

INTERPRETATION: EFFECTIVENESS AT THE FIELD LEVEL

Trevor Goward
British Columbia Parks and Outdoor Recreation Branch
Kamloops

As a seasonal interpreter with the British Columbia Parks system, I want to make it clear at the outset that I am addressing Interpretation particularly on a provincial level. Thus, on content I am speaking mostly to the westerners in the audience. In application, however, I am presumptuous enough to hope that there will be something for everyone.

No doubt there are those of you who have traveled to this conference from eastern Canada, and who are experiencing autumn in the southern interior of British Columbia for the first time. If such is the case, you may have been surprised to observe that autumn colour is really almost as much a western as an eastern phenomenon. When you come down to it, the most important difference between our western leaves and your eastern leaves is not the intensity of their October colour, but the intensity of their reputation. I think you will agree that in this regard our western autumn has been decidedly short-changed.

If I allude to leaves, it is to introduce an analogy between leaves and ideas, namely, that even as the leaves have been falling these past few days outside along the river banks and in the orchards, they have also been falling in our midst, here in this auditorium, from the various speakers who have addressed us. And it is a credit to this conference that the leaves now lie so deep about us. One enjoys shuffling through them (the ideas) with approximately the same wild abandon that one used to reserve for them (the leaves) as children. But though the leaves are deep, still one mustn't conclude that the ground is equally covered everywhere. A few bare patches still remain, and it is my intention as a speaker-who-follows-other-speakers to point these out and then to add a few leaves of my own. This is one of the two main tasks which I have set myself. My other task will be to do a little discretionary raking up of the leaves which have already accumulated.

The question "What is interpretation?" is hardly a popular one among interpreters. That much has been made abundantly clear during this conference. If, therefore, I have elected to consider just this question in introducing the subject at hand, namely the effectiveness at the field level, I hope you will appreciate that it must be an important one in the context of what I have to say. It is important on two levels, the first being the simple articulation of the kinds of things I want to discuss today, and the second being the long-term cohesiveness and impact of our organization. Now, whereas the former importance will speak for itself as this talk unfolds, the latter may not, and so will bear a little elaboration.

Over the past four days we have been presented with a diversity of opinion which is healthy to any organization. Healthy, that is, so long as this diversity can be accommodated under the single banner, Interpretation. It is distressing to hear it said of a speaker – as I have heard it said more than once recently – that his theme has really missed the mark: that he is not talking Interpretation at all, but Education, or Outdoor Recreation, or what have you. Such comment is distressing because it precludes the possibility of meaningful dialogue among the different interest groups present here. Yet by whose agreement would any of these interest groups subtract themselves from what it is to "do interpretation"? Certainly not their own. On the contrary, all of us are here, presumably, because of a personal involvement in something. That something, Interpretation, ought therefore to be characterized in such a way as to encompass all of our interests, no matter how diverse, no matter how at odds with one another our involvement on the surface appears. It is a truism that no organization has ever done itself a favour by refusing expertise. I believe that when we use the words "Interpretation," we ought to do so *sensu lato*, in the broad sense, qualifying it adjectivally when we wish to refer to something more specific.

Having said these things, it would be nonsensical for me now to try and define Interpretation. Indeed, I'm afraid I am one of those who believe that the genius of our profession is most respected only inasmuch as it is least delimited. What I would like to present, therefore, is not a definition, but a conspectus – and a rather vague conspectus at that.

I tentatively suggest that there are four levels to Interpretation. These might be named PRIMARY, SECONDARY, TERTIARY, and QUATERNARY Interpretation. Each level may be thought of (in the abstract) as attempting to satisfy a particular human need. Thus, the goal of Primary Interpretation is INSPIRATION; that of Secondary Interpretation is directed at INFORMATION; Tertiary Interpretation, at ORIENTATION; and Quaternary Interpretation, at RECREATION.

FIGURE I

SCHEME OF INTERPRETATION

LEVEL	GOAL	PERSPECTIVE
PRIMARY.....	INSPIRATION.....	SPIRITUAL
SECONDARY.....	INFORMATION.....	FACTUAL
TERTIARY.....	ORIENTATION.....	SPATIAL
QUATERNARY.....	RECREATION.....	PHYSICAL

Regarding this breakdown, the basic point, the synthetic point, is that all these levels apply equally to what Interpretation really is. What is more, once one accepts a multiple view of Interpretation, once one accepts, that is, that not all of us need share the same interpretative bias, it becomes immediately evident that not all of us need share interpretive tools either. What works for Secondary Interpretation, for instance, will not necessarily work for Quaternary Interpretation. I believe that before we enter any discussion of techniques or goals, we ought to make it clear under just what section of the interpretive banner we are standing.

