



THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF INTERPRETIVE GUIDING IN ENSURING UNDERSTANDING AND CONSERVATION OF SENSITIVE GEOSITES

– Dan Cove

It is an unfortunate reality that an automatic love of the natural world and a desire to see it protected is not instinctive to the majority of individuals. This may seem like a harsh assessment but it is one that is all too often evidenced. It does not suggest that the majority of the population are malicious or desirous of causing harm to the environment, rather that there is no instinctive appreciation of the fragility of one's surrounds and the ease with which they may be irrevocably altered and damaged. Such an appreciation may be reached, indeed it often proves very easy to cultivate, but recognising a need to educate and foster understanding and appreciation in individuals does place an onus on the managers, custodians and guides of significant sites.

Any commitment to conservation requires public support, and this support requires a public that feels a connection to the values of the environment in question. One extremely effective means of achieving this is through well planned and delivered interpretive guiding. The on-site experience can be

the single greatest factor in establishing a long-term connection to both the site and the broader associated environment and therefore the quality of the guide and the guided experience are of enormous importance.

A great number of geosites world wide employ guides, and utilise the concept of the 'guided tour'. Yet the terms 'guide' and 'guiding' are relatively elastic. For some they may be virtually synonymous with tourism at its very worst, and it is certainly true that there are some very poor examples of guides in environmentally based tourist sites. Some guides appear utterly indifferent to their subject matter, others positively distasteful of it. Others deliver dry lectures. Many sound as if they are reciting a script, one which they have performed so often that it has become a chore. However, it is important to focus on the enormous potential inherent in on-site interpretive guiding rather than to focus on the percentage of practitioners who perpetuate these negative stereotypes, a percentage that happily appears to be in general decline. The

positive experience that is achievable is far more true to the literal meaning of the term 'guide', as it involves genuinely providing guidance which is exactly what is required as a first stage in establishing a connection and, ultimately, creating an advocate - the goal of sound interpretive guiding.

'Interpretation' has also been, on occasion, a much maligned term, as again it raises the spectre of lecturing, and suggests that visitors will be subject to a very specific point of view, rather than being allowed to explore their own motivations regarding a site visit. However, this again is an entirely negative focus, and not at all the case when examining interpretive guiding in the truest sense. Interpretive guiding recognises that there are aspects of the experience or attraction that will be foreign and unknown, even unknowable, to visitors without some guidance.

An interpretive guide will accept that every visitor and every group will be different and possess differing motivations, and as such will never guide exactly the same way twice, but will have an underlying framework to a tour consisting of a theme, or a series of themes, aimed at encouraging visitors to explore the many aspects of a site. This is not a one-way process, for genuine interpretive guiding is interactive and responsive, with a necessary skill being the adaptability of the guide and their ability to 'read' each individual and group. Interpretive guiding also aims to convey a message which will not easily be forgotten, and that will lead to the advocacy noted previously. Naturally, the best practitioners of interpretive guiding are frontline advocates themselves.

Guidance does not directly equate to education, although the latter is a component of the former. Science is one extremely important aspect of any geosite, but it is important to remember that it is only one of several aspects that may provide a sense of connection to the site, and that the best way to foster scientific interest is not always to directly attempt to teach science.

The oft-cited argument that understanding is a prerequisite to appreciation is a dangerous one, as it runs the risk of alienation. It is not necessary to fully understand the set of geological processes that go into forming a limestone cave system for a visitor to appreciate the extraordinary beauty of the speleothems. What is important is that values overlap, and that appreciation for a local environment in one fashion, for example aesthetic values, can lead ultimately to acknowledgement of the existence of other values be they scientific, cultural or otherwise, and thus a desire to know more and to explore the site on other levels and, as knowledge and appreciation increase, to conserve and protect this environment.

Here again is the potential of the on-site guide. Just as there is not always the instinctual love and respect for nature that would exist in an ideal world, so to there may not always seem to be an automatic appreciation of science in many visitors.

However, there is frequently an underlying curiosity particularly evident in children who are natural scientists in that they exhibit a great desire to understand the natural world. Unfortunately this desire is often suppressed by adults who scold their children for asking 'silly' questions (often the most thoughtful and hardest to adequately answer).

A guide has the opportunity to encourage and nurture this natural tendency by making science fascinating, relevant, and even fun! When are Earth system processes ever as easy to captivate an audience with, than when one is quite literally surrounded by them? Site guides have an opportunity that is not so readily available in a classroom setting to build a scientific interest on the human inclination to be immediately involved with what can be seen directly in front of you.

