

# Exploring American Places with the Discovery Journal: A Guide to Co-Creating Meaningful Interpretation

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AS AMERICA'S STORY-TELLER, the National Park Service (NPS) has long influenced the practice of interpretive pedagogy by creating programs, exhibits, lesson plans, virtual tours, and more, addressing both natural and cultural resources. In the last decade, the National Park Service improved digital accessibility to park units, developed partnerships with local communities, and invited the public to become direct stakeholders in creating interpretation of the past.<sup>1</sup> The push for more engaging and diverse interpretation is a recent development within NPS. The 2011 report, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service*, completed by the Organization of American Historians (OAH) at the invitation of NPS, identified a whole host of challenges in the workings of the agency. In addition to decentralized leadership styles and a lack of collaboration between park units, the report expounded upon the divide between historians and interpreters and how this impacts public perceptions and visitor experiences.<sup>2</sup>

When the National Park Service was founded in 1916, it was “primarily focused on nature and scenery.”<sup>3</sup> Beginning in the 1930s, NPS became responsible for caring for a significant number of sites with historical significance. As a result, the federal agency began to hire historians to teach about these places and “connect visitors with physical resources.”<sup>4</sup> With the establishment of the Division of Interpretation in the 1950s along with the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) in 1966, the historian’s responsibilities began to shift.<sup>5</sup> Under the NHPA, the National Park Service became responsible for the newly established National Register of Historic Places. As a result, “the labors of NPS historians were gradually redirected to focus heavily upon preservation and legal compliance,” instead of interpretation.<sup>6</sup> This created a disconnect between NPS historians and the interpretive content created for the public.

The OAH’s report emphasized the need for departments within the National Park Service to collaborate across disciplines, resulting in the forging of new partnerships and the re-evaluation and improvement of interpretive techniques. Part of this evaluation entailed adopting a multi-vocal approach to the study of historical content.<sup>7</sup> The National Park Ser-

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vice recognized that the historical narrative was composed of diverse perspectives that speak to a shared American experience.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the agency expanded the focus of historical events and changed its strategy for interpreting this history to directly involve visitors and capture the diversity of perspectives in our collective past.

Now providing online discussion forums, facilitating digital and in-person training seminars, and disseminating resources with refined interpretive techniques, the National Park Service encourages interpreters to consider a more inclusive approach to historical inquiry, identify personal biases, and connect with the public on a deeper level. Resources such as the *Fundamentals of 21st Century Interpretation*,<sup>9</sup> *Knowledge of Self Training*,<sup>10</sup> and *The Arc of Dialogue*<sup>11</sup> prepare interpreters to explore meaning through facilitated dialogues, identify relevant historical themes and narratives that transcend time and place, and make connections with park units across the country. One of the most recent trends in interpretive pedagogy involves making historical content relevant to the public at museums and historic sites, as exemplified by The Empathetic Museum, a collaborative website for museum professionals, and Museum Hack, the alternative museum tour company.<sup>12</sup> One of the ways NPS is striving for relevancy is through audience-centered interpretation.

Audience-centered interpretation seeks to be relevant by providing opportunities for visitors to connect, contribute, collaborate, and co-create.<sup>13</sup> That is, members of an audience become participants in interpretation through opportunities to connect emotionally and intellectually with natural and cultural heritage, contribute to the process of making meaning out of a place and its history and social context, and collaborate with each other and with interpreters in dialogue or other interactions. Overall, the purpose is for interpreters and visitors alike to co-create the visitor experience. Such interpretation at historic sites and parks is usually focused on place, but it is not restricted to any particular place. Instead, it strengthens the meanings of a place by exploring connections—among places, across time, among disciplines, and across other boundaries.

## **Discovery Journal**

The Discovery Journal, a resource created through a collaboration of National Park Service professionals, provides a process for place-based interpretation. It provides space to write, draw, scribble, dream, and be intentional about how to transform the meaning of a place, to reveal excluded stories, and to facilitate healing and change.