Let me set my own example: I would like to make it clear that as afield interpreter, and as a field interpreter addressing the question of effectiveness in the field, I will be focusing my attention on the so-called Primary level of Interpretation, that is, Inspiration and the Spiritual perspective of our vocation.

To judge by the tenor of discussion over the past few days, I would say that it is obvious to everyone here that the purse strings of government, insofar as they are tied to Interpretation at all, are tied exclusively to the Secondary, Tertiary and Quaternary levels of Interpretation. In a way, this is as it should be, since Primary Interpretation, that is, Inspiration, has perhaps not as many worldly needs as the other levels have. What is more, levels Two, Three and Four may cogently be argued to be the real bread-and-butter of level One, since without Information, Orientation and Recreation, Inspiration soon grows thin, weak-kneed, top-heavy, and tends to fall flat. It is not surprising, therefore, that, at the policy-making and budgetary levels, Primary Interpretation must appear diaphanous at the most and, more probably, invisible. In the minds of most managers, and between the lines of most mandates, Inspiration is hardly a prime or serious objective of Interpretation. Even among ourselves (I seem to detect) there is a prevalent feeling that Inspiration will look after itself – so why worry? To this attitude, I would like to take a strong exception.

The theme of this conference is, as we heard on the morning of the first day, “Making Interpretation (more) Relevant”. As a theme this is fair enough, though one has still to ask “Just whom do we want to make Interpretation more relevant to?” From the suite of addresses that has followed, it is now abundantly clear that we ought to be making Interpretation more relevant to management. Certainly one would not want to contest this point. Nor would one care to argue with those who have suggested that it ought to be made more relevant to the public. That too seems clear enough. It has, however, struck me as not a small paradox that I have yet to hear anything by anyone on the subject of making Interpretation more relevant to interpreters.

If I were asked to characterize in a single word just what it is the interpreter does, I would have to say that he “communicates”. In the very broadest sense, I believe his job is to communicate a reverence for life.

During the nineteenth century and earlier, reverence for life wasn’t a particularly important concept, that is, one could leave the supervision of our conduct vis-à-vis other forms of life on this planet to God – on the comfortable assumption that all things had been made for our use in the first place. What is more, with our trusted Helmsman at the wheel, we could depend upon one day arriving safely into port. Today, however, we have come to believe that there is no port. Neither is there any direction separate from the one which we ourselves have set. And yet (all our Existentialist philosophies notwithstanding) as much as ever we still need something to believe in, some reason to bother manning the decks, to “carry on carrying on”. There can be no question that in the long term, our soundness of mind is positively related to the soundness of our existential cornerstones. In the absence of God, the soundest of all cornerstones is a reverence for life. Reverence for life is sound because it is both indefensible and self-evident, that is, it is the stuff of faith. Why, after all, should one want to “preserve the world”? What is so important about form and colour, about the “livingness” of things, about the future? To these questions we simply have no reply – apart from our sub-rational instinct to self-preservation, and in healthy moments we feel convinced that they need no reply: one wants to live and, by extension, to let live, that is all. By definition, almost, an interpreter is one who feels this way more strongly than most. With only the slightest stretch in credibility, you might say of him that he’s a person who’s “got religion”.

Trite as it might be to compare a forest to a cathedral, such comparisons are at least not gratuitous. Indeed, one might go a few steps farther to suggest that the recent decline of the Church and the recent rise of the Park are causally related. When God began to go to sleep sometime late in the last century, He laid Himself to rest in Parks. The very existence of the Parks System in this, the Twentieth Century, bespeaks the understanding, appreciation and preservation of the world around us. Just as the Church used to offer salvation in other times, so today does the Park. Human destiny has come down to earth, that is all. In the broadest possible sense, it seems to me that this is what parks are about. Certainly, at least, this is what interpreters are about. This is the message which, at whatever level of awareness, we are all united to “interpret” to the public at large.

The interpreter, then, is a priest in a twentieth century religion. Though it will not do to push this analogy too far, it is at least true that the priest and the interpreter share an equivalent commitment to their respective causes. A park with an indifferent interpreter is as sorry a thing as a church with an agnostic priest. All field interpreters feel this, no doubt, and so often balk at performing, or else perform badly, any task which does not accord with their personal value systems. One simply has to believe in the messages which one is communicating to the public.

