



Section Four

Interpretive Techniques

Interpretive Techniques

4.0 Introduction

If you can be... *Friendly, so that people feel welcomed*
 Meaningful, so that people are interested
 Clear, so as to be understood
 Relevant, so that visitors feel included
 Informative, so that much is revealed
 Passionate, so that people are inspired
 Artful, so as to enrich the moment
 Purposeful, so as to create a gift
 Provocative, so as to enlighten and influence

.....Then you will be a docent, an interpreter, a teacher, and much, much more!

Yes, it is quite a challenge to be a good teacher, docent, interpreter, or whatever name you give it. Meeting that challenge is like trying to imitate that favorite teacher you remember so well, the one who somehow made learning exciting, interesting, and personal for you. That teacher/mentor was not only warm and friendly, but almost magically informed, entertained, and enlightened you. But there really was no magic involved in what they did or in their method.

That favorite teacher simply used teaching techniques and interpretive strategies that can be learned by anyone who is interested in becoming an effective educator or docent. This section will help you learn those techniques. It will show you how to successfully pass information onto people at a time when they are wide open with awe by the presence of the elephant seals; and it will also show you how to create a guided tour that is involving, entertaining, and educational. You will learn that with time and training, you will develop your own style of interpretation different from your mentor, one that works best for you.

Always remember that this section is just a start in what should be an ongoing effort to make Año Nuevo more meaningful to those who visit each year. Use some of the ideas in this section as a springboard for your own creativity and to stimulate your own ideas on how to make the experience of Año Nuevo richer and fuller for the park visitor.

4.1 What is Interpretation?

This is a popular question and one worth dedicating a whole section to. Often docents, naturalists, and tour guides rely on a large knowledge base to “wow” and impress their visitors. While cool facts and detailed explanations of natural history are important ingredients to a successful tour, they only represent half of what is needed. The other half includes a well planned delivery system that helps tell a story and connects the visitor to the park. This is what the field of interpretation is all about. This story or “theme” is wide open for docents to develop and can often be personalized. Like a good movie you can’t stop thinking about, we want visitors to connect to the park and talk about it all the way home. The material in this section will cover the tips and techniques every docent needs to know in order to fully connect visitors to Año Nuevo State Park.

The Six Principles

The first person that truly studied the field of interpretation was Freeman Tilden. In his excellent book *Interpreting Our Heritage* (1957), Tilden defines interpretation as “*An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media...*” rather than simply to communicate factual information.

Tilden illustrated his point with these six principles:

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow **relate** what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. **Interpretation is not the same as information.** Interpretation is **revelation** based upon information, but they are entirely different things.
3. Interpretation is **an art** that combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction but **provocation**.
5. Interpretation should aim to **present a whole** rather than a part, and it must address itself to the whole person rather than any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to **children**, say, up to the age of 12, should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults but should follow a fundamentally **different approach**.



National Association for Interpretation

Becoming a Naturalist Docent

There are three things you will need to be a successful docent:

- You need sufficient **information** about Año Nuevo
- You need the ability to **relate** that information to the visitors' lives
- You need a **passion** (a genuine enthusiasm) for what you're sharing with visitors

You will get all the **information** you need in the training (so pay attention and take notes); and you will also get it through books, articles, and internet sources that you read. Information by itself, however, is not enough to make you a good docent. A guided tour filled with all the greatest information available can still turn out to be sterile, dull, and unstimulating. Picture yourself, or any docent, out on the trail giving a guided tour by stopping from time to time and reading to visitors from a book on elephant seal behavior, and you'll understand.

To provide effective interpretation you want to **relate** that information to the visitor's lives. Here is an example: You can tell people a full grown male elephant seal weighs 4,000 to 5,000 pounds and that they have terrific battles over territory...or...you can make them see the animal in a way they can relate to by asking them how much they think an SUV (suburban utility vehicle) weighs... (4,000+ pounds.) Then have them picture two of these vehicles rising up on their back wheels and smashing into each other. Unfortunately, when this SUV battle is over you are left with two badly damaged automobiles, both in need of extensive repair. Battling elephant seals, however, seldom injure each other when they fight because they have developed protective padding on their bodies, just like the protective padding a football player wears.

Over time you will begin to understand and discover all that Año Nuevo has to offer. More importantly, you will learn how to share that appreciation and excitement with your visitors and they will benefit from your excitement. Because of this **passion** you will naturally improve as a teacher, and continue to work at ways to give visitors a more engaging and complete experience of Año Nuevo. This passion and interest will be your guide.



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When you are able to relate the information to the visitors lives, then you make it more meaningful and personal to them.

4.2 How to Create a Successful Walk/Talk

Good planning and preparation are fundamental to a walk that presents a well-rounded, **unified story rather than a disjointed catalog of facts**. Your walk should have a **plot or theme** with a **beginning, middle and end**. Set the stage and generate interest through a **good introduction**. Use colorful **transitions** between stops to keep visitors engaged. Include supporting material, suspense, climax, questions, illustration, and other devices needed to get across key points. Adapt a **conservation** message that supports local/global stewardship and the mission of California State Parks. Finally, develop an effective **conclusion** to tie it all together and come full circle back to the beginning.

