

REFLECTIONS ON A SINCERE WELCOME

Sasa Kennedy

On a recent trip to the snowfields I had a few experiences that caused me to reflect on what it is that makes a visitor feel welcome to a tourist attraction, natural site or even a restaurant. The first experience, at Thredbo, was extremely negative, when I had to search for the ticket windows, (while laden with heavy ski gear) then waited in a queue that didn't move at all for some time, was moved to another by staff where we were told we were on the wrong queue and then had to wait while a couple of groups discussed the ins and outs of various types of ski lesson before finally getting to the top of the queue and purchasing two single return lift tickets for the exorbitant price of \$32 each. The price, however, wasn't the issue. The issue was that I had lost a rare and precious hour on the snow while waiting, and had been made to feel like a nuisance merely for trying to hand over some money. Nor was I the only unhappy camper in the queue. If the establishment did not think it worth paying another staff member to provide decent service, a well signposted ticket vending machine would have been better than the lacklustre service that was grudgingly supplied.

Contrast this with the scene the following morning. We arrive at Perisher to catch the oversnow vehicle to Charlottes Pass, knowing only that it departs from the Skitube Terminal. Finding it is not a problem, as it is well signposted. We are welcomed and receive an apology for the short wait while the staff assist some other passengers. As we are early we are offered some vacant seats on an earlier departure, which means we will have more time on the snow. The driver chats to us about mutual interests as we drive to the resort. On arrival another staff member greets us and points out where all the facilities are located, then informs us of the special BBQ lunch (with vegetarian options) which is included in our lift ticket. Breakfast is freshly made and good value for money, as is the full day lift ticket (including lunch and oversnow transport) for \$99. Staff smile warmly and are swift to help at all times.

Which resort do you think I'll be visiting next time I have a weekend off and the snow report is looking good? Which one will I recommend to friends and fellow travelers?

So, what is it that makes our visitors feel welcome, how can we best deliver a sincere welcome at our cave sites and how does this affect our sustainability?

Clear signage – to the car park, toilets, ticket office, café and caves – is an excellent start. Visitors do not feel relaxed and welcome if no-one has bothered to consider their likely lack of familiarity with the site. Signs need to be easily read and clearly visible. Faded, chipped or peeling signs are not welcoming. Internationally



At peak times, extra activities keep visitors gainfully occupied and feeling welcome
Photo: Sasa Kennedy

recognizable symbols should be included to assist non-English speaking visitors. Signs will be easily missed if they compete with visual distractions such as a stunning vista, so placement should be carefully considered.

Having adequate staff to meet visitor needs is also crucial to ensuring a guest feels welcome. Keep people waiting too long in a queue without attention, or for a cave tour with nothing to occupy their time, and they will sense they are not your priority. In peak periods such as public holidays, queues and delays can be unavoidable; at these times having a staff member chat to people in the queue to assist in their decision making before they get to the ticket seller can show that you are concerned about their wait (and can shorten it considerably). At a smaller site eye contact and a smile from the ticket seller to those in the queue shows that they are aware of the situation and doing their best. Either way the visitor will sense that their welfare is important to you.

Self-guided walking tracks or cave tours, interpretive signage, a souvenir guide book, an interpretation centre, or a well provisioned café all provide time fillers for those waiting for tours. Most can also be excellent ways of filling in the gaps in the fascinating, but maybe more specialized or peripheral, information that cannot be included in every cave tour. It is important to remember that we each have different ways of learning, so to complement a guided tour, which is largely aural and visual, our supporting interpretation should also be visual and kinetic. Diagrams can go a long way towards clarifying scientific concepts.

Many years ago, when I delivered my first classroom presentation as a guiding student, I spent much time



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Photo: Sasa Kennedy*

preparing it carefully to make sure my information was accurate and (hopefully) interesting. The feedback from my wise teacher was that the information was fine, but I really needed to smile occasionally. She was, of course, quite right. When concentrating and working hard we can unintentionally look quite severe. This can be quite off-putting for visitors and does not convey the welcome we may presume is implied by delivering a well researched and informative tour. To overcome this I had to actually practise, as I felt quite silly smiling at total strangers for no particular reason. Over time it felt more natural. It is crucial that the smile reaches the eyes and not just the mouth. Not only does this look more sincere, but it actually has a physiological effect, increasing our happiness, thus helping to ensure a welcoming demeanour.

Making our tours more personal for visitors also makes them feel more welcome. There are many ways to do this. I like to ask the group, at the start of the tour, whether they have been to any other cave sites; if I have some knowledge of the sites they mention I then use this information to point out similarities and differences between my caves and the sites they have mentioned. If

not, I ask them about the sites as we chat between platforms. The interest this displays in the visitor and the information they have provided encourages them to more freely ask questions and comment on aspects of the information delivered, ensuring a more interactive and personal tour experience.

Scott Melton's excellent paper at the Waitomo conference on the impact of digital photography encouraged me to rethink my attitude to cameras on cave tours. Realising how important photos are to most people these days to validate their experiences, but as a guide also needing to avoid injuries to clients, nuisance to other visitors and delays to tours I now deal with the issue in a way that has proven to be quite effective for me and also more welcoming to visitors. I explain the reasons for limitations, such as not taking pix while moving so as to avoid injury; intersperse the rules with photographic tips, to show I understand their needs and wish to oblige, and invite them to take photos while I am talking, as the most photogenic cave features are usually where we stop to talk. I assure them this is not rude as we all multi-task nowadays. This not only gets a smile back from the group, but it saves a lot of time, as visitors no



*Japanese language tour supervised by a Jenolan Caves guide, Orient Cave
Photo: Sasa Kennedy*

longer feel rude taking pix while I speak and are usually ready to move on when I am. In addition I offer, whenever possible (nearly always), to take photos of them with a pretty background at some stage of the tour. I can get them a nice photo while waiting for groups to move on at bottlenecks, so it does not take much time and they generally seem pleased with the results. As I've helped them, they are often more compliant with the request to avoid blocking tracks when taking pix and I can more easily finish the tour on time. Everybody is happy.

