



Inklings

Bulletin of Interpretive Ideas

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Interpretation as a Management Tool

“Why are my tax dollars going to build a dam on a dry riverbed?” That was a commonly asked question at the Corps of Engineer’s Mt. Morris Dam in upstate New York. The Mt. Morris Dam, on the



Mt. Morris Dam

Genesee River, is 215' tall. During much of the year, the river quietly flows through the dam’s open gates. As opposed to a dam built to create a reservoir, Mt. Morris was a *dry dam*, used strictly for flood control.

When the winter snows melts rapidly, the Genesee River canyon becomes a torrent. With steep canyon walls, there is no flood plain. The water rushes out of the canyon, inundating communities downstream. These events led to authorizing the building of the dam in 1945. The dam was put to the test in 1972, when Hurricane Agnes dumped 14" of rain in the Genesee watershed. The “dry

dam” reservoir filled to 96% of its capacity. The water stopped rising 4' from the dam’s top.

When *Interpretive Ideas* was asked to develop an exhibit plan for the Mt. Morris Information Center, its first task was to focus on the main story of the site. While facilitating staff planning sessions, it became obvious that, while there were many nice features to the property, the

reason the site existed was the dam. In addition to focusing on the impressive engineering structure, staff wanted the public to understand the role of the dam in flood control.

The exhibit flow started by explaining the history of flooding in the region, leading to the decision to build the dam. Construction of the dam, physical aspects, and how the gates work made up the next set of exhibits. The next exhibit focused on Hurricane Agnes. The last series of exhibits covered management of the dam, the amount of land and dollars saved, and the future of the dam.

By telling the story of the Mt. Morris dam through interpretive exhibits, *Interpretive Ideas* explained the Corps’ mission in managing the dam. An (*continued next page*)

Current/Recent Project List

- Exhibit Design and Exhibit Labels, Clinch Park Zoo, Traverse City, MI
- Exhibit Design, Spring Mill State Park, Mitchell, IN
- Interpretive Panel Design, Celery Bog, W. Lafayette, IN
- Trail Plan, Touch the Earth Preserve, Columbus, IN
- Trail Plan, Latimer Woods, Bloomington, IN

Interpretation, done early in the process, can soften the impact by explaining the factors leading to the decision . . .

Sign Tip: Using Text as Captions

Large blocks of text can be intimidating to readers. By breaking up your text into captions, the same amount of text becomes more reader friendly.



Recently completed sign by **Interpretive Ideas** at Thomson Park, Bloomington, Indiana

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educated public is more supportive of the Corps' presence.

Interpretation has long been used as a management tool in a variety of situations:

1. Communicating Management Decisions. Nuisance wildlife removal? Controlled burns? Managers have to make difficult decisions. Part of the difficulty comes from public perception of the decision. Interpretation, incorporated early in the decision process, can soften the decision's impact. Explaining the factors leading to the decision, and the alternatives that were considered can make decisions less controversial.

Interpretive programs or hikes to affected sites can reach targeted audiences. Publications or exhibits can reach the general public.

2. Protecting Visitors. How can poison ivy be identified? Why is a rip tide dangerous? How can a campsite be protected from bears? Interpretation can ensure that visitors will have a safe visit. By using analogies, comparisons, and examples, interpretation communicates the information needed to protect users.

3. Protecting the Site. Is there an endangered species nesting on the property? Is the public overusing a fragile area? Has an archaeological site been repeatedly vandalized?

Interpretation, by being site specific, attaches people to the site. People who appreciate the significance of a place, whether natural or historical, are more likely to protect it. A "Do Not Enter" sign is replaced by a panel that explains how bald eagles have made a comeback and how wonderful it is that this site now has nesting eagles.

Incorporating interpretation into management strategies leads to a more supportive constituency. Costs from lawsuits, bad publicity, lost time, and vandalism can be minimized. The agency can be productive and enjoy public support.

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