

Effective nature and culture interpretation for quality ecotourism experiences

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Abstract

The success of a destination from the perspective of an effective interpretation of its natural and cultural heritage depends on a series of key aspects. They include an understanding of the tourists' needs, interests and expectations, as well as the quality of existing natural and cultural assets, and the commitment to their conservation or restoration. Other crucial aspects are the generation of knowledge associated with those resources, and how available this knowledge is for use by different sectors of society, including the tourism industry. Such knowledge involves not only technical or scientific information, but local knowledge as well. Another key factor is to have well-trained human resources, particularly interpreters and guides. All these ingredients allow a destination to preserve its natural and cultural resources, to invest in knowledge and people, and to be innovative in terms of its tourism products and services. These factors are also the raw materials needed in order to develop effective interpretation, which conveys the complexities of the natural and cultural realms to people, allowing them to discover the wonders of the world, to relate them to their daily life and to have an enjoyable and memorable experience. In the end, all of these elements contribute to both the satisfaction of tourists and the competitiveness of the destination.

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Introduction

Someone who visits a medieval town or a tropical rainforest for the very first time might feel overwhelmed by the vast amounts of information conveyed by the myriad elements in the surroundings. Everything seems to be talking to the visitor at once, and it is not unusual for the message to seem like foreign language. Thus, what started out as an exciting visit could turn into a disappointing experience. The visitor may even return thinking, "I saw very little," or "I didn't understand much of anything." This is where interpretation plays a crucial role. Interpretation basically means to put the complexities of the natural and cultural realms into everyday language that makes sense to the visitor, and contributes to transforming the visit into an entertaining, valuable, and educational experience.

According to the definition of the National Ecotourism Chamber of Costa Rica, CANAECO, *"Ecotourism is that specialized segment of responsible tourism which promotes and supports the conservation of nature and cultural values at destinations, interprets them for the customer, fosters the socioeconomic improvement of local communities, and seeks to sensitize and satisfy clients in an ethical manner. Its activities are carried out within a design and a scale appropriate to the surroundings, and it allows visitors to come into direct and personal contact with nature and local culture"*. Interpretation is, therefore, a key aspect for any ecotourism destination.

1. What are tourists looking for today?

In order to offer tourists a high quality experience and provide appropriate interpretation of the natural and cultural attractions at destinations, it is important to have an understanding of their interests, needs and expectations. Today's tourists are looking for a combination of nature and culture. They are also seeking interactions with locals, along with quality, authenticity and innovation.

For many destinations, nature is the most important attraction. Indeed, a number of countries in Latin America, Africa, and Oceania are well-known nature destinations. People traveling to such destinations are looking for:

- ❖ Natural surroundings
- ❖ Pleasant climates
- ❖ Biodiversity
- ❖ Protected areas
- ❖ Adventure
- ❖ Conservation values and practical experiences
- ❖ Low-carbon holidays (a more recent trend)

Culture is also a target for many tourists. Rather than zip through 20 countries in 20 days, tourists are more interested in spending time in a remote corner of a single destination, making contact with locals and experiencing new customs. Quality and depth of experience are far more than crossing landmarks off a checklist. Today's tourists want to:

- ❖ Interact with locals
- ❖ Be guided by experts who will take them inside a particular world
- ❖ Try diverse cuisine
- ❖ Enjoy rural life
- ❖ Witness culture in all its manifestations
- ❖ Participate in authentic traditions
- ❖ Learn about historical and archaeological resources

2. What can today's destinations offer tourists?

The combination of natural and cultural resources is an important asset for any tourism destination. Nature and culture add great value to the experience of any tourist, and offer a wide range of possibilities, including:

- ❖ Understanding and appreciation of natural heritage
- ❖ A chance to contribute to nature conservation
- ❖ Witnessing cultural phenomena
- ❖ Authentic interactions with local people
- ❖ Opportunities to learn from locals and specialists (artists, biologists)

3. Key aspects for a successful destination from the standpoint of effective interpretation:

For a country or region to become a successful destination, just having a wealth of natural and/or cultural resources is not enough. Resources should be well maintained, and there should be conservation and restoration strategies in place that guarantee their integrity into perpetuity. Also, the mere presence of a natural or cultural element does not mean that tourists will immediately understand and appreciate its value. Interpretive resources and activities are often essential in order to create a bridge between the person and that element. Effective interpretation is based on high-quality natural and cultural resources, conservation strategies, related knowledge, appreciation by locals, and appropriately trained human resources. These and other key aspects are discussed below in more detail:

Conservation of natural and cultural heritage: A successful destination is one which ensures that its main natural and cultural resources are carefully protected into perpetuity. When necessary, assets should also be restored to recover their original qualities. All this is important because those resources could offer an array of possibilities for improving the lives of local people. They are also the heritage of future generations. In the tourism context, when natural and cultural attractions are well maintained, the tourist industry will be better able to offer high quality products.

Generating knowledge associated with resources: In addition to its natural and cultural resources, a successful destination offers related knowledge as a strategic resource. An interesting example is Costa Rica's National System of Conservation Areas (SINAC), which is in charge of managing the country's protected public lands. Working in collaboration with the National Biodiversity Institute (INBio) SINAC has developed a biodiversity database that catalogs all the specimens of plants, fungi and arthropods collected in the field by INBio specialists. Other research institutions, museums and universities also collect and generate knowledge about the natural and cultural resources of Costa Rican national parks. This knowledge is not limited to scientific or technological data. Local knowledge is highly valuable and, while in many social groups it has not been preserved in written records, it lives on in the minds and daily experiences of the people.

