

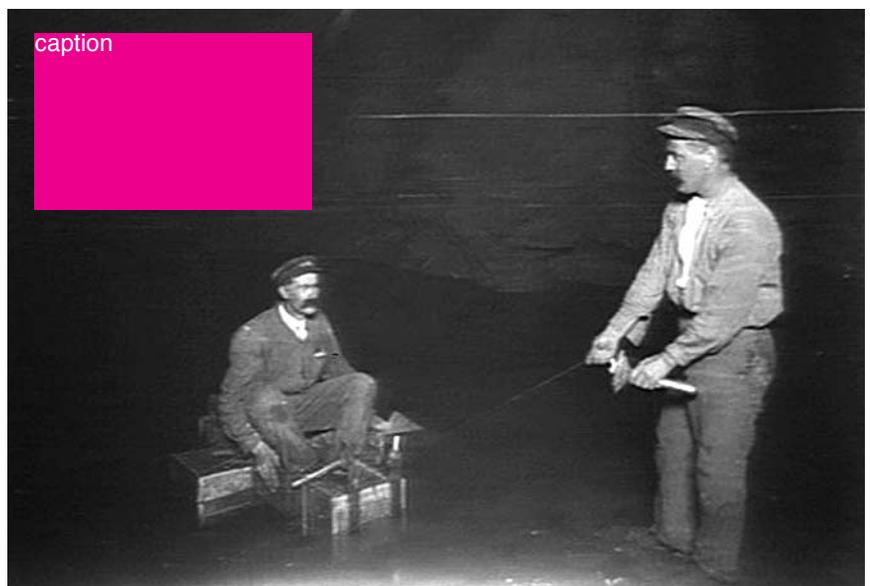
Guided Cave Interpretation

Principles from the Profession

ROSEMARY BLACK &
PENNY DAVIDSON

Cave tourism is an important part of natural area tourism and protected area management. Worldwide, 12 percent of landmass is classified as karst, the landscape in which caves are formed, and in many karst areas, the intriguing and amazing cave decorations, such as stalagmites and stalactites, have led to profitable tourism industries (for example, Mammoth Cave in the USA, Lascaux Cave in France, and Mulu Caves in Borneo). Historically, tour guides have played an important role in the visitor experience of caves: to show the way and ensure visitors didn't get lost, to interpret the site, and as a protector of the cave. From early on, the tour guide's role was to protect the cave from the common behavior of souveniring the limestone decorations, but more recently from harm caused by touching the decorations. Guided cave tours can be for groups as small as one or two, or as large as 120 or more. Guides continue to be an important component of the visitor experience in caves by providing interpretation and an introduction to the cave environment, ensuring the safety and protection of visitors and the environment, and managing the group.

But how do you make caves come alive? What are the key principles of successful guided cave interpretation?



The authors set out to find the answer to this question by exploring the guided cave experience from the cave guide's perspective—specifically seeking the voices of cave guides working in Australian tourist caves.

Our study aimed to identify the key principles of guided cave interpretation used in the field. While we were keen to explore the specific cave environment, we also wanted to hear what cave guides experienced and what guidelines they used to construct an effective guided tour. We facilitated a participatory workshop of 30 cave guides where the guides reflected on what made guided cave interpretation unique and, from their experience, what made successful guided cave interpretation. They had

their own stories of what worked and what didn't and had developed their own criteria for assessing a "successful" guided cave tour.

Principles of Successful Guided Cave Interpretation

Through this participatory process we condensed nine principles of successful guided cave interpretation. Our starting framework were Sam Ham's four principles, which the cave guides affirmed as being valuable and relevant to their experience of cave interpretation. We then explored the experience of the cave guides in further detail and together we added five other principles. These nine principles provide guidelines for a positive and effective guided tour experience from

the perspective of the cave guide and managing organization.

Sam Ham's four qualities for successful interpretation that served as the starting point for the study were:

Principle 1: Interpretation activities should be designed for visitor enjoyment; this principle is sometimes called "entertainment."

Principle 2: Interpretation needs to be both relevant to the audience and to the actual feature being interpreted.

Principle 3: Interpretation must be well-organized so visitors can easily follow what is being presented.

Principle 4: Interpretation should have a key theme or message that has the capacity to tie all the key pieces of information together.

Five additional guided cave interpretation principles emerged from the workshop.

Principle 5: Group Management

A central part of effective interpretation is the guide's interpersonal and group management skills, especially where the audience is captive. The aim of group management is to facilitate rapport between guide and visitors, and between visitor and visitor, as well as ensuring the safety for visitor and site, and increased awareness of the site. In a cave this can be achieved by stringing the group out through a large cave or chamber and letting the visitors wander and discover for themselves, rather than having the group in a tight cluster. The guide can then move freely along the "people string" encouraging, answering, questioning, and managing the entire group unobtrusively.

Emotional management of the group is also important—that is, creating an environment in which the group feels physically and emotionally safe, as well as developing a relationship and rapport with the group. This can be achieved by providing a friendly

demeanor, respecting each group member, taking a relaxed approach to structure and management of the group, and using humor. One example a guide gave was:

To avoid friction between families and visitors without children, it is important to harness the children's energy, enthusiasm, and curiosity. Sending them ahead as "the advance party" or "our fearless leaders" to find the next point of interest is fun for them, frees their carers to concentrate on the cave, and is often greatly appreciated by those without children.



caption

Principle 6: Protection

Tourists and the guide need to be "safe" in the relationship that exists for the brief time of the tour. The group should be physically safe. However, the cave is an environment that holds potential dangers and can also provoke fears and feelings of claustrophobia. Consequently the guide needs skills in preparing the group for the environment they are about to enter, and in reading signs of discomfort or panic. One guide described a satisfying tour they had done as a visitor:

The tour was participatory and the guide made sure the group felt safe. It was well structured and he demonstrated safety and impacts on the cave. The guide can use body language to help facilitate a satisfying experience and build group safety. They can encourage by using emotional language, creating comfort, a different atmosphere, safety, and an expectation and excitement at the beginning of the tour. Safe but exciting.