Dr. Sam Ham has written and lectured extensively regarding the field of interpretation. His book *Environmental Interpretation* has become standard reading for many students of interpretive tour guiding. One of the key points of view that he demonstrates is that interpretation is not the same as traditional “instruction”. Interpreters who try to teach their audience in the academic sense will have a difficult time succeeding. Dr. Ham simplifies the approach in a model known as TORE.

These four ingredients are often considered the foundation of all interpretive programs.

- **T = Thematic**
- **O = Organized**
- **R = Relevant**
- **E = Enjoyable**

T = Thematic: Developing a Story

THEME! Does this word scare you? No? Good! To some it does and as a result many docents tend to shy away from this interpretive tool. Often it can be an intimidating concept to wrap your brain around. But most experienced interpreters agree that a theme is the fundamental foundation to any successful park program. In truth themes are not as foreign as you might think. In fact they are part of our every day lives.

Developing a theme can be an exciting and enjoyable process as you tap into your creative energy and prepare to “wow” your visitors. Your inspiration for your first theme will likely derive from the reason you became a docent. There has to be a good reason why you have chosen to dedicate a large amount of your free time to serving the public regardless of the wind, rain and long drives to the park. That REASON is your first THEME. It could be that you were inspired by the story of the elephant seal’s survival, or discovering the amazing adaptations of this marine mammal, or simply the opportunity to enjoy nature in its preserved setting away from civilization. Regardless of the reason, you have a connection to Año Nuevo and you should consider exploiting that for your first theme. If it provoked you to care, it should provoke other people to care as well.

Themes are just like any other creative idea. They can be changed, molded, copied, stored, discarded or recycled for the pursuit of amazing your visitors. However, themes are only as good as the support you give them. Be sure to design your walk around your theme and include good supporting stops and interpretive lessons.

What does having a theme do for you as a docent?

- **PLANNING:** It makes it easy to figure out what you’re going to say whether you are planning your walk or stuck in a situation out on the trail where you’re not sure what to say next to your group. All of the information you share should support this main message sentence.
- **AIDS UNDERSTANDING:** It allows visitors to better understand and follow your message, even though you cover many subjects.
- **UNIFIES:** People only have to recall one idea when remembering information you shared with them, and theme brings order to a presentation where many ideas are covered, or brings unity to a guided walk where many stops are made.
- **COMPLETES YOUR STORY:** Like the chorus of a song, the theme, when repeated often, gives a sense of wholeness and completeness to your audience. All storytellers and songwriters use theme. It’s a tremendous aid to memory, for you and your audience.

Topics vs. Themes

In order to crack the code of what a theme is, you will need to know that a theme is not the same as a topic. **Topics** describe the subject matter of what you will be discussing. A **Theme** is a complete sentence that says something engaging about your topic. It focuses on the specific message/story you want your audience to walk away with. It’s the answer to why visitors take the time to visit the park, the “so what?” of the tour.

Themes can be expressed in a single sentence or sometimes two. The key to a theme is that it expresses a single whole idea regardless of the statement length it takes you to say it or write it.

Elephant Seal Tours and Themes

Telling your visitors that you plan on talking about elephant seals on your tour is great, but that’s only telling them what your topic will be. “So what” if you talk about seals throughout the tour? There is a lot to the natural history of elephant seals and you do not want to overwhelm visitors by simply dishing out interesting facts and figures. So let’s use a theme.

Topic: Elephant Seals

1st Theme: Elephant seals migrate thousands of miles to call Año Nuevo home.

2nd Theme: Adaptations are key to helping elephant seals survive on land and at sea.

3rd Theme: Humans have played an important role in first endangering elephant seals and then protecting them.

Topic: History

1st Theme: The elephant seals are not the only ones to call Año Nuevo home.

2nd Theme: The Ohlone were able to utilize the surrounding plants and animals to survive.

To see if you have discovered a theme for your tour, include your chosen theme at the end of the following sentence, “*After hearing my presentation, I want my audience to understand that*” This is an effective way to identify if you are on the right track to leading a thematic tour. If you to simply input “elephant seals” or “history” into the sentence you will come up with a presentation that is somewhat lacking in excitement and curiosity. However, with an engaging theme sentence you can let your visitors know what the tour will be about and begin an exciting tour.

Theme Statement Example: *After hearing my presentation, I want my audience to understand that elephant seals migrate thousands of miles to call Año Nuevo home.*

Now that you have discovered what a theme is and how to recognize them you are ready to develop your own.

