

Interpretation workshop: if you've seen one cave, have you seen them all?

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What happened last time you visited a show cave as a member of the general public? Typically you went on a guided tour. The guide welcomed you to the cave and asked you not to touch anything as the oils in our hands would damage the cave. You were invited to ask questions and to use your camera.

Your guide probably told you the story about how the cave was 'discovered' (i.e. its discovery by Europeans) that the limestone had its origins on the sea floor as well as information on stalactites, stalagmites, columns, straws and other speleothems. You might possibly have heard about helictites and given various reasons for their gravity-defying growth. At some stage the guide would have turned out the lights to show you the cave in darkness. The guide may well have commented on how great the acoustics were in the cave and asked if anyone in the audience wanted to sing. Its unlikely anyone did.

The guide's commentary probably dominated the tour and you might have had to listen to (and laugh at) a profusion of well-used jokes. Certainly there was almost no opportunity for silence, quiet reflection or time to look where you wanted to rather than being shown. While there are exceptions to the general pattern, there is such a common structure to cave tours that the phrase 'you've seen one cave, you've seen them all' is one familiar to many cave guides and one which generally angers them.

But regardless of the sincere and hospitable efforts of guides, for the most part, there is a remarkable uniformity in show cave experiences. This is despite other possibilities and ideas being presented at Ackma conferences and other forums over the past 30 years.

Research by tourism organisations shows today's travelling public are far more discerning and are seeking *experiences*. So how do we deliver different experiences in caves? Guides and managers have a suite of possibilities for differentiating their tours.

Firstly there are a range of options besides the traditional guided tour with a commentary and, secondly, the use of thematic interpretation enables endless possibilities for guided tours with both variety and powerful long-lasting messages.

Not all alternative possibilities will lend themselves to every site, nor should we want them to. Exciting and vibrant cave tourism will host a range of opportunities.

A discussion with guides at Naracoorte Caves in 2006 included the following as alternatives to the standard tour:

- See several caves with one guide so that the same information is not being repeated.
- Photographic tour that focused on giving people time to take photographs rather than commentary.
- Adults only tours of Victoria Fossil Cave (as young children become bored and restless).
- Family focused fossil tours.
- Story telling in Alexandra Cave for children rather than a tour.
- Having 'open cave' at Tantanoola Cave' where people could roam around for as long as they wanted to rather than have a structured tour. (This idea has now become the standard way of experiencing Tantanoola Cave.)
- Children re-enacting the journey of children from the past as they explore Blanche Cave (this was done in January 2007 as part of the Australian Speleological Federation conference).

While those who manage caves and guide tours in them have many opportunities to enjoy caves, the people they guide have very limited opportunities to enjoy these inspiring places. The experience of the visitor is often less than rich, inspiring and memorable. A not

infrequent comment is 'that the guide seemed bored' or 'the cave was boring'.

While there are a range of possibilities for enabling the community to enjoy caves besides the traditional guided tour with a commentary, this tour option will probably remain the way most people experience caves. The remainder of this paper will outline thematic interpretation which enables different tour commentaries to be developed with powerful and memorable messages.

Like most interpretation, cave interpretation usually involves a mix of interesting facts, snippets and stories about the topic, in this case a show cave. The range of topics talked about generally includes:

- speleothems;
- history as a tourist cave;
- development of facilities; and
- management

This type of tour generally evolves from the new guide following a guide who has been at the site for some time with the new guide learning information off the more experienced guide. While guides might be told to 'develop their own tour' the realities of busy schedules and limited training and time to develop tours makes for the style of tour described above. Once a guide has found something that works for them, they are unlikely to alter it.

This is interpretation that 'proceeds without focus or direction, as it were trying to say everything and nothing at the same time' (Ham, 1992)

What makes thematic interpretation different? Instead of going into a cave and saying everything that you know about it, you develop a theme (and eventually several of them).

When people think of themes in relation to caves they often think of topics like history, cave decorations, glaciers, water or cave fauna. In thematic interpretation terms, these are topics not themes, but great themes can be developed from these topics.

An interpretive theme is expressed in a whole sentence. It has a subject, verb and full-stop. It is the point that you want to make about the cave. It's the 'so what, the main idea, the 'big picture'.

In considering the topic 'water' from the above list, there is an endless array of information that could be incorporated into a cave tour. Technical details and interesting words such as phreatic, vadose, aquifers and conduits can be shared with visitors. But what will actually be conveyed to the visitor?

However, if you develop a theme to communicate an idea about the cave to your visitors you will have a whole idea to develop your tour around. So, the topic of water could become:

Water is the artist at work in Marakoopa Cave,

or

Water is the life of the cave.

Likewise other topics in the above list can be developed into powerful and memorable themes such as:

History:

You can be a detective trying to answer questions about what you see in Blanch Cave.

Cave decorations:

Within this cave you will discover some of nature's oldest masterpieces.

Cave fauna:

Hidden amongst the spectacular are the caves secret citizens.

The topic is the subject matter, while the interpretive theme is the message you want to convey to your audience.

With a little effort, themes allow guides and managers to unlock their creativity and have a varied number of tours. The same things won't be said on every tour. While some information can be used for more than one theme, information can be left out if it doesn't support the theme. Visitors are in for a new tour, rather than hear one they've heard before.

While interesting, amazing and mind-blowing facts are easily forgotten, a strong theme will be remembered long after the facts that support it are forgotten.

However, themes don't just happen. They require thought, preparation and creative energy which mean that guides need access to training, resources, paid time to develop their

tours and, perhaps most of all, encouragement to develop thematic tours rather than just repeat the tour they usually give.

