Visitor Interests and the Dynamics of Interpreter-Visitor Conversations in National Parks

INSTITUTE FOR Learning Innovation

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project goals:

iSWOOP is a multi-year, multi-focus project, bringing national park-based research to visitors through innovative scientist-park ranger collaborations.

As part of this study, researchers at ILI set out to understand:

• how visitor interests emerge during interpreter-facilitated conversations in national parks
• how visitor interests relate to topics and facilitation strategies used by interpreters
• to what degree interactions might spark or reinforce ongoing interests.

We also focused our work on understanding interpreter facilitation techniques that seem more or less effective at connecting visitor interests and current park science.

research design:

This exploratory study sought to, through observation, characterize interpreter-visitor interactions. To do so, we focused on iSWOOP-trained interpreter roves at Carlsbad Caverns National Park during the 2016 summer season, and at Indiana Dunes National Recreation Area and Acadia National Park during the 2017 summer season.

Roves, the unstructured, informative sessions by which interpreters walk along park trails, were chosen as the ideal program type for observation. On roves, interpreters were able to freely engage with visitor groups in informal, free-choice learning sessions, utilizing iSWOOP imagery to engage and mediate the conversations.

Research occurred over a period of 15 days, 5 days at each site, resulting in 27 video observations
6 interpreters (1 male, 5 female) were shadowed as they engaged with visitors.
Observations of park visitors focused on those who were over the age of 18 years.
A total of 71 visitors were observed.

Conversation Styles

Through our analysis we noticed interpreter-visitor interactions took shape in the form of two primary conversation styles.

Linear Conversations

Characteristics

Three Phases:
1. Interpreters initiate control of the interaction by asking questions and topic of discussion.

2. Interpreters controlled the conversation by disseminating knowledge on a specific science subject. Interpreters maintain control by asking rhetorical or short-answer questions. iSWOOP resources are frequently used to maintain visitor interest.

3. Interpreters offered control to visitors, inviting questions and knowledge sharing.

5 of the 27
covnversations followed this pattern

Fluid Conversations

Characteristics

No Clear Phases, but Rather:

Conversation between the visitor and interpreter is shared. This conversation is characterized by the **back and forth** nature between the visitor and interpreter. Each conversation participant takes turns over who controlled the conversation.

The conversation may begin by either the visitor or interpreter inviting the other into a discussion. Conversation generally begins with a question posed to the other.

These types of interactions maybe an illustration of how both visitor and park-based interests can be shared.

19 of the 27
covnversations followed this pattern

analysis:

1. Review Conversations

2. Ethological Analysis

3. Map Conversations

affordances:

of linear conversations
• May be a more comfortable and familiar format for some interpreters and visitors.
• More opportunities to develop in-depth narratives about science, including stories about park-based research
• Potential to hold the visitor in conversation for a longer period of time.

of fluid conversations
• Maximizes opportunities to connect with and reinforce visitor interests.
• Potential for individualized conversations with more visitors due to the shorter nature of the conversations.
• Interpreters may have opportunities to learn from visitors' expertise.

limitations:

of linear conversations
• May limit visitor choice and control.
• My limit opportunities to connect with and reinforce visitor individual interests.
• Can lead to "contested conversations" when visitors are not willing to cede control to interpreters or have strong motivation to pursue their own interests in the conversation.

of fluid conversations
• May limit the ability of the interpreter to control and standardize content delivery.
• More difficult to develop in-depth narratives about science, such as stories about park-based research.
• Interactions can be short and may not focus on science content or address other educational goals.

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