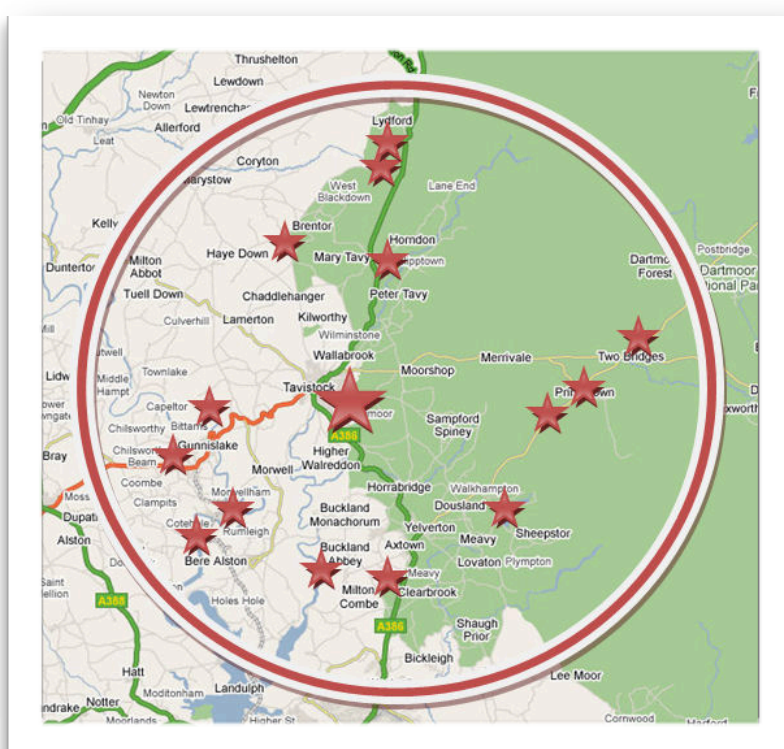


Interpretive Systems Master Planning

*"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it
hitched to everything else in the Universe."*



By Crispian Emberson & Dr John Veverka

Heritage Destination Consulting Ltd.
Suite 1, Poppy House, Mundesley Road, Paston,
Norfolk, NR28 9AD. United Kingdom

Tel: 0871 218 0817
Email: hd.consulting@btinternet.com
Web: www.heritagedestination.com

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"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."

This quotation from John Muir points out one of the problems with interpretive planning as practiced today. While interpretive master planning is generally regarded as essential to the success of any interpretive destination, program facility, or site, the majority of such plans produced today are site or park specific with little attention to the regional context and integration with interpretation at other sites nearby.

Agencies with interpretive planning responsibilities covering extensive areas generally emphasise only on those facets directly pertaining to and within the scope of their own concern. For example, in an article by Badaracco and Scull (1978), little attention is paid to the interface between an agency's mandate and the private sector regarding interpretive stories, themes, and facilities. As a result, a large percentage of interpretive efforts tend to be rather narrow in scope, and may even be excessively redundant in their approach to interpretation — duplicating effort, and making inefficient use of available resources. Today, for heritage tourism and interpretation planning, particularly on a large scale, interpretive systems planning is the "required" approach to ensure cost effective site development and marketing for many thematically related sites, facilities, or locations.

What do we mean by a “system”?

An interpretive systems plan looks at how best to use and integrate all of the interpretive sites, facilities or resources within a given system. Of course, what you mean by "system" can vary. The system can be all of the parks or historic sites managed by a given agency. Or it can be a multi-county heritage tourism region containing many "smaller systems" within it. It can be all of the interpretive sites managed by a state agency, thus covering the effective interpretation of sites managed by that agency state wide, such as a state park system. Whatever the size of make-up of your particular "system", the value of using a systems approach to interpretive planning is quite high and the benefits gained substantial. Here are a few of the potential advantages associated with the systems approach.