A widespread characteristic of field interpreters is their tendency to subordinate interpretive Levels Two, Three, and Four (Information, Orientation and Recreation) to Level One, that is, Inspiration. This is because while Levels Two, Three and Four are certainly what the interpreter does, still they are not his reason for doing what he does. I have already suggested that Inspiration, as an objective for Interpretation, is generally overlooked by management. I would like to suggest now that to the extent that Inspiration is countenanced, at all, it is mostly made light of, that is, it is feared. The reasons for this fear are probably complex, but certainly among them is the obvious difficulty in either controlling or directing Inspiration. Be that as it may, it is largely out of out of our fear that we, the interpreters, have been remiss at explaining to management that Inspiration, dealing as inevitably it must, always in terms of Information, Orientation and Recreation, is not separate from these more orthodox objectives, but it is their confirmation. Inspiration, what is more, is the ultimate communication of a message which is the very foundation of parks, a message whose perpetuation is probably the only strategy by which the parks which managers manage will continue to resist the tentacles of resource exploitation. In the long-term, this message, that is, the reverence for life, will be communicated – not only most easily through Inspiration – but indeed, exclusively through it.

What is the nature of Inspiration? Quite simply, it involves the bringing into focus of an “evident” truth” – or a truth that becomes evident to the person being inspired. In a long-term sense, Inspiration enriches the lives of those whom it touches. It is Inspiration which distinguishes the interpreter’s programme from mere entertainment. To be sure, the entertainment value of any interpretive programme must be high, since the whole communication process is in large part contingent on the catalyst of enjoyment. But if the interpreter has no personal sense of trying to inspire people, then entertainment becomes its own purpose, and the programme which fosters it becomes indistinguishable from a circus act or T.V. comedy. In these, there is only a minimal possibility of effecting change in the viewer. One laughs for a time, then one resumes living. For the interpreter, however, such is not enough.

The field interpreter has this in common with other religious devotes: he sincerely believes that his efforts contribute to a long-term amelioration of the human condition. What is more, though management may tend to ignore, belittle, or fear the evangelical side of Interpretation, still the best field interpreters among us are those who have a personal vision, a personal conviction – quite separate from any pay cheque they may incidentally receive – which informs their rapport with the public, and which furnishes them the spark they need to inspire through the effective communication of the other three levels of Interpretation. This conviction is a form of energy – rare in this day and age – shared by those who have been lucky enough to be born with a mission, a cause. The naturalist is just such a person. If management could be persuaded to tap into his energy, and to use it to its own ends, that is, to the maintenance and furtherance of parks ideals, and to the improvement of public attitudes toward parks and trails and trees – if these things could be orchestrated, Interpretation would immediately be made more relevant to the field interpreter. From being made more relevant to the field interpreter, Interpretation would be only a short step away from being made more relevant to the public as well.

I believe that the recognition of the psychological imperative of Primary Interpretation would entail certain minor, but important, changes in Interpretation, at least as we know it in British Columbia’s parks. There are, I think, three nodes of changes. The first would involve the development of a sense of community. The second would lead to a greater emphasis on individual identity. And the third would entail greater professionalism.

I) SENSE OF COMMUNITY

As a lone interpreter, I tend to spend my summers in something of a vacuum. With other interpreters in other parks, I have virtually no communication, except via the incidental letters which I might now and then receive. Only with difficulty am I able to keep in mind that there really are other interpreters in other parks doing what I am doing. More usually, I am inclined to feel like the last of my species, a sub-fossil blathering on and on about things nobody else believes any more. How much easier my job would be were I to receive even an occasional reminder that I am not without my “comrades in arms”, that throughout the province there are others working toward the same ends. What one sadly misses, as a lone interpreter, is a sense of community.

There are at least three means by which an interpretive sense of community might be enriched in British Columbia. One of them is the establishment (or, in our case, re-establishment) of a newsletter. I believe that it ought to be a necessary part of the job of every interpreter to submit a fortnightly record of his recent experiences, of his anecdotes, complaints and ambitions. These reports could be culled for their choice cuts and then packaged into a biweekly house organ. Even very simple items, such as an incident here, an innovation there, a joke, a cartoon, would go a long way toward creating that sense of belonging which is so necessary to the effective running of any organization.