In this article, we can share a little bit of the process by using a case study of the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C. We are interested in exploring a current and promising trend in heritage interpretation that focuses on inquiry-based and audience-centered interpretation. Using a set of guided questions to discover and re-discover the Tidal Basin, we explore for ourselves how people unlock meaning for themselves. Such a process is, as Nina Simon argues, the very heart of relevance.<sup>14</sup> And there is nothing more relevant than relevance right now in the context of public presentation at museums and historic sites. The Discovery Journal has three main objectives:

1. Identify core questions to ask about a place;

2. Learn methods to identify and explore connections to a place; and
3. Learn how to work within a team to create transformational place-based interpretation.

Beginning with an invitation to research, design, and co-create 21st-century interpretation, the Discovery Journal encourages further exploration of a place. Throughout this process, interpreters should feel inspired to continually revisit their place and experience the wonderment of the surrounding natural and cultural heritage. As “place” is the central theme, the Discovery Journal first asks a team of interpreters and resource specialists (historians, biologists, archaeologists, geologists, etc.) to go out into a place and experience it from a fresh perspective. Sometimes familiarity with a place can cause us to think too “inside the box.” This activity (Figure 1), to be completed while out in the resource, is designed to spark a new line of inquiry about the significance and meaning of a place. Enlisting the help of the senses, these questions should cause us to wonder, “What is it about this place that compels me? What do I want others to know about it?”

Connecting with a place on a deeper level gets the creative juices flowing. But interpretation is most effective when created in collaboration with others. This requires gathering a team of experts with different knowledge, skills, and perspectives. The collaborative process is a powerful one. Interpretation isn’t about one person telling a story; instead, it involves subject-matter experts, interpreters, and visitors creating meaning together. The Discovery Journal, therefore, suggests assembling a creative team and identifying what members can individually contribute to the process, the special qualities or insights they may have, and any tools or resources they bring to the table.

**Figure 1.** An activity included in the Discovery Journal that prompts a team to go out into a place of their choosing to rediscover it through a new lens.

*Shed all of your prior knowledge of your place and reenter as a new observer.*

<p><b>OBSERVATIONS</b></p> <p>What is the landscape like? Flat, hilly, rocky, sandy?</p> <hr/> <p>What kind of life surrounds me? How do I know?</p> <hr/> <p>What is the climate like? Do I feel cool or warm?</p> <hr/> <p>How does the air smell?</p> <hr/> <p>Has this place changed over the past several hundred years? Several thousand? How do I know?</p>	<p>How do my observations and emotions about this place interconnect?</p> <hr/> <p>Are any of my observations at odds with how I feel about this place? Why?</p>	<p><b>EMOTIONS</b></p> <p>How does this place make me feel?</p> <hr/> <p>Why does it make me feel this way?</p> <hr/> <p>Do others have the same experience in this place? How do I know?</p> <hr/> <p>Who am I within this place?</p> <hr/> <p>How does my experience contribute to my understanding?</p>
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Once the creative team is assembled, each individual should explore and connect with the place. In order to create place-based interpretation, all members of the team will need to explore the resource in order to identify and tell the untold stories of this place. This will also lend perspective later down the line when creating meaningful interpretation together.

### **Our place: The Tidal Basin**

Wanting a convenient location in Washington, D.C., to test out the Discovery Journal, we surmised that the Tidal Basin was a good spot to make connections between past and present, and between cultural and natural resources. We began our exploration simply by taking the time to experience it with our senses. On a chilly March morning, we pretty much had the place to ourselves. We walked the approximately two-mile loop around the basin, paying particular attention to what we heard, felt, and saw. The buds on the trees were barely visible and it was very windy and a little bit cold. The wind drowned out all other sounds and churned up small waves on the surface of the water.

As we walked, we asked ourselves, “What is at the heart of this place?” Our answer was that it depended on the time of year. The Tidal Basin is often associated with the cherry trees, but when the trees are not in bloom, it’s easy to consider water as the heart of this place. We also spent time reflecting on some of our personal memories tied to this place.

*Barbara:* I think about a memory of being here as a child, about 4 years old, and my brother teasing me by pretending he was going to push me into the water. And, so, I also think about how small children would experience this place, with the closeness of the water and lack of any railing that they might feel reassured by.

