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## Feature Stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>By</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commmemorating the South Asian Tsunami: Four Sites in Sri Lanka</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Stephanie Yuill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge to the Past</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Chris Kemmerer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation’s Role in Rebuilding Communities</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Maki Kitabayashi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting the Emotional Journey: From Hurt to Healing</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Janet Price</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to Live with Death</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Catherine Brew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It Isn’t Over Yet: Interpreting a Disaster</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Cyndi A. Cogbill</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Departments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Impressions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tsunami Memorial in Sri Lanka, by Stephanie Yuill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editor’s Desk</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Interpreting Disasters, by Paul Caputo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Frontline</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>The Red Carpet, by Kirk Carter Mona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Accommodating, by Bob Carter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep Interpretation</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>The Interpreter as Activist, by Will LaPage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commentary</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Interpreting Nature Centers to Japan and China, by Brent Evans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain Stories</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Story: A Human Universal, by Roger Riolo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAI Now</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>News from NAI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the President</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Up to the Task, by Amy Lethbridge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A memorial in Sri Lanka documents lives lost during the South Asian tsunami in 2004. Photo by Stephanie Yuill. See the story on page 6.
I arrived in South Korea Saturday, April 19, 2014, for NAI’s annual international conference. The country was still in shock and the early stages of grief after more than 300 people, most of them secondary school students, had died when a ferry capsized off the southern coast just three days earlier. The tragedy would lead to outrage over the negligent actions of the ferry’s crew—four of whom, including the captain, have since been charged with murder and 11 of whom have been indicted for abandoning the ship—and the resignation of prime minister Chung Hong-won, who took responsibility for the government’s slow and disorganized rescue and recovery operations. The ongoing investigation has been criticized for being at best, inept, and at worst, a purposeful cover-up.

In those early days immediately following the disaster, images of the sinking ferry played nonstop on every television—in hotel lobbies, in restaurants, and even on tour buses. Conference events that were intended to be extravagant celebrations put on by our hosts were either severely toned down or outright cancelled. One outdoor evening event, a cultural music demonstration, was halted about 10 minutes in when a local community member, clearly with nerves raw, showed up screaming at the top of his lungs. One of our Korean liaisons, Dr. Leo Tak, who has since passed away, sadly, took to the microphone to gently explain what was happening as our hosts tried to calm the community member down.

There is no rulebook for how communities are supposed to deal with tragedies—they are senseless and awful and sometimes there just is no peace that can be found. But if amidst the pain and the grieving, we can honor the lives that were lost and learn from the experience in some way, then it makes it possible for us to move on.

In South Korea, makeshift memorials to the victims of the ferry disaster have popped up in many locations. Some of these memorials may one day become permanent interpretive sites that tell the story of the lives that were lost and the events that transpired on April 16. This issue of Legacy looks at how interpretive sites around the world deal with natural or man-made tragedies—what to interpret, how to interpret, and in some cases, whether to interpret.

Reach NAI Deputy Director Paul Caputo at pcaputo@interpnet.com. Send letters to the editor intended for publication to legacy@interpnet.com.
To the editor:

Thank you very much for including an article in the July/August Legacy about the worth of hunters (“Healthy Habitat with Hunters,” by Scott Beam)! As I work for a state wildlife agency, and find myself as the only “interpreter” in my area, this is a topic I deal with on a regular basis. There is a large misconception that hunters are the “bad guys” when in fact many of them are the “good guys” helping to protect our resources. The majority of guzzler projects in our state are only accomplished by partnering organizations that are composed of mostly sportsmen wanting to protect game herd health. Great job Legacy on shining the light toward a controversial and overlooked topic.

Jennifer Waithman
Las Vegas, Nevada
Many can remember watching in disbelief as the fallout from the 2004 South Asian tsunami unfolded. Waves up to 21 feet high leveled communities and decimated populations in eight countries. Seven countries suffered some structural damage and sustained casualties. An overwhelming 46 countries felt the impacts through loss of life.

Six additional countries felt the physical impacts of the tsunami but fortunately had no loss of life. Six countries felt the physical impacts but fortunately had no loss of life.

Each country suffered in its own way beyond loss of life. Sri Lanka regressed into civil war as aid money was diverted into arms funding. In the Seychelles, damage was assessed at $30 million—equivalent to 14 percent of the government’s 2005 budget. In Aceh, Indonesia, more than 40 percent of locals lost their livelihoods.

In the ensuing decade, each country has also remembered in its own way. For some, it is memorial services held annually to commemorate the victims of the tsunami. For others it is permanent memorials built to serve as a lasting tribute to those who were swept to their deaths. Each memorial is as different as the country and community that built it.

With a death toll at 40,000 people, Sri Lanka was the second-worst-hit country in terms of loss of life. Over the years, a number of commemorations to the disaster have surfaced. This article looks at four of them; three of them are intentional, concrete structures and one is a series of poignant, not-so-deliberate reminders. Each person experiencing the different memorials will have a unique reaction. This article draws upon the writer’s own experiences to understand the messages and emotions associated with each.

**The Unintentional Commemoration**

Ten years later, driving from Tangalle to Colombo, the tsunami seems a distant past. For the most part, the road parallels the water’s edge and the
country’s relationship with the ocean is evident.

Fishermen still eke out a living from their boats and stick fisherman can be seen perched on their stilts a few feet from shore. Bustling tourist towns still attract surfers to the blue waters of the Indian Ocean. Life has gone on.

Over 600 miles of Sri Lanka’s shoreline was impacted when the tsunami hit. Approximately 27,000 fatalities were fishermen, and two-thirds of the nation’s fishing boats were wrecked. And while life has gone on, driving that road you cannot help but notice the tangible remnants of the tsunami.

Many are buildings that stood before the tsunami hit. Families lived in the houses, businessmen prospered in the stores, and tourists stayed in the hotels.

Occasionally, even a decade later, you might find a boat on the shore that had been overturned by the waves. Graves of victims lie in small cemeteries beside the highway. Intentional or not, they still serve as reminders to the magnitude of loss and suffering Sri Lanka experienced.

The Sri Lankan climate has taken its toll on these skeletons. Grasses and trees have overtaken yards and the humidity accelerates further decay. Perhaps it’s this observable marching of time that makes these unintended monuments so poignant. These shattered remnants are the land’s patina, scars of history that tell the story of what was before.

Queen of the Sea
Buildings are not the only remnants that commemorate the events of that terrible day in 2004. Scattered throughout the country are monuments that have been erected in the ensuing decade.

On Sunday, December 26, 2004, at 6:55 a.m., a local service train, the Queen of the Sea, left the capital city of Colombo, travelling down the southwestern coast. On board were upwards of 1,500 paid passengers and an unknown number of unpaid passengers.

At 9:30 a.m., as it neared the village of Peraliya, the first wave hit. Locals believing the train to be safe climbed on board or hid behind it. Ensuing waves toppled the train, crushing those on the outside and trapping those inside. An estimated 2,000 lives were lost.

Today, a graphic memorial depicts the loss of the Queen of the Sea (see “First Impressions,” pages 2–3). Located right off the main highway, the memorial is visible and accessible to all.

Looking at the memorial, one cannot help but feel the power of nature and the futility of escape. It is almost impossible to envision an eight-car train being hurled off the tracks by water. Yet the etched graphics provide intimate details of the power and the suffering: bodies lying across each other, people mangled by machinery, twisted railway tracks, vacant eyes staring nowhere. Some might find it graphic and disturbing, but suffering on such magnitude can only be commemorated with such. Words can describe, but pictures really do say a thousand words.

Fishermen in Sri Lanka were impacted deeply by the tsunami.

Yala National Park
Most visitors to Yala National Park in Sri Lanka’s Southern Province come for its abundant wildlife: elephants, crocodiles, birds, and leopards. Yet at the southern end of the park, on a pristine beach, is proof the tsunami spared no one and no where.

Against the blue backdrop of the Indian Ocean lay the foundation of a building, tiled walls of a bathroom with smashed hand washbasins and toilets exposed.

Next to the devastated foundation is a steel monument representing the tsunami’s massive waves. Four steel waves range in height from eight to 15 feet tall.

A memorial stone explains:

In memory of
The forty seven lives taken by the tsunami
As an act of past revenge
At 9.20 a.m. on the 26th of December 2004
Tsunami waves struck the Yala National Park
Taking the lives of fifteen Japanese & German visitors.
Twenty nine local visitors & Two foreigners & one local reported missing
This monument is erected by the Department of
Wildlife and Conservation at the site of the tragedy in remembrance of the visitors who died and reported missing

The commemoration is particularly poignant. Those who see the memorial cannot help but feel, “It could have been me.” Standing on the picturesque shores of the Indian Ocean, today’s visitors are no different from the visitors of December 24. Likely, they were admiring the views and hoping for glimpses of wildlife. They were probably laughing, taking pictures, oblivious to what was coming.

The inscription on the memorial stone underscores this feeling. It reminds the tourist that it was tourists who died in the tsunami. It reminds everyone that natural disasters do not pick and choose their victims.

Bamiyan Buddha
It is over 2,000 miles from Kabul, Afghanistan, to Colombo, Sri Lanka. Yet one thing binds them together: the Bamiyan Buddha.

The original Bamiyan Buddha statues were built in sixth-century Central Afghanistan. Bamiyan, located on the Silk Road, was once a thriving center for Buddhism. In 2001, the Taliban destroyed the statues on the grounds that they were an affront to Islam.

