

# Thematic Interpretation – adding value to your tours and variety to your day

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## Abstract

To many visitors one cave tour is much like another; the same can be said of many guides.

This paper looks at how karst managers can effectively utilise the principles of thematic interpretation to give their tours a point of difference, raise the standard of guiding at their site and improve job satisfaction for their guiding staff.

In addition the paper will show how by using effective thematic interpretation management can convey a message which will encourage visitors to support them in their conservation endeavours.

The paper will clarify the difference between a guided tour and an interpretive tour; explain the use of themes; give practical examples of interpretive techniques; suggest cost-effective ways to build staff skills and interest; and show how thematic tours can assist you in on-selling your product.

## Introduction

To many visitors one cave tour is much like another; the same can be said of many guides. This paper looks at how karst managers can effectively utilise the principles of thematic interpretation to give their tours a point of difference, raise the standard of guiding at their site and improve job satisfaction for their guiding staff. In addition the paper will show how by using effective thematic interpretation management can convey a message which will encourage visitors to support them in their conservation endeavours.

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On most cave tours as the guide leads the group through the cave they may talk about how the cave and crystal decorations formed;

they will point out and name various formations and talk about how the cave was discovered. In my experience many guides believe the visitors cannot understand, or are not really interested in, the geology, so it is covered in a cursory manner.

A truly interpretive tour is different in that the guide seeks to involve the visitors in the tour and make the site significant to them by developing their understanding of it; the information conveyed is site specific and client specific. The result is that the visitor leaves with a clearer understanding of the site and a memorable message about the site.

To really understand the difference between a guided tour and an interpretive tour it is helpful to go back to the Oxford Dictionary, where interpretation is defined as:

- The act of interpreting
- Proper explanation, hence signification and meaning
- The action of translating

It is the second and third definitions which are useful; explanations must be clear enough that the significance and meaning is conveyed and to do this well we must put ourselves in the role of translator. We must take the language of the cave and put in into words that the visitor can understand. To do this effectively the interpreter must do three things:

- Understand the initial language to be translated
- Use effective translation techniques
- Understand the language being translated to

Language consists of both vocabulary and grammar. When we use scientific and other cave terminology without explaining the meaning of these words we are merely showing off and creating barriers to visitor understanding. When jargon is used the meaning must be explained. This means that the interpreter must themselves have a clear

understanding of the terminology, not always the case when they have picked it up by following other guides on their tours, without additional training and sources of information being available. If we learn a language by listening to a native speaker we will pick up any misunderstandings and mispronunciations they have; likewise if we learn about caves by following only one or two guides.

When we are taught a language we are also taught about the culture that spawned the language. The culture of caves is largely to do with history and science.

Typically guides initially learn of the history of their caves by listening to other guides and management and by reading booklets and other material produced to be sold as souvenirs. Interested guides will also search out early visitor guide books. It is important that access is given to original sources, not just guide books but recounts by early visitors of their experiences and any records that are available, such as records of improvements to infrastructure. Some time spent delving through the records at the local or State Library may prove most interesting. Primary sources are best, but even secondary sources may contain gems of information that have been lost over time.

Local historical societies can provide invaluable information on characters who have played a part in the history of various cave systems. Jenolan Caves is blessed with its own historical society – Jenolan Caves Historical & Preservation Society (JCHAPS) – which many of the guides are active members of. Jenolan also boasts its very own Chat Room on the web, where many questions are raised, discussions held and information aired. While this is a truly outstanding position to be in history wise, local history societies can be found in most areas and should be encouraged to develop files on local cave history. Many people contribute to the history of each system, not just those who made the important discoveries.

The other major facet of cave culture is cave science. Again, this is generally learnt, in the first instance at least, by following guides on their tours and asking questions in the lunch room. This all too often leads to a generic version of cave science being presented during tours, which takes little account of the

audience or of the specifics that set a particular cave apart from all others. Hardly surprising then that many visitors think that once they've seen one cave there is nothing more to discover.

If you are in the lucky position of having scientists, cavers or surveyors interested in studying your cave system encourage them; if there is a lack of interest, make it known that you welcome those who wish to contribute to knowledge of your system. Invite researchers and surveyors to share their findings, maps and knowledge with your staff; try to arrange for guides to be actively involved with any scientific studies taking place in your system. If nothing else it will give them time to look at the cave from a different perspective, without the distraction of keeping an eye on visitors. More likely they will gain a deeper understanding of what they are translating for your visitors.

If at all possible arrange some formal training in cave science for your guides.

Include discussions of current happenings in your cave tours. Visitors love up to date information; it increases their sense of involvement and makes the tour more personal.

The science and history of your karst system is unique; it should not sound just like the science and history of a system in another country.

With a deeper understanding of a cave the messages that the cave conveys become more obvious. These are what we need to communicate to our visitors. Each tour will benefit from having a central theme. A theme is not merely a topic; it is a message that gives your tour coherence. A theme is written as a statement – it can, therefore, be debated. A theme is a message; it may be an environmental message, but could just as easily be an idea that will help to link together the many facets of the tour.

A theme such as:- *A journey through the River Cave is a journey through time* helps to link geological time and historical time into the one story. *From little things big things grow* borrows from the name of a popular song (by Kev Carmody) and will help keep the message in peoples' minds for longer by linking it with a tune they may well be familiar with. It relates

to all facets of the Lucas tour – the formation of the limestone; the formation of the caves and decorations; the discoveries that branched out from one seemingly insignificant crack in the floor; the legal protection of Jenolan and other cave systems; the light shows we can enjoy today from the candlelit tours of the past.

