

# Interpretation

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## and the Four Estates

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### Introduction

In Medieval times, society was often referred to in terms of the Three Estates; the Lords Temporal, the Lords Spiritual, and the Commons. Edmund Burke is generally credited to have coined the term "the Fourth Estate" to refer to the press as the fourth power in society. Modern society is much more complex, yet it too has estates of power that influence outcomes and the future. Long after nearly everyone has forgotten who the first three estates were, the term "Fourth Estate" for the media is in common usage.

The future of parks and protected areas is determined largely by society as a whole more than by professional managers and politicians. Therefore, to promote better stewardship, it may be useful to examine *components* of society that relate to parks and protected areas. Perhaps it seems simplistic to refer to the four estates in terms of interpretive strategy, but it is a useful mechanism in arriving at a successful approach to interpretation.

The four estates that we refer to are: the visitor or user; the area's neighbors; the school-age children of the region; and finally, perhaps surprisingly, the protected area's staff. Two of these estates exist primarily within the park and two primarily outside its physical boundaries. Each of these groups has a tremendous influence on the future and even the survival of parks and other protected areas. Each component must be imbued with the idea and sense of responsibility of stewardship for the area to fulfill its mission in the short

term, and for it to survive in the long term. Each group requires a different interpretive strategy to create that sense of responsibility and commitment.

For too long the interpretive element of park management has not been effectively used as a vital factor and complementary tool of protected area management strategy. Only a few managers have realized the significant management effects that a well-focused interpretive program can implement if adequately supported and strategically employed. Increasing pressures from within and without the protected areas and the agencies that manage them will undoubtedly generate recognition of the vital role of interpretation.

All federal and state agencies are scrambling to deal with budget cuts, trying to place endangered resources into broader ecological contexts, working hard to resolve conflicting use demands, and striving to build citizen constituencies to help pre-

serve area integrity. Natural and cultural resource managers are finally becoming aware of the absolute necessity of working outside the protected areas to ensure survival of the areas rather than assuming that all their efforts should be concentrated within park boundaries.

It is a frequent lament of interpreters and writers on interpretation, that when budgets are cut, interpretation is the first to suffer. Generally, interpretation is a small portion of the total budget and relatively small cuts can have serious impacts on the program. Consequently it could be equally argued that such small cuts do little to meet a large reduction need. Why does the perception exist that interpretation is the program element most likely to experience initial reductions?

One probable reason is that the consequences of interpretive efforts are to bear long-term fruit. In this, it is much like research, which is also perceived as a frequent budget victim. Interpretation competes with the immediate needs for safety, sanitation, resource and visitor protection, meeting visitor demands, keeping toilets operating, etc. Another rationalization may be that managers who move frequently from park to park seldom have the vision, the time, or the support to think and act for the long term. Their bosses, the politicians, the media, and nearly everyone imaginable will not tolerate failure to meet these immediate needs. An additional explanation may be that many managers and interpreters do not sense the potential or responsibility for employing interpretation as a vital method in winning the struggle for survival that many, perhaps all, parks face.

For many, interpretation is a profession that can be practiced in a park, and it is about what and how, rather than why. For many, it is an

art and must be left free to perfect its artistic potential. Some writers have suggested that interpreters must sometimes be gently reminded of their responsibility to the management of the park. Some see the role of interpretation as simply educating the curious visitor about human or natural history. All of these views are valid to a degree and *all* will lead to being the first head on the budget block. More importantly, managers and interpreters will have missed the opportunity of playing a stronger role in the achievement of why the park was established in the first place: its protection in perpetuity. In other words, it's survival.

Society will support what it likes, but it will *fight* for what it believes in. Is it possible for a park to enlist society to believe in its cause? What part of society is vital to the cause? What part can help it or hurt it?

Let us further examine the four estates that have the potential to influence the future of parks and further break those broad estates into smaller audiences for which interpretation can and should design a method of reaching.

### **The Visitor or User**

The obligation for interpretation to this center of power is to develop a national constituency which is sensitive to the importance of park values, and which will help defend parks against the potential loss of those values. As only one park, this responsibility can be rather daunting unless the interpretive message works to communicate the idea that a specific park area is part of a larger fabric of our national cultural and natural inheritance.

Keeping an interpretive program focused on the park's or protected area's primary interpretive themes is critical to the success of the effort in this arena. The USNPS is working on

one approach that helps the park staff to focus on its primary interpretive themes. The parks are being asked to develop their "Compelling Story," which is, in essence, the primary reasons for the area's establishment. The method for developing this basic park story begins with a review of its enabling legislation, but also seeks to place the park in the larger context of society by examining and including, as appropriate, the ecological conditions that surround the park.