The Value of Interpretive Systems Planning

- It integrates related facilities, themes and stories within an agency or with several agencies.
- It facilitates a variety of levels of experience or "pacing" (Veverka, 1978) for visitors as a common thread of experience on a regional, national or international level.
- It facilitates the utilisation of natural, physiographic, historical and cultural resources and stories which might otherwise be ignored or overlooked.
- It expands the potential for using computers to model the interpretive planning process for a given area, site or region. It also expands the use of the Internet in presenting interpretive opportunities within the system.

- It enhances optimal use of available physical, financial, and psychological resources within an area or region.
- It makes evaluation of interpretive plans and programs easier and more meaningful, by pointing out excessive duplication and/or omissions within the interpretive system. It makes evaluation of interpretive plans and programs easier and more meaningful, by pointing out excessive duplication and/or omissions within the interpretive system.
- It encourages a more expedient and rational approach to planning interpretive services along corridors such as scenic byways and historic or National Roads.

Preparing an Interpretive Systems Plan

Preparing an interpretive systems plan can involve both long-range and immediate planning needs. It is probably best to take that proverbial: first step" in developing a systems plan at a smaller scale for your immediate needs and letting your interpretive systems plan evolve into your long range planning.

How do you actually develop an interpretive systems plan? There are five criteria which should be considered when developing your systems plan:

1. Relative levels of a resource's or story's significance and its attractions and appeal for visitors.
2. Degree of environmental or artistic manipulation in light of given levels of significance (i.e. what can be done to enhance the site's marketability).

3. Needed availability of the resource or story relative to visitor demand and interest.
4. Potential or a site or story to enhance the intrinsic variety of themes within the system contrasted to its merely adding more of what already exists within the system.
5. Potential interface with other agencies, sites or facilities.

In addition, consideration should be given to the preservation of rare and or unusual sites for the special uses or emphasis which best capitalize on their unique values. In this light a program on butterflies would not be planned for a unique native petroglyph site unless that program directly related to that site/ story in some way.

Well-coordinated and integrated planning is the essential element in interpretive systems planning. With this in mind, the following steps might be employed in developing an interpretive systems plan for any given organization or region.

Survey key existing resources and interpretive opportunities within your system (lets say for this example the system comprises 10 County Parks and the Agency is a County Parks System). This is the first important step.

- 🌐 For each park within the system list each interpretive resource. You might want to also rank or note the unique value of the resource such as "this is our only example of a bog habitat", or "this is our only accessible archaeological site".
- 🌐 Then make up a matrix of the parks x resources to give you a good picture of what is developing.

Of course this matrix might contain 50 subject areas/resources, but once it is completed you can get a good idea of which resources you have a lot of, which ones are unique to a particular park, or which ones are the best examples.

From this resource inventory you can begin to develop a unique interpretive theme (story presentation) for each park based on "what it has". This will help keep from duplicating interpretive efforts at parks.

1. Then identify existing resources and interpretive opportunities outside your own agency's boundaries with whom cooperative arrangements may be developed, such as nearby interpretive centres or nature centres, museums, historic sites, etc.
2. Then establish the specific interpretive objectives for each park (site) within the system, based on the particular theme and resources that park is best suited to illustrate.
3. Also identify those interpretive themes most dominant or significant at interpretive or resource sites outside of your agencies parks (but located nearby each park).
4. Then identify the main interpretive media/services that should be further developed at each of your parks so you can budget your interpretive improvements for each park.
5. Then create an Agency Wide (all of your parks together) interpretive implementation and operation strategy. This will be a matrix that will look at ALL of the interpretive media needs within ALL of the parks within the system over 5 years. This will help you develop annual development priorities for each park, and for the total interpretive program.

From the interpretive systems plan it will be easier to develop each parks individual interpretive master plan – giving the parks with the greatest need (existing numbers of visitors, site/resource protection, etc.) priority in interpretive planning.

