

Listening to the Landscape: Interpretive Planning for Ecological Literacy

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Abstract

Interpretation is a specialized communication process designed to help connect people with their heritage through first-hand experience with the object, artefact, or landscape. As such, it is a powerful tool for developing ecological literacy. However, interpretation could play a stronger role in nurturing ecological literacy, particularly at the bioregional level. A landscape approach to interpretive planning is positioned as one pathway to an ecological literacy, which seeks to encourage an informed, meaningful, and action-oriented connection to all life. The paper argues for an open and inclusive approach to interpretive planning which seeks to respect the needs of human and more-than-human inhabitants in an effort to build on the connective potential of interpretation to home-place. Four guiding principles to a landscape approach to interpretive planning are presented.

Résumé

L'interprétation abstraite est un processus spécialisé conçu pour aider les gens à s'attacher à leur patrimoine à la faveur d'une expérience pratique avec l'objet, l'artefact ou le paysage. Comme telle, elle constitue un puissant outil pour développer le savoir écologique. Cependant, l'interprétation pourrait favoriser davantage le savoir écologique, notamment à l'échelon biorégional. La démarche axée sur l'écopaysage de la planification interprétative est positionnée comme une voie vers le savoir écologique qui cherche à promouvoir des rapports avisés, importants et pragmatiques avec toutes les formes de vie. Cet article prône une approche ouverte et inclusive de la planification interprétative dans le respect des besoins des habitants humains et suprahumains afin de bâtir le potentiel connectif de l'interprétation du chez-soi. Il présente quatre principes directeurs sur l'approche écopaysage de la planification interprétative.

Interpretation is a specialized communication process designed to help people understand, appreciate, and connect with cultural, historical, and natural heritage. In the words of Freeman Tilden (1977), it is “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information” (p. 8). In North America, the original purpose of interpretation was to enhance the experience of visitors to

national parks. Interpretation is now widely recognized as an important protected area management tool aiding visitor management as well as developing support for agency goals (Butler, 1993; Heron-Promaine, 1998; Sharpe, 1982; Wolfe, 1997). As an effective educational medium, interpretation helps visitors understand management practices such as prescribed burns and closed trails.

Interpretation has applications beyond protected area management as well. For example, interpretation is recognized as having the potential to contribute to the management of nature-based tourism (Bramwell & Lane, 1993; Orams 1996). On a more emotional and ethical level, effective interpretation can lead to greater appreciation and enhanced connection with place—a connection that ideally leads to support for heritage conservation in general (Pierssené, 1999; Uzzell, 1996). Related to sense of place and identity, interpretation is increasingly becoming a tool used by communities to celebrate and share their local heritage (Binks, 1989; Carter, 2001; Clifford 2000; Pierssené, 1999; Tabata, 1989).

In sum, interpretation can be used to achieve a wide variety of goals. Keeping Tilden's (1977) definition in mind, and considering its roots as a way to connect humans with the rest of nature, the broadest purpose of interpretation can be said to be the development of ecologically literate citizens. The aim of this paper is to explore the potential role of the interpretive planning process in this broadest of purposes: advancing ecological literacy.

Ecological Literacy Defined

The concept “ecological literacy” is widely defined and its conceptualization remains the subject of debate. Some definitions focus primarily on acquisition of cognitive skills. For example, RELATE (2001) states that ecological literacy is the ability to “comprehend and critically evaluate basic principles which govern natural systems; linkages among living organisms and the physical environment, and consequences of human activity on natural systems” (first paragraph). A strict focus on the cognitive dimension could imply that this form of literacy is gained via reading about ecology. Others believe, however, that it requires first-hand experience with the more-than-human world. Golley (1998) comments that nurturing ecological literacy requires experiences that:

emphasize feeling the landscape through all the senses. . . . experience is the trigger for environmental literacy. It ignites curiosity and tests the muscles. It teaches us that we live in a world that is not of human making, that does not play by human rules. (p. x)

Along this line of thought, Snyder (1990) suggests that a relationship with the earth must “take place in a place, and it must be grounded in information and experience” (p. 18). Furthermore, it is through direct experience and personal

internalization of ecological knowledge that people understand what the information means in one's own life (Van Matre, 1990). This personal connection is known to be a key determinant of ecologically responsible action.