In December 2004, the South Asian tsunami destroyed 100,000 houses and innumerable Buddhist shrines and temples. Today, near Peraliya, a 60-foot replica of the Afghan Buddhas stands in hope for the future. (See the front cover.)

Built with the financial assistance of Japan’s Honganji Temple and Honganji Foundation, the foundation stone was laid on the first anniversary of the tsunami. Its purpose is threefold: in memory of the original Bamiyan Buddha statues of Afghanistan destroyed by terrorists; in memory of the many Buddhist temples destroyed by the tsunami; and to promote Buddhism and its culture by making strong ties between Japan and Sri Lanka.

In the shadows of the statue,
outside its compound, is a large black stone with the formal dedication. After the prerequisite thank-yous and honorable names, is meaningful text that leaves one with a feeling of hope.

This Bamiyan statue has been erected for the remembrance of the victims of the Indian Ocean Tsunami tragedy of 2004 and it is a symbol of hope for the mental and spiritual relief of all Tsunami victims of this country.

The foundation stone was laid on the 1st anniversary of the Tsunami tragedy on 26th of December 2005. Of plants, trees and animals there are many species. Not so among humans who are all a single species. The division of humans into race begins in our minds. All of humans belong to the single humankind. It is the foremost duty of all Buddhists to spread this truth.

Symbolizing this unity of humankind, this replica of the Bamiyan Buddha statue is erected at Thelwatta, Peraliya, in memory of the original Bamiyan Buddha statues of Afghanistan, a World Heritage Treasure destroyed by terrorists; and the many Buddhist Vihara and Dagabas destroyed by the tsunami of December 26, 2004.

This meritorious work was enabled through the immense generosity of....

Of the memorials in Sri Lanka, the Buddha leaves one with a feeling of hope. Here we see countries coming together to remember and rebuild. We see cultures being strengthened. We see people saying that despite what nature and humans throw at them, they will not only survive, they will thrive.

The granddaughter of an Irish war bride and a Canadian soldier, Stephanie was raised on stories of death and disaster. In her spare time, she travels to such sites and spends her academic dollars writing about them. Reach her at yuilltide@yahoo.ca.
It’s a beautiful fall day in north central Pennsylvania. Hundreds of people have made the journey to Kinzua (pronounced kin zoo) Bridge State Park to take in the blazing reds, oranges, and yellows of autumn. The experience is unlike any other; they can walk out 600 feet on Kinzua Bridge State Park’s skywalk, feel the wind tussle their hair as they peer through the partial glass floor 225 feet above the valley floor, and take in miles of scenic vistas. However, today’s dramatic encounter at Kinzua Bridge is very different from what visitors experienced 11 years ago; everything changed following a traumatic event.

The Kinzua Bridge was the brainchild of General Thomas L. Kane, president of the New York, Lake Erie & Western Railroad and Coal Company, and Octave Chanute, a civil engineer with the Erie Railroad. The railroad company needed an efficient and inexpensive way to transport coal, oil, and lumber to markets in the East but needed to
traverse the 2,000-foot-wide and over 300-foot-deep Kinzua Creek Valley. The company chose to construct a bridge for transport across the valley based on cost and time savings and to minimize wear on the trains themselves.

Construction began in 1881 with the laying of sandstone bases. The ironwork and bridge were soon completed in the spring of 1882. The structure was the highest and longest railroad viaduct in the world at a height of 301 feet at the time. Billed as the "Eighth Wonder of the World," people traveled across the globe to view its splendor and to ride excursion trains across the 2,000-foot expanse. Very early in its history, its 20 towers were rebuilt out of steel. Commercial use of the viaduct lasted almost 80 years before it was shut down and closed, then sold and scheduled for demolition. Thanks to the foresight of its new owner, Kovalchick Salvage Company, and strong local community interest, the bridge was saved and eventually given to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. It officially opened as Kinzua Bridge State Park in 1970. Shortly after designation as a state park, it was named to the National Register of Historic Places. Interpretive programs at the park began in 1987 when excursion trains again took visitors across the viaduct, reconnecting them to the park’s history.

Excursion trains operated almost daily over the next 15 years, transporting visitors from Marienville to Kane and then to Kinzua Bridge State Park. During this period a seasonal interpreter was hired to offer interpretive talks on the historic value of and engineering behind this Industrial Revolution masterpiece. Unfortunately, time and weather weakened the steel towers, forcing the excursion trains to cease operation in 2002. Pedestrians were now allowed to traverse the viaduct, which provided interpretive walk opportunities along the bridge. The guided walks continued until July 21, 2003, when at 3:15 p.m., an F1 tornado ripped through the Kinzua Valley, destroying 11 of the viaduct’s 20 towers. The viaduct, the park’s main interpretive resource, and the surrounding area were forever changed. The majority of the towers lay twisted on the valley floor and the remaining structure was unsafe for use. The park was left in a quandary. What do we do when our resource is severely altered? Without the bridge intact, how were we supposed to interpret the bridge? What would we interpret?

We realized that change is another word for opportunity, and this is what the tornado gave us, an opportunity. In 2004, park staff, personnel from the Pennsylvania State Parks regional and central offices, and dedicated community members began to envision a new Kinzua Bridge State Park. Part of this process included the writing of a new interpretive management plan. The interpretive management plan provides two functions: to guide the development of personal programming at the park, including public and school programs, and to guide the development of a park office/visitor center.

The history of the bridge and the engineering feats that went into its creation emerged once again as essential stories that the park needed
to share. Ensuring that the remaining structure was safe for pedestrian use was of utmost concern. In an effort to reconnect visitors to the resource and to reveal the tornado’s effect, park staff and local community members suggested the idea of a glass floor. The glass floor, along with the causeway leading to it, became known as “the skywalk.” Visitors can peer down to the valley floor and observe the twisted metal of the 11 towers taken out by the tornado. The skywalk influenced the park’s interpretive theme:

*The need to transport coal, timber and oil resources through the Kinzua Creek Valley spurred the engineering challenge of building the Kinzua Bridge. Historically, people were attracted to the impressive bridge and the views it offered; today, scenic views from the skywalk continue to attract visitors.*

Park programming focuses heavily on the bridge, its history, and the tornado that made it what it is today. The most basic public program is an interpretive walk that begins with an introduction of the bridge, its history and significance to the surrounding area, a viewing of the short film “Tracks Across the Sky,” finally ending on the skywalk with discussion on how age and weather caused the demise of 11 towers. More advanced public programming delves deeper into the meteorological field of tornados, the Fujita Scale, and includes hands-on activities that demonstrate vortexes.

In addition to public programs, school groups are a core audience. Emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) education prompted the park educator to create a hands-on program for middle school students. An overview of the bridge, its history, and the tornado is covered as part of the program introduction. Student groups are then tasked to build a bridge of their own using K’nex sets, a commercially available rod and connector building system. The inaugural offering of the program was an event in and of itself. In addition to the bridge model, students created a backboard and oral report at their school. They then visited the park to present their backboard and oral presentation and test their models, which were judged by a panel of local dignitaries, including a local historian, a county commissioner, and the park manager. The program proves to be popular with schools, as it brings a real-world, local connection to history, engineering, and problem-solving.

At present, when visitors are unable to attend a program, there are only three wayside panels and a short video to tell the Kinzua Viaduct story. One panel provides a general overview of the park and its resources, the other a brief description of the bridge’s history,
and the last describes the park in a regional context compared to other visitor attractions. Over the years, interest in and visitation to the park have grown, prompting the need for a more interactive, guest-friendly orientation point. We are now in the planning stages of a park office/visitor center complete with interactive, interpretive exhibits and an indoor classroom.

For exhibit planning purposes, the main park theme is divided into four sub-topics focusing on different aspects of the park: topography and regional resources, the bridge itself, the people who created the bridge, and the natural resources that shaped its history. The story of the tornado will be presented from several perspectives.

An interactive touch-screen exhibit will tell the story of the people—those who built the bridge, those who crossed on an excursion train, and those present the day the tornado struck. “Fast facts,” small quick-read placards, will be sprinkled throughout the two-story exhibit space to relay information (e.g., “An F1 tornado, like the one that destroyed part of the Kinzua Viaduct, can sustain winds of up to 112 mph.”)

The exhibit plan also calls for an engaging timeline that outlines the significant milestones in the viaduct’s history and engineering and world history highlights, providing context for the viaduct’s saga.

The pre-tornado Kinzua Bridge experience will also be interpreted. Visitors can watch a video simulating the views a passenger may have witnessed before the tornado destroyed the viaduct. Is there a more powerful way for today’s visitors to develop appreciation for the loss of a resource than to “experience” it before it was gone?

For now there is no park office/visitor center at Kinzua Bridge State Park and questions from the public about the bridge and what happened here in July 2003 may not be answered. Nevertheless, it’s a beautiful day and visitors are peering through the glass floor of the skywalk, gazing across the horizon at the blazing reds, oranges, and yellows of autumn, and photographing what remains of the Kinzua Viaduct. They are connected to the resource and the power of nature is evident.

As for Pennsylvania State Parks, we learned that interpreting a natural disaster isn’t necessarily about focusing on the disaster, but to simply place it as another event in the long timeline of a precious resource, the Kinzua Bridge State Park.

