

# Where the Mind Runs Free: Observations of An Interpreter

Aural voyeurism (eavesdropping) is not deemed proper social behavior, but at times it can provide valuable insights. So the overheard comments of a couple at Dinosaur National Monument brought a lesson beyond what social research in parks could do.

The couple was viewing activities at the Quarry Visitor Center, where paleontologists were painstakingly exposing the spectacular fossil remains of a dozen species of dinosaurs and turtles.

"Well," said one, "if it is a hoax, it's sure an impressive one."

That comment, honest and revealing, bespoke the challenges to education in parks. What is said by interpreters is not necessarily what is heard; what is heard is not necessarily what is understood; and what is understood is not necessarily what is embraced within one's belief system. That colors the interpreters' strategies. "The canny art of intellectual temptation" is how Jerome S. Bruner described effective teaching — offering a tantalizing buffet and letting individuals decide for themselves which morsels they wish to taste.

As that couple revealed, the barriers to learning are real and formidable. "From our earliest years," observes Marilyn Ferguson, "we are seduced into a system of beliefs that becomes so inextricably braided into our experience that we cannot tell culture from nature." In a thousand ways, schools, movies, news, and families shape our constructs of reality. We accept most without questions and find ourselves comfortable with information that confirms our particular sense of reality. We are discomfited by what does not. Thus it is natural that many who visit parks seek to affirm their own concepts of history and the workings of nature. They seek corroboration, and it is most natural that they do.

But for decades now, a powerful transformation has been at work. As with the turning of an aircraft carrier, the changes have come without fanfare and with inexorable force. Based upon sound research, and using revelation as the fulcrum of learning, interpretation has profoundly shaped the expectations of travelers. This change in expectations cannot be overstated. At Hawaii Volcanoes NP, visitors can witness examples of evolution more dramatic than anything Darwin found in the Galapagos Islands. At Cape Cod National Seashore, travelers may discover that the Pilgrims, so often portrayed in heroic posture, possessed their ugly side. At Salinas Pueblo Missions National Monument, the story of missions and the missionary process reveals both sublime intent and manipulation of the indigenous people.

What people are discovering, then, is often at odds with their past training. For some this is unpleasant, and the gates to thinking close. For this shrinking minority, parks should display signs announcing: "Warning - Dangerous Ideas Ahead." But for others, this is the removal of a fog. They have embraced Carl Sagan's discovery: "We do not advance the human cause by refusing to consider ideas that make us frightened."

A legion of travelers now realizes the extent to which it has been taken in by an educational system; thus,

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the excitement with which parks are approached. Where once there was only light pleasure, blinders can be removed. Out of the tangible resources of parks, abetted by research and the building of extraordinary information bases, have risen intellectual resources – the most powerful resources of all.

“Since I first gained the use of reason,” penned Juana Ines de la Cruz, “my inclination toward learning has been so violent and strong that neither the scoldings of other people . . . nor my own reflections . . . have been able to stop this natural impulse.” The aspirations of Cruz, expressed in 1691, speak of opportunities recognized on an unprecedented scale. The “flight of the unfettered mind” is there, for those who seek it.

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