The loss of our newsletter, however, is not the only bereavement which we in British Columbia have experienced lately. For some of us, our annual pre-season training course has also gone the way of all flesh, that is, not everyone is given permission to attend any longer. The reasons for this, I presume, are financial and political. And yet, whatever the reasons, they can hardly outweigh the damage they are doing to the fabric of Interpretation in our province. Those who maintain that our job ought to be totally contained within and defined by the boundaries of a single park, labour under a misconception. As parks employees, we owe allegiance at least as much to a parks system as to any particular park within that system. As interpreters, that is, as those whose job it

is to inform the traveling public about parks, this is even more so. Our reference books and our microscopes, our chalk boards and our dusters are really only a part of our field equipment. The rest of it consists of a feeling for the interpretive system to which our programmes contribute: small things, like who is stationed where and interested in what, whose park has the sandiest beaches, the best-kept hiking trails, the most magnificent waterfalls. For these reasons, and a hundred others like them, I believe it to be of the utmost importance that all our province's interpreters be given an opportunity to meet one another. That some of us should presently be refused this opportunity runs counter to the whole strategy of an interpretive system, and seriously hampers the continuity of the visiting public's experience of parks.

A third means of improving sense of community in British Columbia would be to enlist the aid of the "roving interpreter". Hired on a regional or inter-regional level, the roving interpreter would travel from programme to programme, spurring the field interpreter on in his work by helping to familiarize him with his park, focusing his attention on certain of its resources, acting as a sounding board for his walks and talks, and bringing word of what is going on elsewhere. The roving interpreter would in these ways function as an on-going source of moral and material support. For the lone interpreter especially, he would supply a degree of solidarity which Interpretation in British Columbia has not known for several years.

I I) INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY

One of the more unfortunate trends in Interpretation in recent years has been a gradual minimizing of individual identity. Increasingly at work within our ranks is a so-called democratic bias, a sort of leveling force whose function it is to guard our reputations at an even, undistinguished monotone, and to mask our individuality beneath a whitewash of standardization.

There is no question that the stifling impersonality which British Columbia Parks has begun to adopt – on the example, one presumes, of Parks Canada – is detrimental to the energy of those who are out there, in the field, struggling to make something substantial of their ideals. In the long term, there also can be no question that this impersonality is harmful to the parks system itself – that is, at least if one is justified in supposing that that system's past successes bear any relation to the commitment of those workers who are responsible most basically for them. In short, reputations and individuality should be viewed as an asset, not a danger, and should be encouraged, not paralyzed.

Last evening, David Suzuki was honoured by our organization for his role as an interpreter. Do we suppose that we would have been honouring him just as certainly had his name not incidentally become synonymous with those things he interprets? Surely that synonymy is every bit as important, for example, to popular science as it is to David Suzuki – since in proportion as his name grows, so grows also his effectiveness at communication his favourite subject, popular science.

Such are the benefits of reputation and individuality: that a person may identify himself personally with that in which he believes and, in the so doing, may animate an attitude, give it an immediacy which otherwise it must lack. Surely not even a hundred civil servants could hope to achieve for popular science what David Suzuki achieved. Ought we not to take heed of the examples of those whose contributions we hold to be exemplary?

In future, therefore, let us adopt a policy of giving credit where credit is due. If an interpreter has contributed, for example, to the production of a park brochure, or of a press release, or, again, to the development of a planning design, then let that interpreter's name be duly acknowledged. Those who are working hard ought to be recognized as widely as their energies deserve.

I I I) PROFESSIONALISM

The final area of change which I envisage is a little more complex, but just as fundamental to making Interpretation more relevant to the field interpreter. This is greater professionalism.

By professionalism, I am not speaking of professionalism in the certificate sense in which one goes to university for four years, dons the gown, shakes the hand, and is thenceforward a *bona fide* interpreter. I personally do not believe that that kind of apprenticeship necessarily accords with the genius of our profession. On the contrary, I am inclined to support the opposite view, namely, that very often it is the self-made interpreter who excels at our vocation. By no means should access to Interpretation be made difficult for these kinds of people. If this is part of what greater professionalism would entail, then I would oppose greater professionalism.

As for myself, however, I am talking about professionalism in a broader sense than it is usually understood. As I use the word, it refers not to quantity of institutionalization, but to quality of programme content. In this broader sense, I am very much in favour of greater professionalism.

Greater professionalism in the broad sense is contingent upon two basic factors: 1) the kinds of people who are attracted to Interpretation in the first place, and 2) what these people are about once they join the ranks. Obviously these two factors are related to one another in a feedback continuum, such that the quality of the first will determine the quality of the second, which will determine the quality of the first, and so on. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that downward spirals, though easily initiated, are difficult to reverse. Upward spirals, on the other hand, are difficult to initiate, but painfully easy to reverse. This is why greater professionalism must always remain a somewhat elusive goal, but must also always be sought after. The only other way is down.