Knowledge shared among people: Generating and accumulating knowledge is not enough. Information should also be accessible to different users, including those in the tourism sector. In the case of SINAC-INBio, for example, their biodiversity database is freely available through the Internet for anyone interested. INBio also publishes widely read books on Costa Rica's biodiversity. Recent titles include "*Costa Rican Glass Frogs*" and "*Snakes of Costa Rica*." The tourism sector greatly benefits from these publications, which are acquired by planners, managers, community leaders, tour guides, teachers, and tourists.

Understanding and appreciation of natural and cultural heritage: Tourists might visit a destination because they appreciate its natural and cultural heritage, but what about the people living there? Public education systems should include these aspects of regional and national heritage as part of the official curriculum in order to deepen people's knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of their culture, traditions, and natural resources. Mass media also can play an important role, not only in broadcasting and publishing information, but also in terms of strengthening the value people place on their natural and cultural heritage.

Quality, authenticity, and innovation: Today's tourists are looking for destinations that offer high quality products and services. Quality does not necessarily mean sophisticated or expensive, but rather that a specific product or service is the very best that can be obtained given its particular rank or type. Authenticity is also highly valued. For tourists, it is important to know that a cultural performance or celebration is not carried out merely to entertain them, but that it has a true meaning for local people. In terms of innovation, knowledge and information are very important in the design or renovation of a tourism product, according to the market's interests and needs, as well as the country's conservation policies.

Committed and well-trained tour guides: Since tour guides can have a direct impact on the quality of the tourism experience, they play a strategic role at a destination. The Costa Rican Tourism Board has established a series of qualifications for guides to become certified. Among other things, the candidate needs to complete a training course that takes between eight months and a year, in addition to acquiring practical experience in the field. Subjects include ethics, first aid, biodiversity, history, guiding, and interpretation. Moreover, this license has to be renewed every three years.

Interpretation, building bridges between tourists, and the resource: Interpreting basically means to put the natural, scientific and cultural realms into ordinary language

that the average person can understand. Interpretation allows people to explore different fields on their own terms, without the need of a technical background. Since the complexity of ecosystems like tropical rainforests can easily overload the senses, good interpretation in the form of a guided tour, a booklet, signs along a hiking path, or other means allow visitors to discover the wonders of the world, relate them to their daily lives, and have enjoyable and memorable experience.

4. Practical examples

The following is a selection of some experiences developed by the author that use interpretation in effective ways to add value to the tourist's experience.

“Manuel Antonio National Park: A true kaleidoscope of landscapes”: Manuel Antonio, considered one of the most beautiful national parks in Costa Rica, receives more than 200,000 visitors a year. All kinds of people, including tourists, students, families, the elderly, young children, and persons with disabilities enjoy the park's outstanding natural surroundings and diverse wildlife. In order to make it possible for visitors to gain a better understanding of these unique resources and to better appreciate them, one of the trails was interpreted by highlighting a series of elements at 12 different stations. As one of the main target audiences were visually impaired people, a small sculpture that could be touched was placed at each one of the stations. The text was also provided in Braille.

“Golden Path: The history of people and gold in the Osa Peninsula”: La Leona Lodge owns a beautiful piece of forest next to Corcovado National Park, in Costa Rica. A two-mile trail there allows visitors to enjoy the forest as well as breath-taking views of the Pacific Ocean. The Corcovado area has been called “the most intensely biodiverse place on Earth” by *National Geographic*, but instead of focusing on nature, La Leona Lodge decided to interpret a section of the trail from a historical and cultural perspective. It tells the story of gold in the Osa Peninsula from pre-Columbian times, through the Spanish Empire in the Americas, to the XX Century Costa Rican gold fever.

“The Otarolas, a family experience in the production of butterflies”: This rural family has been raising butterflies commercially for ten years. All members of the family, from the grandparents down to the grandchildren, participate actively in the various tasks involved in this unusual business. Over the years they have accumulated a great deal of knowledge and experience that they now wish to share with the people who visit their farm. In collaboration with the author, the Otarola family put together an exciting script that describes in simple, vivid terms the complex processes taking place on the farm, including the care of butterflies and the delicate wrapping of pupae to be exported. The family members themselves guide visitors around the farm, which makes the experience all the more authentic.

“The new Sarchí coffee experience: from our fields to your table”: This tour, which is still in the planning phase, focuses on coffee, one of Costa Rica's most important economic activities. It will be located in a coffee Hacienda in Sarchí, a town famous for the production of Costa Rica's renowned oxcarts. There will be a trail through a coffee field and a processing plant that combines traditional and modern technologies. This guided tour will not only share technical aspects related to the cultivation and processing of coffee, but also social and cultural aspects specific to coffee growing communities.

Conclusion

A destination that invests in the conservation and restoration of its natural and cultural heritage, as well as in generating and supporting the scientific, technical and local knowledge associated with it, has greater opportunities to develop innovative and competitive tourism products and services. Interpretation is a way to both innovate the industry and to increase customer satisfaction, since interpreting a destination's natural and cultural attractions makes it possible to explain their subtleties in such a way that tourists will understand and appreciate them, thus turning such visits into unforgettable experiences. With effective interpretation, after seeing an important historic site or natural attraction, a tourist will be able to say, "I learned something new today --- and had fun at the same time!"