Other conceptualizations expand upon cognitive and affective dimensions to address action competency, namely the behavioural skills required to apply ecological principles. For example, the Center for Ecological Literacy in Berkeley California describes being ecologically literate as, "understanding the basic principles of ecology and being able to embody them in the daily life of human communities" (Capra, 1999, p. 2).

Similarly, Stables and Bishop (2001) caution against narrow conceptualizations of ecological literacy that imply the ability to read and write about the earth rather than accepting the landscape as text where the learner is actively engaged in reading (comprehending) and writing (acting upon) the landscape itself.

Drawing upon the literacy debate in languages and literacy studies, and specifically on Williams and Snipper's tripartite distinctions (functional-cultural-critical) of language literacy, Stables (1998) described three types of environmental literacies:

- functional: ability to understand ecological "facts" and to understand the landscape in biophysical terms;
- cultural: ability to comprehend the cultural significance of natural images and to be able to grasp human dimensions of landscapes; and
- critical: ability to actively explore the significance and meaning of one's environment to self and others, and to develop an understanding of how to contribute to environmental change through action.

According to Stables and Bishop (2001), effective environmental action requires critical environmental literacy, which in turn is dependent upon both functional and cultural literacies. Furthermore, bioregionalists suggest that ecological action is most powerful if the text that one is able to comprehend functionally, culturally, and critically is one's home-place (Aberley, 1993; Andruss, Plant, Plant, & Wright, 1990; Snyder, 1990). Reinforcing an experiential place-based conception of ecological literacy is Orr's (1992) statement that ecologically literate people "know how to live well in their places" (p. 1). In other words, one desired outcome of ecological literacy is the development of sustainable communities, where, "What is sustained in a sustainable community is not economic growth, development, market share, or competitive advantage, but the entire web of life on which our long-term survival depends" (Capra, 1999, p. 1). Thus, ecological literacy involves much more than just the ability to read about the environment: it also requires the ability to interpret the stories of the landscape. To move from individual comprehension to sustainable community requires the sharing of individual ecological wisdoms through all forms of human expression including (but not

limited to) written language, oral traditions, dance, music, and the art of sustainable living.

While it is acknowledged that ecological literacy can apply to general issues (such as climate change), this paper is concerned with the development of what might be termed a bioregional ecological literacy. For the purposes of this paper, an ecologically literate citizen in a bioregional sense is defined as someone who knows about, cares for, and acts on behalf of the cultural and ecological integrity of their home-place. Ecological literacy has no endpoint. Rather, it is an active engagement with place, an ongoing dialogue with place, and it is nurtured through celebration of place. The question can then be asked: is interpretation doing enough in terms of fostering ecological literacy? This paper argues that more could be done in this regard and suggests that interpretive planning through a landscape approach is one pathway to achieving this goal. Four guiding principles of this approach are offered and discussed with reference to practical examples.

A local focus is not meant to exclude the importance of caring for places beyond home. However, the majority of interpretive studies have focused on visitors and the impact of their interpreted experiences. This article explores a topic of equal importance, yet one which has received limited attention in literature, that is, interpretive planning and its potential to contribute to bioregional ecological literacy.

Ecological Literacy and a Compassionate Sense of Place

A number of the ideas presented in this paper are supported by the concept of a “compassionate sense of Place.” The use of the term loosely parallels Næss’ (1989) conception of Self-realization in which an upper case Self denotes a striving to connect with all life. Much of the basis for a compassionate sense of Place rests with making a connection to the “other” in a way that strives to reduce boundaries. A variety of traditions in religion and moral philosophy call for us to lessen the symbolic distance between self and other, and it is in this context that compassion takes on its intention. As expressed by Haluza-DeLay and Cuthbertson (2000):

It is such an understanding of compassion and its ability to connect self and other as conceptually inseparable that holds the potential for developing another, alternative sense of place, a sense of place in which individuals, places, nature and city are bound up together in a more fluid and inclusive relationship than the rather rigid and dichotomized places that currently exist in the Western cultural mindscape. Such an understanding necessarily invokes an attempt to feel—as much as may be possible—as if one were the “other.” (p. 20)

Thus, a compassionate sense of Place is an attempt at inclusivity in the development of place-meaning, where physical landscape, human and the more-than-human co-create the value and significance of place.

