

USDA FOREST SERVICE
Interpretive Services Strategy



Sparking Imaginations
and
Making Connections

We create intellectual and emotional connections between people and their natural and cultural heritage, thereby instilling respect and appreciation for America's public lands and fostering their protection and stewardship through time.

Executive Summary

The Forest Service Interpretive Services Strategy (IS Strategy) is a guide for better delivery of interpretive experiences through our services and facilities, and for providing exceptional service to the public both on and off the national forests and grasslands. The IS Strategy outlines actions planned to ensure high-quality providers, products, and programs; effective facility operations; and strong relationships with partners and communities.

Interpretive Services is a key provider of interpretive products (media and presentations) aimed at increasing people's appreciation for natural and cultural resources and land management issues. By forging intellectual and emotional connections between people and their natural and cultural heritages, Interpretive Services plays a key role in achieving the education and visitor satisfaction goals of the Forest Service's Recreation Agenda.

The Recreation Agenda outlines how the Forest Service's recreation activities will meet public expectations while protecting the health and integrity of the land. One way is to improve educational opportunities at our facilities and visitor satisfaction with our services. To achieve these goals, Interpretive Services will use a combination of personnel, facilities, and products.

Today, across the National Forests and Grasslands about 70 major visitor centers deliver critical services to millions of visitors. These centers provide high levels of public contact and often contain a variety of sophisticated and expensive exhibits and interpretive media. Some of these centers are becoming focal points for community outreach and therefore, are increasingly important to local communities and their economies. Some forests offer live interpretive programs at campgrounds and other key developed sites. At dispersed recreation sites, such as roadside viewpoints and trailheads, "non-personal" products such as interpretive signs are frequently used to enhance visitor recreational experiences.

The IS Strategy tiers to emphasis areas identified in the Recreation Agenda and is designed to complement, integrate, and enhance ongoing activities to fulfill the Recreation Agenda and the agency's Strategic Plan. The agency's authority to provide visitor services comes from the Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act. Agency policies regarding Interpretive Services are found in manual chapters 2390, 1640, and 1643.

Interpretive Services Strategy

“The inspiration experienced through visiting the Nation’s scenic wonders and historic shrines, instills a love of country, maintains morale, and participation in recreational activities and is vital to the welfare of the people...”

Harold L. Ickes
February 10, 1942



Introduction

The IS Strategy is an Interpretive Services roadmap for helping to achieve the outcomes in the Recreation Agenda by:

- Improving customer satisfaction, as indicated by measurable improvement in customer satisfaction with services and facilities;
- Improving outreach to youth and urban communities -- both on and off the forest-- as indicated by an increase in the number of high quality products delivered to these populations.
- Sustaining outdoor recreation settings, as indicated by reduced property damage, rehabilitation, and human injury; and
- Enhancing benefits to forest-dependent communities, by increasing the number of strategic business partnerships delivering interpretation, recreation, and tourism.

Processes

A customer-focused approach was used to analyze the current condition of Interpretive Services. The process began by identifying various groups of people served by or important to the success of the Interpretive Services Program – our customers.

Surveys asked each group how we could serve them better – gap analysis.

With involvement of FS field and management staff we identified vision statements and strategies to close the gaps for each of the four identified main market segments: External, Internal, Interpretive Providers (both internal and external), and Partners/Cooperating Associations/Communities and Other Agencies.

The IS Strategy describes the program's current condition, important gaps to be closed, and key objectives to achieve the future condition outlined in the vision statements but it is a living dynamic effort that must be implemented at every Forest Service organizational unit. Regions and forests may tier to the national program of work by addressing those gaps most critical to their programs.

Strategies for closing gaps, for improving our services, will be developed each year as a part of the Interpretive Services program of work. Flexibility will allow us to capitalize on emerging opportunities and help maneuver through continuous change. The Interpretive Services Leadership Team will develop an annual program of work implementing appropriate strategies. An accomplishment report will be produced at the end of each fiscal year.

