

Interpretation for sustainable ecotourism

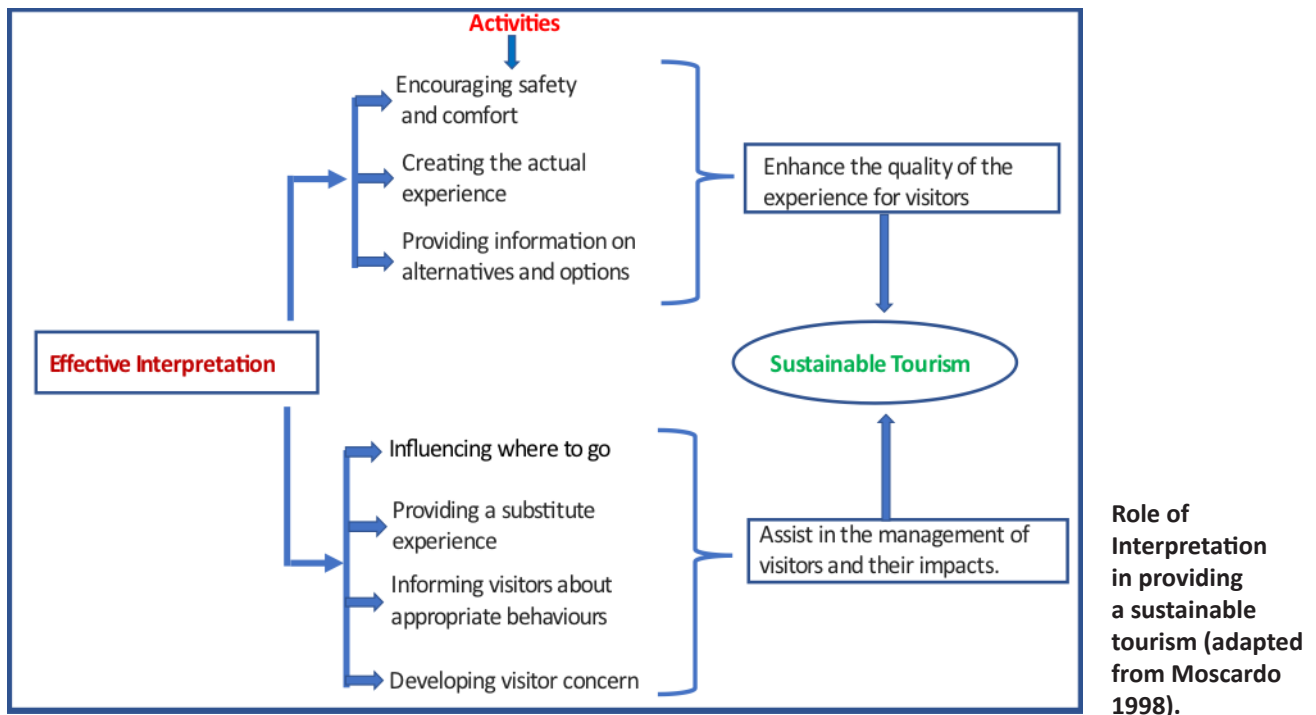
Tourism has become a major industry providing huge income and employment opportunity all over the world. The World Travel and Tourism Council calculated that tourism generated ₹13.2 lakh crore (US\$170 billion) or 5.8% of India's GDP and supported 32.1 million jobs in 2021. Tamil Nadu was one of the most visited tourist destination by both Indian and International tourists in 2021 with over 14 crore domestic visitors. Among various types of tourist places, forests and wildlife areas have become more popular and attractive. As a result, more and more pressures are built on the environment and forests which in turn lead to many negative impacts. Managers of such tourism sites face difficulties in managing the visitors against the increasing environmental damage and resort to taking harsh measures including closure of the site for the visitors partially or fully and temporarily or permanently.

Ecotourism is where both the visitors and the environment are supposedly benefitted making the programme a 'sustainable' one. The International Ecotourism Society (2015), defines Ecotourism as, "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education". As per this definition, interpretation has become the integral part of any ecotourism programme. Tilden (1977) defines interpretation as, "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 simple communication of factual information".