From this it follows that one key to successful site interpretation is allowing visitors the opportunity to explore their own motivations rather than imposing a predetermined set of 'topics'. How many reminiscences of 'bad guiding' stem from the simple fact that the guide did not discuss a topic that was of interest of their audience? A good interpretive tour will certainly provide the visitor with a message to take home, and the tour may have central theme but this is a genuine storyline, rather than a 'topic', such as geology. There are a great many potential means of delivering the ultimate take-home message; "*This site is worth conserving*". One initially unlikely sounding example is the "Legends, Mysteries and Ghosts" tour, offered at Jenolan Caves, NSW.

An extremely popular product, the name and theme of the tour attracts a large and generally diverse crowd. The storyline that the guide then runs through the two hour trip underground weaves the history of European exploration with the conservation efforts of the early guides and the enduring belief that visitors 'feel' or even see the ghosts of these early custodians still haunting the caves. However the ultimate message is that these custodians are a watchful presence and why not, as the caves are worth protecting. Hence a conservation message is at the heart of a tour that would initially seem removed from any such concept, and it is a message that has its basis in an emotional connection with visitors.

There is enormous advantage in emotional connection to a site. People may possibly stand up for a cause that they feel a general obligation towards. However they will fight tooth and nail for any cause in which they feel a genuine sense of personal ownership. As stated, this advocacy should be the objective of all good on-site interpretive guides; to turn passive visitors into passionate supporters who would fight should the natural resource be threatened.

The very best science and scientific work lacks potency in the face of public apathy. In order to be effective, science requires popular support even if it is not support for the science itself but for a set of related values. Public understanding and support is

vital to successful long term conservation efforts, and the scientific rationale that underlies these efforts may find its backing in the related aesthetic, historical, cultural or spiritual connection that visitors may have formed with the area to be protected.



Rachael Robinson – guiding in action at Jenolan.

The importance of interpretive guiding is of special relevance to geosite management, as geodiversity has a generally lower popular perception of potential fragility than does biodiversity. At the heart of this is the enduring belief that people, even in large numbers, do not harm geosites because you can't really hurt a rock. "As solid as a rock", "between a rock and a hard place", 'as immovable as a mountain': all our lives we are reminded that rocks are unchanging and unchangeable.

This perception has led to, and continues to lead to, great harm. A geological site may be seen as a far less renewable natural resource than a biological site precisely because of the time involved in its formation processes.

Early tourists souvenired crystal formations from caves confident that they were doing no real harm, yet it will be thousands of years before these areas will regrow. Structures and car-parks are built over catchment areas. Pollutants are allowed to enter aquifers which are out of sight and, therefore, mind. There are problems with perceptions of time and space – geosites are too large and too old, size and age conveys strength and endurance requiring less stewardship. Visitors to limestone caves are often genuinely surprised when asked to refrain from touching calcite formations, as the concept that a person touching a rock is damaging can be a very difficult one to grasp.

Yet again, this is an area where on-site interpretive guiding has the greatest potential for public education through experience. To be able to incorporate the message of the potential fragility of the site into a tour is a significant step in future conservation. If the message is that the site is worth conserving, then there is great weight behind demonstrating examples of past practices, either malicious or simply degradation as a consequence

of ignorance. A skilled interpretive guide can reinforce this point several times in the course of a tour without 'preaching' a message. This will then become knowledge that is transferrable; and this is an important concept. If public understanding and support is vital to successful long term conservation efforts, then the support for one geotourist destination can be harnessed to provide a broader support base for geoconservation efforts. Well planned and delivered interpretive guiding of visitors is a critical element in gaining and maintaining this support.

If a visitor comes to appreciate that one geosite may be subject to human impact, then it is a relatively small leap to apply this to similar sites, and from here to a broader general environmental ethic. This leads to the 'flagship' concept. Just as in biodiversity conservation, flagship species such as the Panda or Humpback Whale are used to generate interest and support for conservation efforts that extend far beyond the original flagship species, so too geodiversity requires its flagship sites; its Grand Canyon, Uluru, Twelve Apostles, Waitomo or Jenolan Caves to name but a few. The value of these sites is that they are relatively well known to a general audience and may already have an emotional resonance in the popular consciousness.

