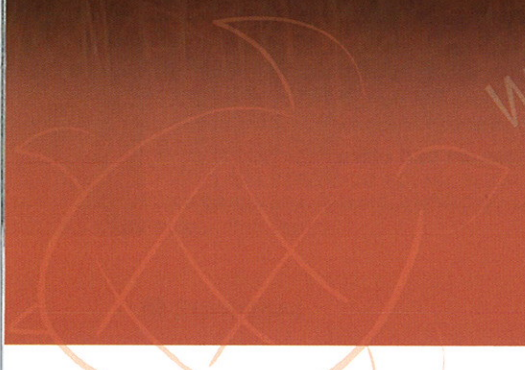




We hatch in the sand after eight to 12 weeks,



Interpretation: enriching the visitor experience

Surveys of visitors to national parks and nature reserves have for the past seven years delivered satisfaction responses of higher than 90 per cent. However, visitors have consistently requested further interpretation of the natural and cultural values of these protected areas. So what is interpretation and how is it done?

by Gil Field

It takes six days to surface and then the ocean we seek.

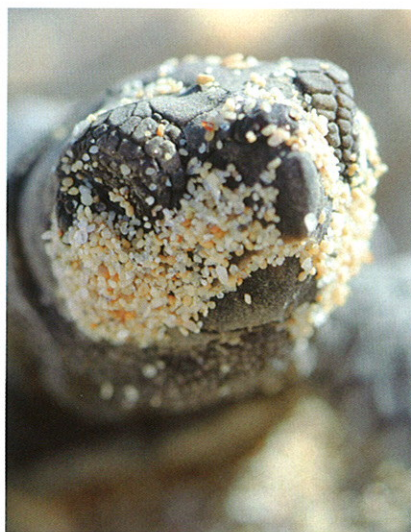


Interpretation is the craft of enriching visitor experience. It is about heightening appreciation of the wonders of our environment through an interactive process involving the visitor, the medium and the environment. Visitors are provided with information that they can relate to their life—information that reveals something that would not otherwise be apparent. But visitors are also looking for enjoyment rather than simply instruction. So interpretation needs to educate and entertain. This can be achieved through provoking ideas, evoking feelings and conveying a message.

The means of communicating with visitors to natural, cultural and historic sites are varied, ranging from signs and exhibits to multimedia displays and art. Western Australia's national parks, marine parks and other reserves feature an ever-increasing range of innovative, on-site interpretative media.

Jurabi Turtle Centre

A leading example of interpretation in a protected area is the Jurabi Turtle Centre in Jurabi Coastal Park near Exmouth, adjacent to Cape Range National Park and Ningaloo Marine



Park. The centre is a cooperative venture with the Department of Environment and Conservation and the Shire of Exmouth with input from community groups and individuals. It is an award-winning example of how site development, facility design and interpretation can help with the management and conservation of protected species—in this case green, loggerhead and flatback turtles.

The centre came about in response to visitors and tour guides seeking direct encounters with nesting and hatchling turtles. There was a need to

establish one beach as the focal point for turtle observation to restrict the impact of visitors on turtles along the coast. Focusing visitors to one beach and one turtle centre would help facilitate gatherings of visitors at night by providing a central location where they could observe turtles while also learning about their behaviour and conservation values through signs, exhibits and guides.

The key to the success of Jurabi was the collaboration of professionals working closely with community groups. The first task was to choose a suitable site. A landscape architect and architectural designer came up with a site within an inter-dunal swale that was positioned to prevent lights from the centre and car park shining onto the beach and disturbing nesting turtles or hatchlings. The facility itself was designed as an open-sided building featuring signs and exhibits that would cater for day and night visitors, with and without guides.

An interpretation officer was an integral member of the project team, advising on the function of the facility and its implications for interpretation. Then, a feisty and invigorated group of interpreters, graphic designers, illustrators and exhibit builders set to work on creating the interpretative experience. Their aim was to interpret the life cycle of turtles and the threats to their survival in an educational, yet entertaining manner.

One such interpretative method was the development of a transparent animation on polycarbonate. This large backlit animation enchants visitors with its vibrant colour, reminiscent of comic



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Main Jurabi Turtle Centre.

Photo – DEC

Inset Text and illustrations inspired by the interpretative signage at Jurabi Turtle Centre.

Above Loggerhead turtle hatchling.

Left Jurabi Turtle Centre display.

Photos – Tony Howard/DEC

Right A gateway through the Wilderness Wall of Perceptions at Swarbrick.

Below right One of the pieces of art designed to give a perspective of the forest.

Photos – Gil Field/DEC

book and electronic media such as the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. It is displayed as a rhyming story line across a series of panels and tells the story of a turtle's life cycle. The team also created a sequence of signs to and from the facility which invites participants to 'meet' the turtles in a responsible way, with tips to turn off torches and approach nesting turtles from behind. Similar messages are scribed on the wall of the facility, further imprinting appropriate behaviour into the minds of visitors.