Chris Kemmerer is the education and interpretation section chief within Pennsylvania’s Bureau of State Parks. He coordinates the promotion, expansion, and implementation of all personal programming within State Parks supporting 100 field educators as they expose Pennsylvania citizens and guests to nature, outdoor recreation, and their public lands.
In 2011, the East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami devastated the northeast coast of Japan. Although it is difficult to capture the whole picture of the disaster, here are some of its terrible dimensions: 15,886 lives lost and over 2,620 still missing as of May 2014; 330,000 people lost their homes and of these, 260,000 are still displaced; 16.9 trillion Yen ($210 billion) in economic losses, including buildings, social infrastructure, and damage to agriculture and fisheries. The nuclear disasters in the Fukushima Prefecture continue, with no known estimates of their ultimate costs. Furthermore, the earthquake caused widespread land subsidence, which has turned low-lying coastal lands into estuaries. For people who live along this coast, their communities and the landscape in which they grew up are either gone—or dramatically changed.

Every natural disaster invites opportunities to tell the story of what happened, and also to place it in a larger context. Earthquakes and tsunamis have a long history along Japan’s Sanriku Coast, both in the geological record and in historical accounts. Learning how people have lived with earthquakes and tsunamis in the past can offer important insights about living with these natural forces in the future. Yet, with events as painful as this one was, there are understandable debates about who should tell the story and how the story should be told—both for the benefit of local people and for visitors to the region over time.

In Kesennuma City, Miyagi Prefecture, several interpretive...
projects have emerged to interpret the disaster—and in one case, not to interpret it—that are contributing to rebuilding the local community. I came to Kesennuma as a staff member of a non-governmental organization (NGO) for disaster relief and recovery. After the NGO finished its work, I decided to continue living in and working for the city in various capacities. The natural environment and culture of this region is fascinating, and I have been privileged to become involved in some interesting environmental education and interpretation projects here.

Kesennuma is located about 400 kilometers (about 250 miles) north of Tokyo, facing the Pacific Ocean. The economy and almost everyone’s lives revolve around the fishing industry. Kesennuma leads pelagic fishing in Japan, as well as coastal fishing and aquaculture farming along the coast. Geologically, this coast is termed a “Rias coast”; it is characterized by steep mountains and narrow valleys close to the sea. Seventy percent of the city is forested, and farms are common both in the flat and mountainous areas. Nearly 1,200 residents of Kesennuma lost their lives in the disaster and 234 are still unaccounted for—about two percent of the city’s population of 73,000. In addition to the destructive earthquake and tsunami, a huge fire engulfed Kesennuma’s downtown; it burned for nine days.

With a disaster this immense and this tragic in cost, its story needs to be told for generations into the future. But what interpretive stories are to be told? Who should convey them and how? In this article, I will describe four examples that reveal different answers to these questions: the city’s decision to create a new slogan, an interpretive opportunity that was rejected, a mural created by children, and a formal museum exhibit.

After the earthquake and tsunami, the newly established Kesennuma Citizens Committee for Disaster Recovery discussed the future of the city. The public administration, local businesses, and other organizations together envisioned how to build back a better Kesennuma. The committee decided on a provocative new slogan for the city, “Living with the Ocean.” At first, this slogan was a source of consternation: hadn’t the violent ocean just destroyed their community and swept away their loved ones? However, within six months, the local citizens began to recognize that they always have lived near the ocean and they receive privileges from it. The new slogan has begun to offer a new perspective about coexisting with the ocean, rather than fighting or attempting to control it.

A more controversial decision concerned a relic of disaster and whether to make it an interpretive site. The tsunami had pushed an enormous fishing vessel nearly a kilometer inland from the port, destroying buildings and homes in its path. For more than two years, the ship was stranded in what had been a downtown neighborhood. The ship became a symbol of the disaster and many visitors stopped to see and photograph the vessel. Without interpretive signs, the vessel was left standing there, inviting visitors to ponder the immense physical energy of the tsunami—but perhaps not the buildings or people that the ship had crushed on its last journey. Local

Tangible and intangible elements come together powerfully in this Rias Ark Museum exhibit.
residents shared strong differences of opinion about the ship. Was it an appropriate symbol of their community destroyed by the disaster? Was it an appropriate touristic site? Should it be protected in some way? Finally, the vessel’s owner, in a gesture to the feelings of the disaster victims, decided to remove the ship entirely.

However, if there had been opportunities to discuss what this vessel and its resting place could interpret, some important stories could be told. The area is an alluvial fan, an expanse of flat land at a river’s mouth. Over time, human use has greatly changed this landscape. In the 16th century, taking advantage of the sea and tides, people created salt fields. In the early 20th century, rice paddies were here. More recently, the development booms of the 1960s transformed the landscape to a residential and fishery related commercial area. Now, because of the earthquake and tsunami, there is land subsidence, and an important opportunity to reconsider how, or whether, to develop this area again.

Another interpretive project attempted not to interpret the past, but rather to envision a future. Several fifth-grade classes created a mural, “Our Dream, Our Future, and Our Omose Community.” Their school is located just 500 meters from the seashore; the tsunami had come within 50 meters of it. Nearby the Omose River descends from the mountains to the sea; its seashore area, quite close to the school, was devastated. Some of these 10- and 11-year-olds had lost their homes and family members. Working with their teachers, a museum curator, and NGO staff as part of the school curriculum, these children first reflected on what had happened to their community. Then they were encouraged to imagine a safe and healthy community 10 years from now. To create the mural that would portray their dream community, they confronted questions such as, Can people live in the devastated area? What should happen now to the devastated area near the shore? Should there be homes or factories or places for fishermen to work? Where should an evacuation center be? After much discussion, the students started drawing—and then painting. Along with the built environment, they also included fireflies, frogs, birds, mammals, and various water bugs in the mountain and river areas, because, they said, they wanted to be sure to sustain nature within their human community. The completed mural was placed on the walls of the large emergency storage box in the schoolyard. The school held an
unveiling ceremony, at which the children introduced their mural to other students and shared their thinking about what they had created. The colorful mural remains on the storage box as a point of reflection and imagination for passersby.

The most formal interpretation about the earthquake and tsunami is at the Rias Ark Museum of Art in Kesennuma City. This 20-year-old museum was founded to foster appreciation of the unique cultural history of the region. The exhibition, “Documentary of East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami and History of Tsunami Disasters,” opened in 2013. It is a large, daring exhibit that explores complex issues from various perspectives. The exhibit’s introduction states, “To reflect on past experience, perhaps, is to think over the future. Why was the damage that catastrophic? Looking back on our experience, what should we think now? The museum would like to share these challenges with you and play a role in reconstruction and development of community for our collective future.” With hundreds of photographs, artifacts, and historical documents, the curators have made an intricate exhibition that is careful not to offer a definitive opinion or conclusion about the disaster. Rather, it invites visitors to examine the disaster’s scope and effects and to reflect on both the region’s history and its future in this tsunami- and earthquake-prone region.

A natural disaster is just a part of nature’s cycle. Interpretation reveals its dimensions and tells the human story of how people are coping with it. As people’s memory fades, new perspectives may develop and the interpretive messages may change as well. However, capturing this disaster right in its aftermath, interpretation has an important role to play, creating knowledge and understanding of the local natural and human history. Here in Japan, interpretation is challenging the entire region to consider how to live more harmoniously with natural forces along the Sanriku Coast. Kesennuma is rebuilding its community. At the same time, interpretation is building new perspectives about living with the ocean.

Maki Kitabayashi works at Kesennuma City Board of Education as an environmental educator and “glocal” interpreter. She has previously worked on interpretive projects at the Wildlife Conservation Society, Lake Nakuru National Park, and Uganda Wildlife Education Centre. Special thanks to Jean MacGregor for her support writing this article.
It was one of those memorable days. You know the kind: You remember where you were the day President Kennedy was shot or the day the Twin Towers came crashing down. I can’t remember what I had for lunch today, but I remember that. Why? Because it made an impression on me. It touched something inside of me, stirring up emotions.

December 14, 2005, was a memorable day in southeast Missouri. That’s the day the privately owned Taum Sauk Reservoir broke, sending 1.3 billion gallons of water cascading down the mountainside. The torrent of water, trees, and massive boulders crashed through Johnson’s Shut-Ins State Park, changing the valley, the people’s playground, forever. It was a day many will never forget.

Where was I that morning? I was just about to walk out the door for work, about 6:15 a.m., when the phone rang. My friends know never to call me that early, so I knew something bad had happened. (Worry) It was our secretary, Agnes: “Janet, the reservoir broke, and they don’t know where Jerry’s family is.”

After a long pause, I said, “What?” I just knew I couldn’t have heard right. Agnes repeated the awful news. The unthinkable was happening. (Disbelief)

My head was spinning. I knew things were about to go crazy. I turned on the TV, but it hadn’t even hit the news yet. Soon, bits of information (and misinformation) came out. Calls of concern started pouring in. Everyone’s main concern was for the superintendent’s family. Once found, would they be okay? They were. (Relief)

Entering the park the next morning, I stopped at the maintenance shop on my way to the office. “Be careful not to get mud in Agnes’s office,” Lee cautioned me. I slopped my way toward the office through mud up to my ankles. “Oh, no,” I thought. “Agnes will be very upset with me.” I opened the door and saw three inches of mud covering everything down to bedrock for over a mile.
everything, including Agnes’ office. I remember standing in the middle of one of Missouri’s greatest environmental disasters and laughing. Humor is a great coping mechanism.