*Katie:* I am reminded of a high school field trip to the Tidal Basin. New monuments have been added since my first visit to this place. I begin to wonder: “How do new monuments change the meaning of the place? Do the monuments give this place meaning? Or do the natural resources? What meaning do they create together?” I think about how the Tidal Basin has changed over time and what will be here in the future.

As we quietly took in our surroundings, our minds filled with questions about this place. We discussed them with one another and wrote down ideas to help guide our research later on. Acting as a team of two, we collaborated and co-created meaning as we brainstormed new ideas about how to best interpret this space.

We absorbed the essence of the Tidal Basin and slid back and forth between thinking of ourselves as visitors and researchers. That is, researchers in the sense of inquirers, as members of an audience might see themselves if they were participating in an audience-centered, inquiry-based exploration. We were guided by the National Park Service’s “Curiosity Kick-Start,” an online set of core questions meant to spark curiosity when visiting a place:<sup>15</sup>

- What is this place?
- What happens or happened here?

- Who and what lives here?
- Who and what lived here before?
- How is this place changing through time?
- How did it come to be this way?
- What will be here in the future?
- How is this place connected to other places?
- What does this place mean to me and to others?
- How do we know the answers to any of these questions?
- What don't we know and why?

These questions form the core of the Discovery Journal process. We delve into them in the context of the Tidal Basin in an article we co-authored for the journal *Open Rivers*.<sup>16</sup> We allowed the questions to lead us to further exploration and the kind of light research that any visitor could accomplish with a mobile phone while on-site.

Like many visitors, we came to the Tidal Basin with a vague knowledge of the place and a curiosity to learn more. The core questions fueled our intellectual appetite for more information about its history. Even without further research, we concluded that the Tidal Basin was a space for exploration—visitors can experience both natural and cultural heritage. Both locals and tourists have the opportunity to explore on land (via the walking path) and on the water (using rental boats).

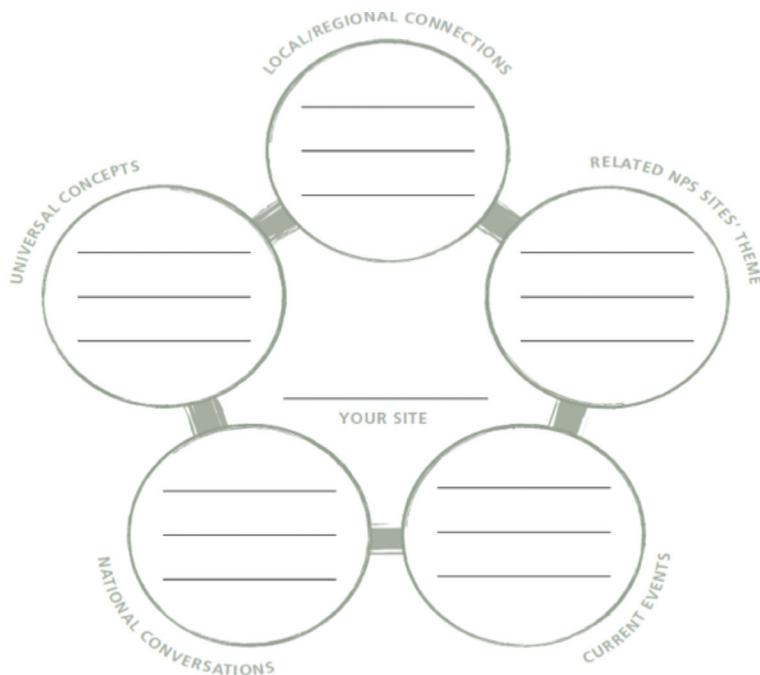
While we were able to confidently answer “What is this place?”, we struggled to address the remaining core questions. On-site interpretive signs provided a brief history of the Tidal Basin, giving us a general historical timeline, yet there was so much we still didn't know! We attempted to answer the core questions as thoroughly as possible during our visit; however, we recognized the need to conduct additional research later down the line.

