

INTERPRETATION IN CAVE TOURISM – A LITTLE UTILISED MANAGEMENT TOOL

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Abstract: Show caves are tourist attractions, thus host visitors. But are guided tours only a business activity, an opportunity for visitors to spend their free time, or can it be considered a management tool building on management–visitor interaction? While this paper does not deny the previous characteristics, it argues that through interpretation site managers can, in fact, influence their audiences and work towards their management goals. A case study research carried out at the World Heritage caves of the Aggtelek Karst gives factual evidence to support this theory.

Key words: interpretation, management, knowledge, attitude, visitor, heritage, cave

THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO INTERPRETATION AT SHOW CAVES

The central service at each show cave is the cave tour (guided or self-guided) by nature, often paired with further interpretive efforts, such as visitor centre, print or electronic publications, lectures. But, in fact, some of the memorabilia sold in the souvenir shops and the built environment can reflect the given place (Carter 2001), too. The motivations of managers can vary to some extent, but by conscious interpretive activities they are likely to achieve those management goals that are related to visitors.

Before actually talking about the management nature of guided tours (and other interpretive activities) at show caves, it is quite necessary to ask some fundamental questions.

Why interpret?

What is interpretation?

To answer the first question, remember a site you visited for the very first time. Besides the first impression, maybe aesthetic experience and some fragmented information, you were unlikely to know the real story of the place, its relevance and broader context. And most cave visitors are first time visitors to a particular cave.

But to answer this question it is also necessary to examine the participants of the situa-

tion. Beyond the obvious, the cave itself, there are two major players, i.e. the visitor and the interpreter. Visitors, however, are quite diverse, and they all bring their knowledge, personality, agendas, mood, etc. to an interpretive situation and they have different motivations for visiting the cave (Beck & Cable 1998).

The interpreter, on the other hand wants to educate the public, and communicate a message. Also different management objectives are meant to be achieved by providing interpretive services. (In this context to enhance conservation ethic should be one at show caves.)

This leads us to the question: “What is interpretation?” There are several established definitions (Tilden 1967, Interpretation Canada n.d. cited in Capital Regional District Parks 2003, Association for Heritage Interpretation n.d., National Association of Interpretation n.d., Scottish Interpretation Network n.d.) for that, but they all have something in common. They all state that it is a communication process between visitors and interpreters, and that it reveals meaning of and enhances appreciation towards the site (Beck & Cable 1998). When asking “What is interpretation?” it should also be clear what it is not. As already Tilden (1967) stated, it is definitely not only facts and figures, but rather to tell a story. Some might not think of it as a kind of science, but to do it at its best, interpreters should obey some basic rules, in which some

academic principles are well worth considering.

The communication/interaction quality of interpretation is the key why it is also a management tool. Managers/interpreters may consider visitors merely sources and causes of problems (such as whose physiological needs have to be satisfied, who potentially damage the site, etc.), but taking a different view point one should realize that they are in fact free choice learners (Ham 1992) who come to the cave voluntarily and usually are quite open to hear something new and interesting, while experiencing something unique, and if they are satisfied with the service they receive, they spread the word. Managers, in fact have different tools to manage the public, and while legal leverages and physical barriers are necessary, as Beaumont (2001) argues it is interpretation through which a win-win situation can be achieved.

THE LEARNING CYCLE

While we take our visitors on a guided tour or provide a book or DVD on the cave, we actually take our audience on an intellectual journey. In the theory of reasoned action by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) attitude is argued to be a key to behaviour. Thus it is commonly accepted today that to achieve favourable, even pro-active behaviour of the audience we need to shape their attitude, and as a prerequisite, their knowledge. In practice, by tapping into visitors' belief systems and knowledge structures interpreters can create a situation of cognitive dissonance that can be a powerful tool to shape people's thinking and attitude (Orams 1995: 88) therefore their behaviour. In Moscardo's (Moscardo *et al.* 1996, Moscardo 2004) opinion we should transform our visitors into 'mindful' visitors. Figure 1 expresses the above theories with the addition that from the linear knowledge-attitude-behaviour process, by adding learning a cycle can be formed.

However, it is equally important to understand this figure not only from the visitor-manager, but also from the manger-visitor perspective. By that it is meant that if managers are willing to learn about their visitors it can greatly influence their attitude towards the



Fig. 1. The Interpretation Cycle should be considered a mutual process in the visitor-manager relationship.

public and their management behaviour. This again supports the communication nature of interpretation.

CASE STUDY

As a pragmatic example for the above theories, the results concerning the knowledge-attitude relationship of a specific research project is presented here. The interpretive practices at the World Heritage caves of the Aggtelek Karst Hungary were appraised in a study (2009-2010) (Tolnay 2010), which included the investigation of various aspects from planning to implementation, from the analysis of interpretive management to visitor studies. In order to gain the best insight in the complex issues, different methods were used, among them a visitor questionnaire survey.

