

Effects of the loss of interpretive programs in BC Parks

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Abstract

Interpretation is a vital component in the management of any system of parks or protected areas. The loss of interpretive programs in BC Parks will have many consequences for the parks of British Columbia. These include a decline in the enjoyment felt by visitors, a decrease in the ecological integrity, and an overall loss of revenue to the province through decreased use.

Introduction

On May 16, 2001, the Liberal Party won a landslide victory in the BC provincial elections. Although receiving only 57.6 percent of the popular vote, the Liberals won 98 percent of the seats in the BC Legislature. Since that time, the government has announced many reductions in public services. In February 2002, Joyce Murray, Minister of Water, Land and Air Protection, announced the cutting of interpretive programs in BC Parks. The announcement stated the province would save about \$800,000 annually (Lavoie, 2002).

Interpretation is a vital component in a park system. The numerous benefits of interpretation in both park and tourism management have been shown in many studies (Pigram, 1983; Cooper, 1991; Sharpe, 1993; Orams, 1996; Curthoys, 1998; Moscardo, 1999; Kuo, 2002). Interpretation is also an important component in cultivating cultural heritage and developing community spirit (Tilden, 1957; Pigram, 1983; Cooper, 1991). BC now joins Mississippi as the only two jurisdictions in North America without a park interpretive program (Vancouver-

Province, 2002). The loss of interpretation will cause a decline in the enjoyment felt by visitors to BC Parks. Environmental degradation, increased fees and enforcement will also be consequences and will further diminish the quality of visits to BC Parks. The sense of community spirit and pride in one's cultural heritage will diminish with the loss of interpretive programs. While these factors are significant, they do not have the same impact on decision makers as economic effects. Loss of revenue to the province should follow as visits to BC Parks decline. BC Parks contributes over half a billion dollars to the provinces GDP and is responsible, directly and indirectly, for the employment of over 9000 person-years (Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection, 2001; Coopers and Lybrand, 1996). Finally, loss of enjoyment, environmental degradation, and loss of revenue are the consequences of removing interpretive programs from BC Parks and will be felt to such a degree that this decision should be re-evaluated.

Interpretation: History and Definition

Interpretation has been occurring for centuries. It can take place when someone writes about their impressions of the natural environment, or when these impressions are passed orally. Around the turn of the century, interpretation began to resemble what it is today as interpreters began to work in closer relation with the recipient and the feature, using a greater range of media (Sharpe, 1994). By World War II it was well established and used as a tool to increase the public awareness of the value of the countryside, townscape and industrial heritage (Cooper, 1991). Freeman Tilden (1967) helped define interpretation and established its six guiding principles. Tilden's definition of interpretation is as follows:

An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.

Tilden's (1967) six principles of interpretation are as follows:

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to children should not be the dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach.

Interpretation in this form has helped provide richer experiences for Park visitors across this continent. It has led to a greater respect for the environment at the site and at home, an increased sense of community spirit, and a strengthened cultural heritage (Tilden, 1957; Pigram, 1983; Cooper, 1991).

Since 1957 and the publication of Tilden's book, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Interpretation has undergone a fundamental change. While its first objective is still providing education to create a more enjoyable visitor experience, interpretation has become an integral part of visitor management. In the context of visitor management, interpretation has joined information and visitor codes as elements of soft management strategies which help reduce or replace hard

management strategies such as physical, regulatory and economic aspects (Pigram, 1983; Cooper, 1991; Orams, 1996; Moscardo, 1999; Kuo, 2002). For example, rather than increasing fees, or limiting access to certain sites with permits, visitors might be persuaded by information purveyed through interpretation to travel to more remote, less used sites.

Interpretation: Essential for enjoyment

In a 1995 Study by BC Parks, 2,926 randomly drawn participants returned a questionnaire which asked many questions regarding the management of BC Parks. When asked what specific services the participants wanted to see in BC Parks, the fourth most desired service was nature educational programs, coming in after the more basic services of trails (1), firewood (2), and showers (3). In fact, seventy four percent of the participants responded that nature educational programs were either essential or desirable (Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks, 1995). Clearly the public places great value on interpretation. As many as 800,000 people took part in interpretive programs through BC Parks last year (Lavoie, 2002). The fact that interpretive programs exist at the park level in all park systems in North America except British Columbia and Mississippi is a testament to their benefit. Despite budget problems in other jurisdictions in North America, interpretation has been judged too vital to eliminate. Not only will regular visitors to BC Parks notice a loss of enjoyment in relation to past visits, first time visitors from within North America, being familiar with interpretive programs in their own park system, will undoubtedly notice they are lacking here.