Outline of an Interpretive Systems Plan

In simple terms visitors exiting your museum / heritage centre / historic site / and so on, should be able to summarize the interpretive theme of the visitor experience in one succinct sentence.

1. Main Interpretive theme and Sub-themes (from focus workshops and site resource analysis).
 - a. Main Interpretive theme and rationale.
 - b. Main Sub-themes and rationale.
 - c. Interpretive story-line flow bubble diagram.
 - d.

2. Total interpretive program/services objectives (Learn, Feel, Do). This is for **the total interpretive program/services effort** – site and/or visitor center combined. This usually comes from a focus workshop, and edited based on the interpretive site resources review.
 - a. Learning Objectives
 - b. Behavioral Objectives
 - c. Emotional Objectives

3. Visitor Analysis. This is usually based on existing visitor data as doing new visitor surveys is both time consuming and expensive. Sections of this part of the plan can include:
 - i. Visitation numbers and trends over the past 3-5 years (graph this data).

- ii. Basic market profile – who are the visitors, where are they traveling from, how long are they staying, gender and age variables, etc.
 - iii. Visitor experience desires or focus (why are they visiting this site?).
 - iv. Seasonal visitation trends or issues.
 - v. School group and curriculum based interpretive planning needs and issues.
 - vi. Visitor Management Issues (relate to behavioral objectives).
4. Individual Site Interpretive Inventory and Story Development Forms.
- a. Site resource location/inventory map. This map would show the locations of each interpretive site, feature, facility, etc. that an interpretive planning form set would be completed for (existing or proposed).
 - b. Interpretive Site Index list. This is a list of all of the interpretive sites inventoried and included in the interpretive planning form sets that follow.
 - c. Interpretive Planning form sets for **each interpretive site** inventoried including orientation sites, facilities, trails, demonstration areas, historic sites, natural resource areas, etc. (existing or proposed).

For each planning form set we include:

Site Inventory Form

1) Site Name	
2) Site Index Number	We usually key this to a map, arial photo or satellite image. Ideally we gather this data using GPS readings.
3) Site Location	Reference site index map, etc.
4) Site Description	We add a site description here usually with relevant photos.
5) Interpretive Significance	Explain why we are we interpreting this site and how it fits into the overall theme

Story Development Form Set

1) Interpretive Theme	The main Interpretive Theme for each individual site
2) Site Objectives	These are physical development objectives such as building a stair way, add a viewing deck, etc.
3) Interpretive Objectives	These are the <i>specific objectives (learn, feel or do)</i> that interpretive programs, services or media are to accomplish at this specific site.
4) Interpretive Media	Recommended Interpretive Media for this location. This is a list of the interpretive media that could best be used to accomplish the stated objectives (i.e. self-guiding trail, interpretive panel, outdoor demonstration, guided walk, exhibit in a visitor center, etc.).
5) Costs	Any budget issues or estimates. This helps make each individual interpretive planning form set a “mini” work plan for each individual site or feature that is part of the interpretive plan.

5. Five year implementation and operations strategy/matrix. This includes: Site Index Number – each Interpretive Media or Site Development needs – Fiscal Year for implementation – estimated cost for each site/item listed.

This allows us to plan priorities and costs for actually implementing the total interpretive plan 5 years down the road.

6. Evaluation recommendations. How will you know if the interpretive media you are going to purchase actually works (accomplishes its objectives), such as pre-testing interpretive panels in draft form, etc.
7. Appendices as needed.

Summary

An interpretive systems plan is the most cost effective way to inventory, rank, and plan for future development of themes and stories within a large systems of parks, historic sites, heritage tourism regions, or other related agencies. The systems plan help identify the "unique" interpretive story of each site, relative to other sites within the system, or located outside of the system, but nearby. It is a key planning tool for long range interpretive/heritage tourism planning for making the best use of existing resources, and planning for new/future interpretive media/services development.

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