Here are some example topics to develop into a theme:

- **Survival** Of course survival is a great topic when talking about Elephant seals, but it also works when talking about the light station, or the Ohlone’s way of life. **Theme:** *The Ohlone benefited greatly from the abundant resources of Año Nuevo.*
- **Home** The elephant seals, the Ohlones, and the lighthouse keeper all called this place home. **Theme:** *Elephant seals are not the only ones to call Año Nuevo home.*
- **Geology** The creation of the island brought the seals to Año Nuevo. Monterey chert (flint) brought the Ohlones, and the off shore rocky reefs brought about the need for a lighthouse. **Theme:** *Geologic forces have long attracted inhabitants to the shores of Año Nuevo.*
- **Travel** We all love travel. The elephant seals do it quite well, using their up and down diving pattern while they journey to and from Año Nuevo. The Ohlones travelled here regularly, and the constant ship traffic created the need for the lighthouse. **Theme:** *The sandy shores of Año Nuevo have forever been traveled upon by a variety of hosts.*
- **Culture** Discussing what our culture is like (the habits, customs, beliefs, and practices of a society) leads to discussing the Ohlone culture, the California gold rush culture (lighthouse), and finally describing and discussing the elephant seals as a culture, a animal culture with their own set of rules. **Theme:** *Here at Año Nuevo we will discover cultures that are different from what we are used to.*
- **Personal Connection** For a personal tour approach, share aspects of Año Nuevo with the visitors that makes the place so wonderful for you. **Theme:** *Año Nuevo is a place where we can forget about the pressures of our life and escape to a world of natural beauty.*

O = Organized: Planning A Guided Walk

Once you've chosen a theme, the next step is to plan your tour. It can seem a bit scary to plan an entire tour. Luckily there are a few techniques that may be familiar to you that you can use. To begin, interpretive tours include four parts: a **staging period**, an **introduction**, a **body** and a **conclusion**.

The Staging Area

Arrive 15 minutes early. Spend this time meeting individuals and finding out where they are from and what brings them to the park. This initiates a comfortable rapport and allows you to learn more about your audience so that you can make your information more relevant to each of them. Details like where they come from, occupations, and previous vacation visits can aide you during your hike in connecting them to your tour. Do your best to create a positive first impression that can help launch your tour even before it begins.

The Introduction: Getting Started

The tone of your walk is set by the first few minutes you spend with your group. During this introduction, several elements should always be included:

- Introduce yourself and share a hook/grabber.
- STATE YOUR THEME to help orient the audience to what they will be learning about.
- Find out about your group - where are they from? Have they been to the park before? Encourage them to share any health or safety issues with you at any time (as you walk) so that they don't feel they have to say something in front of the whole group.
- Give an overview of the State Park System; mission, and explain what a State Park or a Natural Preserve is and why they are important.
- Tell them about the walk - where you will be going, how long, type of terrain. Capture their attention by telling them about something you are going to show them later on, or relate some little known fact about the park.
- Encourage the visitors to use all their senses on the walk – to see, smell, hear, touch, and speculate as they follow you.
- Encourage your group to ask questions.
- Remind visitors about the safety concerns for both visitors and the animals: stay back 25-30 feet, be prepared to listen to instructions from you or park staff, do not interfere with the seals, stay together as a group always.
- End with a transition to the next stop

The Body

A well-organized body helps to develop the theme of your program. This information should be organized around the main ideas that were presented in the introduction. Facts, concepts, examples, comparisons, analogies, anecdotes, and other interpretive material should also be included in order to make the body engaging and meaningful, personal and informative to the audience.

A common mistake is to stop at every interpretive viewpoint and unload everything you know about elephant seals and Año Nuevo. Instead focus on your main idea and select stops accordingly. This is not to say that spontaneous questions and unplanned teachable moments can't be addressed. However, keeping to your main points will help steer your tour to not only be on time, but end with a message that visitors can easily remember.

Watch out for misinformation: don't pass on material you are not sure of. Just because someone else said it is true, don't assume it is. Find out for sure - help each other. Good resources can be found in the docent coordination office, the docent roost, as well as the San Mateo Coast Natural History Association's website. The SMCNHA website (www.sanmateocoastnha.org) has links designed especially for docents to learn and refresh all the information needed to lead tours and talks at the park. Along with natural history information, there are visuals to download as well as audio clips from lectures to listen to.

Planning Your Stops

Much like planning your ideas and information into an organized tour, it can be helpful to know what you want to say at each stop. These interpretive encounters are often the fun part for docents as this is where the sharing of park resources takes place. When thinking about what to say at each stop, consider organizing it into four parts: a **focusing sentence**, a **description** (or explanation), a **thematic connector**, and a **transition**.

Focusing Sentence

A statement which focuses the tour's attention on the object, scene or idea you wish to emphasize is considered a focusing sentence. This is where positioning yourself where everyone can see and hear you is important, especially if it's a large group.

Description

Simply put, the description is the main part of your stop. It includes interpretive information on the resource you are viewing or discussing. Use the theme of your tour to guide you on what to discuss. Remember to carefully select this material and do not talk too long.

Thematic Connector

This part of the stop connects the description to the tour's theme and explains why that location was chosen. It may seem like only a small detail at the time, but later when you add up all the thematic connections the results will be beneficial.

