

“Another look at the world: environmental interpretation in National Parks and Reserves”

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A small group of people huddles in the dappled light of the forest floor. Their attention is focussed on the delicate green hooded orchid beside the track, so unobtrusive that all would have mistaken it for a grass and walked right past it, if the National Park Ranger had not pointed it out. A child has been enlisted to demonstrate one of the characteristics of the flower. With exaggerated caution, as if performing some delicate surgical operation, she gently touches the flower's exposed labellum with a twig. There is a gasp of wonder as the labellum flicks back like a spring trapdoor, just as it would if an insect landed on it. Suddenly the air is alive with enquiring voices. Does the flower eat the insect? Can the insect escape? How? Why? To each of these questions the ranger responds. Each answer weaves a picture of the fascinating interactions between plant and animal in the forest environment. The demonstration of the orchid's pollination technique leads into a discussion on adaption and symbiosis. With curiosity well and truly aroused, the discussion can extend to the more general themes of the interdependence of all living things and the unique natural balance in any ecosystem. The walk continues through the forest and these themes are developed and reinforced, using concrete examples as cues. Gradually, as if by osmosis, the awareness grows in the walkers that they too are inextricably enmeshed in this web of inter-relationships.

Every plant, landform, animal and artifact has a story that waits to be told. Yet not all people can read their subtle codes — they are messages that require interpretation. The ranger introducing the group of people to the world of the hooded orchid was doing just that — interpreting a particular characteristic of a plant into terms that were sensible to the group.

Telling nature's story

This sense of the word “interpretation” originated in the US, where it has developed into a specialist skill among park rangers. It is only in recent years that park interpretation has taken hold in a big way in New Zealand. It is recognised as an integral part of park management. Accordingly, it must compete for priority with other work such as animal and noxious weed control, facilities development and maintenance, safety services and track development and so on. The effectiveness of these functions is being constantly evaluated. Staff and finances are limited, so for effectiveness read cost-effectiveness. For interpretation, this means reaching as many people as possible within a given time. Summer nature programmes provide the answer.

Every summer, in National Parks and Reserves, and in State Forests throughout New Zealand, summer nature programmes are organised and run by the Department of Lands and Survey and by the Forest Service. Conducted walks and a host of other activities give a range of people the opportunity to appreciate and

understand their park environments. For a period of four weeks or so during the Christmas holidays, after a considerable period of planning, park rangers put aside other duties to organise the activities.

In addition, a substantial number of seasonal interpreters are employed to assist rangers and other staff for the duration of the summer nature programmes. These people come from all walks of life. They have in common a good knowledge of natural or human history, a commitment to the preservation of natural and historical resources, and a strong interest in communicating these values to people.

Walks on the wild side

Why is interpretation now recognised as an integral part of park management? The reasons are many, but can perhaps best be summed up by saying that parks and people need each other. A public whose consciousness of the natural, cultural and recreational values of national parks, reserves and other protected areas is raised is more likely to respect and defend those values, thus helping management's cause.

The human need for these areas is undeniable. Apart from such utilitarian needs as watershed protection, species habitats and genetic diversity, people derive important psychological benefits from unspoiled environments. This need seems to become more deeply felt as our technology removes us further from intimate contact with the natural world. We need to periodically re-establish that contact. Similarly, historic sites, buildings and artifacts provide concrete links with our past that seem essential for a sense of cultural identity and continuity. The recognition that these special areas need preservation, while at the same time being accessible to the public for inspiration, enjoyment or recreation, is enshrined in the Reserves Act 1977 and the National Parks Act 1980, which speak of the parallel and complementary goals of preservation and use.

The philosophical and practical foundations of interpretation had been in place overseas for many years before

Every plant has a story waiting to be told — Tongariro National Park.

Photo: John Mazey