Over the next four years, many of us went through a range of emotions as we all worked to reclaim what was once Johnson’s Shut-Ins State Park. (Shock. Disbelief. Awe. Anger. Frustration. Hope.) Park staff and visitors dealt with their great sense of loss in different ways. Some cried. Some threw up. Some left the state. Some immersed themselves in the work ahead. (Courage) I and others spent a lot of time helping to recover and clean some of the superintendent’s family things, literally pulling them out of the mud—photographs, toys, unopened Christmas presents. Digging through the rubble that was once their brick home, we found, unbelievably, an unbroken glass slipper. (Wonder)

On the one-year anniversary of the disaster, park staff were offered counselling, but I don’t think anyone accepted that offer. We were okay. We lived in the midst of the disaster every day. We all did our part to clean up the mess. We watched Johnson’s Shut-Ins State Park come back to life. We were healing. (Recovery)

The reservoir breach left scars upon the land, and on those who loved it. Many visitors who had not been to Johnson’s Shut-Ins State Park for decades came back to see it now. Some former visitors say they will never come back. They want to remember it as it was. Many visitors wanted to help in the restoration efforts. Local folks were hired to do just that. They put their hearts into the back-breaking work. (Pride)

Part of my job as an interpreter was to assist in planning the new visitor center and exhibit. Team discussions were as you might expect: How much money do we have to spend? What is the best method to use? How long will there be interest in this disaster? How do we tie it into the park and its resources as a whole? What have others done after disastrous events?

After the reservoir break, many artifacts were collected—pieces of the entrance sign, a campsite post, an amphitheater bench, rebar from the reservoir. We considered using these artifacts to create a small museum, built on the foundation of the superintendent’s house. However, research revealed that public interest in disasters wanes in as little as three to five years. We decided, instead, to treat the reservoir break as just one chapter in the rich history of the park.

Video in the new visitor center chronicles clean-up efforts. Exhibit panels illustrate rare geologic features created by the powerful floodwaters. The central rock mud-encrusted family heirlooms remind us that this disaster affected real people.
A lone survivor withstood the blast of over 1.5 billion gallons of water rushing down the mountainside.

layer of the visitor center wall is rhyolite cobble, which first formed the mountaintop, then lined the reservoir, and now illustrates the layers of the St. Francois Mountains. Wayside panels and a stone mosaic describe geology now exposed in the scour channel. Intermingled with these through the park are exhibits and panels describing the natural and cultural resources that make Johnson's Shut-Ins State Park a place worth preserving.

That was the easy part, the tangibles: water, boulders, destruction. But how do we interpret the rest of it? How do we interpret the intangibles: worry, disbelief, relief, laughter? How do we interpret the journey so many took from shock to anger to frustration? How do we help others understand the courage it took to find hope in the midst of chaos? How do we help others to heal?

That is the story that needs to be told, the story of a deep hurt, and the healing that follows. It is not an easy task. It can’t be interpreted in a panel or in a scripted video. It is a story of emotion. To interpret emotion, we must touch people’s emotions. We must make them feel some of the fear and loss. We must carry them through the recovery, leaving them with a sense of courage and pride.

In order to make our visitors feel, we must feel. It is the hardest interpretation of all. I often tell my audience, “Look, that’s where the water came from. That’s where the house was. That’s where they found the family.”

But I’m not really interpreting until I say, “Look, that’s where so much water came down that it picked up those boulders and carried them a mile and a half, without so much as a scratch. That’s where the children were sleeping when the water hit. That’s where they sat in the dark, freezing to death, not knowing who was alive or dead, or if help would ever come.”

Sometimes I interpret. I tell the story, asking them to feel what it must have been like. But I’m always careful. I’m always holding something back, to protect myself from the very emotions I’m trying to convey. It’s hard. It’s scary.

The best interpretation of this disaster will come from the hearts of the people who lived through it. Perhaps we video interviews with the family and the workers. That might mean opening up old wounds. Do any of us really want to go there? Should we?

Some of the emotions are still raw. I can hear Agnes’s fearful voice. I see the despair in a coworker whose life’s work was washed off the face of the earth in a matter of minutes. I found a mangled soccer net in the field last week, and a shirt buried in the mud, remnants of the family washed away. It brought back a flood of emotions.

It was one of those memorable days. You know the kind. What made it memorable was the emotions it stirred. How do we interpret disasters? We interpret “the whole.” Interpret the emotions, those universal intangibles. It’s hard, but it will yield powerful results. And they will remember.

Janet Price is the interpretive resource specialist at Johnson’s Shut-Ins State Park in Missouri. She can be contacted at janet.price@dnr.mo.gov.
Learning to Live with Death

Someone once said to me, "What is the spirit of this place and how can we get it across to our visitors?" Every time I start a new interpretation project, I ask myself this question. It's kind of my mantra now. It keeps me focused on telling an accurate, unbiased story and encourages me to look at the esoteric side of the subject at hand, not just what's immediately obvious. As interpreters we do our best to create impartial stories, often walking a delicate path between the needs of the client, stakeholders, and the audience. But what about ourselves? Do our personal partialities affect the manner in which we present a subject or the stories we choose to tell? Are we even aware of their presence in our decision making?

I ask this question because interpreting natural disasters brings these issues into stark view. Turning our communities upside down, natural disasters can be devastating, leaving people to rebuild over many years and mourn the death of loved ones. They force us to take notice. They force us to look at death: catastrophic death, tragic death, death without bodies to bury. But are we really comfortable with contemplating mortality and exploring issues around death? How do we interpret a subject that in so many parts of the world remains the last taboo?

When interpreting a natural disaster, the obvious perspective is to focus on the natural processes and examine why it happened. We like to make sense of things. Sometimes it's the only way to cope with the scale of the death toll. We might mention how many people died and give an example of a personal tale to add a human side to the story. This would be good interpretation. However, I would like to question whether compelling human stories are sometimes missed because of the interpreter's own feelings towards death.

Steve Taylor, senior lecturer at Leeds Metropolitan University, writes in *Psychology Today*, “We live in a culture that denies death,” and as a result, “a large part of human behavior is generated by unconscious fear of death.” Death remains a difficult subject for many, even though it’s 100 percent dead certain that we’re all heading for the same final event. We might touch on it briefly during a religious service, a funeral, or perhaps when a character dies on TV, but we are not taught to talk about death openly. It's become unpredictable, unknown to everyday life.

In recent decades, death care has been removed from families and put into the hands of medical professionals. Subsequently, “death is on the outside of life,” according to Caleb Wilde in *Confessions of a Funeral Director*. It is dealt with by hospitals, medical trusts, and death care organizations. Now out of our hands, we find it awkward to talk about. So when we're called to interpret natural disasters, is it any wonder that we may choose to focus on the natural processes? Perhaps we look at mass death instead, which often remains nameless? We might refer to the large numbers of people killed as a way of showing how catastrophic the natural disaster was. But we are interpreters. We know that telling a more personal story or likening the subject to people's lives (ours included) is actually more meaningful. Hence, I would suggest that good interpretation portrays the enormity of the death toll more effectively through personal tales.
However, at this point, we have a problem. Personalized death is raw. It’s an emotionally confronting subject. It makes us think about our own lives, our families, and fears in ways that we might not want to tackle. Despite our best efforts to remain impartial, how often do we fall on the side of telling an environmentally themed story instead? Interpreters need to be careful not to attribute their own meanings or fears to the narratives of natural disaster interpretation. As with all subjects, we ought to seek to tackle difficult issues openly, sincerely, and truthfully. It is vital that we approach these subjects in a manner that encourages people to make their own meaning. Talking about meaningful subjects like death sincerely and truthfully changes lives. It gives victims a voice.

I hear some of you saying, that’s fine for adults, but what about children? In the United Kingdom, Dying Matters Awareness Week occurs every May. It is a week of community events, held to raise awareness and encourage discussions about death, dying, and mortality. This year, we attended the event “A Dead Good Day Out” with Ichabod, our interactive death dummy. We developed him to train people to care for some of the common complexities of death and dying care. A South Korean film crew also attended and expressed their shock that not only was there no age limit to the event, but that there were activities for children. Some of the most powerful interactions that Ichabod had were with children. They especially engaged with the interactivity of his bodily functions and wanted to touch his hand.

One woman who worked in child bereavement inquired about Ichabod teaching children about what a dead body looks like. She said that her classroom activity of children lying down with their arms crossed wasn’t working too well. It wasn’t real enough. Her willingness to talk about death with the children was refreshing.

By contrast, I spoke to a film maker last year who was asked to film a training session for teachers. The teachers were told that the session was to teach them about ways to talk to their classes about death, especially when a child’s pet or grandparent dies. Only afterwards did they learn that the entire session had in fact been aimed at helping the teachers deal with their own feelings towards death. There was real desire to ensure that teachers did not impose their own unease with death onto the children, who in most cases, were quite black and white about the subject. I wonder whether the organizers would have received so many attendees if they’d been more direct initially, about the real aim of the session?

In exploring the interpretation of natural disasters, it seems pertinent to ask, what actually is a natural disaster? According to the Oxford Dictionary, a natural disaster is “a natural event such as a flood, earthquake, or hurricane that causes great damage or loss of life.” The severity of the disaster is measured through the economic loss, a community’s ability to rebuild, and the human lives lost. It seems to be a greatly human-centric event. A heavy storm that floods a termite mound is undoubtedly a natural disaster for those termites, when as humans, all we are left with is a few puddles.
However, in measuring human lives lost in the context of natural events, it seems acceptable to suggest that certain diseases be considered as natural disasters. Consider widespread infectious diseases like AIDS/HIV, Spanish influenza, and the plague.