Transition

Transitions bring an end to the current discussion and begin the journey to the next stop. In addition they can be used to foreshadow what the groups will do or see at the next stop or to give visitors an activity to participate in on the way.

More on Transitions

A group will move eagerly to the next spot if you entice them with some hint about what to expect there. Transitions can keep the group engaged in learning even when you are not talking. There are two types of transitions: **Foreshadowing** and **ambulatory** transitions. Foreshadowing allows you to entice your audience to the next stop by foreshadowing what is ahead. Ambulatory transitions require you to ask your audience to notice things as they walk to the next stop. For example, “You can hear the wind and the waves clearly at this point; notice how the sound changes while we walk to our next stop.” or “Count the different number of birds you could hear and we’ll figure out what they are.”

Ambulatory Transitions:

- “We are getting close to the seal colony located on the point. As we get closer see if you can hear the sounds they make and see if you can pick out the difference between the males and the females.”
- “For hundreds of years Año Nuevo Point consisted entirely of sand and dunes. As we walk the next section of the trail try to imagine the absence of the plants growing today and what the area would have looked like with sand in all directions. We’ll find out what species survived here back then at our next stop.”
- “Coyotes and other inland creatures use the park trails as highways. Be sure to keep an eye out for tracks and scat left behind by the other park inhabitants.”

Foreshadowing Transitions

- “What is making all that noise? Let’s move to the next stop and find out.”
- “Elephant seals need to learn to swim. Up ahead we will find their swimming pool.”

The Conclusion: Ending the Tour

Although there will be many reasons to cut your tour short (bad weather, seal access, or group logistics), never cut short the opportunity to deliver a formal, well planned conclusion that summarizes your main points, re-states your theme and leaves your group on a thought-provoking note. Have a definite point for dismissal and let the group know the activity is over. Do not let it just disintegrate.

Conclusions offer the perfect chance to make a difference and leave your main message (the theme) ringing in their ears as they begin their last journey to the parking lot. Include the theme, a quick wrap up of the main points covered, and our appreciation for visiting the park. In addition docents can add information on other park opportunities and nearby places to visit, places to find more information on Año Nuevo, or even add a last-second natural history fact. Conservation messages can also fit in nicely here.

Upon reaching the staging area make an effort to stay and linger a bit to answer questions from visitors on your tour. They will likely regard you as a friend now and may seek out more information from you. Don’t be surprised to receive a few compliments for you efforts as well during this stage of the tour. Remember, any tips offered can be directed to the SMCNHA donation boxes located at the staging area and the MEC (Marine Education Center) to support our interpretive programs.

Moving the Tour On the Trail

Leading an elephant seal tour at Año Nuevo State Park is unlike anything you have probably done in the past. As a result, there are many logistical items that need to be woven into your tour.

- Know the area that you plan to cover and learn the route thoroughly. Be aware of what resources you can use on the route. Be aware also of any trail hazards and inform your group, particularly about poison oak. This plant is found in abundance along many portions of the trails. All of this information can be found on the Año Nuevo Point Map located in the Docent Roost.
- Know how many people are in your group, and keep the group together. Constantly look back to make sure the group is not straggling. Set an appropriate pace. This may be different for each group.
- Keep the lead at all times; turn around to talk to the group. Hold your head up, and project your voice over the heads of those near you (this does not mean shout!) Wait to speak, until everyone can see and hear you. If someone has a hearing problem, try to make sure that she/he is near you. Speak clearly, strongly, and with confidence. People will ask you questions while you are walking. Talk to them but repeat the question and the answer when you stop if appropriate. (Remember to write down questions you couldn't answer and then look them up later. Do not hesitate to say, "I don't know." Then add, "I will find out." You can have a stack of postcards. If you don't have an answer, then ask the person to write their address on the postcard and question – you can find out the answer and mail them the postcard.)
- Be aware of weather conditions. Situate yourself so that your group is not facing the sun. Stand "upwind" from your group so your voice won't be carried away.
- Pay attention to the needs of your group. Perhaps today is colder than the last time you gave this walk, and the group would be more comfortable stopping for a shorter amount of time than last time. Keep the needs of your group foremost in your mind as you deliver your walk.
- Adjust your vocabulary to the level and age of your audience. For all ages, a large number of facts and dates are not necessary. Most will be forgotten anyway, but the feeling they get from the experience won't be forgotten.

R = Relevant: A Meaningful Conservation Message

As interpreters and docents we care very much about the environmental problems facing our planet. Our profession is one where we have direct contact with many other people who, as visitors to our park, probably care as much as we do about the state of the world. Because of this connection docents have the chance to be involved in addressing these environmental problems and potentially making a positive difference in the world.



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One small step you can take in that direction comes from how you interact with visitors. We definitely open up a window into the beauty and wonders of the natural world for all our visitor groups. While looking through that window together, the docent can say one small thing that might just make a significant difference in the minds of visitors in regard to the preservation of the natural world. It is adding a meaningful conservation message to the important natural picture you are presenting visitors with on your tour. One message, one thought, might enhance their experience of Año Nuevo in such a way that they will later act in some way to preserve and help protect our planet of ours. Studies show that a

meaningful conservation message is one of the few ways to really get people thinking, talking, and perhaps acting upon their innate desire to help protect the natural world we live in.