There have always been certain characteristics of Interpretation which aspiring interpreters have invariably found attractive. For myself, back in the early 70's, these characteristics were the freedom of creativity, the involvement in the out-of-doors, and the premium on learning which the job seemed to involve. The character of the interpreter himself I also found attractive: he was someone who combined humanity and enthusiasm with a boundless curiosity. In short, he was someone who was in love with his job and with life.

This is the positive, or if you like, the rose-coloured side of the outsider's vision of Interpretation. It is these things, among others, which initially attracts the young naturalist to our profession. Once attracted, however, it does not take the young naturalist long to discover that the interpreter's job has a few lumpy spots as well. One of the most basic of these, in British Columbia at least, is that one works for only four months of the year. Now this is fine for the university student. But what about that same student once he finally graduates? What happens when, having gained perhaps three or four summers of interpretive experience and having decided to maybe carry on in that line, he is decisively confronted with the prospect of eight months of stewing for every four months of working? Is it very likely that he will turn to interpretation as a viable life style? Hardly. If he is a man of options, (that is, just such a person as would be a boon to our vocation), he will almost certainly follow up one of his other possibilities.

Interpretation, therefore, is not a place where, at the field level at least, people with potential stay very long. Upward spiraling, however, is absolutely dependent upon people with potential. For this reason it would seem evident that one of our highest priorities should be to find a way of making interpretation into a viable life style.

Along these lines, I wonder whether it wouldn't be possible to develop a certain number of jobs which could be available to a small number of interpreters every winter. I suppose that such jobs would not even have to necessarily be Interpretation-oriented. Their basic function would be to provide an in-house option for those who might otherwise be lost, during the annual off-season drought to other professions.

Greater professionalism also depends for its development on the commitment of our interpreters to learning. It is a very easy thing to acquire a superficial knowledge of many subjects. It is not so easy, however, to also develop a profound knowledge of a few subjects. Yet to the competent interpreter, this profound knowledge – or specialization – is just as valuable as the more general knowledge which he uses every day. I believe that every interpreter ought to have a specialty – not because he wants to write monographs, but because, in understanding

one field very well, he learns to understand other fields well also. It is not only facts that one needs to be at home with as an interpreter it is also – and more particularly – perspectives. Part of the job of the interpreter, as we have seen, involves the bringing into focus of “evident truths”. These truths depend for their communication upon a vision which is deeper than any single fact, a vision which can penetrate beneath the facts, combine them, give them perspective. Such a vision is the vision of one who has learned how to perceive things in depth.

Friendly competition among interpreters might be another means of improving both the factual and visionary content of our programmes. This of course harkens back to the sense of community which I discussed earlier, and supplies yet another reason why such an ambience should be allowed to develop in our ranks. To be candid, it has always surprised me that vanity has not been put to greater use by our organization in British Columbia.

The training courses offer a third means of providing interpretation with a stronger basis in fact and perspective. It is rather unfortunate, therefore, that to date our courses in British Columbia have been largely oriented to preparing us for the bureaucratic nitty-gritty of our job. Some training in technique is provided, of course, but even here it is presumed that everyone either already has or else will acquire the kind of knowledge requisite for the job. More to the point, I think, would be to offer some basic training in the knowledge itself. One could, for instance, provide an overview of the geology of the province. Or perhaps the relations between the life zones ought to be discussed. A third possibility might be changes in the season. And so on. Elaborated in this way would be a conceptual framework – a perspective – which would permit a more efficient assimilation of facts by the interpreter. It is not enough to ask an interpreter to know his stuff; he should also be given some effective means of learning his stuff, that is, of learning what it is he ought to learn.

In summary, it seems to me that to the extent that the field interpreter is given room in his profession for his ideals and convictions, and to the extent that the parks system is willing to offer him a viable life style – to just that extent will Interpretation in British Columbia finally begin to reverse the downward spiral in which it has lately found itself caught. The key to this reversal, what is more, lies in winning management over to the importance of acknowledging what it is in the interpreter that commits him to his job and gives him ideally, some measure of success in it. I am not talking about a mere tolerance off ideals, but an active incorporation of those ideals in the fabric of the job. Only by this particular union agreement will management finally derive the greatest benefit from our efforts.

These are the leaves I will leave you with. I sincerely hope that they have contributed to the litter.