When a person dies of disease, their death is determined as death by natural causes. Now, if those deaths occur on a massive scale, do they not become natural disasters too? Over 230,000 people died in the 2004 South Asian Tsunami, yet these deaths remain greatly disproportionate to HIV/AIDS deaths. Since the first reported case of HIV in the Congo in 1959, 25 million people have died from AIDS, according to AIDS Orphan. Moreover, National Geographic identifies that the 1918 outbreak of Spanish Influenza killed 50 million people worldwide. In the 14th century, the plague claimed an estimated 75 million people, according to History.com. Nevertheless, worldwide natural disasters are still commonly referred to as environmental events, such as floods, earthquakes, forest fires, drought, volcanoes, hurricanes, and landslides.

The interpretation of natural disasters offers us a platform to examine a range of issues outside of the expected environmental stories. As interpreters, we hold a critically important tool within us. Our ability to create experiences that challenge social norms and accepted wisdom is a true gift. However, it also forces us to reflect upon our own lives. Regardless of our fears, death is ever present. It will come to us all. “Its transformative power is always accessible to us,” Taylor writes, and “becoming aware of our own mortality can be a liberating and awakening experience.” Accordingly, interpretation that approaches human mortality with an open heart can be revolutionary. It has the potential to create remarkable unforgettable experiences…but only if we learn to live with death ourselves.

For More Information


Catherine Brew is a partner at Red Plait Interpretation LLP and specializes in the interpretation of death and cemeteries.
I’m from Joplin, Missouri, now infamous for an EF5 tornado.

On May 22, 2011, a massive tornado swept a 13-mile path from the west side of Joplin, though the middle of town, exiting to the east near I-44. That event killed 161 people, damaged or destroyed 7,500 dwellings and 553 businesses, displaced 1,308 pets, and accumulated nearly 300 million cubic yards of residential debris.

During a recent supper with several girl friends, I discovered that we aren’t over it. We gather on a regular basis and the tornado comes up in conversation occasionally, but this night it was the primary topic of conversation. For about three hours, we talked tornado.

With the extraordinary amount of debris, no electricity, and limited phone coverage during the tornado, we found it difficult to know what was happening and to check on family and friends. The damage zone was so large that it will be years before we have stability. It is a long process from clearing to rebuilding, but we are eternally grateful for the incredible amount of assistance financially and from the 176,869 volunteers donating over a million hours.

You can’t live here, near here, know someone from Joplin, or have volunteered here, and not be affected. My home was not in the path, but family members had damage to their homes. One friend lost her sister and brother-in-law; another survived, trapped in the rubble, but lost everything; and a third friend, over 60 miles away, felt the change in medical care and shopping. I didn’t realize how far the impacts reached, the time needed for normalcy, nor the varying stages of healing.

**Endeavors**

Shortly after it occurs, you will see a lot of effort to help at any catastrophic event, but the recovery process is lengthy. If my friends and I have issues three years out and probably for years to come, others will too.

Below are just a few of the amazing undertakings for Joplin. Check out the links at the end for more information on a specific project.

Several works of art around town encourage hope and strength. Dave
Loewenstein designed a bright and colorful mural, "Butterfly Effects: Dreams Take Flight," to inspire people to do good works and show the metamorphosis or rebirth of Joplin. Using what remained of a tree, the "Tank," a group of local artists, painted the "Spirit Tree" to signify the strength and spirit of Joplin. Tricia Courtney gathered and received rubble to create art in the form of angels. Her website states, "Angels: not only a theme among many survivors' accounts, but a defining feature for Courtney's artwork. Her artwork inspires people to think differently about Joplin—as a memorial and as a hopeful, united community."

Butterflies emerged as a common theme after the storm with the stories of the butterfly people or angels giving hope and assisting people to survive. Cunningham Park now has a soothing butterfly garden with flowers, exhibits, flowing water, metal structures in the footprints of former houses, and an opportunity to journal. A woman named Cindy described her visit in her blog. She sat and held the journal, not needing to open it to find solace.

A local organization, Art Feeds, encourages children to express themselves creatively to deal with stress through painting, photography, dance, and more. Their trauma curriculum and art packs helped not only Joplin students, but children in the sites of other disasters like Moore, Oklahoma, and Estes Park, Colorado.

Leslie Simpson of the Post Memorial Art Reference Library created a video, "After the Storm: Joplin’s Lost Heritage." The video preserves the past by showing and describing many homes lost in the tornado.

People Want Normal
Nature- and man-created disasters aren’t going to stop; it is our job to respectfully interpret these incidences for as long as needed. Adapt any of these projects to assist with healing, remembering, and explaining the lessons learned.

For More Information
After the Storm: Joplin’s Lost Heritage video. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbaQo-PTAR8

Connect2Culture (the Spirit tree, more murals, and projects). http://www.connect2culture.com

Cyndi A. Cogbill is the owner of Pawpaw Patch Productions. The author asks that you share your successes, ideas, and questions with her at pawpawpatchpro@yahoo.com.
The Red Carpet

I was born in the 1970s in a first-ring suburb with nearly all available land developed except a few vacant lots. This was the world I grew up in. My view of it expanded dramatically when my grandparents took me to Sears one summer day to pick out my first bike. The 1980s were an amazing time for BMX bikes and everyone wanted to ride like the pros. There were so many options to add. You could have pegs on all four wheels for standing on. You could add hand brakes and even the coveted “gyro” detangler that allowed you to spin the handlebars 360 degrees without wrapping your brake cable around the stem. My bike had none of these things. It was a very macho bright blue with rainbow chain guard. None of that mattered. Like hundreds of thousands of other kids, the bike was my ticket to an expanding world around me.

Word spread at my elementary school from older brother to younger, from friend to friend, about the best place to ride. It was just a few blocks from the school. I can still picture the route in my head. We’d leave the northwest corner of the school, ride down past the church where the cub scouts met and past the road to my friend Pete’s house. At the bottom of the hill the road dead-ended and we would jump the curb heading up a small hill, though a field of long grass to one of the few remaining vacant lots in the city. There, tucked into a small woods, was a kid’s dreamland. There were winding dirt paths through the trees and numerous built-up jumps. All the kids simply called the place “suicide.”

The dangerous name for the place added to the mystique. To a young kid, the jumps seemed huge but looking back they were probably very small. The jumps themselves had fantastic names kids passed down to one another in hushed tones. Someone had covered one of the jumps in a scrap of red shag carpeting. It was everyone’s favorite. “Have you jumped the Red Carpet yet?” Kids would ask as a way to size each other up.

Eventually the landowners came in and tore everything out, ruining childhood daredevil dreams. Houses went in and it became yet another developed piece of property devoid of the sacred reverence created when a group of people use the land to help them discover who they are. The next summer though, like the mythical phoenix, a new unsanctioned bike area appeared. Suicide Two was bigger and less than a mile from my home.

The new area was in a lovely spot called Mud Lake. Ringed by walking and biking trails, the interior of the park was all wetlands and small hill after hill, covered in trees. They almost seemed like rows of burial mounds though they could have been eroded ground moraines. While some exotic geologic or ancient anthropologic explanation is possible, it is more likely the topography was caused by years of dumping excess fill along the edges of the swampy land.

These hills provided mere seconds of thrills racing down them but many minutes of apprehension sitting at the top and many hours of dreaming while away from the park.

As I grew older this park became a place to hang out and explore. My best friend in junior high lived on the other side. I would ride my 10-speed to his house and we would explore. We spent hours running around playing and of course some mischief...
ensued. We dug traps in the loose glacial loess and covered them with sticks and leaves like we’d seen in the movies. We found an old rusty coil of concrete reinforcement grid discarded in the woods and held it open with a stick, imagining it to be a giant trap. One summer afternoon we even made a Molotov cocktail with an old bottle and gasoline and snuck into the park to burst it open on a glacial erratic. It didn’t work. We aren’t the people you want when the revolution starts.

Now it sounds like we used that park hard and we did, but here’s the thing. It is still there.

At most of the centers where we work, we’re strict about the trails and the land. We put up “stay on the trails” signs and come up with extensive lists of prohibited activities. I’ll grant that some of us work at highly ecologically sensitive sites but many of us do not. The land may take on a sacred quality to us because of how well we know it but we all too often assume the public will befoul our special places.

How often do our signs and rules prevent everyone else from actually engaging with and making a connection to the land? The wild places I remember as a child, those formative spaces, the spaces that helped make me who I am were places I was able to get off trail. They were places I was able to muck around on foot or BMX bike or whatever I had to get me to nature. It was these places that helped make me the naturalist I am today.

I’m not advocating we let people destroy our wild places but we must remember there is a balance to be struck. To fall in love with something we have to truly experience it on our own terms. Relationships that are too stifling, too restrictive, and full of rules, guilt, and blame—they ultimately never last.

Kirk Carter Mona is an interpretive naturalist for the Three Rivers Park District at Lowry Nature Center in Victoria, Minnesota. Reach him at kirk@twincitiesnaturalist.com.
This happens all of the time. I get all set to send in a column for Legacy and then my new issue arrives and something in it sets me off in another direction. The trigger this time is Roger Riolo’s excellent article on using a multisensory approach in interpretation. Roger’s article, and its focus on visual processing, reminded me of something I am dealing with today as both a university faculty member and a museum curator. I am fully sighted with no visual limitations and one of my greatest challenges professionally was learning to consider and accommodate those who are not. What happens when vision is compromised?

