

## Natural Resource Interpretation and Conservation Education in a Global Society

Stephen Mather, first director of the National Park Service, believed that with education would come appreciation (Shankland 1970). Yet growth in population and dramatic changes in the world ecosystem have presented not just national parks, but nature centers, aquariums, botanical gardens, zoological facilities, and other entities focused on conservation of our natural resources with challenges perhaps unforeseen by their founders. All these organizations share with other interpretive and educational institutions, including public schools, constraints that apply to what they may pursue as a focus of their public message.

All of us who are concerned with interpretation of natural resources share the common goals of conservation, but each has a particular mandate determined by boards of directors, foundations and, in the case of the National Park Service, by legislation based on the type of resource. Educators and interpreters historically have presented programs to the public in order to relate the importance of their site within the scope of its specific mandate and mission. The key element is "relate"; in an increasingly multicultural society, relatedness takes on an increasingly complex challenge to interpretation—a challenge which is much more than simple "political correctness." No matter what a conservation organization's mission, its constituency is becoming more culturally and ethnically diverse each day. Through adjustments in thinking, self-discovery, cultural and ethnic sensitivity, preparation, and

presentation, interpreters can touch their most valuable resource: the Global Visitor.

Despite a firm grounding in the principles of interpretation espoused by Freeman Tilden 40 years ago, interpreters and educators often attempt to gain the understanding of visitors for resource protection and appreciation by interpreting an essentially monocultural and often ethnocentric perspective of the American natural heritage. However, the American legacy is, by definition, multicultural. One of the basic source references for all interpreters has been Tilden's *Interpreting Our Heritage* (1957). In the National Park Service probably the most coveted recognition of an interpreter's work has been the Freeman Tilden Award. Much has been learned in the past 20 years regarding learning, teaching, and leadership and, in some circles, much of Tilden's work may seem

dated or obsolete in the 1990s. However, two of his "principles" serve us well in the context of developing sensitivity to cultural differences and skill in addressing the global adult audience.

Tilden's (1957) first principle explains that interpretation must relate to something within the experience or personality of the visitor or else what is communicated will be sterile. He states further: "The visitor is unlikely to respond unless what you have to tell, or to show, touches his personal experience, thoughts, hopes, way of life, social position, or whatever else" (Tilden 1957, 13). An individual's cultural and ethnic background obviously is an integral part of that person's personality, experience, and value system. It is obvious that any presentation to which the interpreter cannot relate in at least some small way to the cultural and ethnic background of a person, will become boring and uninteresting to the listener who may be indifferent to our message. The interpreter will lose the opportunity to connect, and the individual may even simply walk away. However, if the interpreter can find some common thread or can make some connection with something for which the individual can hold some frame of reference or common perspective, they will be curious and interested and will in the end be informed or even inspired by the interpreter's message. Finding this common thread is the interpreter's challenge, and it may be found in race, gender, age, or physical condition, or

all of these together.

Tilden's (1957) fifth principle explains that interpretation must address itself to the whole person rather than any single facet. The aim should be to present a whole rather than a part. He further states:

It is far better that the visitor to a preserved area, natural, historic or prehistoric, should leave with one or more whole pictures in his mind, than with a melange of information that leaves him in doubt as to the essence of the place, and even in doubt as to why the area has been preserved at all (Tilden 1957, 41).

This principle addresses itself to the current day. Today the message of an interpreter actually may have reached a point of urgency and is just as relevant, appealing, dynamic, and intriguing as it was 20 or 75 years ago.

Today it may be tempting to attempt interpretation of America's natural and cultural heritage in such a way as to set it apart, to isolate it from the rest of the world in order to assert its importance to the interpreter. However, one of the landmarks or attributes of this same heritage is its foundation in diversity. Certainly, conservation can no longer only be thought of as America's heritage, but now a world heritage, because in order for conservation to really be successful it must be thought of in the context of a global system. Bringing our perspective up to date and providing leadership with a global view will serve to enhance and broaden the

presentation of our natural resources and our cultural heritage as well.