In many ways, providing interpretive messages to park visitors may be viewed as "preaching to the choir" or working to convince people who obviously already appreciate park values because they are presently using those resources. While this may be partially true, it also overlooks the necessity of becoming more sophisticated in approaching this important audience by segmenting the message along the lines of its composition. Designing the interpretive message needs to be done with the benefit of a good audience assessment, taking into account the different age groups, socio-economic data, repeat visitor patterns, group composition, professional level interests (this is especially evident in the paleontological and historical parks, but others as well), and nearby universities.

### **The Area's Neighbors**

This important "estate" can and needs to be segmented to increase its effectiveness in message delivery and acceptance. There are several different segments to consider:

**Political.** This group is further subdivided into elements, including the town council, city manager or mayor, county boards, and planning commissions. All of these entities have a special interest and deserve a carefully crafted message to encour-

age them to support parks. They must be convinced of the benefit of getting involved with protecting area resources in an ecological context.

**Social/Economic.** This particular sub-element is part of a very complex equation but a critical one to understand in the era of mutual cooperation. As with the case of protecting Florida Bay in the Everglades, the intensity and conviction of the disagreement between farm industry lobbyists, state and federal officials, and environmentalists is rooted in economics. For the longest time, it was believed that the biological integrity and sustainability of a resource area and the economic integrity and sustainability of adjacent gateway communities were on a parallel or even divergent course. Increasingly, this old premise is being re-examined. If interests on either side of this philosophical debate do not look to the greater-area picture, both will eventually lose. These "trans-boundary" issues need to be the grist for a portion of the interpretive program in pointing out shared interests and a common future.

**Advocacy groups.** Examples include land trusts, area improvement associations, community or neighborhood organizations, "friends" groups, historic preservation groups, Audubon societies, conservation groups, artists, etc. General outreach programs can be created that have appeal and connection to many of these types of groups, and which can be altered slightly to make them pertinent.

**News media.** It is critical to identify and work with sympathetic writers and editors so that these individuals may be summoned as needed to communicate current area concerns, while at the same time helping them to sell their publications.

**Freelance photographers and writers.** The park interpretive staff

can provide enormous assistance in working with this group of professionals. Feeding them timely stories, giving them leads, asking for their participation in park programs or using their materials in publications or exhibits build valuable friendships and a support network.

### **The School-Age Children**

Environmental education is an "over the horizon" investment that many park managers are reluctant to make because the dividends appear so far off in the future. These are the future members of the other three estates. In addition their experiences and values have immediate impact on the thinking of their parents and friends.

One of the important aspects of this group that might be easily overlooked is the changing cultural and ethnic demographics of this nation. There are many cultural/ethnic groups that are not stakeholders in the protected area concept. Many cultures see wildlife in a very different manner than the traditional patterns accepted in our Western culture. The use of open space and even the value of open space are not held in the same regard as we have grown accustomed. What are the implications for these different values? Do we as park managers understand their outdoor resources value system? Should we be engaged in trying to understand their values and in helping other cultural and ethnic groups understand and appreciate ours? It is not difficult to foresee the cost of disenfranchisement of such new majorities to the prospects for sustaining our precious resource areas.

### **The Protected Area's Staff**

One of the most frequently overlooked and under-valued centers of power for sustaining park or pro-

TECTED area resources is the staff we all work with on a day-to-day basis. Some of these people are drawn from the already partially skeptical estate of park neighbors. All the best planning and all the best strategies for creating public support can go out the window in one conversation at the local restaurant or bar from the mouth of an employee who does not understand or support the park's purpose or specific programs and projects. This may indeed happen anyway, but why increase the chance of a negative local public contact by ignoring the very people we depend on to manage and operate the park area?

The message and the method of delivery must be worked out on a case-by-case basis, but each group of people within an organization deserves the chance to understand how their efforts contribute to the overall goals that the organization is trying to achieve. Specific efforts must be made to reach employees in maintenance, visitor protection, resource management, and administration to help them understand how they can, and do in fact, contribute to the overall mission and goals of the organization on a daily basis. This is a relatively fundamental assumption; but how often do we take the time to ensure this base is covered, and how often do we expect the park's interpretive function to take on this responsibility? It is essential to consider each of these areas carefully and assist each group in understanding how they can and do contribute on a daily basis.

Another important audience in these days of shrinking budgets is an area's cadre of volunteers. These individuals are often a member of one or more of the other estates of power that influence the future of park and protected areas.

In summary, public appreciation and support are the salvation of protected areas. Interpretation is potentially the foremost tool for engendering a loyal advocacy. The USNPS is in the process of restructuring in order to cope with the challenges of resource preservation into the next century. In its vision statement the agency has stressed the absolute necessity for reinvigorating its educational and interpretive program efforts. This strategy obviously is

aimed at broadening the base of public support for parks and open space. Park and protected areas staff must acknowledge the need for interpretive involvement in the important task of helping parks to survive. It is critical that interpreters become the activists of the park movement, not merely its academic observers. Interpretation cannot continue to be a passenger. It must become a driver.

## References

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