The first time I ever had to deal with someone else’s vision issues was way back in another one of my lives, as a flight instructor. For new pilots, the most difficult aspect of flying an airplane is landing it. Everything else is, as they say, easy peasy, at least by comparison that is. Landing a plane is a multisensory operation. It is part kinesthesia, or as pilots call it, “the seat of the pants” feeling. Gravity and other forces tugging on our bodies, the feel of the controls, and our balance systems, in concert with vision, tell a pilot what is going on with the airplane at all times. It is called flight by visual reference but it is so much more than that. And landing is the biggie. In executing a landing, vision becomes even more important. A pilot uses both kinesthesia and binocular vision—depth perception—to guide control inputs in those last few feet when the craft transitions from air to ground.

My awakening came one day when I got a new student pilot. He had sight in only one eye. No binocular vision. I had no clue how to land an airplane by visual reference without depth perception. A fellow instructor spent some time with me in one of our airplanes while I made several landings wearing an eye patch. I figured it out, and that student did solo, but it was a revelation, and a lesson I never forgot. It was when I realized that educators will have students who cannot avail themselves of all learning modes and it is up to the educator, teacher, interpreter to find ways to accommodate for that. Landing a plane is more skill based than cognitive but I believe the point is still valid—we do not all carry the same tool bag.

Over the years, as both a formal and nonformal educator, I have run into other challenges in making things accessible to people with visual, or other, impairments, not the least of which is complete blindness. The list includes other physical challenges as well as learning disabilities. And that brings me to my point here. It seems to me that despite all of our advances in making the world more accessible for our fellow humans who may have one or more special needs, it is not uncommon to find that in the planning of interpretive or other educational experiences they are poorly accommodated or not at all.

The museum where I am curator is a museum of education history.
Consequently, the bulk of our holdings consist of books and other printed materials. We also have an educational technology collection, which includes prototype and early production Braille writers, and a reconstructed one-room school.

Last spring we embarked on a major renovation with a redecorated space, new library shelving, new exhibit cases, and new exhibits. All well and good, but until recently, all of the physical layout and the exhibit planning have been centered on accommodating mobility issues and nothing else. Recently, a graduate student working for the museum suggested that we create some displays for the visually impaired. It was what is usually referred to as a “duh” moment. Why? Perhaps because the college in which I teach, and in which the museum is housed, is also home to one of the preeminent vision programs in the country. For decades that program has been preparing educators who are able to meet the needs of learners, from children to adults, with all sorts of visual impairments and yet there has been absolutely no representation of that in a museum dedicated to educational innovations. Not only has the museum been ignoring part of its audience, it has been failing to tap into a superb resource.

It is necessary to talk about using a multisensory approach in designing interpretation; it makes great educational sense, but what do you do when some of your audience may not be able to avail themselves of one or more of those input modes? I am beginning to work on some new exhibits. What are you doing?

Bob Carter teaches outdoor and environmental education, interpretation, and museum studies at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois. He has been an NAI member since 1989, is a Certified Interpretive Trainer, and is NAI Region 5 director. Contact him at carter@niu.edu.

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International Conference on Interpretation
Montreal, Canada, Spring 2015

Details at www.interpnet.com/ic.
Freeman Tilden believed that “The chief aim of interpretation is provocation.” But provocation can be ephemeral, short-lived, because it can be aroused through curiosity or an adrenaline rush. On the other hand, the chief aim of Deep Interpretation is conviction. Our convictions are always grounded in something longer-lasting, namely our beliefs. Similarly, Tilden believed that the key to successful interpretation is relevance. Relevance, too, can be transitory. In contrast, Deep Interpretation seeks success through connections. The best connections are those of shared beliefs, because they can lead to commitments and convictions.

Let’s look at another example. Suppose that you are interpreting amphibians. You can make them relevant in many ways, such as their need for the right habitat, their need to reproduce, the dangers they face, and their life cycles. However, it’s going to take a shared belief before their decline will be seen as a threat to our own quality of life, thereby making the connection that will lead to a conviction that something must be done. Where will that shared belief come from? I suggest it is the interpreter’s responsibility to seek it out through earnest respect for others’ beliefs. Here, the interpreter’s role is one of curiosity and questions rather than a giver of answers.

So, the door to Deep Interpretation is that of caring enough to go beyond the realm of shared information, and on into the next level of shared outcomes. Deep Interpretation seeks to build stakeholders, potential activists for a shared future. I know that any mention of encouraging activism, or becoming activists, invariably makes some interpreters uneasy. It’s like a dark cloud threatening what was promising to be an interesting day. If you feel this way, perhaps it’s your own perception of activism that’s getting in the way? Aren’t you already activists, if you believe in Tilden’s goal of provocation? Remember, activism takes many shapes, it’s not always about lobbying, protests, boycotting, or similar confrontational activities.

Confrontational activism is largely antithetical to the purposes of interpretation, and it is decidedly inappropriate to Deep Interpretation’s basic tenet of a respectful search for shared beliefs. Deep Interpretation is far less interested in provocation than it is in awakenings, in “Eureka Moments” that create activists. Interpreters are in the enviable position of being able to create activists through the stories they tell, the information they share, their ability to tie the specific to the bigger picture, and their focus on making it all relevant. When we talk about evaluating our interpretive efforts, what better measure of success than planting seeds with embryonic activists—seeds that answer the latent question, “What can I do?” Interpreters are also in the enviable position of being sought out by caring people—people who are receptive to ideas and to seeds for change.

Activists Embrace Change
They provoke us to think about things like peace and justice, or the way things are as opposed to the way they might be, or whether we can do better. And guess what? Interpreters also seek change, a deeper level of understanding, a higher level of appreciation, and a stronger commitment to preservation, to

“Belief without action is the ruin of the soul.” —EDWARD ABBEY
community, and to the future. The real difference is in their methods. Activists tend to use confrontation, while interpreters are committed to providing information in the belief that rational minds will evaluate it and make appropriate changes in behavior.

However, our daily confrontation with an enormous information overload and its resulting paralysis mean that the only messages consistently getting through are those resonating with our beliefs. Marketers of every imaginable stripe are appealing to our beliefs in natural products, truth in advertising, green practices, humane practices, sustainable agriculture, and Constitutional guarantees. What they’ve discovered is that information is not enough. Facts are not enough. They know that they have to dig deeper and tap into the ultimate relevancy: that of our belief systems. Twenty-first-century leaders, whether political or professional, know that persuasion is ultimately a question of understanding attitudes, opinions, and beliefs.

I believe that if Freeman Tilden were with us today he’d tell us that interpretation is the key to all change, and that we should be leading the way with messages that go beyond provocation and relevance. I believe he’d be advocating for messages that connect and convince by attaching themselves to our common beliefs. Tilden would argue that our two-party system is based on warring beliefs, that all of our major life activities are grounded in our beliefs—beliefs about the value of education, about the security of investments, about our careers—and therefore so must interpretation if it is to be relevant to today’s audiences.

The Belief Question
So, how does the interpreter get at the beliefs of the audience? The answer is simple. Simply ask! Simply observe! And, if you aren’t able to ask and observe directly, then you need more research, more preparation. Once, while interpreting the behavior of a captive pack of wolves at the Wolf Education and Research Center in Idaho, I observed one of the viewers at the back of the group aiming an imaginary rifle at the pack. I thought that I understood his beliefs. On the walk back to the visitor center, I fell to the back of group and engaged him in a conversation about his beliefs. What I found out was that, yes, he was an avid hunter who’d grown up on a cattle ranch in southern Idaho, but that he had no desire to kill a wolf! What he wanted was to experience the feel of what it must have been like for his grandfather as a boy to have had a wolf in his sights. And, he added, maybe in that way he could come to understand a little better how that generation could have been so obsessed with killing wolves to the point of virtual elimination.

Edward R. Murrow, the creator of the “This I Believe” series on radio and in print, once said that “people don’t speak their beliefs easily or publicly.” But, then, he went on to prove himself monumentally wrong. People love to talk about themselves. Try it. I think that you will find that the waters of Deep Interpretation aren’t really so deep. In fact, they are incredibly refreshing!

To paraphrase Robert Frost, Deep Interpretation is a way of “taking the future by the throat.” All acts of interpretation share one common purpose: the building of appreciation.

We believe that appreciation is our best guarantee for the future. That’s a belief that we can build on. Just as parks build a sense of community around the core values of recreation, interpretation builds a future around the core values of appreciation. Without parks our sense of community would be poorer. Without interpretation our belief in the future would be weaker. Without Deep Interpretation, without using our beliefs to get us there, that future would be far more tenuous.

The Future Belongs to Whom?
Embedded in every act of interpretation is a profound belief in the future. Why else would we bother? “The future belongs to those who believe,” Eleanor Roosevelt once said in a plea for world peace at the United Nation—words with a not-so-hidden warning that belief can be a two-edged sword. Back in the days when we had no gas stations, and no highways to put them on, and no cars to use them, Henry Ford never ceased to believe in the necessity of an automobile for the masses. Both Sheldon Coleman and Thomas Edison believed that our lives shouldn’t be circumscribed forever by darkness and the limitations of whale oil. Freeman Tilden’s unshakable belief that our heritage must be interpreted to be saved, heralded an exciting new era in the saga of America’s conservation efforts. Given the incredible role that belief has played in human history, isn’t it time that we begin to understand the immeasurable power of belief? There can be no doubt that belief is what got us here, so isn’t the power of belief at least as important as the power of science? After all, how powerful would science be if we didn’t believe in it?