The National Park Service, for example, is entrusted with contributing to an environmentally and historically literate society, enabling its members to view nature and the history of this nation from the varied perspectives of its participants—past, present, and future. Visitors experience little or no identification with the resource in such a way as to become impassioned, thereby compelling a sense of ownership and commitment that the founders hoped for its visitors. The founders of the National Park Service hoped its visitors would buy in to the purpose of national parks: “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” The Organic Act makes no reference to an idea that visitors may be of any single race, creed, or nationality.

Today’s potential visitors do not reflect the same demographics that existed at the time the Organic Act was formulated. Nonetheless, the present generations include a cross-section of a global community. If national parks, zoological and botanical gardens, aquariums, natural history museums, and nature centers are to remain relevant to a more diverse American society, and an increasingly global society, then interpretive and educational programs offered

must be more encompassing in their coverage of the people, places, and events of past and recent history. We must include our international travelers. Interpreters must become more worldly in terms of culture and cultural perspective. The National Environmental Education Act, Public Law 101-619 (United States Congress 1990), recognizes that the same factors that influence natural ecosystems also affect the living and working conditions of people: decaying urban centers and population growth.

Population growth, war, poverty, famine, and natural disasters at least in part result from some erroneous perceptions of how different cultural and natural systems work. If we consider that the complex societal problems facing us today are going to become even more complex in the future, then conservation education and interpretation must provide opportunities to interrelate and apply knowledge to actual community concerns. In order to understand community problems, interrelated parts of a community must be understood. No community is an island; therefore, the interrelatedness of communities must be understood and appreciated. If we are to reach the global visitor, the concern must be with the development of beliefs, attitudes, and values reflecting each of our lives in a diverse human and environmental ecosystem. Interpretation and conservation education about our natural resources are disciplines focusing on human-environment relationships

encompassing cultural, political, ethical, philosophical, and aesthetic interpretations that demand a problem-solving, inquiring, action-oriented approach.

Culture is defined by some in terms of educational achievement or artistic ability. More recently, culture has referred to race, or color, or ethnic background. Culture consists of values, institutions, symbols, behaviors, and other aspects of society which are human-made. Schools, churches, community organizations, museums, and national parks all organize cultural activities in an attempt to convey perspectives of other cultures in events like Black History Month, Women's History Month, and Cinco de Mayo, to name a few. But do these events really provide participants with a cultural perspective? Do we even hold events that focus on differing cultural perspectives of natural resources? Do such events enrich our lives by focusing on the cultural diversity that exists in our community or workplace and our facilities relative to natural resource conservation? Though they are well meaning and have some value, these activities are usually single events that are not infused within a whole interpretive and conservation education program, and often they deteriorate into something called "tourist curriculum" or "tourist activities." For example, during Black History Month a facility or park may hold living history programs depicting crafts from the Antebellum Period, or invite community participation in

African Food Festivals.

Special events and programs such as the above give us a glimpse of culture, but they do not accomplish the real intent toward better understanding of a cultural perspective. Such programs emphasize the differences among people and between cultures, yet they can trivialize by dealing not with real-life daily problems and experiences of people but rather with surface aspects of celebrations or modes of entertainment. Frequently, such activities focus on information about other countries but often in a standardized manner. It is assumed that there is only one set of goals or activities for all settings, and interpreters often assume that presenting the perspective of another culture is only needed if there is diversity among the audience, or that they don't have to talk about the contributions of a member of a specific cultural group to natural resource conservation. But such an occasion does provide an opportunity to bridge understanding of natural resource perspectives of another culture, thereby increasing the possibility of understanding resource conservation on a global scale.