Another major component of a compassionate sense of Place is one's relationship to the connectedness of places. While a profound understanding of, and attachment to, a particular locale is a worthy pursuit, a need to work towards an identification—at least on some level—with all places is required to complete the circle. It was this felt need to identify with something larger which inspired Aberley (1993) to assert:

My need now is for my own "sense of place" which depends not simply on discovering my own neighbourhood, community or local region, but upon seeing the relationship of my own local places to every other place on the planet. I need a sense of my whole planet, of my continent, and the major sub-parts of my continent in order to see how my local places are parts of these wider regions of natural life and living. (p. 53)

What is at issue in this paper is the complementary tension between the local and the global qualities of place. Neither should be sacrificed for the other nor take precedence. Rather, there should be an allowance for one to slide fluidly along a continuum, focusing as needed toward one end or the other, but not losing sight of the connection among places nor the unique character of a particular place. It is this inclusive, connected perspective which ultimately describes a compassionate sense of Place.

The connection between this understanding of place and Stables' critical literacy becomes more apparent when one considers the implications of a recognized co-construction of place meaning. The interconnectedness of these contributors suggests a bond which compels us to respect and attend to the other meaning givers, that is, to act on behalf of others to ensure a continuation of their contribution. In short, the very identity of any individual in a particular place depends on the continuous re-construction of that individual by the rest of the living and non-living elements of that place.

In this sense, there are also conceptual nuances which affect attempts to combine the usage of cultural integrity and ecological integrity as interdependent. From the perspective of a compassionate sense of Place, in order for a (human) culture to be filled with integrity, in addition to whatever else it is, the culture must be ecologically inclusive. The reverse, then, is also true. A substantive ecological integrity must make room for the sensitive, meaningful, direct-contact interactions of humanity with the rest of nature. A compassionate sense of Place rejects the desire to rank culture and ecology; they are in some ways merely useful tools of language with which to describe parts of a whole.

For the purposes of this paper, a compassionate sense of Place takes on these qualities of connection and co-construction of meaning while focusing on the potential of the interpretive planning process to unite individuals from a bioregional perspective. In this vein, a "compassionate" planning process seeks to encourage an articulation of a home-place in ways that speak to both the immediacy and specialness of place as well as connecting all life through

that place. If, as Relph (1976) has argued, place is the junction between humans and nature, a compassionate sense of Place is, at least in part, “the perfect meeting ground for a human understanding of other lives” (Cuthbertson, 1999, p. 17).

Interpretive Planning as One Pathway to Ecological Literacy

From the beginning, the interpretation profession has been seen as a way to help people understand their place in this world. Successful interpretation is widely recognized as a catalyst to a life-long interest in heritage. Indeed many practitioners and participants will attest to the power of interpretation: experiencing the “real thing” through the aid of a skillful and passionate interpreter can lead to magical moments. However, the long-term impact of these magical moments in terms of nurturing ecological literacy remains unknown and requires further evaluation (Knapp, 1998; Knapp & Poff, 2001; Stewart & Kirby, 1998).

What we do know from research in environmental education is that development of ecological literacy, particularly with regard to ecologically responsible behaviour, is that it is a complicated and multifaceted process. Although it was once believed to be a simple linear progression from awareness to understanding to action, studies now indicate that numerous factors beyond knowledge of issues comes into play. For example, knowledge of action strategies, action competency, sensitivity (through first-hand experiences), ownership of the issue, sense of empowerment, reinforcement, and situational factors all come into play (Hungerford & Volk, 1990; Orr, 1994; Wisconsin Centre for Environmental Education, 1997). Furthermore, ecological literacy will not be achieved as the result of a single exposure to ecological wisdoms—whether that exposure be conceptually or experientially-based. Thus achievement of ecological literacy takes time and has many possible pathways.

Interpretive experiences obviously have a role to play. However, these tend to be singular events rather than a series of more formal learning experiences. In addition, interactions between the visitor and the interpreter (whether directly or indirectly) tend to occur over a short period of time. A typical exposure might involve a one to two-hour guided walk, a campfire program, an exploration of a visitor centre, or a stroll down a self-guided trail. Therefore, while the interpretive experience can be a powerful catalyst, interpretation by itself has a limited capacity to develop ecological literacy.

In contrast, the interpretive planning process is an event that requires more sustained interaction with a place and with the people involved in the planning. As such, it has the potential to be an important pathway toward ecological literacy. We believe that harnessing this potential however, will require a transformation in current interpretive planning models toward a more dynamic and participatory landscape approach.