A wall display acknowledging the volunteer research and monitoring program was erected and also functions as an audiovisual screen used by rangers, volunteers and tour guides. On the facility's deck area, plinths with dioramas reveal up-close observations and threats to turtles which are not apparent to most visitors.

Thanks to the interpretative facility, visitors now know where to go and what to do to observe turtles appropriately. They appreciate the turtle life cycle and support turtle management and conservation through minimising their impact. Visitors also have the opportunity to better understand and support volunteers involved with monitoring and research of turtles.

Swarbrick—about changing perceptions

Interpretation can be as varied as the protected areas it seeks to enhance. In WA's south-west, the Walpole Wilderness Discovery site at Swarbrick offers an intriguing way of interpreting the environment. Here, amid old-growth karri forest now protected within the Walpole Wilderness area of more than 360,000 hectares, visitors will find interpretative quotations and exhibits that celebrate the changing perceptions of forests and wilderness over time. The site was central to



a long-running forestry debate that stretches back more than 100 years. The interpretation examines how perceptions of foresters, forests and wilderness have changed during this time—from when land clearers began felling trees for agriculture, to an extensive forestry debate and the passionate environmental movements which culminated in the creation of the Walpole Wilderness area in 2001.

However, when a community is divided over changing land use from timber production to national park, and the State election is decided by the shades of green vote, interpreting the events is an intriguing challenge.

The first task in providing such

interpretation was to gather historical information. A literature search of past texts and a timeline of political events was compiled and oral histories were recorded by interviewing local identities.

The interpretative team's aim was to retrace history, while also providing visitors with 'spaces for introspective contemplation of the forest and wilderness'. The intent of the exhibits was to challenge visitors' perceptions of the forest, wilderness and their protection.

A 500-metre return walk was constructed through the old-growth karri forest taking visitors on a journey past the 'Door of Perception'



Above The Wilderness Wall of Perceptions in the Walpole Wilderness area.
Photo – Gil Field/DEC



Left Interpretative sign on Darwinia Drive.
Photo – Tricia Sprigg/DEC

reflection and words. It almost appears as though the words float in the forest, the wall nothing but an illusion.

A break in the wall defines the transition from a world of words and events to another world of shape and form without words. Here, commissioned artworks evoke emotional responses to the changing perceptions of the forest and wilderness that they interpret. The intent is to ‘mess with the mind’ of the visitor so they see the differences in perception among us all. For, while we don’t all see things the same way, we can celebrate differences and work together to get acceptable outcomes.

Driving the message home —the Dryandra drive trail

Another example of WA’s diverse range of interpretative media can be found on the Darwinia Drive interpretative drive trail at Dryandra. Darwinia Drive is a 22-kilometre circuit on good gravel roads in the heart of Dryandra woodland, an area of State forest two hours south-east of

(a trailhead that resembles a door to have fallen from the sky) and along the ‘Wilderness Wall of Perceptions’ before encountering art exhibits that present perceptions of a different nature.

The Wilderness Wall of Perceptions carries more than 30 quotations from the past 100 years, along with dates of political events relevant to forestry and wilderness during that time. This information gives visitors an insight

into what life may have been like in this area for a group settler, a forester, a protestor or a local in their day.

But the Wilderness Wall of Perceptions is not just a wall of words—it is a metaphor for seeing life as much more than words. The 25-metre long and three-metre high wall of mirror-quality stainless steel reflects the visitor and the old-growth karri forest behind them, creating a surreal mix of

Perth. The drive aims to foster a greater understanding of the relationships between plants and animals at Dryandra that depend on each other for survival. It was named after a small plant that grows in only a few localities in WA's south-west, including Dryandra, and is located in one of the largest areas of remnant woodland in the State's central Wheatbelt.

At each of five stops on the drive, a large interpretative sign reveals some of the intimate relationships that exist between landforms and wildlife in the immediate environment. The signs feature photographs of animals, plants and fungi as brilliant visual compositions up to 80 times the subject's real-life size. The resultant imagery is so striking that visitors often feel compelled to stop and get out of their cars to investigate the signs. By doing so they will learn about orchids that look and smell like female wasps to attract male wasp pollinators; birds that never raise their own young because they fob them off to other bird species who become unwitting and devoted foster parents; the capsid bug that sucks the life out of other insects trapped in the sundew's sticky tentacles and repays this 'carnivorous' plant by defending it against sap-sucking aphids; the endangered mammal that depends entirely on the humble termite for its food and shelter; and the termite's symbiotic gut fauna that make all its wood-munching possible.

