

100,000 Beating Bird Hearts: Tourism, Wildlife and Interpretation

Sam H. Ham and Betty Weiler

Professor Ham is Director of the Center for International Training & Outreach, University of Idaho (USA) and Adjunct Professor of Tourism, Dept. of Management, Monash University, Melbourne. Associate Professor Weiler is Deputy Department Head (Tourism), Dept. of Management, Monash University, Melbourne.

Keynote Presentation
First National Conference on Wildlife Tourism in Australia
Hobart, Tasmania, Australia
28-30 October, 2001

ABSTRACT

Interpretation is a necessary centerpiece of wildlife tourism because of its potential to influence tourists' beliefs and actions toward wildlife, and because of its importance in shaping both the nature and quality of tourist experiences. Tourists interact with wildlife, both captive and free-roaming, in a variety of ways--from physical touching at "petting zoos" to close-up or long-distance observation in the field, to vicarious encounters with animals through stories, photographs and videos. Yet in each interaction there is a psychological outcome that is recorded in tourists' minds in the form of "experience," and which is represented in memory as beliefs, attitudes and behavioural intentions related to wildlife. Through these intellectual and emotional pathways, tourists may become satisfied customers and may well develop a commitment to protecting wildlife.

Multiple stakeholders may benefit from effective wildlife interpretation. Visitors are motivated by the enjoyment that wildlife encounters provide. Tourism operators and other entrepreneurs are at least partly motivated by the revenue the encounters provide. Protected area managers get involved largely because of the short- and long-term impacts on wildlife conservation that such encounters may engender. Interpretation, when it is intelligently designed and powerfully delivered, represents a mechanism for addressing the needs of all of these stakeholders.

Tourists, themselves, expect interpretive services as part of the experience they seek and as part of the product they have purchased. Whether they are delivered in the form of self-guided media (such as web sites, field guides, exhibits, brochures and audiovisual programs) or face-to-face services (such as guided tours and overland excursions, talks, and demonstrations), interpretive programs contribute to the intellectual and emotional dimensions of a tourist's encounter with wildlife, and in so doing, they strongly influence the nature of the experience formed in the visitor's mind.

Face-to-face interpretation by a skilled tour guide can be particularly powerful in influencing what visitors think and feel about the wildlife they encounter. In fact, because of its personal nature, guided interpretation may be singularly important in

wildlife tourism. Drawing on research on interpretive tour guiding and a new theory of guiding quality, this presentation illustrates the powerful influence that guided wildlife interpretation may have on tourist experiences and on the development of a wildlife conservation ethic. A comparative case study of two cruise-based tours (one in Alaska and one in the Galapagos Islands of Ecuador) is used to highlight the elements of “quality” in guided wildlife tourism. Attributes that nature-based tourists associate with quality interpretive guiding in Alaska and Galapagos may help to provide a foundation or blueprint for achieving excellence in guided wildlife interpretation. Among these attributes are the guide’s passion, entertainment skills, inferred knowledge, and her/his ability to provide relevant information in the form of “new insights” about wildlife. Implications the case study findings for practice, research and theory are discussed.

Key words: wildlife tourism, interpretation, guiding, tourist behaviour

Pounding Hearts — Tourism, Wildlife and Interpretation

When we were invited to give this presentation, we were specifically asked to address whether interpretation can and does facilitate sustainable wildlife tourism.

In fact, we believe that interpretation is the *centrepiece* of sustainable tourism.

In this presentation we will first define what we mean by *interpretation*, and second, we will explain what we mean by *sustainability*. Then, drawing on research particularly on interpretive tour guiding, we will outline exactly how interpretation is central to sustainability.

1.0 Interpretation

What is meant by “interpretation”? Originally defined by Tilden (1957), interpretation is an educational activity aimed at revealing meanings and relationships to people about the places they visit and the things they see and do there. As we have argued elsewhere, interpretation lies at the heart and soul of what any good tour guide can and should be doing (Weiler and Ham, 2000), whether guiding visitors on land or on water; whether on foot, using non-motorised forms of travel (e.g., canoe, raft, mountain bike or horseback), or vehicle-based tours (e.g., bus, four-wheel drive, riverboat or sea-going vessels), and whether the company or tour is labelled as ecotourism or is part of an adventure, cultural, or heritage product, attraction or resort program.

Interpretation is not just about face-to-face communication by guides, however; it includes non-personal or “static” interpretation such as printed materials, signs, exhibits, self-guided walks, pre-recorded tour commentaries on cassettes or videos, virtual tours, and other electronic media. Many of these interpretive media can be effective in enhancing visitors’ understanding and appreciation of the environments being visited and the various natural and cultural phenomena experienced.