Interpretation has been recognised as an important solution to reduce negative impacts whilst also educating the visitors to achieve the goals of sustainable tourism development (Ballantyne et al. 2007). Forestell (1990) considers interpretation as a 'win-win' situation for environmental managers and tourists. According to Tubb (2003), the three key goals of interpretation are "knowledge gain and awareness increase, attitude change and behaviour modification". So, wherever the ecotourism programme is going on, there must be interpretation component to ensure its sustainability. Accordingly, the objectives of the interpretation programme are proposed by the proponents as follows:

Knudson et al. (1995) listed six objectives of interpretation indicating the wide scope of activity inherent in the concept.

1. to increase the visitor's understanding, awareness, and appreciation of nature, of heritage & of site resource.
2. to communicate messages relating to nature & culture, including natural & historical processes, ecological relationships, and human roles in the environment.
3. to involve people in nature and history through first hand (personal) experience with the natural and cultural environment.
4. to affect the behaviour and attitudes of the public concerning the wise use of natural resources, the preservation of cultural & natural heritage, and the respect & concern for the natural & cultural environment.
5. to provide an enjoyable and meaningful experience, and



6. to increase the public understanding & support for an agency's role, its management objectives, and its policies.

According to Moscardo (1998), an effective interpretation can contribute to sustainable tourism in two main ways: it can enhance the quality of the experience for visitors and assist in the management of visitors and their impacts. According to him, there are three ways that interpretation can contribute to the quality of visitors' experience, by providing information on alternatives and options; encouraging safety and comfort, and creating the actual experience. Similarly, there are four important ways communication can contribute to visitor management: influencing where visitors go; providing a substitute experience; informing visitors about appropriate behaviours; and developing visitor concern.

Powell et al. (2010) after reviewing 70 research articles on interpretation in tourism, categorized the outcomes under the following categories:

Satisfaction, Awareness, Knowledge, Attitudes, Behavioural Intentions, and Behaviour. They also categorised different activities / best practices that were followed to achieve the above outcomes based on their review.

Interpretive techniques for reaching the objectives

Motivation and Arousing Interest:

Interpretation cannot force people to change their behaviour, rather it seeks to persuade voluntary behaviour change. In order to prompt behaviour change, tourists must be convinced of the reasons why they should change. Providing examples of human activities that are harming the environment is an important mechanism for creating behaviour change motivation (Orams 1996). Arousing interest among the visitors on the object or the scene to be interpreted is prerequisite for detailed interpretation. This will make the visitors to pay more attention on the interpreter's talk or on the subject. This can be done by presenting thought-provoking questions to the visitors.

For example, one can present a question near crocodile enclosure in a zoo, 'why do these crocodiles keep their mouth open most of the times? Like to know more such interesting behaviours of the crocodiles?' Such questions certainly make the visitors to pay more attention on the subject. Paulraj (1992b) has explained various such techniques which arouse interest on the subject of interpretation.

Interpretation for neglected objects:

Many occasions the visitors pay more attentions on the subjects of their interest and pay no or little attention to many things which are of less attractive to them in a forest or in a zoo. But such neglected subjects may be of more ecological / environmental value. For example, most of the visitor neglect visiting or knowing about wild boars as it is common and not attractive. But if the visitors come to know about their important role in the ecosystem as 'ecosystem engineers' through proper interpretation, their negative thinking on these animals will certainly vanish. Interpretation on even small ants or a common tree could be made interesting by a good interpreter (Paulraj 2010, 2011). More such techniques are explained by Paulraj (1992a).

Media of Interpretation:

Selection and use of appropriate media for interpretation is of great importance. A good interpreter could select appropriate media for an effective interpretation. Recent technological advancements provide vast scopes for developing interactive methods of learning that are very effective in interpreting facts or information. Use of humour elements in interpretation seems to be effective and are enjoyed by visitors (Paulraj 2018).

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