Conservation Message Examples

To help you to include a conservation message into your tour, several samples are given below that relate to themes and tour stops docents usually include in their tours.

Año Nuevo

- The beauty of Año Nuevo is obvious. It mirrors the beauty of all the natural world. Año Nuevo is protected. Forever. The rest of the natural world is not protected. It is completely up to us what happens to it. That is one big responsibility.



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Año Island and the Light Station

- The role of the light keeper was to ensure the safe passage of ships at sea as they journeyed from port to port. Whatever our job or occupation we can ensure the safe passage of our families and friends as they make their journey through life.

Elephant Seals

- When speaking about how the female elephant seal leaves her pup behind in order to mate and return to sea, and reflecting on our own natural human concern for our children...the conservation message might be: The elephant seal mother trusts in the natural world and leaves her pup in the care of the ocean...but who takes care of the ocean?
- When talking about the evolution of the elephant seal species one might theorize...30 million years ago the mammal ancestor of the elephant seal entered the water in search of a new source of food energy. Perhaps competition and conflict over land-based energy sources had grown too great. Over time it evolved into a creature that could do unbelievable things (dive a mile deep for example) to acquire a new source of energy. Let's be inspired by the change the elephant seal went through to successfully obtain a new source of energy. A similar change for us to a cleaner form of energy would insure our own (and the elephant seals) survival into the next century. And it would be a lot easier for us to achieve compared to what the elephant seal had to go through!
- An elephant seal is truly a sensational creature that represents the marvel of the natural world. An elephant seal's single breath could be enjoyed for an hour. An exploratory dive into the very depths of the deep blue sea ends in the enjoyment of a deep water seafood meal. Clean air and clean water...an elephant seal thrives on it. So do we humans...and we are the only ones who can provide it...for ourselves...and for the seals.



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E = Enjoyable: Interpretive Techniques for Docents

There are many ways to make technical information more enlightening, educational, engaging, and entertaining. Here are some techniques and strategies that are used by interpreters at parks, museums, and historic sites around the world. Join with them in using methods that they have discovered to be effective ways to share information and experiences with visitors. These ideas are based on the works of authors like Sam Ham, William J. Lewis, Larry Beck, Ted Cable, and Freeman Tilden (See references at the end of this section).

Be Friendly and Smile

See yourself as a host welcoming people into your home, making sure they feel comfortable and included. Link up with your group of visitors by asking what brought them out here or back for a second visit. What did they remember that really impressed them? What else, besides elephant seals, interests them about this place? Remember people are seeking enjoyment and involvement, not instruction. They did not come to be lectured. They want a docent to engage their interests and imagination. Here are ways to do that.

Link Information to Human History

It is important to link information with the visitors own lives:

- Don't just tell people that the willow tree contains the chemical we find in aspirin. Relate it to their own lives, and ask visitors what medicines they use, (including their use of aspirin) and then introduce them to the Ohlone Indians' discovery that the willow was not only a medicine, but had many other important uses as well. This plant was a handyman's dream because so many things could be made from it.
- Using the story of shipwrecks like the *Coya and the Hellespont*, tell how the island evolved as a light station. Bring the light keeper's job alive with stories of the work it took to keep the light, fog horn, house, and dock operational. Tell of the dangerous island-to-mainland crossing that made the job of light keeper even more of an adventure. (See the State Parks website under Año Nuevo light station)
- Speculate with visitors about how the gold rush of 1849 changed Año Nuevo and its environs in other ways besides creating a light station. Ohlone, otter and whale populations were effected radically.

Use a Visual Metaphor

Metaphors help to describe or "see" an idea:

- Involve visitors in showing the size of elephant seals by having them hold onto sections of a rope in order to mark and see the actual size of the seals.
- Have visitors look at the Santa Cruz Mountains behind Año Nuevo, which at 1500 feet can give an idea of how deep an elephant seal will dive in search of food.

Use an Overriding Analogy

An analogy allows visitors to “see” the many ideas that make up your walk in a single, simple way:

- There’s more on the menu at Año Nuevo than elephant seal. Tell visitors that as their chef you will be allowing them to sample all of the appetizers, entrees, and desserts on the menu, not just our main dish, elephant seals. What else are they interested in sampling?
- The elephant seals are one large family coming home to be with relatives, help with a birth, argue, laugh, and generally have one big family reunion. The wonderful thing is we’re invited to the party! Be sure and relax and act natural, because they sure do. The Año experience puts reality TV shows to shame.
- The area on the ocean side of the island is like a supermarket for white sharks. The shark population off the island doubles at the very same time that the Elephant seals begin arriving.