This is the third of three articles on the role of belief in interpretation. Will LaPage is the author of Rethinking Park Protection: Treading the Uncommon Ground of Environmental Beliefs.
Interpreting Nature Centers to Japan and China

BRENT EVANS

My wife and co-author Carolyn and I started an improbable adventure 25 years ago that would ultimately land us in Asia. It started in Boerne, Texas, when we became enchanted with a neglected city park, built nature trails, a nonprofit friends organization, and the Cibolo Nature Center. Our book, The Nature Center Book: How to Create and Nurture a Nature Center in Your Community, published by InterpPress of NAI, found its way to Japan and China, where we were invited to discuss nature center development. Our Japanese and Chinese friends gave us new perspectives, and fundamentally expanded our vision.

Our mission has always focused on conservation of natural resources through education and stewardship. The interpretive message that I advocate has been influenced by being a counselor for children with impulse control disorders. Since I teach these children social ethics (considering the impact of their behavior on others), I see the parallel with teaching people environmental ethics (considering the impact of their behavior on the environment). I see our environmental problems as a natural outgrowth of our own biology—like most species, humans eat, procreate, expand territory, and accumulate power, without thoughtful planning for outcomes. Hence, the long history of empires, depletion of natural resources, pollution, and disastrous environmental collapses. It seems to be a law of nature that we need to overcome, so that our civilization can achieve a sustainable future.

So, nature centers can be more than pretty places to visit, and can include environmental education, community gardens, and farmers’ markets—all of which have to do with sustainability and long-term thinking.

But, how would Asian citizens react to these ideas, and what was their interest in developing nature centers? Several years ago, environmental educator Mikihiko Yamamoto asked permission to translate our book into Japanese. Then, he showed the book to Professor Huang Yu of the Beijing Normal University, who asked permission to translate it into Chinese. The book is now in print in Japan and is in process in China.

So, this summer we were off to Japan and China to meet folks...
interested in nature centers. The Japanese culture holds unique connections with the natural world, but most interpretive centers are top-down, operated by governmental agencies, rather than by local governing boards, donors, and volunteers. Mikihiko focused on the importance of community-based interpretive centers and sustainability. He was also mindful that some tsunami-devastated communities could restore coastal areas into nature center operations that could restore natural ecosystems and rebuild a sense of community.

We met kindred spirits, full of creative interpretive strategies that were new to us, like Mikihiko’s "Haiku Hikes." We met a neuro-psychiatrist who researched how nature exposure increases dopamine levels in the brain. We saw land reclamation, tree planting, gardening programs, and outdoor cooking classes with healthy eating as a primary interpretive concept.

At the Friends of the Forest Center in Kyoto, visitors walk through the 300-year-old Honen-In Buddhist shrine and up into a dazzling mountain forest with flying squirrels. Here, reverence for life was the recurrent theme.

We presented a workshop in the temple, looking out on mesmerizing meditation gardens. We told the creation story of the Cibolo Nature Center. I discussed how nature centers give people a place to feel a part of nature, a place to rejuvenate and learn about having a healthy relationship with the natural world. Carolyn shared the how-to of community organization and volunteerism.

Ryo Yamazaki, well-known community designer, said the American dream had taken America and Japan from a pre-industrial age toward an unsustainable future. He described the need for a detour toward sustainable communities that live in balance with nature. Mr. Kajita, the Buddhist priest who operates the temple, listened carefully to each presentation, and then added, “I think each person can be a nature center.”

Japanese nature centers will teach their vision of environmental ethics, grounded in the experience and values of their people.

At the Friends of the Forest Center in Kyoto, visitors walk through the 300-year-old Honen-In Buddhist shrine and up into a dazzling mountain forest with flying squirrels. Here, reverence for life was the recurrent theme.

We have since purchased 20 Japanese versions of the book for Mikihiko Yamamoto’s organization to distribute to needy communities.

In Beijing we met Professor Huang Yu, Ph.D., of the College of Geography and Remote Sensing of the Beijing Normal University. He has translated The Nature Center Book into Chinese and is eager to see it published. We discussed the need for nature centers in cities struggling with pollution, as well as for newly built communities for people displaced by projects like the Three Gorges Dam. The professor is now seeking funding sources for its publication.

We spoke at Beijing Normal University, Capital Normal University, and Beishicao Jr. High School, the People’s Republic model Green School. Chinese audiences were interested that our nature center was created on public land through a citizen/government partnership. They were incredulous about the video of children playing in the creek, and the wildness of our park: “How did you move people off the land to create the nature center?” “People live in the park?” Desirable but uninhabited land seemed as foreign as clean air and streams. But the idea of natural oases in their cities was appealing.

One thing is for sure: the Chinese and Japanese know that they have serious environmental issues. Most Americans don’t, because they just don’t feel personal pain. Nature centers could thrive in these cultures famous for long-term thinking, nature centers not built on the Western design, but nature centers addressing local concerns, reflecting local values, founded by local visionaries, with their own unique interpretive message.

Brent Evans and his wife, Carolyn Chipman Evans, founded the Cibolo Nature Center in Boerne, Texas, 26 years ago. They authored The Nature Center Book: How to Create and Nurture a Nature Center in Your Community, published by NAI’s InterpPress. Brent is also the executive director of the Cibolo Conservancy Land Trust.
“God made Man because he loves stories.”  
—Elie Wiesel, The Gates of the Forest

Story is as much a genetic part of our makeup as our standing on two legs. We enter this world with an aptitude and obsession for story. Researchers almost unanimously agree that story structure is our most effective form of oral or written communication.

Storyteller Kendall Haven, in his book, Story Proof, says, “Lives are like stories because we think in story terms, make sense out of experiences in story terms, and plan our lives in story terms.” He goes on to add, “Human minds are still hardwired to think and perceive through stories.”

Unless you are a professional storyteller or writer, we don’t often think about when, or if, we are using story. We use it all the time, unnoticed, like the oxygen we breathe. Story surrounds and consumes us constantly, helping us communicate and make sense of our world.

Freeman Tilden’s third principle begins, “Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts.” Story is an art form. Tilden valued the importance of story. The fourth chapter of his Interpreting Our Heritage is titled “The Story’s the Thing.” That chapter is dedicated to his third principle.

If we view story in the light of tangibles, intangibles, and universals, story is one of those universals with a capital “U.” Story structure is indelibly ingrained into our thought process. Research supports that structure is as important to us as the story itself. Good story structure works for all audiences. All cultures have developed story. Effectively told, everyone relates to a story. Story is a true human universal.

Most scientists agree that human beings have been telling and listening to stories for over 100,000 years. What makes this estimate interesting is that most of those same scientists feel we only started exercising oral language skills around that same era. To use a rodeo term, it seems we started swapping tales “right out of the chute.”

Or maybe not—bear with me as I digress to make a point. Armed with only the above information on the origin of story, a big question immediately popped in my mind. There are gaps in this story. Therefore, prior to language, how did we communicate? Did we, or could we, communicate stories prior to that event in prehistory? The human brain dealing with informational input is required to make sense of things in order to process material. We do this by coming up with a story or scenario. Something that is plausible for us. Something we can live with. To fill in those gaps, we must make assumptions.

A couple of images immediately popped into my head. One was maybe there were mimes before language. Interesting, but I discarded that particular mental picture very
quickly. I then thought about early communication prior to language. Maybe it occurred through a series of grunts, gestures, facial expressions, body language, and props. An image of early man performing pantomime or a prehistoric version of charades before a campfire amused me. Afterwards, I began to make sense of the whole thing. In Speech 101, I learned that tone, volume, timing, gesture, facial expressions, and body language were valuable communication techniques. This is the process we go through when trying to make sense of new information. We use prior knowledge to assist us with new, incomplete information.

Assumptions also assist us with prediction and decisions, and often keep us out of trouble. On the other hand, assumptions can also often be incorrect and lead us to wrong conclusions. It is only one part of how our brain processes sensory and informational input.

So, let’s look a little closer at this process. Whether we receive this input in the form of a story or not we produce our understanding of the input in story form. Bear in mind, the bulk of this process is done by our subconscious in a matter of microseconds.

In the very first step of the process our brain asks this question of every sensory detail and piece of information entering our noggin, “Will this harm me, or not?” If we get an immediate “yes” our amygdala kicks in and takes control of our mental and physical functions.

If we judge the input not to be a threat or, at least, not an immediate threat, then we try to evaluate the information and attempt to make sense of it. We make an effort to place the details in some sort of order. We are constantly searching for patterns throughout this process.

We then compare it to past memories. This is where assumptions come into play. If the new data and prior knowledge do not make sense, we try to somehow make sense of it anyway.

We then attempt to merge this combined data into story form. This will give the information, experience, or event context and relevance. If context or relevance cannot be established the story will have no meaning. Without meaning or relevance the story will not enter into memory. People think in story form and people remember stories. Most research agrees that children are expert at recognizing and following story structure by age three.

Okay, so how do we best use this information? The good news is most of us have been intuitively using

Don’t disregard the facts. However, facts have little chance of taking on meaning unless they are incorporated into story.

story technique and story structure almost since birth. Kieran Egan, in The Educated Mind, conducted years of study and research on how children learn. He determined we are genetically hardwired to respond to story first. For example, ask an uninhibited three- to six-year-old to explain how anything works and you will most likely get a story. Probably, it will be quite enjoyable and exhibit a trait I call “kid logic.” Kid logic follows a pattern of trying to make sense of things with little exposure to the experience, very little prior knowledge, and a heaping dose of assumption. I thoroughly enjoy listening to children explain the ways of the world. They are already accomplished little storytellers. Only lack of experience hinders their logic and process. Some might consider a child-generated story quite a “whopper.” However, that is just his or her way to make sense of the world. And sometimes it’s okay be just a little silly.