Interpretation: Environmental Impacts

Perhaps the most important element of interpretation is its ability to change one's attitude towards the environment, which in turn facilitates the development of new behaviors. These

behaviors can minimize the impact to the environment and lead to more effective visitor management strategies. Ian McLellan, Cape Scott area supervisor, explains:

“Interpretation saves us money. If we can stop someone from cutting trees, and feeding squirrels salted nuts then we don’t have to enforce against those behaviors” (I. McLellan, personal interview, May 24, 2002)

Interpreters meeting for the Seventh National Workshop of Interpretation Canada discussed many practical results of interpretation. Interpreters noticed fewer incidents of picnic table vandalism and less damage to vegetation where interpretation was introduced to campsites (Sharpe, 1980). Last year over 40,000 children attended interpretive programs on southern Vancouver Island (Lavoie, 2002) and in 1978 over 32,000 (Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection, 1979). Similar programs have existed all over the province.

The benefits of interpretation are not felt overnight. The respect that the citizens of British Columbia feel towards their parks has taken many years to achieve. Generations have been exposed to interpretation; the desire to protect the environment it instills in people has affected hundreds of thousands in British Columbia. Similarly the problems associated with the loss of interpretation will not be felt immediately though, in many years, there is no doubt BC Parks will face a public with less respect for the natural environment. This public will be more likely to cause damage to the environment through an increase in undesirable behaviors. The costs associated with this change will be great. Increased enforcement will be required to prevent undesirable behaviors and increased maintenance will be required to deal with their after effects. With the overall cuts to the budget of BC Parks at 24 percent with a 31 percent cut to jobs, it is clear that there will be no room for increased enforcement or maintenance. Without the resources needed to prevent the environmental impacts of the loss of interpretation, these impacts will inevitably occur. Unfortunately, the increase in undesirable behaviors effecting the environment will not only occur in BC Parks but the provincial wilderness as a whole.

Environmental degradation contributes to decreased enjoyment.

In 1975, BC Parks was visited by approximately 7.5 million people. In 2000 that number had approached 24 million (Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection, 2002). With the increased use and miss-use of BC Park resources, ecological integrity will suffer even more. This environmental degradation will surely affect the quality of enjoyment felt by visitors to BC Parks.

Without interpretation, BC Parks will be forced to rely on other measures besides enforcement to manage its resources. These measures could include increased fees, the use of permits, or closing popular areas due to overuse. These hard management strategies, used without interpretation and information, have been shown to have many harmful effects (Pigram, 1983; Moscardo, 1999; Orams, 1996; Kuo, 2002) including:

- low level visitor understanding and appreciation
- low level visitor experience and enjoyment
- resource degradation
- inappropriate visitor behavior

Protected areas which have need of regulatory and permit based visitor management strategies due to sensitive resource needs benefit from interpretation by helping visitors understand why such strategies are necessary (Curthoys, 1998). These benefits of interpretation account for its prevalence in the management of parks and protected areas. The loss of interpretation has the potential of creating a spiral effect; decreased enjoyment further leads to inappropriate behavior with environmental damage as the result. With increased environmental damage, BC Parks will need to rely on more hard management strategies which, without information and interpretation, further lead to loss of enjoyment (Figure 1).

Economic Impacts

Ultimately, the decreased enjoyment felt at BC Parks' facilities will result in decreased usage. The decreased use will not, unfortunately, lead to better ecological integrity because of the increased environmental damage done by each visitor. Lower usage will lead to a decrease in revenues for both BC Parks and the communities which exist around the parks. Studies have shown that 90 percent of expenditures on BC Parks come from the spending of park visitors (Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection, 2001; Coopers and Lybrand, 1996). In effect, for every dollar spent on BC Parks by the taxpayer, nine dollars is generated by the public. The studies go on to show that one third of the revenue generated by park visitors was done by out of province residents. Therefore, for every dollar spent on BC Parks by the taxpayers of British Columbia, over three dollars of revenue is generated by out of province residents. Much of this revenue is collected in smaller communities away from southern Vancouver Island and the lower mainland. In fact, 285 million dollars was spent on BC Parks outside these areas in 1999 accounting for five thousand jobs. As resources such as timber, fishing, and mining are exhausted, tourism becomes more and more important in these areas.