Use a Contrived Situation

Use a make-believe scenario to help people view a situation from a different perspective:

- The elephant seals are throwing sand on themselves because they’re too hot. Picture yourself dressed in a full down jacket and pants in 70 degree weather. Why sand? Dig your hand into the sand. Does it feel the cool?
- Pretend you are back in 1958, when Año Nuevo Island was for sale. Run a mock auction with visitors to see how close they can get to the actual selling price (\$100,000). Ask what they might do with the island, and compare it to why bidders in 1958 wanted to buy it.
- What would it be like to be a light keeper or one of his children on Año Nuevo Island in 1890? What problems would you face to live out there?

Use Personification

Give a human quality to non- human things.

- Narrate the elephant seal life cycle from a “thinking” female’s point of view. “Now I have to choose a harem...what should I be looking for?”
- If an elephant seal was on this walk, the seal could do most of the walk holding its breath if it wanted to. Why and How?
- As a weaner, out on your own for the first time, what problems would you have to face? What help do, or did, you get from Mom and Dad?

Self Referencing

Have people think about themselves momentarily as a way to relate to a new piece of information:

- Ask visitors what they think makes up a safe environment to raise a child in our society. Then talk about how the harem works as a safe environment to raise a pup in the world of the elephant seal.
- Most visitors will have the experience of viewing reality shows, including those dating/mating reality shows. Luckily, Año Nuevo is the best reality dating show in town as visitors will soon find out. Play with this idea by doing things like introducing the first outcast male you see as “Bachelor Number One”. The possibilities are endless. Ask the group what qualities a good father or mother should have. Then compare these qualities to the behavior of the Alpha bull or the female elephant seal.
- At the Life Cycle Stop form up your group to resemble a harem, with yourself as the Alpha bull, the women and children gathered around you closely, and the males placed on the outside of the group. Now describe harem life using the layout of your group as an example to help you explain harem dynamics.
- Ask visitors to recall the last time they were sick and feverish. What medicine did they take? Then introduce them to Ohlone “aspirin”, which is willow bark, rich in salicylic acid, it is the real thing of which aspirin is made.
- Ask people what it would take to get a traffic signal installed at a dangerous cross street in their neighborhood. (Answer goal: a number of accidents and deaths, especially children.) Then tell the story of the many shipwrecks and loss of lives that led to building the light station at Año Nuevo, especially the *Coya and Hellespont*.

Use Comparisons

Comparisons show similarities or differences by making connections to something that is familiar to the audience:

- A mother elephant seal’s milk is 50% fat. What other dairy product contains that much fat? Perhaps whipping cream or butter?
- There are many, many earthquake faults at Año Nuevo that are all part of the main San Gregorio fault. Compare that phenomenon to a crack in the glass of a windshield, where one major crack soon becomes many small ones.
- When talking about an elephant seal’s growth rate as a pup, point to a child in your group, saying that if this child were an 80 pound elephant seal pup, in thirty days he would be as big as the adult who is standing next to him. (actually bigger, 300 pounds is more like a football lineman).

Audience Involvement

Most of the ideas you've read about so far are those of the interpretive author, Sam Ham. The following strategies come from another interpretive writer, William J. Lewis. Lewis stresses audience involvement.

- INVOLVE the visitor in a variety of ways.
- INVOLVEMENT creates satisfied visitors.
- People love to participate.
- Participation uses a physical experience to lead to mental involvement and understanding.

Use an unusual statement

- The body of an elephant seal with its layer of blubber can be compared to a corn dog, the hot dog being the animal and the corn meal coating, the layer of blubber or fat. This blubber led to the near extinction of the elephant seal because the oil made from it was used for lamps in the 1860's and 70's
- The lighthouse at Pigeon Point was a failure, (at least some of the time). Even though it was tall and beautiful like lighthouses on the East Coast, it turned out to be too tall! On foggy nights its light could not be seen because its beacon shined above the fog line (40-50 feet) hiding it from ships at sea level.

Use All the Senses

- Have visitors *touch* a piece of molted skin as a way of experiencing the molting process of the elephant seal. Do humans molt?
- Before reaching the elephant seal viewing area, *stop* and *listen* to the sounds of the harem and explain their significance. In your demonstration or description of the sounds have visitors actually try to make the sounds themselves. e.g. the UNK! UNK! of the male. The EEP-EEP-EEP of the pup. The BRAAH of a bothered female. Tell them what the sounds mean so when they hear them while viewing the elephant seals, it will aid their understanding.
- At the Ohlone midden site have visitors *touch* a piece of chert, have them describe its characteristics, and then have them predict what this might have been used for. Handle and discuss as many midden items as possible.
- If the viewing area *smells* badly and visitors comment, use the moment to talk about the fasting of these elephant seals and how much worse it would smell if this were a herd of cattle that was constantly eating and pooping in this small an area for 3 to 4 months.