Now, the really good news: Many interpretive methods are suspiciously alike, or at least, very similar to the essentials of effective storytelling. For instance, we advocate the use of theme, imagery, addressing the senses, relevance, using universals, and making meaning as important elements in quality interpretation. These techniques are also common elements needed for constructing a good story.

So what makes story so memorable? Author and writing professor Lisa Cron, in her book Wired for Story, talks about what we remember and what makes an impression upon us in story. She advocates the use of specifics over vague facts or general data. She states, “If you can’t picture it, it’s general. If you can see it, it’s specific.” For example, can we visualize this statement? “The U.N. warns that as many as 50,000 South Sudanese children could perish from hunger this year.” Or could we better visualize a story that takes us through the daily struggle for survival in the life of a single Sudanese child? Specific details make a difference in what our mind latches onto. Specifically, sensory details are key to grabbing our attention and creating personal mental imagery. Those pictures in our heads create memories. Sensory details also convey emotions. Emotions create meaning. Without an emotion attached, facts are sterile. Nobel Prize winner and Sicilian playwright Luigi Pirandello is credited with saying, “A
Electronic Titles from InterpPress

Available in print at Amazon.com and for download on the NAI store: www.interpnet.com/store.

Establishing a Nature-Based Preschool
Rachel A. Larimore

Nature-based preschools are powerful programs that fuse early childhood and environmental education to develop a child’s lifelong connection with the natural world. With the number of these unique, cutting-edge programs growing throughout the country, many nature centers are asking, “Is a nature-based preschool right for us?” Establishing a Nature-Based Preschool helps answer that question, and provides a how-to guide to move from concept to implementation.

Interpretive Perspectives
Larry Beck and Ted Cable

Interpretive Perspectives: A Collection of Essays on Interpreting Nature and Culture represents the work of two significant, contemporary voices in the field of interpretation, including original pieces written for this publication and reprints of articles that have appeared in National Association for Interpretation publications spanning three decades. You will be inspired by Larry Beck and Ted Cable’s unique ability to find interpretive lessons in tangential fields, beauty in the everyday, and hope in the future.

Interpretive Solutions
Michael E. Whatley

Interpretive Solutions will help you harness the power of interpretive communications to improve critical resource protection issues and situations. Matching the right communications approach with the audience most in need of being reached can play a pivotal role in whether a situation stabilizes, improves, or worsens. Appropriate communications can make a positive difference in the role people play in helping to achieve desired resource protection outcomes and results.

Putting Interpretation on the Map
Heidi Bailey

Putting Interpretation on the Map: An Interpretive Approach to Geography is a handbook for frontline interpreters, managers, and planners on incorporating maps and other geographic technologies into interpretive media, exhibits, and programs. This book reviews basic geography concepts and map skills, and introduces resources from simple map activities to the most advanced geotechnologies.
fact is like a sack—it won’t stand up if it’s empty. To make it stand up, first you have to put in it all the reasons and feelings that caused it in the first place.” Once again, emotions create meaning. Or as Daniel Gilbert states in Stumbling on Happiness, “Indeed, feelings just don’t matter—they are what mattering means.”

Don’t disregard the facts. However, facts have little chance of taking on meaning unless they are incorporated into story, especially one rich with sensory detail. Good stories, as the NAI definition of interpretation declares, can “forge emotional and intellectual connections.”

During this discourse on specifics, sensory details, feelings, and emotions the word “theme” kept tugging at my brain. Particularly Sam Ham’s voice kept resonating in my head, “People remember themes—they forget facts.” Throughout the ages story has been our primary means for teaching and delivering messages. Story seems the perfect vehicle for delivering a theme. Lisa Cron points out, “Theme is the underlying point the narrative makes. It is also where the universal lies.” She also adds, “It’s the story’s job to show us the theme, not the theme’s job to tell us the story.” A captivating story will deliver the goods. Most storytellers agree: a theme should be specific and one should be able to sum up your take-away point in a single sentence.

This is only a small sample of story and how we process it as a listener and how we produce it as our view of the world. A good story can consume an entire presentation or can be a single sentence. It only needs to arouse our senses and create vivid imagery in order to generate personal meaning and relevance.

Story is a powerful and essential tool for effective communication. Story is in our DNA. We cannot help ourselves. We are programmed to process and produce in story form. Story uses sensory details to emotionally charge facts to produce truth embedded within our messages.

Story permits us to deliver those truths in a palatable manner. Annette Simmons, in The Story Factor, sums things up nicely, “Your goal in telling a story is for your listener to see, hear, smell, and taste the elements of your story enough for their imagination to take them there.” She also adds an important message: “When you tell a story that touches me, you give me the gift of human attention—the kind that touches my heart and makes me feel more alive.”

Story—touching my heart and feeling alive—a true human universal.

For Further Information


Roger Riolo CIT, CIP, CHI, CIG, is an independent interpretive trainer and consultant. Reach him at 541-610-4044 or rlriolo@bendcable.com.
2015 International Conference dates announced

Join us May 3–7, 2015, in Montreal, Canada’s second largest city, and a thriving, modern, culturally diverse metropolis. Interpreters from across the globe will gather here to share ideas and experiences, and yes, even share a serving of poutine. The host hotel will be the Hotel Omni Mont Royal.

Every year at the International Conference, we address a specific topic of importance to the international interpretation community. In 2015, we’ll put our heads together to discuss the development of international standards for the field of interpretation.

The International Conference on Interpretation will be a partnership between NAI and Interpretation Canada. Learn more at www.interpnet.com/ic.
I am Melissa Zabecki Harvey, Park Interpreter at Parkin Archeological State Park in Arkansas. Interpretation allows me learn cool stuff and pass that cool stuff on to others. NAI has figuratively and literally introduced me to the giants in the field, who have taught me how to pass my cool information on in a meaningful way.

Tell us your story! To participate in “I am NAI,” send us a photo or 30-second video of yourself with the following information (limit 50 words): Your name and job title, where you work, why you interpret, and what NAI means to you. Send your submissions to pcaputo@interpnet.com.
Elections for NAI’s Board of Directors are upon us again. Thanks to our Nominations and Elections Committee, chaired by Alan Leftridge, we have a ballot that for the first time in years has at least two candidates for each opening. Below is a glance at the type of things Board members discuss at meetings, like our most recent one in Fort Collins, Colorado, in August. As you will see, much of the volunteer work is done by task forces, usually with a Board member champion along with member volunteers. If you see a task force referenced here that you’d like to serve on, please let me know!

Development Task Force
One of our highest priorities is organizational viability and sustainability. We have a two-pronged approach. Executive Director Margo Carlock has spent the last year assessing and analyzing efficiencies in operations and seeing where we can reduce costs. Also, our Development Task Force consisting of Board member Tom Mullin (chair), Chuck Lennox, and Travis Williams, is working closely with Margo to research and develop recommendations for revenue resources such as pursuing grants and corporate donations, strategic fundraising campaigns for specific purposes, and others. As we discuss increasing member services and other goals, knowing how we are going to fund them is critical.

One of the task force’s recommendations was to continue last year’s $25 for 25 Years campaign through NAI 2014 this November in Denver. This fund will provide scholarships and financial support for members who are not students to attend trainings and workshops. Several Board members stepped up and offered matching funds, so please consider giving and supporting professional development opportunities for fellow interpreters. (Find it on the NAI website.)

Advocacy
There are many forms of advocacy: for the profession, for interpreters, and for specific initiatives. That NAI should be more involved in advocacy has been supported by the Board, but what’s the process? Margo will propose a policy and guidelines in November. Start revving your engines—if we put out the interpretive Bat Signal for letters or for someone to testify on behalf of interpretation and interpreters, would you be willing? An advocacy team is sure to be next, so let us know.

Leadership Development
Members frequently request leadership development and mentoring. While staff will be looking at services that address management and leadership skills, a Board task force will look at a structured leadership development program for NAI. Board member Jay Miller will lead this task force.

Supporting Interpretive Research and Academic Programs
There’s an ongoing and dynamic discussion regarding both how NAI can support academic programs in interpretation and how we can serve as a vehicle for our members to have access to research. There were a lot of great ideas and I anticipate a Board task force working with the College and University Academics (CUA) Section to champion these ideas.

Task forces are appointed to address specific issues for a limited time frame. If you don’t have time for a leadership position at the “sub unit” level or on the national Board, let me know if you have an interest area and expertise that might make you perfect for a task force appointment.

NAI depends on our wonderful member volunteers who give of their time, expertise, and leadership to ensure we continue to be a relevant and effective organization. I can be contacted at lethbridgeathome@gmail.com. Email me anytime.

AMY LETHBRIDGE

NAI’s president Amy Lethbridge is the deputy executive officer of the Mountains Recreation & Conservation Authority in southern California. Reach her at lethbridgeathome@gmail.com.
This second edition of Interpretive Planning: The 5-M Model for Successful Planning Projects draws from author Lisa Brochu’s more than three decades of experience in creating interpretive plans, and explains the process she has taught to hundreds of interpreters. This book can be a valuable tool for those wishing to develop an interpretive plan as well as those aspiring to work as a consultant or planner.

Join us in the Rockies for the 2014 NAI National Workshop!