Taking a Landscape Approach to Interpretive Planning

Landscapes are fluid and ever-changing. According to landscape ecologists, landscapes can only be understood as holistic entities—complex, open, dynamic mosaics—rather than as collections of isolated static resources (Zonneveld & Forman, 1990). Interconnectedness of form, function, and life is central to the landscape perspective. Furthermore, a landscape perspective embraces both cultural and ecological dimensions thereby dissolving the artificial separation of humans from nature. While it is true that we are all linked to landscapes, these linkages are commonly broken or forgotten under the weight of concrete, the blur of schedules, the bombardment of electronic messages, human-centered language, and our seemingly ceaseless desire for “things.”

Numerous authors from a diverse range of disciplines including conservation biology, protected areas management, and environmental education state the need for paradigmatic change in order to stop rapid alteration and destruction of wild places (Brunkhorst & Rollings, 1999; Grumbine, 1997; Orr, 1994). One of these fundamental changes is the reversal of the physical and psychological detachment of humans from the more-than-human world. At the most basic level, we need to get reconnected, for it is disconnection from our place in nature that is at the root of ecological illiteracy. A landscape approach to interpretive planning has the potential to help people rediscover, validate, and celebrate landscape connections. In doing so, the interpretive planning process will complement effective interpretive products in developing ecological literacy. What then, is a landscape approach to interpretive planning?

A landscape approach to interpretive planning is based on respect for the inherent ecological and cultural integrity of a place. A landscape approach to interpretation seeks to protect landscape health. In order to meet this objective it is necessary to listen to the landscape where the landscape is respected as a dynamic, wholistic community of life. Listening to the landscape means active participation with home-place to learn its stories. Listening to the landscape will tell us:

- who the sensitive community members are;
- what the needs of the local inhabitants are;
- what the key ecological processes are;
- where the fragile areas are;
- what is possible in a given location; and
- what stories should be told.

Importantly, listening to the landscape also involves listening to each other to keep alive the stories of a place, to venerate cherished features, and to increase awareness of shared responsibilities.

A landscape approach brings together both folk knowledge and scientific understanding of a place, thereby integrating socially constructed meanings and ecological realities. It harmonizes with the dynamic nature of the landscape and thus is open to its emergent properties. The planning process is guided by systems thinking: relationships, continuity, and context. Outcomes complement agency goals but are not necessarily limited by them. In other words, the planning process is open to the changing needs of community members. Thus a landscape approach is a dynamic, cyclical, creative process that fosters respect for life and empowers local people to foster a relationship with home-place by bringing their voices to the forefront of the interpretive planning process.

Guiding Principles

Four guiding principles of a landscape approach to interpretive planning are presented. These principles are informed primarily by the disciplines of landscape ecology, bioregionalism, and deep ecology. They are also informed by extensive case study research on excellence in small protected area management where the importance of enhancing landscape linkages through interpretation and environmental education was fundamental to successful stewardship.

A Landscape Approach to Interpretive Planning Requires that Protection of Ecological Integrity is Explicitly Stated and Guides All Aspects of the Planning Process

If interpretive planning is to contribute toward a bioregional ecological literacy, the planning process itself should reflect an understanding of, and concern for, the health of the landscape being interpreted. In this way, there will be a greater chance of provoking people into new ways of relating and responding to the animate world.

Orr (1992) stated that “all education is environmental education” (p. 90) referring to the fact that what we say and do, as well as what we don’t say and do as educators, speaks to our relationship with nature. This idea has important implications for the creation of interpretive products and experiences. Actions, images, and words implicitly and explicitly reflect the planners’ relationship with home-place, as well as the interpretive organization’s priorities and long-term goals. As noted by Edwards (1979), “Everything, from building design to the kind of print on a label, is saying something—perhaps silently—that is part of the total message” (p. 67). In his reflection on changes that need to occur in education, Jickling (2001) comments that environmental educators:

... should invite teachers and others to re-imagine the language needed to express the values we sense in the larger living world. We should ask, "What kinds of concepts/words do we need?" Many societal images portray nature as a commodity, a resource, or an obstacle, and in so doing, conceal implicit assumptions about human/nature relationships. To examine these relationships we might ask, "What are the prevalent cultural assumptions? How might they be revealed, examined and evaluated? How are they manifest in controversial issues? What would the alternatives be? What new metaphors do we need? How could they be made concrete?" (p. 187-188)

Similar questions could be asked of the interpretive planning process.