Global education has been defined as education which "involves learning about those problems and issues that cut across national boundaries, and about interconnectedness of systems—ecological, cultural, economic, political, and technological" (Tye and Kneip 1991). These aspects of global education overlap with conservation and environmental educa-

tion, interpretation, and citizenship education; they are all aspects of the shared goals of conservation organizations attempting to convey natural resource protection to its visiting public. If we hope to be successful in the 21st century, we must be committed to moving aggressively in the direction of inclusion rather than exclusion, and, if we are to move boldly into a new century, we must develop "an array of educational presentations that reflect the many voices, needs, and traditions of America's diverse population" (Goldsmith 1994), and not only to the diverse American citizenry but to all citizens of the Global Society.

Culture and learning style should be considered by the interpreter in that before preparing any presentation, there are certain "givens" to be acknowledged: all people can learn and learn differently; all people learn at different rates and in different ways; and people learn better when they are taught utilizing a teaching method that closely matches their learning style. This basically involves understanding that human beings are distinct, that many individuals may seem "different" to us because they appear to be different from the mainstream (this also applies to interpretation). However, we also must understand and believe that to be different means a person may be distinct, but it does not mean he or she is inferior. Each person belongs to a group or to a number of groups which are distinct in terms of gender roles, family identity, time orientation, sense of com-

munity, age status, importance of tradition, spirituality and religion, or subservience to convention or authority. All of these things ultimately will have some effect upon how a person learns and what type of presentation method will reach her and him at any given time.

It quickly becomes apparent that interpretation in the global society is complex and requires a great amount of training and dedication, and a commitment to life-long learning with constant attempts to understand perspectives of many cultures.

There is no doubt that research is needed on perceptions of nature and the environment among different cultures and ethnic groups. Studies should be conducted similar to those by Dolin (1988), who looked at African-Americans' attitudes toward wildlife, and Noe and Snow (1989-90), who looked at Hispanic cultural influence on environmental concerns. Socioeconomic factors must be studied as they relate to cultural differences as well. Research in these areas should be conducted collaboratively among researchers of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds in order to ensure that diverse cultural perspectives are represented in research approaches.

Research information must be disseminated among those interpreters setting agendas in the field. At the field level, again, there needs to be collaboration among interpreters representing diverse cultural backgrounds. For example, Native American oral tradition offers insight

and a tool for instilling a human-to-land ethic (Russell 1988). Diversity of cultural perspective can only enhance overall human understanding of our complex environmental and social ecosystem. A global perspective will provide all of us with a better understanding of each other and our relationship with the earth. It is biological and cultural diversity that drives the human ecosystem.

In 1987, former National Park Service Director William Penn Mott addressed the NPS urban superintendents, saying:

We must avoid the temptation to become an insular agency focused on a simpler past. We must reach out in order to ensure that the values of the NPS will remain a vital part of our national agenda into the 21st century.

Ten years later these words are booming in our ears as we seek to make America's national parks, museums, zoological and wildlife conservation parks and gardens, botanical gardens, and nature centers relevant not only to an increasingly culturally diverse citizenry but to citizens of a Global Society, including the disabled and people of all colors and races, and of both genders.

We only need look to nature to understand the value of diversity and the cost of ignoring the importance of diversity. All parts of any biological system play a role in the optimal op-

eration of that system. All parts are closely interrelated. We now know that diversified ecosystems tend to have many overlapping systems of checks and balances so that the system as a whole is buffered against the impact of any change. Nature teaches us that diversity is the natural state of things. Is not our best strategy to adopt the attitude of humility and respect with regard to the living things with which we share this planet? Diversity is what gives meaning and sustenance to all things on this planet. It is a natural law. The world on any level is not static. Change is constant. Diversity is one of the tools nature provides to cope with and survive change. If we are serious about interpreting our natural and cultural heritage, it must be from the global perspective of many diverse cultures. Just like nature, we will find strength in our differences. Differences are not deficits, but add to the human pool of possibility. If our conservation efforts are to be fruitful, we need to provide interpretation of our natural resources from as many different perspectives as possible in order to include the values and viewpoints of the global citizenry. Only then will we be truly successful in generating solutions to the many complex environmental and social issues that face all of us. It is the only way we may ensure that our global natural heritage is secure.

## References

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