Both Moscardo, Woods and Greenwood's (2000) literature review of visitor-related research on wildlife tourism and Muloin, Zeppel and Higginbottom's (2001) study of indigenous wildlife tourism identify guides as the interpretive method most frequently used in wildlife settings. Other media include interpretive signs, brochures, guidebooks, animal shows and displays, audio-visual presentations and interactive computers. These media are more than just ways to transmit information; what we are arguing here is that these are vehicles or pathways to sustainable tourism.

2.0 Sustainability

The concept of sustainability first appeared on the public scene in the report put out by the World Commission on Environment and Development (better known as the Brundtland Commission), in 1987. The idea of sustainable development is that economic growth and environmental conservation are not only compatible, they're *necessary partners*. We can't have one without the other.

When people talk about *sustainable tourism*, they mean it exactly that way...as a form of tourism that's developed and maintained in a manner and at such a scale that it remains economically viable over an indefinite period and doesn't undermine the physical and human environment that sustains and nurtures it. It needs to be *economically* sustainable, because if tourism isn't profitable then it is a moot question to ask whether it is environmentally sustainable – tourism that is unprofitable and unviable will simply cease to exist.

So, while debate continues among ecologists over the esoteric definition of sustainability, we know that it means “for a long time”, and that it is a good thing.

As might be expected, most of the papers at this conference are focused on ecological sustainability, evident by the dominance of papers in theme 2 (managing environmental impacts) and theme 3 (integrating tourism and conservation). However, when we use the term “sustainable development” we're talking about economic, ecological and cultural

sustainability. So “sustainable development” is taken to mean development that produces ecologically, culturally and economically desirable outcomes over time.

The rest of this presentation takes a look at these dimensions of sustainability, and how interpretation is central to each.

If we first look at *economic sustainability*, there are two main ways that interpretation can facilitate economic sustainability: *first*, by satisfying customer demand, and *second*, by creating local employment.

2.1 How does interpretation help to satisfy customer demand?

According to the recent report by Fredline and Faulkner (2001), one out of every five international visitors surveyed by the Bureau of Tourism Research in 2000 said that their decision to visit Australia was influenced by the opportunity to “experience wildlife.” A key question here is what visitors mean by “*experiencing* wildlife?” For example, to what extent are learning and information seeking important motivations for tourists?

We know that learning and information seeking are important motivations for a lot of tourists...that what goes on between a tourist’s ears is an important part of the experience. And there’s certainly ample evidence now that visitors want accurate, timely and relevant information during their experience. In fact, visitors seek information about the places they visit not only while they’re *on-site*, but also *before* and *after* their visit. And we’re learning that they don’t just seek it, they *expect* it, and they *demand* it as part of the experience they’re trying to have and for which they have *paid*.

In other words, they want to get the right information, in the right way, at the right time, and to the extent that they do this, their experience is more satisfying. Successful tourism businesses know this, and they concentrate as much on developing and delivering interpretive services as they do other aspects of their business.

The experience they deliver to their customers is more satisfying because it's not just a physical experience...it is first and foremost a *mental* one. To the extent that wildlife tourism strives to engender an intellectual and emotional connection between people and places as much as a physical experience with land and water, interpretation is the means by which such links are established.

The "connection" idea is important. It's not a case of filling visitors with endless facts and figures. Something else must be going on.

Researchers are finding increasing evidence that visitors expect not just information, but interpretation, as part of their wildlife experiences and that, for many, high quality interpretation is a major contributor to their satisfaction. We know from our own research on tourists' perceptions of quality guiding that the best interpretation engages the visitor both intellectually and emotionally and that it is personal, relevant and meaningful for them.

Certainly research on other forms of tourism has found that powerful interpretation creates satisfied customers, and satisfied customers create positive word-of-mouth advertising and repeat visitation, all of which contribute to economic sustainability. And we've heard over and over from tourists in our own research how important their guides are to their experience.

Is interpretation really an integral part of all wildlife tourism? There's mounting evidence that interpretation enhances the experience, and that like most nature-based tourists, even very educated, well-travelled and highly experienced wildlife tourists seek out and appreciate quality interpretation. But generally we still don't know a lot about how different market segments respond to interpretive options...for example, in terms of how they choose tours or their satisfaction with different kinds of interpretive offerings.

Some visitors may indeed associate the value of their tour experience largely with the quality of the interpretation they anticipate receiving. If this is true, then these market

segments would be expected to (1) select tours according to their interpretive interests, (2) be more satisfied with tours that offer interpretation directed to their interests, and (3) be willing to pay more for such tours than they would be willing to pay for more general tour offerings.