Questions

Another technique to involve people comes in the form of special kinds of questions that a docent should frequently ask visitors. There are several types of questions that do things like:

- **Predict:** Ask what might be the result if there was an earthquake in a particular place such as on or near the island along the Año Nuevo thrust fault? Telling visitors what may have actually happened (the island being formed) lets them check their predictions against reality. Or, ask them to predict what might happen if a disease hit the genetically similar elephant seal population?
- **Focus:** What do you see on the island and what noises do you hear out there? Why are there gulls and ravens in the harem area?
- **Infer:** What can you tell about the Ohlones from the contents of this midden? What effect does fasting have on the elephant seal?
- **Apply:** How could advance satellite tracking systems be used with elephant seals? How might the Ohlones use the bendable willow, the abalone, etc. What do you need to raise a human child, and how is a similar kind of support provided (or not) for a pup in the elephant seal society?
- **Problem Solve:** What allows the elephant seal to hold its breath for so long? What would a lighthouse keeper's job entail?
- **Cause and Effect:** What caused the POINT (as reported by Vizcaino in 1603) to become an ISLAND? How did the gold rush of 1849 affect Año Nuevo? Why are elephant seals tossing sand on themselves?
- **Make Connections:** How have earthquakes and global temperature changes (ice ages and warming periods) affected Año Nuevo? Why was Año Nuevo so important to the Ohlones?
- **Clarify:** Why are the elephant seals classed as pinnipeds? Who uses the island as a home?

You are encouraged to use a variety of different types of questions such as these examples throughout your interpretive program.

Use a narration or story to illustrate or enhance a point of information

- When the steam whistle (fog horn) was first sounded on the island, all the milk cows at the dairy stampeded down to the beach, perhaps to see the wonderful bull that could make such an alluring sound.
- Stories about the Ohlones bring their culture alive. Stories connect people. Think of friends sharing stories. A story is told not so much to give information as it is to create relationship, familiarity, and connection.
- Año Nuevo was not only a tool making center because of the chert found here, but it was a bank or mint as well, since the Olive Snail (*Olivella*) shell found here in abundance was a form of money used in trade.

Working With Kids

If there are children in your group involve them in the process whenever you can (as well as the adults). Tours that are geared for an adult audience do nothing to include the children present; you do them and their parents a great disservice. Parents love to see their kids included in the activities!

Include things to hold, pick up, or pass around to the group; always have children help with the task. Children are also adventurous and love trying and sharing their reaction to things like “holding their breath like an elephant seal” and make a noise like an Alpha bull (UNK!). Always get their reactions to items you have the group hold and feel. Kids can add a lot to every tour experience.

When asking questions of the group, ask the children for their answers and opinions first, and then get the adult’s thoughts on the subject. Try and include everyone as if you were one, big family. This works and is appreciated.

Activities

The following are examples of activities that you can do to enliven your walk and make it more dynamic. There are many references (available through staff) that provide more techniques such as these. Remember, you do not have to be a botanist or any other type of scientist to help people have fun on a walk and learn to look and wonder!

- Always look for tracks in the sand, dust, or mud. Show tracks and ask if anyone recognizes them. Ask if anyone knows the direction or the size of the animal. Sometimes it is exciting to have no one able to identify the tracks.
- Hand out fur, whiskers, etc.
- Use visitors as “elephant seals” when discussing the life cycle. Kids enjoy this especially.
- Bring pictures and photos to support what you are talking about. This can help when there is little activity or to explain something that is not visible.
- Use the sand as a whiteboard and draw in it. (Maps, diagrams, diving charts)
- Stop the group and have them listen for 10 seconds. Sometimes visitors need to be directed to focus on sound and then they can hear more.

Interpretation is a voyage of discovery in the field of human emotions and intellectual growth, and it is hard to foresee that time when the interpreter can confidently say, “Now we are wholly adequate to our task.”

Freeman Tilden

4.3 The Molting Season

The molting season from April to November provides the docent with a welcome change of pace, and it is a time that presents the docent with new opportunities and challenges alike. Docents are stationed at the best viewing spots and visitors come to them. The molting season often turns out to be an enriching experience for everyone involved.

You get to spend leisure time with other docents in the best of settings, chatting and sharing your knowledge and insights about the natural wonders around you. When visitors arrive and it is not your turn to be the host, you get to listen in on another docent's presentation, which often introduces you to new interpretive material and methods. The rigid structure and tight schedule of the winter season is gone. Small groups of two to four visitors make it easy to establish a friendly, personal relationship. After escorting and talking to groups of twenty visitors during the winter season this relaxed, intimate atmosphere seems quite relaxing and natural.

However, this ideal "one on one" interaction does not guarantee instant success as an interpreter. Rather, it may reveal to you that no matter what the size of the group, good interpretation is still good interpretation: anything less fails to satisfy. Stimulating the interest of park visitors is, and always will be, an elusive yet worthwhile goal. Here are some ideas to make docenting during the molting season a successful experience for everyone.

Things to Remember

The small groups of people visiting Año Nuevo during the molting season allow you to actually get up close and personal with the park visitor, perhaps even getting to know the visitor on a first name basis. Introducing yourself by name and learning the visitor's names is one way to immediately make them feel welcome and included.

