

Interpretation

Western RAIN

Workshop Held

Nearly 150 persons from Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming attended the workshop conducted by the Northwest Region of the Association for Interpretive Naturalists (Northwest RAIN) Oct. 26-29 in Vancouver, Wash. On day one of the workshop, three concurrent sessions ran all day under the general headings "Interpretation in the Private Sector," "Special Populations," and "Shoestring Techniques for a Shoestring Budget." On day two, the conference split into five groups for all-day field trips to Mount St. Helens, Mt. Hood, the Trojan nuclear power plant in Washington, the Columbia Gorge, and the Washington Park complex in Portland, Oregon.

The final day of the conference dealt with Research for Interpretation, interpretive techniques, and a "hot issues panel," in which one of the hottest issues turned out to be the question of volunteerism in the interpretive field and what that movement portends in the way of interpretive professionalism.

Roger Clark with the U.S. Forest Service in Seattle sounded the keynote as the conference opened: "Interpretation in the 1980's: Delivering the Message Through Cooperation," and wildland recreation professor Paul Saunders, from Washington State University, delivered the closing banquet remarks.

Gary Machlis, NPS sociologist from the University of Idaho in Moscow, delivered one of the meatier presentations of the workshop when he addressed a session on "cross cultural interpretation." He described the "myths" and "norms" of various cultures and how human behavior can be inferred to mean certain things by one culture that are not necessarily meant by the people who exhibit these behaviors. "Our myths," he said, "tell us what is right and wrong, good and bad, appropriate or taboo. And "norms" are the informal rules

for behavior — the things that tell us how to act at a football game as opposed to a cemetery. Norms are society's powerful hand, telling us what is polite, what is rude, what is appropriate."

Machlis suggested that interpretation, in order to stand the best chance of transcending cultural gulfs, might best be based on what he called "universals." These universals consist of distinctions that hold in every culture — concepts such as family, stratification, hierarchy, and life cycles. Using "family" as an example, Machlis pointed out a biological fact of human life — that you either have some semblance of a "family" to nurture you from birth until you can cope on your own, or you die.

"So if you start interpreting a historic site by asking 'What do you think family life was like when this fort (or whatever) was built?' the chances are you will reach all the visitors in the audience in some way — at their own cultural entrance level."

Machlis suggested that census data is a classic source for the cultural information on your local scene. Such data can tell you what cultural groups you are dealing with — by sex, by income, by living area, by nationality, and so forth. There is no greater cross-cultural challenge to be faced than the one that is inherent in the United States today, Machlis said. The divisions are deep and cover an enormous range of cultures.

"Consider," he said, "the great cultural gap that exists between some stuffy 25-year-old interpreter and an audience of video game freaks." Then multiply this seemingly frivolous disparity by scores of gaps that occur among urban poor, blue collar, white collar, professional, Southern, Northern, Mexican, black, and all the rest of the pieces that make up the U.S. cultural patchwork. "There is no need to include Japanese, Germans, French, and the rest of the nationalities to define our culture gap problems and opportunities," Machlis said, "but these other nations and their tourists provide us with a growing visitor audience and a growing need for understanding."

He closed by describing one proposed Park Service solution to the interpretation of Ellis Island — to invite each of the national and ethnic groups who had entered the U.S. there in great numbers to supply its own interpretation of what Ellis Island meant to those forebears. "It works out to a sort of market basket approach," he said. "The visitor can browse through the various ideas presented and respond to those that make a connection with his own experience."

And then Machlis tacked on a throw-away line that could serve as the subject for an entire workshop. "Perhaps," he said, "interpreters should be *catalysts* for, rather than *definers* of, the public myths."