Our initial responses to the questions included in the “Curiosity Kick-Start” centered on the monuments and the cherry trees. The Tidal Basin has an amazing setting and is surrounded by famous trees and quite a few national monuments. There are lots of fun facts and some interesting seeds of ideas that might take us beyond those trees and monuments. We also identified connections between natural (the cherry trees) and cultural resources (diplomatic relations with Japan). Yet we kept reminding ourselves that one of the main functions of the Discovery Journal is to inspire others to create interpretation based in healing and transformation. The answers we came up with to the core questions didn't really address healing.

How do we begin to think about healing and transformation? We re-evaluated and re-defined the scope of our place. Instead of looking at the Tidal Basin as encompassing the monuments, the trees, and other features, we decided to focus on the water itself. Where might this extraordinary body of water take us?

### **What is transformational?**

We're leaving out a lot of steps in the Discovery Journal, but what really seems to be the key to freeing the creative process is this very simple tool (Figure 2) for thinking about connections and current relevant issues.

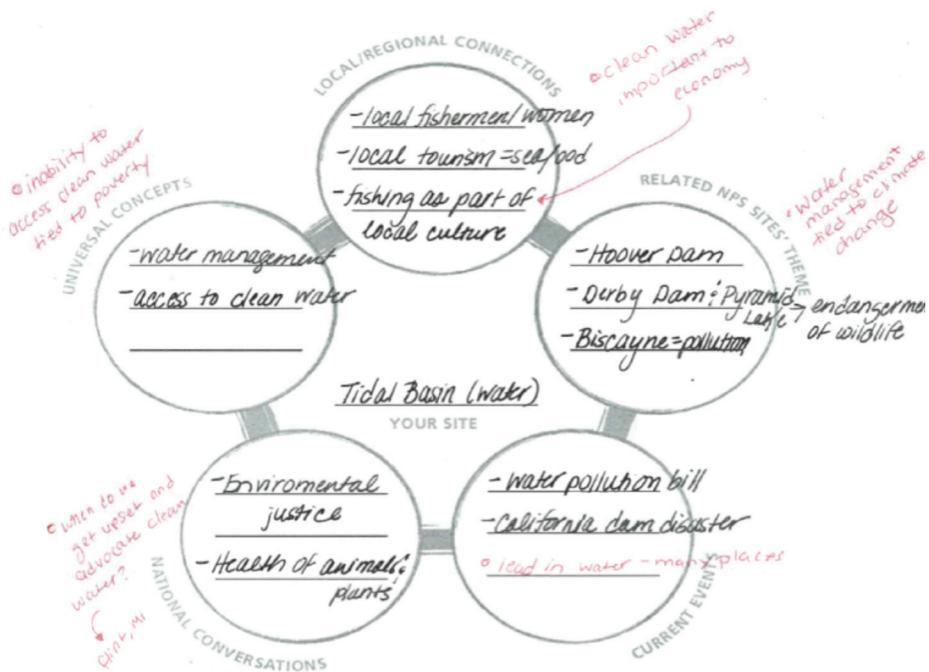


**Figure 2.** The place being explored is at the center of the diagram and the connecting circles are prompts for thinking about connections and current relevant issues.

The diagram encourages individuals and the team to think about how the stories of a place are relevant and how best to expand on them. It works when you have taken the trouble to learn something about the place and the time to consider and discuss. Here is our diagram with initial thoughts and then further thoughts from both of us added (Figure 3).

So, how has our visit to the Tidal Basin informed our exploration of inquiry-based and audience-centered interpretation? We used the core questions and a little bit of further research to discover the Tidal Basin as a place relevant to each of us, connected to environmental justice. Would others have come up with the same meanings for themselves?

We are both involved professionally in public history. After this exercise, we first jumped to thinking about how we might come up with ways to encourage visitors to discover the water and the ways in which it connects to other waters, especially waters that are not drinkable, swimmable, or fishable. We reasoned that wherever visitors are from, every one of them has a connection to water. We jumped too fast, but our reaction was instructive to us because it made us think about our roles and audience roles. Certainly, we want to acknowledge that there is value in using interpretive tools to engage visitors and raise their awareness. However, that is not what this set of core questions is about. Audience-centered means that the members of the audience are full participants, and it is their meanings that they are unlocking for themselves. It is not up to us to tell them what a place means to them.