The design and implementation phases are sensible times to be cognizant of our cultural assumptions ensuring a more egalitarian relationship with all members of a bioregion. Here careful attention should be given to ensure that interpretive activities and structures do not interfere with the ability of the local ecology to sustain itself. Where necessary, interpretative structures and activities should be designed to undo past damage (for examples of architecture which embody such ecological design principles, see mcdonough.com). Furthermore, all activities and structures should be sensitive to the cultural and spiritual dimensions of the landscape to facilitate responsible interactions.

Language plays a fundamental role in our relationship with the animate landscape acting as either a barrier or gateway to ecological literacy (Abram, 1996). Thus an explicit goal of the interpretive planning should be the deliberate use of words that help transcend human-centred thinking. We need to reflect upon the impact of language used in planning models, during the planning discourse, and of course pay careful attention to the language used in the actual interpretive service. For example, consider the different emotions and associations elicited by the word "resource" versus the word "life." The former appears to entrench a subservient position of the more-than-human by modernist cultures while the latter seems to affirm a shared sense of community, one which encourages a recognition of the intrinsic value of "other."

We also need to think about the impact that our words have on cultural integrity. Language has the capacity to damage or validate the social fabric of a landscape. Anecdotal evidence of this power was witnessed by one of the authors of this paper in her encounter with a Native elder. The elder's pain and sadness was clear in describing his shock at seeing an interpretive exhibit that referred to his people in the past tense.

Choosing more appropriate language will require a conscious effort. As Donald Michael (1995) comments:

Our conventional ways of thinking and speaking about language and social reality are inadequate for coping with our current circumstances. . . . Our semantic baggage from past experience is not matched to a reality of systemic interactions, circular feedback processes, nonlinearity, or multiple causation and outcomes.

Implicitly, our conventional language relates us to a world of linear relationships, simple cause and effects . . . But this is not the world we live in. (p. 462-463)

Through deliberate choice of words and images, and careful attention to the ecological and cultural impacts of actions, the capacity for interpretive planning to enhance ecological literacy is increased.

Extensive case study research on small protected area management (Curthoys Brown, 1995) shows that making ecological integrity a priority has been central to successful stewardship. An example of an ecosystem health-first approach was seen at the Nature Conservancy's Ramsey Canyon Preserve (RCP) Site. At this site, the needs of the landscape and its inhabitants guide all management actions: "listening to the landscape" is not just a poetic phrase. For example, the stewards are truly tuned into what the birds are saying, and accordingly, visitor activities (such as availability and location of interpretive trails) are guided by the needs of these local inhabitants. The Ramsey Canyon Preserve shows that a stewardship approach that is both respectful of landscape health and respectful of people can foster humility in preserve visitors. Visitors "learn to consider a visit to this site a privilege rather than a right, and become willing to place the needs of canyon life above their wants" (p. 36, Curthoys, 1998).

Protected area organizations across Canada, including Parks Canada Agency (2000), The Nature Conservancy of Canada, and numerous land trusts are giving ecological integrity a greater priority in their management efforts.

In summary, taking a landscape approach to interpretive planning means that protection of ecological integrity is in the forefront of decision-making and this philosophy is reflected in language, images, and actions. In giving the necessary attention to ecological integrity, we enable the physical landscape and its more-than-human inhabitants to co-create the value and significance of place.

A Landscape Approach to Interpretive Planning is Founded on an Inclusive and Wholistic Conceptualization of "Expert" Knowledge

The interpretive planning process is a prime opportunity to engage people in a dialogue with and about their home-place. The word "dialogue" implies sharing information, exploring ideas, openness to emergent properties that flow from creative interactions, and the freedom not to be an expert. The word "dialogue" also implies storytelling, for people tend to share information in story format. Storytelling is an important way of raising awareness of place into our everyday consciousness: at times even to the level of reverence (Strauss, 1996). Sheridan (2001) goes further to suggest that storytelling is a necessary vehicle for reanimating the landscape. Abram (1996) articulates well the importance of stories, place, and their relationship to both storyteller and listener:

The telling of stories, like singing and praying, would seem to be an almost ceremonial act, an ancient and necessary mode of speech that tends the earthly rootedness of human language. For narrated events . . . always happen *somewhere*. And for an oral culture, that locus is never merely incidental to those occurrences. The events belong, as it were, to the place, and to tell the story of those events is to let the place speak through the telling. (p. 163)

Collaborative planning frameworks encourage dialogue and sharing stories about place, and more specifically, sharing those stories in place. Movement toward more inclusive interpretive planning is occurring (Carter, 2001; Pierrsené, 1999; Taylor 1998); however, many models still imply a predominantly expert-driven process with reliance upon scientific information. Those that are shifting away from prescriptive planning models, still imply some degree of exclusivity of involvement. Collaboration in these models often refers to “stakeholders,” “organizations,” or classifiable individuals and groups rather than unaffiliated people, regular folk.

Reflection on the meaning of expert knowledge is key to interpretive planning that seeks to advance ecological literacy. Expert knowledge is typically equated with scientific knowledge. Yet science has traditionally shied away from the intangible, from things that are not easily categorized and quantified, and from areas of emotional attachment. Thus, while science adds a significant layer of meaning to the interpretive message, at best it can only provide limited insight into local distinctiveness. It is from local residents (including the interpretive staff) that the subtleties, realities, and power of a place will be learned. As Neil Diment (1998) suggested, we need to “put some of ourselves” (p. 3) into interpretive products.

This aspect of the interpretive planning process has particular relevance for the development of cultural ecological literacy for it allows integration of other ways of knowing, reading, and writing the landscape. And as Stables and Bishop (2001) note:

An environmental education which runs independently of an exploration of cultural, aesthetic, personal and even irrational views of the environment will prove insufficient to our needs, as it will harness not “hearts and minds” but merely part of the mind, in a limited range of contexts, and with a limited view of the Earth as essentially mechanical and liable to breakdown (p. 96)

Furthermore, if science is the sole source of information, the interpretive message becomes generic and diluted. Consider the well-known saying within conservation circles: “wetlands are not wastelands.” It is an important message, to be sure, yet alone its power to get people to take notice and to care is diminished. The abstract principles of ecological science are partially captured, but their relation to place remains isolated and detached. Depth of meaning is added to this significant ecological wisdom when combined with sense of place information (“This is the place where “I remember when we “We are worried that . . .”). Conversely, providing

local perspectives alone would reduce development of a compassionate sense of Place. An inclusive process of sharing stories will empower local people through the validation and celebration of local distinctiveness. The message itself will be authentic to the place, yet relevant to the visitor. Thus it is the combination of local truths (“this place is important to our community because . . .”) with scientific truths (“this place is important to you because . . .”) that is required to advance ecological literacy.

An interpretive planning approach founded on an inclusive and wholistic conceptualization of “expert” knowledge stimulates ongoing dialogue with home-place. Reaching out and sharing stories is an important way to make our connections to home tangible. This benefit of an inclusive approach to interpretive planning is expanded upon in the third principle.

A Landscape Approach to Interpretive Planning Strives to Facilitate Creative Expressions of Intangible Connections to Home-Place

Interpretive planning is an opportunity to encourage grassroot, artist initiatives that help people articulate local meanings. The above principle addressed the value of sharing stories about home-place during the planning process. Dialogue may flow easily about concrete experiences (sighting a great blue heron at the local pond, for instance). Sometimes, however, we have difficulty expressing the intangible: When does a place become home? What meanings do we give to the abstractions cultural and ecological integrity in relation to our home-place? What in our community do we care about? How do we want visitors to our community to know us? If interpretive planning is to encourage community members in a critical engagement and celebration of their bioregion, these intangibles need to be explored (Curthoys & Clark, 2002). Here the power of art comes into play. According to Butala (1995):

Even those who have always lived there, who know the place intimately with their bodies and their senses, usually are not conscious of minute details about it, and when a “poet” (I use the term to include prose writers, referring only to a certain sensibility) describes the place down to these minute details, they’re astonished to have these particulars brought to light, gratified to have such subtleties acknowledged and pleased to be able to say that these are things they’ve always known. They talk with one another, reiterating the details identified by the writer; they vie with one another to go even farther, to bring to light more particularities, to extend those already described. Their place gains a solidity, a dignity and an importance to those who call it home that it lacked before, and couldn’t have otherwise acquired. (p. 22)

Sue Clifford (2000) of the British organization Common Ground also comments on the power of art stating that, “Often we have journeyed with the arts to work through new ideas for exploring emotional attachment and expressing the intangible” (p. 10). Examples include: an anthology of poetry

on local rivers; river carols sung by a community choir; asking a storyteller to research and tell stories about a particular river; and a concert conducted beside a river during the dawn chorus of birds.

