



Interpretation for National Parks with High Visitation: Defining Effective Planning and Implementation

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Interpreter (between 1999-2016) of natural and cultural history in Grand Canyon, Redwood, and Yosemite National Parks.

Interpretation Supervisor (current) at the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park in Maryland.

- Only 2-5 kilometers wide but 300 kilometers long! Almost 5 million Visitors.
- www.nps.gov/choh

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park

National parks visited in Sweden!

Store Mosse, Garphyttan, Tiveden, and Tyresta

(My goal is to visit all the Swedish National Parks)



Regardless of high or low visitation, remember...

Effective interpretation is

- 1) Mission-driven, and**
- 2) Not instruction, but provocation.**



Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park

■ Trends in the national parks

- More volunteers and park partners asked to cover visitor and interpretive services
- Less personal services, more non-personal services, and perhaps eventually no interpretive services
- Increased focus on providing social media
- Increased need for orientation and basic information for visitors.
- Competition for limited funds.
- Less printed material and more reliance on high tech gadgets to provide interpretation.
- When personal services (walks and talks) are provided by a interpreter, replacing passive monologues with active dialogues that engage the visitors.



Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park

■ Interpretive Planning for High Visitation

- Identifies the park's significance and primary interpretive themes
- Effective planning considers both personal and non-personal services
- Aims for effective position management for interpretive staffing
- Identifies and provides interpretive staff training
- Incorporates the "Visitor Experience Spectrum (VES)" of orientation-information-interpretation into all planning aspects.
- Hire an Interpretive Media Specialist
- Develop a comprehensive media plan for the park (park social media & website, indoor and outdoor interpretive exhibits, maps, brochures).
- Both daily maintenance and long term longevity of non-personal services is given primary consideration



Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park

- **Interpreter Competencies for High Visitation**
- Demonstrates emotional intelligence (EI) to recognize their limit with a large audience
- Demonstrates knowledge of large audience dynamics and communicate accordingly.
- Demonstrates effective group facilitation skills
- Demonstrates effective listening and observing skills for verbal and non-verbal visitor cues and aligning with an “Visitor Experience Spectrum (VES)”: Orientation (“where” questions), Information (“what” questions), and Interpretation (“why” questions)
- Demonstrates knowledge of effective talk settings (is it formal or informal?):
 - Conducted Activity: are you moving the large group from point A to point B to point C....?
 - Informal Visitor Contacts: “Roving” vs Pop-up” techniques for large groups
- Utilizes the Interpretive Equation for all group sizes: (Knowledge of the Resource (KR)+**Knowledge of the Audience (KA)**) Appropriate Technique (AT)=Interpretive Opportunity (IO)
- Utilizes training AND peer-to-peer coaching in combination



Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park

■ Lessons learned at Grand Canyon National Park

- Developed a partnership with communication experts from a university to observe interpretive practices and make recommendations.
- Humans are “hard-wired” for certain types of communication. Technology-driven interpretation is not always the best approach
- Provided interpreters with skills and technology to address large audiences at identified locations.
- Collaborated with a park partner to fund the cost of replacing old sound and lighting system in auditorium that improved interpretation services for large audiences.
- Implemented Facilitated Dialogue techniques into interpretive programming.
- Effective interpretation is a dialogue between the interpreter and the audience (not a monologue). As long as the interpreter has the Emotional Intelligence and understands how
- Be cautious of exhibit designers and exhibit fabricators who also market themselves as “Interpretive Planners.”



Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park

- **Lessons learned at C&O Canal Natl Historical Park**
- Recognized through a park wide position management discussion that a full time Interpretive Media Specialist was needed.
- Visitor use survey may reveal that most visitors, when asked about Visitor Experience Spectrum, prefer effective orientation and information, not interpretation.
- Recognized the limits of using volunteers and partners to cover interpretive services.



Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park

■ Conclusion

- If you have limited staffing and funds: Ensure visitors receive effective park orientation and basic information first.
- Know the limits to using volunteers and partners. They are not meant to replace fully trained, competent staff.
- Train **AND** Coach interpretive staff for specific knowledge and skills.
- Hire an Interpretive Media Specialist but be cautious of relying fully on electronic gadgets to fulfill the needs of high visitation.
- Engage, Engage, Engage