extra" on the set?

True public appreciation of our outdoors, and historic sites comes only from an exposure to both the physical resource and information about that resource - - either one by itself won't work. Historically, parks professionals have viewed their job as primarily that of providing opportunities to use resources. The knowledge about those resources, and how to use them, was considered to be the responsibility of each visitor. Some visitors would do their "homework"; most would not. In that situation, appreciation develops minimally, if at all. And, in the absence of appreciation, resource decline is inevitable.

A little reflection (or library research) will quickly reveal America's public parkland's history as having been cyclical: long periods of extensive budgetary neglect, interspersed with brief periods of high profile reinvestment and public atonement! Overuse and misuse was invariably blamed on an inadequate supply of public lands! And, the prescribed remedy is equally predictable: buy more land! Perhaps we should have been making America more like a park instead of accentuating the differences between ownership? You do find yourself wondering how things might be different today if our past national focus had been on building public appreciation for ALL lands, not just acquiring those deemed worthy of "protection." Expanding the public lands empire doesn't insure public land appreciation - it may even have the opposite effect. Achieving a balance between resources and their interpretation requires a conscious elevation of goals from protection to appreciation. In past years, whenever budget reductions were mandated in parks, we cut interpretation - - sometimes completely out of the system (like a cancer?)! Given a legacy of balance, cutting interpretation would have been as unthinkable as selling off the public lands to balance the budget!

I'd like to share with you two basic truths and a challenge. The truths are: 1) every parcel of public land has a story to tell - why else would it be public land? and 2) only rarely is that story being told - although it's probably the land's best possible protection. The challenge obviously is to reverse this situation - make

interpretation the rule, not the exception! Accepting the challenge will not be easy. It requires that you become activists and come out of your comfortable niche as scholars and get on the firing line. Stop accepting the role of an "extra" and become a "star"! You should seek to make interpretation the fundamental reason for your agency's existence. You must insist that the term "protection" include appreciation as its goal. Demand the opportunity to review all development plans for their interpretive sensitivity. Become involved in promotional efforts to insure their relevance. Assume leadership in training so that every employee has an interpretive role, including the law enforcement group. In short, seize the moment, stage a silent coup! I've just described for you, the most valued people in my organization - those who care.

I am convinced that this is your moment in conservation history. The long era of "protection through acquisition" is gradually drawing to a close. The budget-busting era of "protection through management" is forcing us to look for new funding mechanisms (which still may not be adequate). But the idea of protection through enlightened self-interest is just waiting for you to nurture it into the most successful strategy for conservation that America has ever known. And it all begins by building appreciation and pride! I hope you will accept the challenge. I doubt that you have a choice!

Frankly, I don't know anyone better qualified than our interpretive specialists to set the agenda for our public lands. You best represent the Marshalls, Muirs, Tildens, Sloanes, Adams, Porters, Leopolds, Carsons, Muries, and those hundreds of writers and artists who have tried to tell us that the land is more than just resources. It is a whole collection of states of mind: adventure, opportunity, freedom, pride, and wonder. We sometimes forget that those national symbols which we cherish so much, here become the real thing! In Freeman Tilden's special way of looking at things: "It is the duty of the interpreter to jog our memories". At the very top of your daily agenda I hope you will try to jog the memories of administrators, planners, and budgeters. Remind them also that every "park" is a demonstration area - for good or for worse. A parks' existence demonstrates that someone once cared. Its' condition demonstrates that someone still does - - or does not! Its' development demonstrates our sensitivity, our awareness, and our credibility as environmental educators and resource stewards. In short, every park is a "classroom." How proud are you of the lessons being taught?

* Adapted from a keynote address at the National Association for Interpretation, Region I Workshop, Pinkham Notch, N.H., March 30, 1992.