

# Encouraging Public Appreciation

# Interpretation and Education in Parks

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Images as credited

Renowned for its greenery and garden city status in the world over and having recently been named among the top five global destinations to relocate to (The Global Professionals on the Move Report 2011), it goes without contention that liveability in Singapore is high. With almost 50 percent of Singapore covered by greenery, and some 300 parks island wide, parks can be considered an integral part of life in Singapore. Parks give us environments in which to play, relax and enjoy nature, come together with family and friends, as well as connect and interact with the broader community. Just as importantly, parks also provide habitats for a diverse range of flora and fauna including many rare and endangered species. In short, Singapore's parks and open spaces contribute tremendously towards its foundation of urban liveability, providing social, recreational, ecological and economic benefits that are essential to the healthy functioning of urban communities.

The opportunities for learning in parks are tremendous. Everywhere you look is a story to be told, every turn of a corner has the potential as the start of a new nature trail, and every nook and cranny holds a habitat for an amazing amount of biodiversity to be treasured and conserved. This makes parks very valuable places for park users (of any age or demographic group) to not only to be close to nature, but also to learn about plants, animals, and the interconnectedness of nature with the environment.

Interpretation is essential. It is about connecting (and communicating) with visitors, thus enlivening a park. While information presents facts, interpretation attempts to do more, by giving meaning to things. Interpretation is an important way of telling the public about the work a park

is doing and of raising awareness about what the park stands for. In addition to its educating function, interpretation in a park can:

- add value to the visitor experience, making parks more relevant and accessible to visitors;
- encourage visitors to explore nature, raise awareness, gain understanding and get excited about plants, animals and the environment;
- help teachers and self-guided groups to use a park and to make sense of the site and its resources;
- enhance the quality of facilitated educational programmes and create a rich learning environment in a park;,
- assist with visitor management, where strategically placed signages enable the focus of attention on certain displays and help keep visitors away from sensitive areas;
- reach out to a wide audience, even when manpower and other resources are limited;
- help win public support by promoting organisation missions and informing park users of new developments; and
- assist with fundraising, directly or indirectly.

## Environmental interpretation and environmental education

A close relationship exists between environmental interpretation and education. Generally, they are similar in that both have the same ultimate goal, which is to bring about behavioural change (both immediate and long-term), encouraging stewardship and producing individuals that can make responsible environmental decisions and take effective action.

The difference, however, lies in the nature of the audience. Most people visit a park for play and fun, relaxation and enjoyment. They do not have to learn, or even pay attention, unless they want



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**BELOW** Map boards and directional signages help orientate park visitors and lead them to the various unique attractions that a site may have to offer, without the need for a human interface or a visitor service officer (Photo: Janice C. K. Yau).



to. This makes them a non-captive audience. In this instance, interpretation tends to be voluntary and is deemed informal, with the primary goal of enhancing visitor experiences. Interpretation also tends to be short-term, normally in the form of single and standalone experiences, covering a period of an hour to half a day, with the aim of revealing information and raising awareness.

On the other hand, learners in a classroom are a captive audience because they have to listen and pay attention, particularly if they want to pass their examinations. An education programme is a formal learning experience, normally associated with formal institutions that require students to participate in a sequential learning process. Education is usually part of a series over an extended period.

It is crucial, however, to evaluate an interpretation or educational programme to ensure it fulfils its designed role. This can be done through asking park visitors several simple return visitor-ship or participation questions, for example:

- Do they return to enjoy the park?
- Would they recommend the park and its programme(s) to friends?
- Would they attend the programme(s) again in the future?

Evaluation allows for impact measurement of an interpretation or an educational programme and the tracking and measuring of the resulting action or decision-making change and its effectiveness in changing attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

### What does developing interpretive material entail?

Developing interpretive and education material can be demanding on staff time, as it involves:

- Discussion
- Research
- Drafting
- Checking (clearing texts, etc.)
- Testing ideas (Is the information easily understood, thought provoking, or entertaining?)
- Sourcing good photographs and illustrations
- High quality design
- Product specification
- Coordination of production
- Installation
- Evaluation
- Monitoring
- Maintenance

Before any proposal is considered and developed, it is advisable to look carefully at the objectives and target audience. Decide on what to interpret, what methods to use and what costs are likely to be incurred.

### What forms of interpretation are there?

The many ways to interpret a park differ widely in how personalised and how interactive they are. On the whole, static forms of interpretation (e.g., posters and storyboards) lack interactivity and personal touch. Interpretation which involves people (e.g., guided walk, hands-on workshop or discovery station) tends to be more engaging and more popular with visitors.

Some interpretive and education options include:

- Mapboards
- Posters and story boards (signages)
- Brochures, guidebooks, leaflets and maps
- Self-guided trails
- Electronic media and mobile applications
- Exhibitions
- Informal staff-visitor interaction
- Discovery stations (also called "show-and-tell stations")
- Slideshows
- Talks and demonstrations
- Guided walks
- Hands-on workshops
- Drama and role-play

In communicating ideas and concepts, interpreters and educators can draw on a wide range of experiences, stories, ideas, inspirations and beliefs from all educational disciplines. For optimal effectiveness, it is important to provide a range of thematic interpretive approaches and formal learning programmes to engage visitors of all ages.





**ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** Young visitors in awe of the Thousand Fingers Banana. Interactive guided walks with show-and-tell help instil a sense of awe, awareness and appreciation for the natural world, aiding learners to connect with their surroundings and the biodiversity in it; Good interpretation encourages discussion, stimulates new ideas and inspires learners to find out more (Photos: Krystal Heng); Arouse children's inquisitive minds through encouraging the use of their senses, in activities such as observing and expressing what they see, smelling and crushing plant parts, touching and feeling different textures, listening to the sounds of nature and tasting various specimens; Experiential learning is a well-used and effective approach in environmental education (Photo: Chiew Yong Seng); Outdoor interpretive signages and panels are an excellent way of sharing the secrets of these hidden treasures (Photo: Janice C. K. Yau).

### Principles for effective interpretation and education

In developing interpretation and educational programmes to get messages across to park visitors, there are a few key points to keep in mind for optimal effectiveness:

- Know your audience. Find out what your visitors want to learn. Knowing your audience before you embark on your design journey can prevent wasted effort.
- Make it relevant. In designing programmes to capture the interest of schools and educators, interpretation and programmes should complement the formal school curriculum.
- Use themes and sub-themes. Keep interpretation themed and make sure this theme is clear throughout.
- Get organised. Good interpretation is well organised. This aids understanding and results in a better grasp of essential take-home messages. Always leave visitors with something to think about.
- Incorporate photos and illustrations. A picture can be worth a thousand words. This helps tremendously in posters and interpretive storyboards. The use of pictures as props or in show-and-tells are especially effective, if you are not able to obtain the real specimen.
- Utilise short amounts of text. Dividing text into sections with headings makes easier reading. This applies to all written material – posters, signages, storyboards, exhibition panels, activity and worksheets.
- Choose appropriate locations. The value of good interpretation is based on location. A perfect display in a poorly chosen place is effort gone to waste. Placed at popular locations, information can be disseminated to the maximum number of visitors possible, while encouraging the exploration of less visited parts of a park. Locate displays close to paths for easy access and do not obstruct general park maintenance work.
- Be innovative and creative. Aspire to make your content thought provoking yet enjoyable. Use humour, if and where appropriate. Entice your learners by providing bits of information in a fun way, so that they would want to learn and find out more. At the same time, keep up with trends to appeal to the young and the IT-savvy.

**BELOW, LEFT** The Photosynthesis Exhibit at the Jacob Ballas Children's Garden (Asia's first Children's Garden); Interpretive plaques explain the process of how plants absorb carbon dioxide and water in the presence of sunlight and chlorophyll, making food for themselves (and other living beings) and releasing oxygen into the air (Photo: Chiew Yong Seng).


**BELOW, MIDDLE & RIGHT** "The Seed that Changed the World" exhibition at Singapore Botanic Gardens. Good interpretation is entertaining, informative and provides visitors with a meaningful and enjoyable experience. (1) It helps to organise information in sub-themes for better flow and grasp of meaning, (2) use short amounts of text for a better grasp of essential take-home messages and, (3) sustain interest by using colour, pictures, props and (where appropriate) a sense of humour (Photos: Paul Chin).



- Provide special and memorable experiences. The aim of this approach is to instill a sense of wonder and appreciation for the natural world. A well-used and proven-effective approach in nature and environmental education is experiential learning, where activities are designed for learners to engage actively in sensory, cooperative and empathetic ways. Where appropriate, educators can encourage learners to see, hear, feel, taste and smell the objects under discussion. A student will learn more about the structure of a flower by dissecting it than by copying a drawing from a book and labeling it. A child may remember the smell of a plant and what it can be used for, even if he or she does not remember its name. If children are allowed to touch its trees, they may feel more urgently the importance of protecting the environment in which they live. Interpretive signages need not only be for reading or disseminating information. They can also invite visitors to smell or touch plants.

it can encourage thoughtful use of the park by visitors and promote a keener sense of awareness, appreciation and understanding of the role of parks.

The ultimate goal of interpretation and education is to translate knowledge into values and build lifelong skills that promote a sense of personal responsibility for biodiversity and the environment. We empower action for change by working towards encouraging positive attitudes and behaviours towards preservation and ensuring sustainability for Earth's life-support systems.

In this millennium of global warming and climate change, environmental interpreters and educators have the added challenge of ensuring that the design and delivery of environmental interpretation and educational programmes address plant conservation, the maintenance of biodiversity, conservation and sustainability efforts. Environmental interpreters and educators all over the world face a race against time to educate, change mindsets and convince people to take action, change lifestyles and live sustainably. 

### Challenges for the Future

Innovative and interpretive education will help accomplish a park's management objectives as



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