Heritage interpretation in New Zealand: Research informing practice in changing times

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Preface
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Presentation outline

• Preface
• Changing times are challenging times
• The relevance of research
• Case studies: Research informing practice
• Discussion
• Conclusions
Changing times are challenging times

GLOBAL
- Security Issues
- Digital Technologies

LOCAL
- Nature Deficit
- Natural Disasters & Env Change

EFFECTS
- Environmental
- Socio-Cultural

- Immediate
- Gradual
The relevance of interpretation research
A continuum of research & evaluative tools

Espiner & Stewart (2013)
Illustrating the research – practice nexus

Examples from Aotearoa New Zealand
1. Get the message?!

Hazard communication and visitor compliance at the Glaciers, Westland National Park, New Zealand
A park with a problem...

New Zealand
Westland Tai Poutini National Park
Research to the rescue!

- Introduction of pictorial images on warning signs
- Visitor surveys, observations and interviews
It was very important for us that we got to touch the glacier face. I felt a bit naughty about ignoring the barrier, but I’d do it again, even though I now know more about the danger of ice falling. I’ll probably never get another chance!

Why would ice fall from the glacier today when it’s been like that for hundreds of years?

I’d like to see access to a safe bit [of the glacier] just for touching, but I guess thousands of human hands may damage it.
Key findings: Attention paid to information signs at entry points

• With 4 text-based signs, 34% of visitors stop to read information panels
• A single pictorial panel increased attention to 60% of visitors
Key findings: Awareness of hazards and signs

- 70% of visitors report no natural hazards
- Introducing pictorial signs significantly increased awareness of hazard messages
Key findings: Compliance with warning signs

• Considerable variation in rate of compliance
  • Text-based signs: 50 – 80%
  • Pictorial-based signs: 80 – 95%

• Significant differences between groups
  • Men make up 70% of non-compliers
  • Those aged 18-30 most likely to cross rope
  • Visible non-compliers increased chances of new arrivals also crossing barrier
Outcomes for management
Beyond the Glaciers: Implications

- Warning signs at natural attractions can be improved to effect desired outcomes
  - Some visitors will always ignore
- Visitors attention is limited
  - Use visual and ‘interpretive’ styles
- Balancing hazard management with wider visitor experience aims
  - Disruption of natural character
  - Creating unrealistic expectations
2. Interpretation after disaster

Making connections in post-quake Christchurch, New Zealand
Critical context: Christchurch earthquakes

- September 2010 (7.1) and February 2011 (6.3)
- 185 dead
- 14,000 ‘aftershocks’
- 100,000 homes damaged
- 70% of CBD buildings gone
- Core cultural heritage lost
Recovery mode: How has the interpretation sector responded?

Images courtesy of Sarah Murray, Canterbury Museum
Quake City: Technical stories

‘Safe’ but informative

Images courtesy of Sarah Murray, Canterbury Museum
Quake City: Heritage objects at different scales

• Aimed to show “a spectrum of mourning”  (Social Curator)
• Heritage items at once both familiar and unfamiliar

Images courtesy of Sarah Murray, Canterbury Museum
Quake City:
Science facts and community resilience

Images courtesy of Sarah Murray, Canterbury Museum
Quake City: Informing future developments

- Inclusion of Maori mythology was controversial
- Exhibit name was unpopular and misleading
Utilising vacant spaces: Christchurch City
‘Greening the Rubble’
‘Greening the Rubble’

Images courtesy of Jonathan Hall
The Green Room

What is broken can be rebuild

The story of Victoria’s first community garden created in 2005, when the vision of a local community group led to the establishment of a shared space for local residents. The garden provided a place for social interaction and support, and became a hub for community engagement.

Some examples of stories that came with the chives

Many thanks to the wonderful Greening the Rubble volunteers.

The Greening of Rubble

Images courtesy of Jonathan Hall
Evaluating Conservation in the City projects

• Collaboration between public, volunteer and business sectors

• Projects aim to:
  • Reconnect with urban populations
  • Engage young people and families
  • Develop and maintain partnerships

• Evaluation focus:
  • How are the sites used?
  • By whom and why?
  • Unanticipated outcomes

• Approach:
  • Observation; interviews; intercept survey
Evaluating Conservation in the City projects: Living Wall
Evaluating Conservation in the City projects:
Woods from the Trees
Evaluating Conservation in the City projects: Nature Play
Evaluating Conservation in the City projects: Nature Play
Nature Play is a stepping stone. It’s a way for us to connect with an urban audience; to create an area where people can experience what it’s like to be out in the bush...
(Ranger)

It gives the Department some exposure in the city that it didn’t have before
(Ranger)
Nature Play

People come here to have a good time, and that creates appreciation. If you care about something, you’re more likely to look after it. Enjoyment of the outdoors and a conservation ethic – they’re linked

(Parent)

Photo credit: Greening the Rubble Trust
Nature Play Evaluation Summary (interim)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meets these objectives...</th>
<th>But...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Embeds nature in the City</td>
<td>Users from limited demographic</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Creates possible starting point for engagement</td>
<td>Panels not widely used</td>
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<tr>
<td>Showcases Department's work and brand</td>
<td>Homeless and others use park at night</td>
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<tr>
<td>Successful partnership with community and business</td>
<td>Secondary destination (not primary)</td>
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Source: Holland (2015)

Documenting the successes and limitations of these initiatives provides the basis for informed re-design and future interpretation investment.
Research often raises more questions!

• Challenging questions need debate:
  • To what extent is it the responsibility of park rangers to raise safety concerns with visitors, and how can interpretation best contribute to this?
  • Is the visitor experience negatively affected by signs and panels in natural settings?
  • When is it too soon to interpret disaster?
  • Who is the (disaster) interpretation for?
  • Interpretation connections in these city cases can only be transitional, creating future issues for residents and managers

• How can your practice be informed by research given the changing times in which you operate?
Conclusions

• A range of social, technological and environmental changes present us with interesting challenges, within which opportunities exist

• Research and evaluation are critical components of successful heritage interpretation delivery and management

• The capacity to document and explain gives us the power to augment, improve and justify interpretation to an increasingly discerning public and private sector

• The benefits of research can extend well beyond the individual project

• In changing and challenging times, researchers and interpretation practitioners have much to gain from cooperation and collaboration