As with any interpretation, the development of themes need to consider not just what the mission of the cave reserve managers is, but what visitors are interested in. How much do we know about what visitors want and how much do we attempt to accommodate this when developing tours.

In his paper at Conference No 11, Hamilton-Smith presented the idea that 'the tour program should offer a menu of options—defined and explained just as in a good restaurant menu.' This is rarely done with cave experiences and where it is it is the logistics of the tour like time, steps to climb, admission prices or cave features are noted. If a range of interpretive themes were developed for a particular cave, then the tour program, and cave promotional material such as the internet, could reflect this and visitors could choose a theme which inspired their interest.

While creating variety presents challenges to managers and guides, the rewards are more meaningful cave experiences for visitors and more satisfying and varied options for those who present cave tours.

This presentation preceded a workshop on thematic interpretation which 24 people attended. The participants organised themselves into five groups and each group chose a cave to work with.

The groups then wrote a list of general topics that could be talked about during a tour of that cave. Related topics were then grouped together and a single topic area was selected. The groups then developed an interpretive theme for their selected topic area. Hence, a lot of the topics were disregarded. Having an interpretive theme means that you can immediately leave out material that does not help to communicate that theme.

The groups were asked to write their interpretive themes down so that they were very clear about what their theme was.

The interpretive themes that were developed were:

Water links all the other parts of cave development together.

Walking through an ancient sand dune will blow you away.

Travelling under a galaxy of glowworms is like a journey under the night sky.

Water carves caves in many ways.

Our cave is a gallery of sculptural forms using many tools.

If bats start to disappear from an area you can be sure that something either has—or is about to—go very wrong!

The groups then listed the five or fewer main ideas that they would use to develop their theme on a tour in the selected cave. Why five or fewer main ideas? Ham quote Miller (1956) that human are capable of making sense of 7, plus or minus 2, new and separate ideas at a time. Therefore, as soon as more than five main ideas are introduced some of the audience will be left behind. Once left behind, they will lose attention and switch off.

The five main ideas that the workshop groups developed to support their themes are in the appendix.

In summary, while cave presentations both in Australia and many overseas countries generally follow a similar pattern, there are alternatives available. Firstly, there are a range of possibilities besides the guided tour. Secondly, the use of thematic interpretation means that a variety of tour messages can be developed. The use of interpretive themes means that guides will be talking about different things, and a guide working in just one cave, can have a range of interpretive presentations. There's no reason at all for visitors to feel like 'you've seen one cave, you've seen them all.'

References

Ham, Sam H, *Environmental Interpretation: A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets*, 1992.

Hamilton-Smith, E, *Interpretation: Past and Future*, Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association, Conference 11, Tasmania, 1995

Buchan Caves: Workshop on thematic interpretation

Group1:

General topics for cave tour:

- Bones
- Water
- Limestone
- History
- Flora

Theme developed from these topics:

Water links all the other parts of cave development together.

Five or fewer main ideas to support the theme:

1. Ocean (water) created limestone through:
 - Coral polyps
 - Shells
 - Mud (water and dirt)
2. Rain (water) falls through the sky collecting carbon dioxide, then seeps through the soil collecting more...
3. Streamways conduct water through the cracks and cave passages, e.g.:
 - Meandering passage
 - Scallops
 - Gravels
 - Channels in-cuts
4. Dripping water deposits calcite in many water-like forms, e.g. flow-stone, Frozen Niagara, The Rapids.

Group 2

General topics for cave tour:

- Sand dune
- Water

Theme developed from these topics:

Walking through an ancient sand dune will blow you away.

Five or fewer main ideas to support the theme:

1. Consistency of rock is sand (touch example).
2. Water, wind, sea level changes (use of prop to show water movement through sand and cementing to form limestone).
3. Water flow through dunes and limestone forms caves (white ant building house analogy).
4. Fossils in limestone and layering (sand dunes layers, shells etc).
5. Re-formation of sand beds in cave where stream.

Group 3

General topics for cave tour:

- Glow-worms and darkness
- Glow-worms and habitat
- Glow-worms and water
- Glow-worms and food
- Glow-worms and cultural history

Theme developed from these topics:

Travelling under a galaxy of glow-worms is like a journey under the night sky.

Five or fewer main ideas to support the theme:

1. Culture
2. Habitat and lifestyle
3. Food and fishing
4. Changing times (life cycle)
5. Environmental protection

Group 4

General topics for cave tour:

- Scallops—flow: how fast and direction.
- Whirlpools—flow patterns, time, tool (millstone)
- Solution tubes—structural cracks in materials
- Stylolites
- Pendants

Themes developed from these topics:

Water carves caves in many ways. Our cave is a gallery of sculptural forms using many tools.

Five or fewer main ideas to support the theme:

1. Materials—Types of rocks. Structural elements.
2. Tools—Chemistry, abrasives (gravels and stones), time, bats.
3. Somewhat sensory—sculpture, sound.
4. Active and passive—sculptor looking for opportunities, viewer looking at results.

Group 5

General topic for cave tour:

- Bats

Theme developed from this topic:

If bats start to disappear from an area you can be sure that something either has—or is about to—go very wrong!

Five or fewer main ideas to support the theme:

1. There are many species of bats and two main groups of bats (big and small).
2. Insectivorous bats maintain a natural balance.
3. Without the large bats native forest would decrease, causing a chain of linked extinctions.
4. Threats to bats include clearing, disturbance, illegal shooting, chemicals and aerial spraying.
5. Bats are not blind and don't get stuck in your hair.