If these relationships can be substantiated through research, travel operators would be able to apply this knowledge to their tour products in several ways. First, they would be able to make more informed decisions about the interpretive products they market and sell, essentially diversifying their products by matching interpretive offerings to their clients' tour selection criteria. Second, they would be able to direct human and financial resources more strategically to developing and improving interpretive products that are known to produce satisfied customers and potential future spokespersons for the tour company. And third, they would be able exercise more creativity in pricing their tour options according their clients'

2.2 How does interpretation contribute to creating local employment?

This is an issue looked at in Muloin et al's (2001) study of indigenous wildlife tourism in Australia. They suggest that involvement of indigenous people as guides and interpreters adds a unique and authentic element to the wildlife tourism experience that is valued by many tourists and adds depth to visitors' understanding of wildlife.

People with local knowledge, and with a passion for the place in which they have grown up and come to love, have the two essential ingredients that make the best interpretive guides: they are knowledgeable, and they are passionate. We will talk about these two qualities, knowledge and passion, a little later when we talk about our research on quality tour guiding.

Training and employing local people as guides and interpreters represents an important sustainable development strategy because it produces a type of employment that is based on, and even demands, an unspoiled environment. If you are employed in the industry, then the economic value of protecting it is compelling for you. So training and

employing locals as interpretive guides not only provides satisfied customers, but it provides satisfied locals who become important allies in the protection of both the natural and the cultural environments that form the basis of the wildlife tourism industry.

3.0 How interpretation facilitates ecological and cultural sustainability

We turn now to interpretation's role in *environmental sustainability*. *First*, in wildlife tourism, interpretation acts as an on-site regulator of visitor behaviour. It is a key strategy for achieving one of the conference themes, that of "managing environmental impacts". *Second*, interpretation influences not only what people know and do on-site, but potentially what visitors come to believe about the area, about the importance of the resources being protected and the strategies being used to protect them, and even about conservation globally. So interpretation is also a key strategy for achieving the second conference theme "integrating tourism and conservation".

3.1 Interpretation's role in minimising or managing impacts by regulating visitor behaviour

In attempting to develop a conceptual framework for wildlife tourism, Reynolds and Braithwaite (2001) discuss several strategies for controlling visitors, particularly in the context of tourist interactions with wildlife. Beyond the physical strategies (such as regulating group size and access) that have dominated management to date, they invoke the idea of "intellectual control", which they describe as the use of a tour guide and other interpretive mechanisms to transmit knowledge and at the same time influence on-site visitor behaviour.

Interpretation has, of course, been used for decades by agencies such as the Canadian Parks Service and several land management agencies in the US for precisely this purpose. More recently, the US National Park Service has implemented a sophisticated interpretive planning processes aimed at informing decisions such as which audiences will be targeted by which interpretive media to communicate a range of strategic messages...or themes, aimed specifically at influencing visitor behaviour. In fact, in Australia, Parks Victoria is embarking on a very similar planning process now.

These strategic interpretive planning strategies are underpinned by two related theories of human behaviour...the theory of reasoned action and the theory of planned behaviour. Twenty five years of research based on these two theories have confirmed this about human behaviour:

1. we act in accordance with, that is, we behave in ways that are *consistent with* our attitudes and,
2. that our attitudes are consistent with our *beliefs*.

Although relationships between beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are a little more complex than this, the main implication is that if you want to influence how a person feels and acts toward a thing, you need to influence what they *believe* about it. When interpretation is designed and delivered to influence a tourist's beliefs about an animal, an animal's habitat or concept like "respecting" or "protecting" that animal or its habitat, it can have its most profound impacts.

This is a different strategy than, say, just filling an allotted time period with cool facts about wildlife. It's more strategic, more purposeful, in the sense that it's aimed at a known desired outcome. This is thematic interpretation: the idea of communicating beliefs in an effort to strategically influence attitudes and ultimately behaviours. Any theme expresses a belief about something. So, whether it's a guide's commentary, an exhibit text, or a web site, if you've designed and delivered it to plant a theme between a tourist's ears, you've done something far more important than just entertaining the tourist with cool wildlife facts. You've implanted the foundation of a new belief related to a desired behavioural outcome. Of course, this too should be done in a very fun and entertaining way (because tourists want to have fun), but it's just that the entertainment can't be the end in itself. Getting the theme across *is*, as illustrated here by Ham and colleagues' research aimed at influencing visitor behaviour in Yosemite National Park.

So far, the approach in protected areas in Australia has been a little less strategic but nonetheless a lot of resources have gone into using interpretation as a way of controlling and regulating visitor behaviour, all in the interests of minimising negative impacts and facilitating sustainability.

