



Inklings

Bulletin of Interpretive Ideas

June 2002 Volume 2, Issue 2

Current/Recent Project List

- Interpretive Panel Design, Clinch Park Zoo, Traverse City, MI
- Interpretive Plan, Bluhm County Park, LaPorte, IN
- Mastodon Exhibit Design, Celery Bog Nature Center, W. Lafayette Parks and Recreation, W. Lafayette, IN
- Interpretive Training, Bloomington Parks and Recreation, Bloomington, IN
- Interpretive Panel Design, Turkey Run State Park, Marshall, IN
- Interpretive Panel Design, LaPorte County Parks, LaPorte, IN

Exhibits: Letting the Theme Tell the Story

When planning an exhibit hall, it is important to first answer the questions: What makes the site unique? Why is it important? Why should a visitor care? The answers to these questions are the foundation of the interpretive theme. This theme provides the story of the site, and is the anchor for all of the exhibits.



Cape Henlopen, Delaware

For example, a site's interpretive theme might be: The Pineland Barrier Island is always physically changing. What do people need to know to appreciate and understand this theme? What are the natural and human-caused influences that change the island? The first exhibit to greet visitors would be a statement of this theme and an invitation to learn more.

To understand this theme, visitors may first need to know how the island formed. When the oceans were lower, the island was once part of the mainland. Its becoming an island was the first

change. This is the second exhibit.

What other factors influence change? Wind, wave action, pioneer vegetation, residences along the coast? Each one of these changes supports the theme, and warrants an exhibit. *(continued next page)*

Traffic Flow: Guiding Visitors Through Exhibits

When reading a book, we start at the beginning, and follow it through page by page to the end. To effectively tell a story through exhibits, visitors need to encounter exhibits in the order intended. Exhibit location and placement is critical to guiding visitors sequentially through the story.

A trail is always more interesting if it has some curves. The curves create an anticipation for what's coming up around the next bend. In a similar vein, the physical placement of exhibits can be used to create the anticipation for the next exhibit. Exhibits can be used to block the view of the next exhibit, and

divert the visitor in the proper direction (see figure).

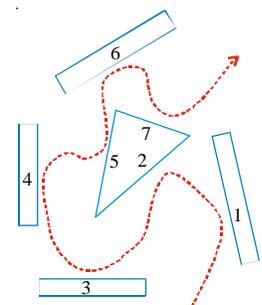


Exhibit placement can guide visitors through the exhibits.



This exhibit sticks with the prairie theme, and also diverts traffic in the intended direction. (Neal Smith NWR, Iowa)

When visitors see the entire exhibit hall at a glance, there is a tendency to get stimulus overload. It is more difficult to focus on one exhibit because of the distraction of others. By creating a traffic flow, visitors slow down, and are encouraged to stop and read the story page by page.

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These exhibits are the plot development of the story.

The final exhibit, the story's conclusion, should summarize your theme, provide visitors with an opportunity to learn more, and also provide an avenue for involvement. Involvement could be attending programs, becoming a volunteer, or joining a "Friends" group.

By anchoring exhibits to an interpretive theme, an agency has a wonderful opportunity to use exhibits to enhance a visitor's experience, increase appreciation for the site's significance, and create new advocates.

Interactive Exhibits: Keeping a Tool From Becoming a Toy

Many times I have heard "This is our favorite nature center. Our children really enjoy the interactive exhibits." I watched as the children ran from exhibit to exhibit, pushing buttons, lifting doors, turning knobs. The average time spent at each exhibit was under 20 seconds, far less time than it took to understand the exhibit concept. The children were enjoying the manipulative aspect of the exhibits. The exhibit, however, was failing to meet its objectives.

Interactive exhibits are wonderful for reinforcing a concept. By adding an additional level of involvement, the potential for learning is enormous. The key is that it is an "additional" level. Visitors need to understand the exhibit concept for the interactive component to work. Text labels, a staff person, or other method need to communicate the concept.

Seeing the light flash on an exhibit, means that the technology of the exhibit is working. Seeing the light go on in a child's mind means that the interactive component is working.

The key to making an interactive exhibit work is to slow people down. One way is by placing the exhibit out of view of other exhibits (see related article). This reduces the distraction of other exhibits. People are more likely to invest the time in reading the text labels associated with the interactive portion.

Another method of slowing people down, is to have staff or docents present to explain the exhibits. This has been

effectively used in childrens museums, which generally have a high number of interactive exhibits. The docent explains the concept before the visitor interacts with the exhibit.

Seeing the light flash on an exhibit, means that the technology of the exhibit is working. Seeing the light go on in a child's mind means that the interactive component is working. It is important to distinguish the difference.



An adult can help a child understand the concept of pollination that is creatively reinforced by this interactive element. (Kalamazoo Nature Center, Michigan)