When this tactic proved to be so successful I decided to try extending it. I now tell my groups that not only is it okay to take pictures while I'm talking, but if they aren't interested in the commentary that is fine – enjoy the tour in their own way; I won't be offended. It is, after all, their tour and I am there to help them enjoy it, not the other way around. This doesn't mean I don't care whether they pay attention to my information. The truth is that it is up to me to make it relevant and interesting to them and if I don't why should they listen? The reaction from visitors when I give them control of their own tour is, at first, a sense of disbelief, followed swiftly by genuine smiles, sometimes laughter and a palpable feeling of relaxation settling over the group. They love it and so do

I. The majority of the group members still listen intently to the interpretation and those that don't (often non-English speakers) would not really have been absorbing much anyway.

Overcoming the language barrier, to ensure visitors with little or no English feel welcome takes a bit more effort. En route to the ACKMA AGM in Mulu I visited the Sarawak Cultural Village to learn a little bit about local lifestyles before heading into the wilds of Borneo. I was utterly charmed by their avenue of entry banners. Each silk banner pictured one of the staff members with their hand over their heart, in the Malaysian symbol of a genuine welcome, and each had the simple message "welcome" written in a different language. It may sound a little corny, but it felt sincere. Banners like these are very expensive, and would not be appropriate on the entry to all sites; a simpler, less visually intrusive, idea for a natural site would be a single sign, carefully placed and including the "welcome" message in the languages spoken by all your major visitor groups. Including images of smiling staff sends a strong visual message.

A simple way to welcome non-English speakers is to have multi-language information sheets or audio-guides available. This seems expensive, but can be a one-off translation expense if sheets are designed to be



*Memories to share, Orient Cave
Photo: Sasa Kennedy*

photocopied. Backing this up with interpretation signs that are visually explicit will make the information more accessible to all. Being able to speak a word or two of greeting in a range of languages is another simple way to be inclusive of non-English speakers. Perhaps cave sites could compile a list of such greetings for new guides and ticket sellers, along with all the procedural and interpretative information, to be handed out at induction sessions.

How we react to tour members who may make our job more challenging is a real mark of how welcoming a site is to their visitors – parents with fractious children, people with disabilities and less mobile or elderly visitors often feel unwelcome or a burden. We must do everything possible to accommodate their varying needs in order for them to feel as welcome as every other member of the tour. Empathy is crucial. The guide will set the tone that the rest of the tour group will follow.

Be understanding of the parents with the fractious child; there is no law that says they must stay at home and not annoy other people until their child grows up. The truth is that every child has its less co-operative moments and

it is not a sign of bad parenting or lack of consideration for others when this occurs. Empathize with the parents and acknowledge that we were all young once; if the parents feel less stressed about disturbing the group it may even help settle the child. Parents who do not control their children are less easy to empathize with, but still deserve respectful treatment.

Be patient with the elderly or less mobile; give them easier options where possible, such as perhaps not climbing stairs to a high section of the cave, but make sure they know they are not holding the group up if they wish to be there. Likewise with phobic people; create space around claustrophobic visitors by keeping them near the front or back of the group, check how they are going occasionally and give them fair warning of what to expect. Remember that nearly all of us have some phobia, and be supportive rather than superior.

Be respectful of those with disabilities and be aware that those with intellectual disabilities may understand far more than is apparent. Your visitor may have very high emotional intelligence and will feel any slight just as you would. If unsure about the level of delivery that is appropriate, ask if they understand and, if not, rethink your delivery. Be inclusive.

Remember not to underestimate the abilities of those who have a disability. We recently had an adventure caving participant who had only one arm, so we had a chat and asked him to let us know if he needed assistance at any time so that we could demonstrate different ways of getting through if necessary. At the end of the tour, which he completed with no issues at all, he thanked us sincerely; he had previously booked a tour with Bridgeclimb (Sydney Harbour Bridge) and been refused entry as he could not hold on with both hands! He had explained that he had adapted to having one arm, having been born that way, but they still refused him permission.

Offering visitors the opportunity to comment on your site, via feedback surveys, in a visitor book or on TripAdvisor will indicate that you value their opinions and are always keen to improve your service. This is an excellent departing reminder that when they return the welcome will be just as sincere.

When visitors are made to feel welcome they will be more likely to return, and more likely to recommend your site to others. The counter is also true – if they do not feel welcome they will recommend that friends, relatives and fellow travellers avoid your site. Return visitors and recommended visitors cost a lot less to entice to your site, something which should not be underestimated in these days of so many competing attractions and activities. It is also probable that they will be more likely to assist you in protecting your site if they feel like welcomed guests, rather than cash cows. It all comes back to the triple bottom line; if you wish to have sustainable profits you need to tend to the needs of the environment and of the people, including the visitors. Make sure the welcome you are extending is not only a sincere one but is seen to be a sincere one.