The involvement of the commercial sector in controlling visitor behaviour has been more recent and much less strategic. However, park management agencies are well aware that interpretation has been largely taken out of their hands by government cut-backs and privatisation, and are increasingly keen to “use” the commercial sector for communicating minimal impact messages, managing visitor behaviour and role modelling appropriate practices at least while visiting national parks.

Here in Australia, this can be illustrated by research being undertaken by Armstrong and Weiler in cooperation with Parks Victoria and the Victoria Tourism Operators Association. This is a CRC-funded study critically evaluating the interpretive messages and communication strategies being used by commercial operators, and examining strategies for more effective use of interpretation as a park management tool.

3.2 Interpretation as a vehicle for influencing long-term conservation

We said earlier that interpretation can influence not only what people know and do on-site, but potentially what visitors come to believe about the area, about the importance of the resources being protected and the strategies being used to protect them, and even about conservation globally. There’s some evidence that high-quality interpretation contributes to more positive attitudes towards wildlife conservation. This is illustrated in Ham’s work developing a fund-raising campaign for Lindblad Expeditions and the Charles Darwin Foundation.

Knowing what constitutes “high quality interpretation” is important. As part of a wider study, we’ve been analysing responses from tourists about the qualities they consider most essential in their guides. Our research focused on shore excursion guides as part of nature-based cruises in Alaska and the Galapagos Islands.

What we found is that the guide's passion, their ability to entertain, and their ability to provide new insights were the three most common qualities passengers associated with the best guides. And, of course, those qualities are consistent with a lot of other research that's been done on effective interpretation and guiding the past three decades or so.

Although the guide's knowledge was mentioned by most passengers as an important quality, these results tell us that it isn't the raw amount of information transferred to tourists that's important. Far beyond the technical information a tourist gets, it's *how* the guide presents it and what she or he *does* with it that make the biggest difference in the quality of interpretation. And, of course, our results so far apply only to guided, face-to-face interpretation, and so it seems important that research should continue trying to ferret out the dimensions of quality in other forms of interpretation as well.

One of the important things to remember about interpretation is that although it involves learning and the transfer of information to visitors, it isn't "teaching" or some autonomous information function. It's wrapped up in a larger experience that based on expectations for fun and value for money.

So even though access to timely and compelling information is central to just about any tourist's experience, it all has to be designed and orchestrated to match or fit in to that larger experience. In this sense, the form and character of interpretation a tour company offers can distinguish it from other companies—in other words, interpretive services may be part of a company's competitive advantage. And indeed you can see this taking place if you look at the sheer number of and types of different tours that are offered out there and the different markets they target.

So there's a lot more we need to understand about interpretation's role in sustainable tourism. We've highlighted some evidence that suggests that, strategically packaged and creatively delivered, interpretation can contribute to sustainable wildlife tourism by satisfying customer demand for information, creating opportunities for local employment,

reducing impacts on wildlife resources, and promoting in tourists a conservation ethic that may extend well beyond their on-site experience.

Through the well-documented “sleeper effect” process, a day spent observing or thinking about wild animals, whether free-roaming or captive, can theoretically turn into something much bigger in the form of new beliefs implanted in a tourist’s psyche. That, of course, depends on the themes the tourist leaves with and the kind of reinforcement she or he experiences in the coming days and weeks. But it *can* happen. That’s both the premise and promise of interpretation in sustainable wildlife tourism. Done well, it’s simultaneously both an expected and demanded tourism service and a strategic communication medium.

And at its best, interpretation will inspire tourists and give them insights into things that will literally make their hearts pound. And pounding people hearts may well lie at the root of sustainable wildlife tourism.

References

- Brundtland, H-G. (1987) *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*. UNESCO.
- Fredline, E. and Faulkner, W. (2001) *International Market Analysis of Wildlife Tourism*. Wildlife Tourism Research Report Series, Gold Coast, CRC for Sustainable Tourism.
- Moscardo, G.; Woods, B.; Greenwood, T. (2000) *Understanding Visitor Perspectives on Wildlife Tourism*. Wildlife Tourism Research Report Series: No 2, Gold Coast, CRC for Sustainable Tourism.
- Muloin, S.; Zeppel, H.; Higginbottom, K. (2001) *Indigenous Wildlife Tourism in Australia*. Wildlife Tourism Research Report Series: No 15, Gold Coast, CRC for Sustainable Tourism.
- Reynolds, P. and Braithwaite, D. (2001) Towards a conceptual framework for wildlife tourism. *Tourism Management* 22: 31-42.
- Tilden, F. (1957). *Interpreting Our Heritage*. Chapel Hill, NC, USA: University of North Carolina Press.
- Weiler, B. and Ham, S. H. (2000) Tour Guides and Interpretation in Ecotourism. Chapter 35 in Weaver, D. (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Ecotourism*. Wallingford, UK: CABI Publishing.