The signs are positioned along a route which takes visitors through a wonderful diversity of habitats and landscapes—wandoo woodland, sheoak thickets, colourful heath, granite outcrops and rugged laterite breakaways that provide extensive views of the surrounding woodland. Added to this are pockets of raspberry jam wattle, sandalwood and brown mallet. There is also a section of the drive that follows the edge of the woodland. Here visitors can wander among tall silver mallet and look out over neighbouring farmland where revegetation has been undertaken to combat erosion and

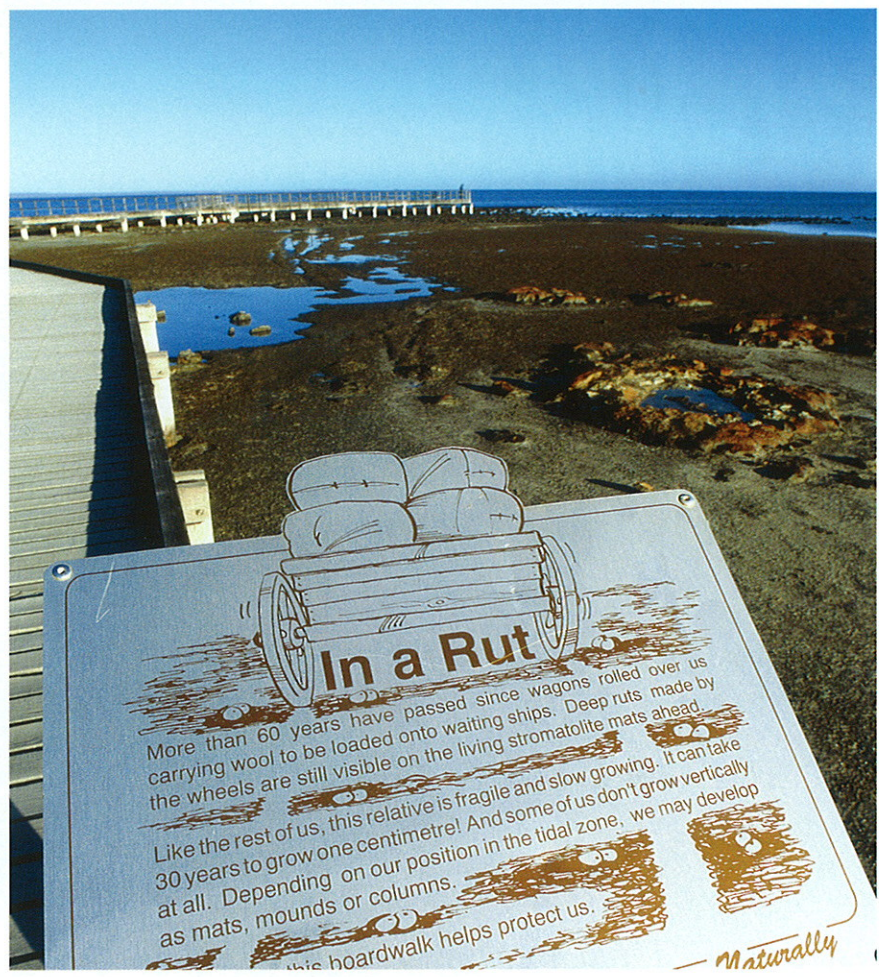
salinity and provide corridors for wildlife.

By setting out on the drive and taking in the interpretative information, it is hoped that visitors will look at the Australian bush a little differently, with a richer appreciation of its complexity, its subtlety and its fragility. Most of all, the interpretative drive seeks to show the interdependence of all elements within natural communities.

Interpretation is value adding

Sites such as Jurabi and Swarbrick and the Darwinia Drive show the rich diversity of interpretative material in WA. They reveal how effective

interpretation can enrich visitor experiences of the natural, cultural and historic values of our environment. By developing stories and establishing themes and messages, interpretation can relate to the lives of the visitors while revealing the secrets of the setting. The means of conveying these values involves stage-crafting through site and facility design and choreography through the sequence and style of graphic design. All major parks and reserves have interpretative signs, displays, exhibits and facilities to further your understanding of an area. Check them out for a memorable, informative and enjoyable experience.



Gil Field is the Coordinator of the Department of Environment and Conservation's Interpretation and Visitor Information Services section within the Parks and Visitor Services Division. In 1999 the Interpretation Australia Association awarded him the Georgie Waterman Award for his outstanding and sustained contribution to the development of the profession of interpretation in Australia. Gil and his colleagues won the Interpretation Media Award in 1998 for the Hamelin Pool Stromatolites and in 2005 for the Jurabi Turtle Centre. He has also co-authored three books on interpretation. He can be contacted on (08) 9334 0580 or by email (gil.field@dec.wa.gov.au).



Right Interpretative sign at Hamelin Pool.
Photo – Ann Storrie

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