Laughter is good medicine and common among friends. If it suits you, add all the appropriate humor you can to your presentation. For example, did you know that the elephant seal has given us the ultimate answer to a healthy weight loss program? Have visitors heard of the Año Nuevo weight loss program as practiced by the elephant seals? It includes exercise (swim 6,000 miles twice a year) and fasting (don't eat anything for one to four months depending on the season). It is guaranteed to work, with losses of up to 40% of your body weight. Thousand of elephant seals can't be wrong!

Since we all seem to end up talking to visitors about the winter birthing season, don't forget to make use of the many interpretive techniques that are found in the earlier portions of this section when speaking about this subject.

There will be times during the molting season, especially on a busy day, that you feel you just about reached your limit when it comes to talking about elephant seals. "Not another visitor, please..." you might be thinking. Here's a remedy for that. Begin asking more questions about the visitor's lives, get to know them, and soon that feeling will be replaced with the excitement of meeting new people. Here's a secret: You become much more "interesting" to a visitor if you are "interested" in them. Remember, though, that your primary purpose is to provide interpretation.

The molting season is truly a great time to get together with fellow docents and share the joys and experience of interacting with park visitors. In the process you may see old things in new, unexpected ways, make new friends, and marvel at things you've become aware of for the first time. It is a time when docents help visitors see the beauty of Año Nuevo, and it is a time when docents help each other develop into better teachers and interpreters. We are all essential to each other, and as we continue to experience Año Nuevo at its most magical times, we all benefit from it. We hope visitors feel a sense of wonder about this special place, and as a result begin to feel protective about all such natural places.

4.4 Non-Tour Special Presentations

Community groups, clubs, and other organizations occasionally ask for special presentations such as slide shows and/or talks. At the request of the Docent Coordinator, you can assist the park in giving the program or lead it yourself. Preparation is the key to a successful program, and there are many resources that you can use for the “how-to’s” of preparing for your program. The docent coordination staff will be able to assist you.

Special consideration in giving talks includes arriving at the presentation site in plenty of time to check out all the equipment you may need. This includes such things as audio-visual equipment, seating arrangements, lights, ventilation, etc. Once you are sure everything is in a state of readiness, you can start mixing with the audience as they arrive. This informality:

- Establishes a friendly, informal atmosphere;
- Helps weld the audience into a responsive whole;
- Gives you an opportunity to assess the mood of the audience;
- Provides you with information you can use in the introduction and presentation;
- Helps you visualize the audience as a collection of individuals rather than an amorphous mass;
- Makes it easier for you to manage nervous tension at the beginning of any talk;
- Allows the audience to feel comfortable enough to ask questions and take interest.

When your talk is over, make yourself available for further questions and discussion. This will be a time when you can get some genuine feedback on your talk, and a time when you can give further service to people who are especially motivated.

In using slides, remember that they only support the theme you have chosen to develop. If the equipment fails, for one reason or another, you can still have a meaningful presentation if you are not dependent on the slides.

Generally, the slides should flow smoothly along to punctuate, underline, and emphasize what you are talking about. They should not be used as cues in your presentation. Too many interpreters wait for the slide to come on the screen to remind them what to say next. In professional slide programs, the verbal message usually slightly precedes (one to three seconds before) the slide, which then comes along and supports what has been said.

Slide selection is of paramount importance. Your individual preference and taste comes into play, of course, but all slides should be clearly focused, neither under- nor overexposed, clean, and right-side up. You will have to choose slides that seem most appropriate to you and then seek advice from the docent coordinator, docents, the ranger staff, and your audience. You can generally tell from an audience’s reaction how they feel about your slide choice. The main thing is to select slides that support your theme. In giving the presentation, speak to the group from a place where you can easily be seen and heard.

4.5 A Final Thought

How do you capture and put Año Nuevo into words, into a guided walk, or into an interpretive stop? Impossible... It seems that Año Nuevo can only be absorbed a little at a time, and that absorption process can go on for a lifetime. For the book of Año Nuevo has no beginning and no end. Its beauty is found in the eye of the beholder, and you, the beholder, can only tell the story of Año Nuevo in your own special way.

We hope these techniques will help in meeting the challenge of becoming a docent who influences people to such a degree that they think and feel differently about Año Nuevo (and all natural things and places) after they have completed your guided tour. And, although this list of techniques is a limited one, awaiting the addition of some of your own tried and true methods and ideas, we hope it helps you to create your own personal vision and style as a docent, forming a unique path that you will travel with visitors at Año Nuevo.

“When love and skill work together expect a masterpiece”

John Ruskin

4.6 References

Environmental Interpretation by Sam Ham

Interpreting for Park Visitors by William J. Lewis

Sharing Nature with Children by Joseph B. Cornell

Interpretation for the 21st Century by Larry Beck and Ted Cable

Interpreting Our Heritage by Freeman Tilden



Acknowledgments

This docent manual represents the latest version of the ongoing effort to provide the latest and best information for incoming and existing docents of Año Nuevo State Park. Since its conception decades ago this document has grown into a truly useful companion that brings to light the natural and cultural history of Año Nuevo State Park. The Docent Coordination office would like to thank all those who, whether recently or in the past, have worked hard to build this manual.

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