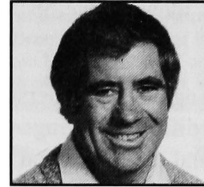


Interpretation in Environmental Education— An Introduction to the Papers in this Issue

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The sub-editorial group which considered the interpretation papers in the following section consisted of Elizabeth Beckmann, who provided the introduction below, Pat Devlin and Stephen Wearing.

Environmental interpretation occurs as part of the educational continuum that ranges from simple awareness-raising sought by promotional activities to the major attitudinal shifts often pursued in environmental lifestyle education. Interpretation has long been seen by natural resource managers and others not only as “an educational activity...to reveal meaning and relationships” (Tilden 1977) but also as a means of creating “a desire to contribute to environmental conservation” (Aldridge 1974). In 1996 how are we using interpretive theory, techniques and programs to contribute towards developing the cutting edge of environmental education?

Earth Education has long provided examples of how interpretive techniques can be incorporated into programs intended for children in the formal education sector. A variety of Earth Education programs have been offered throughout Australia for many years. These have demonstrated the effectiveness of high-quality interpretive and experiential approaches in heightening awareness, improving knowledge gain, and affecting the values and attitudes of participating students. Pat Darlington and Rosemary Black show how, in Kosciusko National Park, “an exciting and successful environmental education program” has been based on two Earth Education programs, Earthkeepers™ and Earth Caretakers™. By providing structured educational programs that emphasise “understanding, feelings and processing” within the natural settings under their control national park management agencies are encouraging the development of the


“environmentally literate citizenry” proposed by Australia’s National Conservation Strategy (Department of Home Affairs and Environment 1982).

Whatever programs we use the different audiences for interpretation affect not only the way we present interpretation but also the way we think about it. The experiential basis of interpretation has been driven by long-established pedagogical theory. For example, the Swiss educator Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) gave one of the earliest pieces of advice to would-be environmental interpreters: “If a bird should sing or an insect should crawl on a leaf, stop your conversation immediately; the bird and insect are teaching...you may keep still” (Downs 1975). But, to ensure continuing effectiveness, practitioners in any field must constantly reassess the theoretical bases of their activities and strategies. Kevin Markwell presents his re-assessment of the theoretical basis for environmental interpretation, and asks us whether we should be moving on from its existing pedagogically traditional basis—which to Kevin seems didactic, knowledge-driven and technique-driven—to an andragogical basis “one which acknowledges the learning characteristics of adults and accentuates the affective domain of learning”. The discussion offers much food for thought and sets a challenge to us all to think about not only what we do but also why we do it that way!

However we carry out interpretation one of the keys is to understand the term ‘environments’ and that they surround us everywhere, wherever we are—not only in the places of our dreams and holidays but also in the places of our daily work and leisure, whether these are windy cities, suburban gardens, local parks, or waste dumps. Christine O’Brien reports two case-studies, related to the themes of blue-

green algae and waste management respectively, that show how carefully planned interpretive techniques can be used effectively in 'less than natural' environments to promote the development of ideas, develop values and change behaviour.

Christine shows once again that understanding the different kinds of audiences in different settings—who they are, why they are there, and what they need and want to know about the relevant topic—is a key to presenting interpretation in a manner that will truly engage people and provoke them into confronting their own values and behaviour.

Without doubt, interpretive techniques are an established part of the educational repertoire of the great majority of environmental educators. Many may not necessarily call what they do 'interpretation' nor have a complete understanding of the theoretical bases of what they do. But actions speak louder than words, and interpreters show themselves in their actions. 

References

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- Downs, R. B. 1975, *Heinrich Pestalozzi: Father of Modern Pedagogy*, Twayne, Boston.
- Department of Home Affairs and Environment 1982, *National Conservation Strategy for Australia: Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development*, AGPS, Canberra.
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Elizabeth Beckmann's PhD was the first in Australia to address significantly the subject of environmental interpretation, using a case-study and evaluative approach to a range of situations including interpretation in Kakadu National Park, ranger-guided walks in Victorian National Parks and the impacts of Earth Education and other interpretive approaches on schoolchildren. She has worked in formal and informal settings in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Recent consultancy work has involved her as a researcher on visitors to heritage sites, and as a professional communicator on issues of science, environment and heritage including the Australian Capital Territory and national State of the Environment reports.

Pat Devlin is Reader in Parks, Recreation and Tourism, in the Department of Human and Leisure Sciences at Lincoln University where he teaches Interpretive Studies and Resource Based Recreation. For twelve years he was a seasonal Ranger Naturalist at Tongariro National Park.

Stephen Wearing lectures at the School of Leisure and Tourism Studies, University of Technology in Sydney. His interests are in environmental and social issues. Stephen's research experience includes work in the areas of urban and regional planning and management, in community development and social sciences and in natural resource management.