External Market: Neighbors and Visitors

Vision

The Forest Service contributes to the physical, emotional, and intellectual desires and expectations of people by providing relevant and authentic experiential opportunities both on and off the forests.

Current Condition

The scope of the Interpretive Services within the Forest Service is broad. It encompasses the full range of interpretive media, both personal and non-personal. The delivery of Interpretive Services frequently involves working across program areas, as well as with external partners, communities, and the travel and tourism industry. The Forest Service operates about 70 large visitor centers, some of which are travel destination sites. Significant financial resources are required to operate and maintain these visitor centers. Most of the agency's full-time, highly skilled interpretive specialists are employed at these centers. Some of the centers offer world-class exhibits and dynamic presentations.

Many successful personal programs and non-personal products are delivered to visitors to enhance their experiences at dispersed sites such as campgrounds, viewpoints, and trailheads. National, State, and Forest Scenic Byways are also used to provide interpretive messages through wayside exhibits and self-guided trails. Interpretive Services is currently striving to meet the needs of a growing number of people who want learning-based activities. Interpretation plays an important role in helping people pursue their interest in learning about the unique heritage, culture, wildlife, or natural beauty of an area. Thus, Interpretive Services assists in protecting resources, managing capacity, and maintaining local economies through sustainable tourism.

Critical Gaps to Close

- **Interpretive activities and recreation business management systems such as Budget Formulation and Execution System (BFES), INFRA/Meaningful Measures (INFRA/MM), and performance reporting are not fully integrated resulting in a lack of accountability.**
- **Need for greater corporate use of “business planning” to identify target markets and develop customer-focused programs.**
- **Inconsistent oversight of program delivery.**

Internal Market: the varied employees of the agency

Vision

Line, Staff, Law Enforcement, and Resource Specialists ensure that Interpretive Services is integrated into a broad spectrum of Forest Service activities, and ensure that Interpretive Services receives full consideration in annual processes for planning, staffing, budgeting, and accomplishment reporting.

Visitor centers are valued for their significant contributions to delivering visitor services and interpretive and recreation opportunities and fostering sustainable rural economies.

Current Condition

When properly used, interpretation is a valuable tool that can help individual units meet public expectations while protecting the health and integrity of the land. There are, however, instances where interpretation is not used to full advantage as a public communication tool or for increasing the environmental responsibility and involvement of visitors. Possible reasons include an incomplete understanding of how interpretation can be applied to resource issues; insufficient budgets; and ineffective interpretive products. There is a need to better integrate Interpretive Services with Heritage, Wilderness, Conservation Education, Naturewatch, Fire Prevention, Healthy Forests, Law Enforcement, and other programs. Better integration and coordination will help maximize cost-effectiveness, enhance the agency's credibility, and gain broader public support for its mission and management practices.

Visitor centers are a focal point for making visitor contact and delivering a variety of agency programs and messages. Some centers are becoming important places for community activities such as art, music, and traditional crafts. Thus, they can be viewed as value-added to local communities and their economies. Visitor centers are not only about the physical place but also about the life and vision of local communities. Regardless of the important role centers have in serving visitors and forest-dependent communities, they are often viewed solely as financial burdens due to their operating costs.

Critical Gaps to Close

- **Incomplete interpretive planning of site specific projects, Forest business/marketing plans, and Forest Plans.**
- **Incomplete understanding of interpretation's benefits to resource protection and management.**

- **Lack of appreciation for the significant role played and services provided by visitor centers.**
- **Inconsistent coordination of Interpretive Services and other related educational and communication activities.**

Interpretive Providers Market (internal and external): the story tellers, designers and educators

Vision

All providers of Interpretive Services offer high-quality, innovative, creative programs/services based on professional standards and current communication science. In addition, all providers share their expertise with others to achieve mutual goals.

