

INTERPRETATION WORKSHOP: ISCA 2014 CONGRESS

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For many delegates, the Interpretation Workshop was one of the highlights of the International Show Caves Association (ISCA) Congress held at Jenolan Caves, New South Wales 2-9 November 2014. Facilitated by Maryanne Leigh from Acoustiguide of Australia and Cathie Plowman from the Australian Speleological Federation (ASF), topics ranged over a wide variety of interpretation experiences from around the world. The following is an overview of the ideas presented.

It was agreed that a cave is a living, dynamic museum, a precious resource that needs protection and interpretation. Visitors have different needs, expectations and cultural attitudes. Delivering responsible interpretation to satisfy visitor expectations and create memorable experience is therefore challenging. The cave tour route must be designed to facilitate the delivery of interpretation with platforms for groups to assemble and avoiding long narrow passages where interpretation is required.

SELF GUIDED TOUR via Handheld devices or Apps

For the preservation of the cave and the safety of the visitor, the cave must be carefully selected or purpose developed to accommodate a self-guided experience.

There was a variance in preference of experience depending upon cultural background; with one delegate reporting that English people preferred a “live” guide, whilst Dutch and Italians showed a preference for an audio guide.

Other delegates questioned whether audio guides were an option that visitors were requesting or was it the perception that self-guided meant “free”. Therefore should the term self-guided be removed?

In caves with long narrow passages, delivery of interpretation can be challenging when it comes to large groups running in a line. The forerunners get up close to the guide and hear everything but those at the rear can find it difficult to hear. There are group guiding technologies available – however presently these radio frequency technologies can be really useful for whisper quiet nature walks above ground, but this technology can be challenging inside a cave. Development of these technologies including booster transmitters could see this challenge averted in the coming years offering all visitors a near one-to-one experience with the guide’s voice straight into their ear.

There are many advantages to using other forms of standard MP3/MP4 multimedia guides in a cave including:

- Consistent delivery of accurate and quality information

- Catering for mass visitation or overflow during peak periods
- Catering for multilingual visitors – even when accompanied by a live guide.
- Provision of themed content options to cater for different levels of information: not one size fits all (e.g. kids’ tours, indigenous focus tours, above ground geology, hydrology, flora and fauna trails)
- Inclusion of expert commentary
- Inclusion of music and sound effects
- Possible expansion of content to incorporate images, videos or animations to demonstrate past events or creatures such as fossils.
- Provision of a different experience that may extend a stay or cater for repeat visitation after experiencing a “live” guide.
- Opportunity to use pre-recorded tours as a resource for guide training.
- Development of smartphone apps to expand the reach of content to include use off site and practically around the world. Pre-visit learning is very popular, and armchair tourism is equally as popular.
- Way finding
 - in the caves using iBeacon
 - and outdoors using GPS
- Use of pre-recorded technologies minimised the need for signage which maintains the integrity of the site.

LIVE GUIDE INTERPRETATION

Many delegates believed that the best tour guides were irreplaceable; they are master story tellers delivering and editing a compelling story. The personal interaction between guide and guest was a valuable addition to the experience and provided a sense of place. It was also a refreshing contrast to a world connected to digital experiences.

Selection and training of quality guides is imperative to successful delivery of “live” interpretation. These were hot topics of debate with various methods adopted in different countries.

Various pre requisites for a guide were tabled. These included a drug test, working with children clearance and first aid.

Pre selection of applicants:

- Initial telephone conversation was used as part of the interview process.
- Candidate asked to do a screen test and present a scenario of a common object.
- Young people selected and employed for 2-4 year period.

Training programs are varied but it was agreed that no one can be taught passion or people skills; these come from the heart. Training methodologies tabled included

- Classroom setting to deliver geology, biology, history.
- Trainee guide shadowed other guides. This could result in an issue of consistency.
- Competency tests applied at end of training
- Guide tool kit developed as a resource
- Payment of trainee guides varied. An alternative suggestion was the trainee guide host a tour for his family/friends.

GUIDING AS A CAREER

Dark Cave, Malaysia employed relevant science graduates, who combined research projects in the cave with tour guiding. A system of qualifying points was used to allocate time between research and guiding. This resulted in the cave being a desirable place to work with diversity of activities to keep the guides fresh and performance linked to productivity.

Guiding was perceived to be a life skill training that provided the development of skills in personal relationships and public speaking.

A system of staff hierarchy was advocated to encourage career advancement.

Different cultures placed different values on guiding as a profession. Remuneration varied between countries.

Professional development for guides included:

- Guide workshops on the strategies for delivering memorable experiences
- Road trips for guides to other attractions and caves
- Attendance at guide schools eg ACKMA gabfest, Savannah Guide school
- Organise guide meetings with regional guides
- Professional development is necessary to refresh and retain guides and avoid “boredom in paradise”.
- Guest feedback important eg www.tripadvisor.com.au
- Discussion of other interpretation methods.
- Cave websites.



Sasa Kennedy introducing her group to Jenolan caves.
Photo: Steve Bourne

Date claimer: ACKMA Guide School for Guides at Capricorn Caves, Queensland in 2016 will focus on interpretation and guide training. Everyone welcome.