The significance of both art and community involvement was demonstrated at another example of excellence in small protected area management: the Fairfield Osborne Preserve. Local community members donated money, time, and artist talents in the creation of a home-grown nature centre. The preserve manager commented that not only did the contributors “share a piece of their heart” with the new building, but through their involvement, the 22 year-old nature sanctuary “became real” with its gained recognition as a vital part of the community (Curthoys Brown, 1995).

In summary, interpretive planning that encourages people to find creative ways to explore and express their connections to home-place will contribute toward critical ecological literacy. However, as discussed below, application of the former three principles all take time.

A Landscape Approach to Interpretive Planning Requires Time and Flexibility

A planning process that is open to dynamic landscape possibilities and that invites community members to reflect and share their stories, must itself be flexible. Understanding the ecology of home-place, taking proactive steps to protect ecological integrity, engaging community members in an ongoing dialogue with their bioregion, and encouraging people to find creative ways to celebrate connections to home-place are all time-consuming endeavors. Like other forms of adaptive and collaborative planning, a landscape approach to interpretive planning is more time-consuming than prescriptive planning (Lister & Kay, 2000). It requires slowing down so that we can comprehend what the landscape has to say. It requires flexible schedules that allow people the time they need to get engaged in the process and to express themselves in ways that they feel comfortable. Furthermore, schedules need to be adaptive to the creative process, rather than the creative process being limited to meeting strict timelines.

Reflecting on the need to take time in discovering local distinctiveness, Clifford (2000) states that, “Listening and looking can reveal much. Lounging can be an important way of re-engaging with the things we take for granted, of savouring our own knowledge, and the interest someone else takes in the stories we have to tell” (p. 10).

The suggested planning process encourages people to slow down, to take time to reflect on what their community means to them, and to take notice of the animate world around them that typically exists as a mere backdrop to daily life. In a world of rushing, ever-increasing commitments, and tight budgets, asking folks to slow down and asking administrative bodies to permit flexible, organic planning processes is perhaps the greatest challenge of a landscape approach to interpretive planning, yet it may be

essential to nurturing a bioregional ecological literacy. Furthermore, it may offer one of the greatest rewards interpretation has to offer communities that are in search of sustainability.

Conclusion

If experience, knowledge, and action are to become the result of good interpretive products, the planning processes must be an intentional reflection of the goal to reveal meaning and relationships. The four principles presented in this paper are based on the assumption that at every step in the interpretive planning process there is an opportunity to model respect for life forms and processes, to strengthen community ties, to empower local residents to take part in a celebration of their home-place, and to connect to all life through an understanding of place in its wholeness. The approach suggested here calls for an appreciation of an organic design which requires organizational flexibility, greater inclusivity of local residents—both human and the more-than-human—and the courage to set an open agenda with respect to time and creativity. Achieving bioregional ecological literacy is not a sequential, linear process, but rather a complex endeavour with numerous pathways and modes of expression. The process outlined here is one such pathway.

It is recognized that in the application of any planning approach, the limitations in budget, timelines, and organizational goals will have real implications for actualizing the results envisioned at the outset. For the guidelines sketched out here, the profiles of such limitations can become larger. Indeed, engaging the four principles discussed above could appear to be more utopian than practical. However, while this type of planning process breaks away from traditional approaches, it is meant to complement existing processes rather than replace them. The benefits of more traditional planning processes are established and are by and large effective. Our purpose here has been to stimulate discussion which would contribute to an expansion of the possibilities in how interpretive planning is addressed in its early stages. In the end, what is being asked is for agency administrators and planners to consider the extent to which these principles might be applied within the context of their own work. Attempting to incorporate an open, inclusive, and critical perspective with respect to the issues raised here may allow for the kinds of experimentation and creativity that nurtures a bioregional ecological literacy, one which connects the cultural and the ecological, two components of one nature.

Notes on Contributors

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