Current Condition

Over the past decade, the Forest Service has shifted how it manages and delivers interpretive services. Currently, there are settings where an external partner delivers the full range of interpretive services. In other settings, delivery is by entry-level uniformed Forest Service employees. These employees are classified under a dozen different OPM series, often spending less than 50% of their time on interpretive work. Opportunities for training in interpretive planning, program management, budgeting, and workforce development may not receive much attention. Not having a clearly defined career ladder hinders employees in moving into higher graded interpretive specialist positions or into forest or regional recreation staff positions.

In the past the Forest Service employed a greater number of professional interpretive specialists. Now, more resource specialists (biologists, archaeologists, landscape architects, etc.) or external partners (special use permittees or cooperating associations) are used to deliver interpretive services. Not all of these providers are trained or experienced in interpretive techniques and communication theories, methods, planning, and program management. This inexperience currently limits the agency's ability to provide and oversee a more complex, comprehensive interpretive program.

Critical Gaps to Close

- **Providers may not be professionally trained or educated in interpretive or communication methods.**
- **Better position management is needed for leadership succession due to changing workforce.**

Partners/IAs/Communities/Other Agencies Market: those outside the agency with and for whom we work

Vision

Providers of Interpretive Services assist partners and local communities by engaging them in respectful and meaningful dialogue; valuing their diverse perspectives, cultures, and lifestyles; and helping them achieve mutual goals for sustainability.

Current Condition

Interpretive Services has maintained long-standing partnerships with about 60 Interpretive Associations from around the country. Interpretive Associations contribute about \$5 million annually to the agency's Interpretive Services program. Over the past decade, the public's desire for a more seamless delivery of information and services has spurred increased cooperation with other organizations. Some of the results are more interagency centers, shared training, and jointly produced publications. Forest Service leadership is encouraging innovation in working with partners but there are numerous internal and external hindrances. Additionally, changing demographics and social trends require interpretive staff to seek out new partners in diverse communities and to define mutual goals.

Critical Gaps to Close

- **Legal authorities and cooperating agreements do not provide clear citations or direction for conducting partnerships.**
- **Forest Service Manual chapters and field guidance need to be revised to meet current conditions.**
- **Cooperators may need further development to ensure high-quality interpretive services.**

Interpretive Strategy Objectives at a Glance

Identified Gaps <i>Where we can improve</i>	Key Objectives <i>What we want to do</i>	To Achieve These Benefits <i>What the result will be</i>
Better Integrate Agency's Education Efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve efficiency and effectiveness • Increase coordination with other programs and agencies • Enhance internal relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased customer satisfaction • Improved resource protection
Develop Better Tools for Program Evolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize customer-focused programs and products • Develop tools and processes that promote flexibility, adaptability • Provide seamless inter-organizational delivery of programs • Increase the opportunities for interpretation to be delivered by other providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased customer satisfaction • Increased number of products to standard
Develop, Maintain and Recognize Professionalism of Internal and External Providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that interpretive activities are based on industry and professional standards • Promote professional training • Recognize all providers for their expertise and support continuous improvement of their skills • Raise staff qualifications • Integrate the delivery of interpretive activities to ensure high-quality Forest resource management programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased customer satisfaction • Increased number of products to standard • Improved resource protection • Enhanced benefits to forest-dependent communities
Focus on Long-term Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link to agency priorities, professional standards, and measurable outcomes • Develop support through community-based organizations • Look long-term to be sustainable • Develop advocacy network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased customer satisfaction • Increased public involvement • Enhanced benefits to forest-dependent communities

Conclusion

Interpretive Services is a key provider of interpretive messages and products aimed at increasing people's appreciation for natural and cultural resources, and understanding of complex land management issues and the multi-use mission of the Forest Service. The IS Strategy is an Interpretive Services roadmap for helping to achieve the outcomes in the Recreation Agenda by communicating the value and relevance of national forests and grasslands to the American public. By forging intellectual and emotional connections between people and their natural and cultural heritages, Interpretive Services plays a key role in achieving the education and visitor satisfaction goals of the Forest Service's Recreation Agenda.