Principle 7: Two-way Communication

Effective interpretation incorporates an emphasis on a two-way process of interaction and communication. It is equally important to listen to the group as it is to give them something to listen to, not forgetting that listening might be more about body language than words. Guides need to interpret the body language of the audience and be aware of their own body language. This can be achieved by encouraging, asking and answering questions of the group in a way that allows them to be participants, not just an audience. A successful tour feels like a shared experience for both visitors and guides. One guide said, "The guide is part of the tour; they shouldn't be the tour." Another guide described an effective tour:

This tour was special because it provided excellent information in an enthusiastic and question-and-answer style for the whole tour. The guide only spoke briefly, and asked what was of interest to the people. The guide then spoke on what had been requested. Communication can be enhanced when guides fulfill a range of roles: ticket seller, where they talk with visitors and answer pre-tour questions, leading or accompanying tours, and then being available after the tour to answer post-tour questions. Two-way communication can be particularly enhanced when the guide accompanies the tour rather than leads or directs it.

Principle 8: Holistic Approach

The interpretation of caves is similar to other types of environmental interpretation in that each karst feature is connected to environmental and social processes and events outside the immediate area.

Interpretation can provide specific and detailed information about the site, it can also explain how a site connects to the broader ecology, geology, geography, or social aspects of the landscape. This is particularly relevant in the interpretation of caves as the processes that form and influence caves are both above- and below-ground environments. One can't understand the karst environment without understanding these links and connections; that is, a holistic approach is required where a guide connects different parts of the cave system such as the rock formation process (geology) with water movement through above- and below-ground landscapes (hydrology) for the visitor. One guide said:

I like to try to link the above-ground with the underground.... I can talk about the dissolving process on the surface, and the features of rock. That helps people to understand the terrain and that the process starts on the surface. Sometimes a rare bird is associated with a particular plant that lives on the limestone—for example the rock warbler, or we might see possum droppings, or feathers whilst above ground. I point to where we will be inside the hill. “That is where we will be” and sometimes I will do it in the cave. This way, the guide-visitor relationship is starting to evolve before I go into the cave.

Principle 9: Emotion

Providing the visitor with an emotional experience is also key to successful cave interpretation. This can be achieved by promoting the aesthetics of the cave and fostering an emotional experience through deliberate stimulation of all of the senses. While the cave environment



caption

provides many visual delights, it also provides an absence of vision. This is a powerful component of the cave experience and perhaps for this reason the cave tour can be a more aesthetic experience, revealing beauty beyond the visual. Guides can make a conscious effort to move beyond a focus on visual engagement to stimulate other senses for the visitor. For example, the guide can ask the group to be silent and listen, they can control the light and take away vision, and by limiting other sensory stimuli

they can introduce the visitor to the haptic (sense of touch) experience of constant temperature and enclosed spaces. One guide remembers: “A teenager’s response on her first-ever caving trip (after going) back into the cave alone to sit in the darkness ... said to her mother afterwards, ‘I could hear the earth thinking.’”

The guides did not perceive providing an emotional experience as a tool or method of enhancing the tour, but as their core agenda; the guides wanted the experience to be a “feeling” experience: “This is special.... I want you to get right up close and look and enjoy it ... and then I’ll shut up as being silent gives people a chance to experience the cave.”

Some Final Words

The process of seeking cave guides' views and experiences confirmed some of the key principles in successful interpretation, but what also emerged from the voice of the profession was an emphasis and articulation of "emotion" that is not often mentioned in the literature. Effective interpretation provides as much an emotional experience as an intellectual experience; it is able to facilitate wonder, inspiration, mystery, and sense of adventure. This study suggests that the centrality of emotion to guided interpretation is common to all guided experiences, and not exclusive to cave guiding. We suggest that interpretation should go beyond a cognitive focus and emphasize the emotional and sensual aspects of the experience that are relevant to both cave guided interpretation and other guided interpretation.

The shift in emphasis to an emotional experience has implications

on how guides are trained and evaluated and how the industry of tour guiding in general presents itself. For example, guides need skills to facilitate, or make available, an emotional experience for visitors. There are also implications for how the industry evaluates its success and the success of guides. Evaluation of interpretive experiences in the future may place more emphasis on the success of an emotionally stimulating experience, and require a broader range of evaluative tools such as observing the delivery of a tour or testimonials from visitors or peers, rather than relying on exams or other documentation.

For More Information

Davidson, P., and Black, R. S. 2007. Voices from the Profession: Principles of Guided Cave Interpretation. *Journal of Interpretation Research*, 12(2): 25-44.

Ham, S. H. 1992. *Environmental Interpretation: A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets*. Golden, Colorado: North American Press.

Pierssené, A. 1999. *Explaining Our World: An Approach to the Art of Environmental Interpretation*. London: E & FN Spon.

Rosemary Black is a senior lecturer in the School of Environmental Sciences at Charles Sturt University in Australia. She can be reached at rblack@csu.edu.au. Penny Davidson is an adjunct researcher with the Institute for Land, Water and Society. Reach her at pdavidson@csu.edu.au.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR INTERPRETATION
MEDIA AWARDS
2012
WINNER

geckogroup

CLEVELAND METROPARKS ZOO African Elephant Crossing

branding marketing exhibits multimedia environmental

REDEFINING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE WITH INSPIRED INTERPRETATION AND DESIGN.

geckogroup.com | 610-430-0305