Once again it should be a function of all on-site interpretive guides at these flagship areas to ensure that visitors are aware that the issues that confront their site are not necessarily site-specific, but extend widely to other geosites. This has the dual benefits of raising environmental awareness as well as promoting wider knowledge of less well known sites with the potential trickle-on effect of increased geotourist visitation and consequent appreciation. Of course there is also a commercial element to this equation, as geotourism sites may require high levels of visitation to remain financially viable. Wider appreciation and a positive on-site experience translate to greater return visitation and wider tourist involvement in geosites as a preferred destination type.

Successful interpretive guiding therefore provokes an emotional response in visitors that may not otherwise have arisen, leading to a more profound connection with the site. However, this desired outcome is not easily achieved, as today's guides are in competition with a media saturated 'sound-bite' audience with high expectations of instant gratification. It is easy to overlook just how much harder it is for a site-guide in the early 21st century to achieve an emotional response in their group than would have been the case in the early 20th century.

Visitors to geosites 100 years ago would most likely have been generally infrequent travellers and have had little to no exposure to the experience before them and few preconceptions. As such they required relatively little additional stimulation beyond the attraction itself in order to have a deeply satisfying and enduring experience. Today this is simply not the case.

Today's visitors are more stimulated than ever before, are accustomed to travel, have increasingly higher expectations of their experiences, and are often familiar with the site via print and electronic media well before arrival. They therefore require far more additional stimulation than did last century's visitors in order to achieve the same response and emotional connection.

In environmental interpretation there are a series of keys or 'triggers' that may be utilised by on-site guides to achieve the emotional connection between visitors and a site. One principle trigger is to deliberately confront the visitor with an experience that confounds their expectations, accentuating the difference in their experience to the everyday.

The trend in making geotourist sites ever easier to access should not be at the expense of making the experience seem mundane. In the past there have been quite conscious efforts to suppress the very differences that make a site unique. These have often been well intentioned, even necessary, such as the construction of safe walkways constructed to national safety standards through the middle of a cave system.

Today's visitors generally have expectations of a safe and secure environment also, which overlooks the fact that a cave is not always a safe or secure environment, and that there are enduring cultural connections to caves as places of danger, mystery and magic. Hence, by providing an experience that ensures visitors remain entirely within a comfort zone, we can remove a core motivation for visiting, and a potentially powerful emotional stimulus. An on-site interpretive guide can restore this balance without compromising visitor safety. By presenting a tour that maintains a sense of adventure and discovery, that lets visitors feel that they have been taken out of their comfort zone, the experience becomes a more enduring one.

Interpretation, therefore, requires planning, versatility, an understanding of visitor 'triggers' and can also require a willingness to use technology as a tool to assist in delivery and providing emotional stimuli. The traditional 'guided tour' concept may not be as sufficiently enticing as it once was, and this is a problem. Our guides must work even harder. We must offer an experience that is fresher, more challenging to the visitor and delivers a surprise factor. In reality, we are looking to evoke the same emotional response that guides of the 1880s achieved by simply turning on a single light switch.

This is not to suggest the use of technology as a prop or special effect, rather to acknowledge that there is a necessity for innovation. How to achieve this? At Jenolan we have experimented with our lighting designs, creating lightscapes of great beauty but also lighting that surprises and confronts the visitors, lit to surprise, as well as please the eye leaving visitors a little dazed. Adventure tours continue to grow in popularity, combining the adventure seeking with the more intimate discovery and eco-experience that comes

from leaving the pathways behind. Our guides need to be equipped with increasingly innovative tools to meet these modern challenges, to be ever more flexible in approach and presentation.



Training of new guides is also of an importance once overlooked. It is inadequate to recruit a new guide, present them with the necessary facts and figures and expect them to translate these into a meaningful experience for visitors. If we accept that the on-site experience can be the single greatest factor in establishing a long-term connection to both the site and the broader associated environment, then the quality of the on-site guide is of enormous significance. Training of guides in line with national units of competency, formal assessment programs, mentoring of new guides by suitable experience staff and encouraging self-development and cross training between sites are all elements to be considered by site managers.

At Jenolan Caves our guides regard themselves, quite rightly, as professionals and possess a defined training framework and career path. The result is a team of highly motivated and enthusiastic individuals presenting a quality product.

Interpretive guiding is a craft, and its finest proponents do more than educate or entertain their visitors, they completely alter their perceptions of the site in which they are involved. In the case of geotourism, they leave visitors with an appreciation of the need for conservation and a finer understanding of the potential fragility that may be associated with geodiversity. These guides are the frontline element in any broad effort to create a public that is sympathetic and supportive of conservation and long term protection of sensitive geosites. Their quality and commitment is of the highest importance to long term management.