Looking at the relationship between the amounts spent on park infrastructure and resulting revenues, it could be argued that through the many benefits of interpretation, it accounts for an even greater rate of return on investment. These benefits are being studied by tourism planners with objectives starting at enhancing the visitor experience and ending with encouraging higher visitor expenditure (Kuo, 2002). A visitor having a richer, more enjoyable experience is likely to spend more money. Studies done by the Ministry of Lands, Parks and Housing (1979) show that visitors attending interpretation programs were mostly families and large groups and tended to camp one extra night. If we take the relationship between the resources spent on BC Parks and the return in revenue established in *Economic Benefits of British Columbia's Provincial Parks* (Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection, 2001; Coopers and Lybrand, 1996) and add

the costs associated with the increased maintenance and enforcement needs, the loss of interpretation from BC Parks results in a very negative financial impact. The loss of interpretation, as well as the overall budget cuts to BC Parks, pose a public image problem of their own. Articles appearing in Seattle newspapers such as *In The Northwest: Action belies image as B.C. cuts its parks* (Connelly, 2002) could have an impact of their own.

“...how can B.C. live up to its billings as a "SuperNatural" destination if visitors find roads washed out and campgrounds closed and trash-covered, and are forced to defecate near the banks of the Skagit?”

Conclusion

The loss of interpretive programs in BC Parks will cause many problems. Visitors to BC Parks will find them more expensive, more regulated and will derive far less enjoyment from them. The parks will suffer environmental degradation with fewer visitors causing more damage. Communities dependent on park visitors for income will suffer as will all residents in British Columbia with the loss of associated tax revenue. Perhaps the worst consequence is the loss of important links interpretation draws between the community, the land, and our cultural identity.

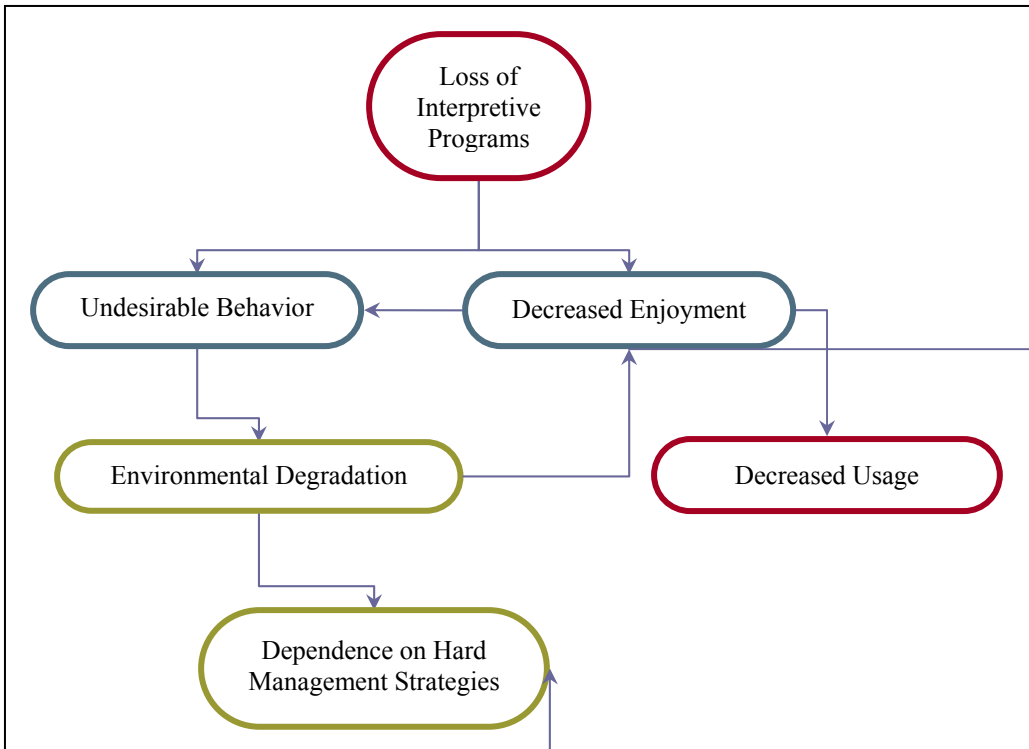


Figure 1. Effects of losing interpretive programs in a park or protected area.

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