**Figure 3.** We made connections between the Tidal Basin and other related sites, and identified how this place is relevant today.

There are many factors that influence what someone finds relevant in the core questions: prior knowledge, language skills, curiosity, companions, availability of materials or technology to research questions, and so much more. The very definition of the place, at the beginning, would influence the experience of inquiry-based exploration of it. At the Tidal Basin, the boundaries of the place being experienced are fluid. The place could be the Tidal Basin as we defined it, a grove of cherry trees, the paddle boats, the Jefferson or Roosevelt or Martin Luther King, Jr. memorials, the monumental core of the city, or something else.

The water of the Tidal Basin took us where our own curiosity and interests led us. Using the Discovery Journal in conjunction with the Tidal Basin, we were able to deepen our connection and understanding of this place. Guided by a core set of questions, we identified the meaning and significance of this place and were inspired (with a little help from the Discovery Journal) to create transformative interpretation based in collaboration and co-creation. Our experience taught us both about the Tidal Basin and about the realities and possibilities of inquiry-based, audience-centered interpretation.

### Endnotes

1. Anne Mitchell Whisnant, Marla R. Miller, Gary B. Nash, and David Thelen, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* (Bloomington, IN: Organization

of American Historians, 2011), 33–37, details several of the National Park Service’s recent efforts to engage the public. Manzanar National Historic Site, for example, reaches audiences virtually through its digital story-booklets, online photo galleries, and archived oral history interviews. The Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Traveling Exhibit and the Tent of Many Voices is another example of public engagement and co-creation on behalf of NPS. The Tent of Many Voices provided a space for representatives to share the story of Lewis and Clark through live demonstrations.

2. The report claims that the National Park Service’s overall effectiveness is diminished by “the agency’s weak support for its history workforce, by agency structures that confine history in isolated silos, by longstanding funding deficiencies, by often narrow and static conceptions of history’s scope, and by timid interpretation,” all of which impact the visitor’s experience at park units; see *Imperiled Promise*, 5.
3. *Ibid.*, 20.
4. A government reorganization in the early 1930s along with the 1935 Historic Sites Act resulted in a change in focus at the National Park Service. Once almost solely dedicated to natural resources, NPS was henceforward tasked with caring for cultural resources; see *Imperiled Promise*, 20.
5. *Ibid.*, 21–22. 6. *Ibid.*, 22. 7. *Ibid.* 8. *Ibid.*, 6.
9. National Park Service, Interpretive Development Program (2017), online at <http://idp.eppley.org/sites/default/files/Foundations%20of%20Interpretation-Version%202016-NPS-IDP-with%20cover.pdf>.
10. National Park Service, *Knowledge of Self Training* (2016), online at <http://idp.eppley.org/sites/default/files/Knowledge%20of%20Self%20Training%20Ideas-0416.pdf>.
11. National Park Service, *Achieving Relevance in Our Second Century* (2014), online at [https://www.nps.gov/getinvolved/upload/IEVStrategicPlan\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/getinvolved/upload/IEVStrategicPlan_FINAL.pdf). Adapted from International Coalition Sites of Conscience and The Tenement Museum materials.
12. The Empathetic Museum, <http://empatheticmuseum.weebly.com/>; Museum Hack, <https://museumhack.com/>
13. Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0, 2010) and *The Art of Relevance* (Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0, 2016); National Park Service, *Achieving Relevance in Our Second Century*.
14. Simon, *The Art of Relevance*.
15. National Park Service, “Telling All Americans’ Stories, Consider a Place: A Curiosity Kick-Start,” online at <https://www.nps.gov/articles/taas-consider-a-place.htm>.
16. Barbara J. Little and Katie Crawford-Lackey, “Where the Water Takes You: Unlocking Place-based Meanings through Inquiry at the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C.” *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 7 (2017), online at <http://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/where-the-water-takes-you/>.

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