The visitor questionnaire survey

The questionnaire was structured around five issues, i.e. (a) visitor profile and audience groups segmentation in terms of demographic and social characteristics, (b) prior knowledge, motivation (Graefe *et al.* 2000; Packer & Ballantyne 2002; Black 2005; Briseño-Garzón *et al.* 2007) and interest (Black 2005), (c) visitor opinion and satisfaction outside the cave visit (Puczko & Rätz 2000), (d) visitor opinion and satisfaction during the cave visit phase and other interpretive provisions (Puczko & Rätz 2000), (e) visitors' perception

on the 'sense of the place' (Stewart & Kirby 1998; Carter 2001), as a complex of cognitive and attitude issues.

Although the questionnaire was based on closed questions, visitors were offered the opportunity to express their opinions in their own words, as they were asked in sections (c) and (d) what their best and worst experiences were. The closed questions resulted in nominal and scale variables. The scale variables were derived from a 5-grade Likert-scale, where value 1 stood for fully disagree/fully dissatisfied, and value 5 for fully agree/fully satisfied.

Questionnaires were filled out pre- and post cave visit, by different participants to eliminate research bias in this respect (Tubb 2003). This also allowed for analyses of the effectiveness of the cave tour guiding from three aspects, knowledge, attitude and sense of the place. Sense of place is a new quality formed by a combination of the knowledge and attitude.

The 'typical visitor'

Although there is no such thing as a 'typical visitor' (Carter 2001, Black 2005) the survey result showed that overwhelmingly the visitors were Hungarians i.e. domestic (90 %) visiting for the first (36 %) or at most the second (38 %) time, and travelled from a considerable distance (71 %) from over 200 kilometres, despite the fact that they spent less than one day at the site or in the area (81 %). They were in their active years (between 18 and 55) (84 %), and had a minimum of a secondary level education qualification (90 %). There were different motivations for visiting the site but recreational activity paired with an interest in nature was the prime motive (78 %). The occasion was a family excursion (74 %) using the family car as the principle mode of transportation (95 %). Visitors use more than one source of information to prepare for their visit and the internet was the most important resource (54 %). A relatively high proportion of visitors did not search for any preliminary information (24 %). This can partly be explained by the repeat visits and by some awareness of the site within society.

Testing knowledge gain

There are different aspects of knowledge. It can mean familiarity with and knowing about the existence of something. In this respect 77 % of visitors thought it was a well-known place.

However, lexical knowledge and its increase is a different dimension and can indicate how successfully the message is delivered. One question asked the visitors if they were aware of the World Heritage designation of the caves, as this fact is clearly communicated during the guided tours, without any explanation on the significance of the designation. However, sixty percent of visitors were aware of this fact.

Applying Chi-square statistical test method to study whether cave visits had any influence on knowledge, it was found, that although people, who had already visited the cave tended to be aware of the WH designation more, in fact cave visits did not influence this knowledge significantly ($X^2=2.377$; $df=1$; $p>0.01$). It means that message delivery is not very successful during the cave tour.

Testing the 'sense of the place'

Some questions/statements were selected and analysed to reveal visitors' perception (sense) of the place, as a concept of attitude. Some of them reflected aesthetical or value judgements, others were provocative, as shown below.

- *It is a special place of interest* – expected agreement from respondent resulting in a high score
- *State ownership of the WHS safeguards its protection* – expected agreement from respondent resulting in a high score
- *Selling speleothems is a sustainable form of generating revenues* – expected disagreement from respondent resulting in a high score
- *There are too many restrictions in the area* – expected disagreement from respondent resulting in a high score
- *Visitor interested in other assets* – expected agreement from respondent resulting in a high score
- *Considering the cave awe-inspiring* – expected agreement from respondent resulting in a high score

The statistical summary on this set of answers (5-degree Likert-scale) informs us that 74 % of

visitors have a high level sense of the place, i.e. within the 3.6 – 4.5 score range. Further nineteen percent of respondents, in fact, have very high level of sense of the place (4.6 – 5). No respondents can be found in the “very low” and “low” categories, i.e. below 2.6 points.

The mean average of these selected variables was 4.15 (high), with the minimum of 2.32 (low) for the question if visitors felt that there were too many restrictions at the site, and the maximum of 4.76 (very high) for the question whether the cave was beautiful.

Applying the non-parametric Chi-square statistical test, it could be concluded that cave visits actually had a significant influence on the sense of the place perception ($X^2= 14.455$; $df=4$; $p<0.01$).

The relationship between knowledge and the sense of the place

The research investigated to what extent knowledge influenced the sense of the place perception. Indeed, the analysis showed that knowledge significantly affects how visitors perceive the cave(s) and the broader environ-

ment ($X^2= 182.161$; $df=129$; $p<0.01$). So visitors with an increased knowledge (either preliminary or newly gained) tend to have an attitude that is closer to the management's expectation, i.e. more pro-conservationist.

This simple, illustrative example suggests that shaping visitors' knowledge and understanding of a show cave does influence their attitude, so managers can rely on this process and orient the public to an expected form of behaviour.

CONCLUSION

The importance and potentials of interpretation is often underrated in heritage tourism. It draws on several principles from visitor studies, psychology and learning theories, but its primary function is communication between site managers and visitors. But show cave managers consciously using interpretation actually gain an effective management tool by which they can greatly enhance the success of their corporate objectives for the mutual benefit of the site and its visitors.

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