In order to convey a message, we rely on both the sender and the receiver. Your guides are each a unique combination of personal qualities and foibles, experiences and interests. Encourage them to pursue their interests in the cave world and, where appropriate, to share their personal cave stories with your visitors. The aim is not to develop egocentric guides, but to create more personal interpretation for your visitors; to hear stories first hand gives them a real feeling of being close to the action and encourages interaction between guide and visitor.

However, guides each have their own unique weaknesses as well. Even experienced guides can benefit from some formal training in interpretive theory and techniques, even if only to remind them of the range of options available to assist them in getting their message across. Formal training in cave geology can also clarify the very complex science involved in cave development.

Your visitors, too, are each unique. To tailor the translation to them your guides need to get to know them; to understand their lingo and a little of their culture. Chatting to individuals at the meeting place and between interpretive stops will prove invaluable in ensuring that the tour meets the needs of these specific visitors. Factors to consider are where they are from, how long they are staying, what their interests are, what other caves/sites they have visited and why they have come to your site.

There are many techniques which may be utilized to ensure the translation is clear and interesting to your visitors. Some techniques are optional, a few are essential. To begin with the guide should not just be enthusiastic about the cave, but should openly share that enthusiasm. This requires some energy output! The guide must also be knowledgeable on their topic. It is great to acknowledge and utilise the knowledge and experiences of your visitors, but it is not a good look when they have a better understanding of the site than the guide.

Be site specific: discuss what you are observing now, not the shawl you will see later in the tour or the discovery hole that was passed on the way in; talk about how this cave was formed, not how caves in general are formed. While being site specific, it is also important to provide some context:- *When these caves were discovered they were still sending convicts to New South Wales.*

The use of props may be appropriate. Pictures of the early explorers or visitors are useful, as humans are very visual critters and like to relate to other people. A piece of crystal to pass around will dispel the urge to touch the cave and answer the genuine question *Is it soft like wax?* Models or diagrams may be helpful when explaining how the caves formed.

Use of direct quotes can help capture the essence of a different age, for example a reading from a letter detailing the discovery of a cave, or a postcard written by a visitor from an earlier age. Or you could try some living history - stepping into character either with full costume for an entire tour, or a simple hat for a scene or two.

Alternatively you could run an activity instead of a tour: Junior Guides Program, CSI Jenolan, Streamwatch activities or a photographic session. Each allows for different methods of interpretation.

Whatever you decide on you need to involve your visitors. Hands on activities and games; questioning and challenging or adding an element of competition will all focus attention.

In these days of interactive media it is also important to consider how you tell stories; people are used to being active participants, not passive listeners. Instead of saying “The explorers used candles and hemp ropes” try “Imagine going through this tiny hole into complete darkness, relying on just your candle and hemp rope. How do you think you would feel?”

While interpretation needs to be flexible it also benefits from planning and structure. Try to ensure a logical flow from one point to the next. This often requires a bit of thought as a cave is not designed as a neat, succinct narrative. Introduce your theme, build the body of your evidence as you proceed through the cave and remember to conclude by reiterating the major points that have been

covered. Many tours are derailed by a limp ending. “Thanks for coming. I hope you enjoyed your tour” is polite, but hardly memorable!

Begin each interpretive stop with a focusing statement to set the scene. Remember to keep your information clear and relevant for this particular audience. Be succinct. The visitors have come to experience the cave, not to hear the entire sum of your karst knowledge. Finish with a link to the next stop – a clue, something to look for, a question to be answered.

This may all seem much more complicated than the instruction to “Walk and talk”, but it is also far more rewarding for the guide and satisfying for the visitor.

So if this is not happening on your tours what can be done? Firstly, consider how new guides learn their job at your site and what they learn. With each new guide learning from more experienced guides who have come through the same system there is the possibility of a watered down version of the original, containing a variety of Chinese Whispers, to develop as the standard tour. If there is a sameness to the tours at your site, rather than consistency of quality, then perhaps some of the techniques described can help to liven things up.

Fresh ideas and new ways of doing things can develop if you build opportunities for your guides to visit other cave systems. Guide exchanges may work for you. It is also extremely beneficial for guides to observe a range of other interpretive guides in action. Much can be learnt by watching both good and bad guides at work. Try to organise reciprocal freebies with as many organisations as possible.

For an excellent way of keeping your finger to the pulse of what is happening in the world of interpretation (guiding, signage and interpretive displays) join the Interpretation Australia Association. They run excellent workshops and hold great conferences with international speakers.

The final link of the communication (translation) model is the feedback loop. It is important to know if what you are doing is actually working for your visitors, your guides and your organisation. Check with your guides how things are working; ask for their ideas on how to improve things – be prepared to listen. Keep a Visitors’ Feedback Book and record return visitation. Conduct visitor surveys. Be prepared to evaluate, adapt and change.

All this probably seems like a lot of work – and it is. Changing a guiding ethos is more demanding than changing a brochure or a logo, but it is also more meaningful, satisfying and effective in the long run.

Thematic interpretation encourages innovation and development of new product, exactly what economists are telling tourism and recreational businesses they need to do to survive in the current economic climate. You can use thematic interpretation to provide better product differentiation, with the end result that visitors stay longer and have more reason to return. Word of mouth from satisfied clients is ultimately much cheaper and more effective than paid advertising.

The variety that can be introduced via use of a range of interpretive themes eliminates guide boredom and staleness. Enthusiastic delivery by staff improves visitor experience. Applause is good for the ego, making for happier staff and so a pleasant spiral begins.

Improving skill levels also increase job satisfaction. The end result is that you save money on staff recruitment and training.

But perhaps the ultimate benefit to a land manager of using thematic interpretation is that you choose the messages that you want your visitors to take home. They depart with a greater understanding and appreciation of the karst environment. Hopefully they also become advocates for the protection of caves and other geo-heritage.