

Wilderness Interpretation - the European Part

As we know, the development of interpretation from an idea to a profession took place in the USA; and from the beginning interpretation paralleled the effort of protecting wilderness areas.

In 1871 **John Muir**, son of a Scottish priest, who paved the way for Yosemite National Park, wrote into his note book:

“I’ll interpret the rocks,
learn the language of flood, storm
and the avalanche.
I’ll acquaint myself
with the glaciers and wild gardens,
and get as near to the heart
of the world as I can.”

Even in the US, this was an uncommon way to look at wilderness. Interpreting the “language” of the wild became a new type of “translation”.

A few years later, 14 year old **Enos Mills**, a young friend of John Muir, went to the Rocky Mountains, and set up a small cabin to live there. Through his advocacy, Rocky Mountain National Park was established. And we interpreters owe to him the elaboration of the first principles of nature guiding. Step by step, as he brought his visitors up to Long’s Peak, he broadened his horizon. And face to face to wilderness he created a trail school, which certified the first men and women(!) as nature guides. “He who feels the spell of the wild... is in tune with the universe”, Mills said. What this means, he described in 1920 within his book *Adventures of a Nature Guide* (Mills, 1990).

Finally **Freeman Tilden** travelled the parks, set up his six principles of interpretation, and with the first edition of *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Tilden, 1957) a new profession was born.

Since then, interpretation was no longer limited to national parks. Nature parks, museums, zoos and botanical gardens became interested in the methods of translating the language of specific phenomena into the language of their visitors. Today we deal with a lot of interpretive branches from sky to underwater interpretation. Was wilderness interpretation just a preliminary stage, reflecting the situation in the USA, and not too significant to dense-populated Europe?

I don’t think so. Wilderness interpretation is one of the most modern branches of our profession. It can stimulate personal growth, and it can support the sustainable development of our western society. Wilderness interpretation is not just a question of outer space. It also needs impulses from inside. And here we take up the thread.

The Relevance to the Individual

We are used to live in a well-organized world. On the one hand, wild nature fascinates us; but on the other, we feel permanently threatened. For a long time man assumed, that the laws of culture wouldn’t have to do much with the laws of nature. Wild and cultivated areas seemed to be the opposite ends on the same straight line. But times have changed.

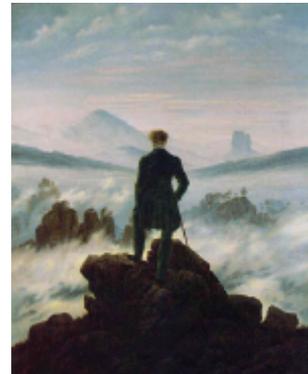
Besides values like loyalty and order, creativity and adaptability become key qualifications in a society, which is more and more characterized by its continuous change. Suddenly we recognize relations - e. g. between ecology and economy - and the suspicion arises, that nature has much more to tell, than we first assumed.

Fortunately interpretation always is about to reveal such connections. On the occasion of planning an interpretive trail through a gorge for the German-Czech international park Sächsisch-Böhmische Schweiz, we figured out a whole bunch of similarities, showing that “the wild” is not only a phenomenon surrounding us in a national park. It also penetrates our society and the mind of each individual. To find the balance between order and chaos becomes vital.

Our national parks allow visitors to search for this balance in a safe atmosphere. And wilderness interpretation supports them to focus on the themes, essential for their personal growth.

*The Wanderer
above the sea of fog*
C.D. Friedrich, 1818

A lonesome visitor
facing the wilderness.
Today the landscape is
part of a German-Czech
international park.



The Relevance to Sustainable Development

The mission statement of *Interpret Europe* is clearly pointing out, that

“The network will actively support sustainable development.”

But what does that mean? In *Interpretation for the 21st Century* (Beck/Cable, 1998) the authors emphasize the role of interpretation in resource preservation, and the motto of the international conference on interpretation, which was intended to take place in Denmark this summer was *To be or not to be – sustainable*.

Indeed sustainability is essential for our planet. Since the UN Conference on Environment and Development, which took place in Rio in 1992, sustainable development is the central theme in search for a solution of the economical, ecological, and social problems, that we are exposed today. But how can we realize sustainability, and what part might wilderness interpretation play?



The track to the future seems to have two rails. Both of them are indispensable for the process.

The first rail is called **efficiency**. That means: How can we satisfy our needs, by using less material and by avoiding waste and emissions.

Concerning this point, we can already achieve some success in Europe. Since Rio most of our countries are constantly reducing their energy consumption. This is possible, because we can make use of familiar patterns of competition - just the other way around. Only in 1997 the report to the Club of Rome supposed, that our problems can be solved, if people internalize, that it is smart to buy things, that use less energy (Weizsäcker et al., 1997). But what seemed to be an advantage unfortunately neutralized most of our improvement: People buy more and more energy-saving but additional devices, and replace them after a shorter and shorter period of time. This is how a consumer society works. It is obvious, that not every person on earth will be able to share this way of life without irreversibly destroying the basis of our existence.

To break through this vicious circle, we need the second rail, which is called **sufficiency**: We have to be happy with less material wealth. It is of some interest, that the first steps in this direction were taken by economists. In 1975 the long-standing consultant of the British National Coal Board, Ernst F. Schumacher, spoke up for a general set-up of easy to grasp economical structures, to allow the individual a more responsible acting (Schumacher, 1975). This framework is still necessary. But, of course, setting frames is not our job as interpreters.

So, what does all of this have to do with wilderness interpretation?

Wilderness can not only remind us, that there are still ways to enjoy our life in an almost immaterial way.

Wilderness does not only teach us billions of years old strategies, to solve at least some of the problems we have to deal with today.

Wilderness stimulates us to leave our everyday structures behind, and inspires our creativity in the search for more sustainable life-styles.

By the IUCN, national parks are defined on their renunciation of economical use. Let us take this advantage to train our sufficiency. That means

- not just to penetrate space, but to animate it
- not just to save time, but to use it wisely
- not just to possess things, but to share them.

Wilderness interpretation can support sustainable development by bringing forward each of these points, by "building receptivity into the still unlovely human mind", as Aldo Leopold once said (Leopold, 1949). Because "in wilderness is the preservation of the world" (Thoreau, 1862).

Conclusions

Wilderness interpretation is one of the most modern branches of our profession, as it can

- ⇒ support the mental growth of the individual
- ⇒ inspire the search for sustainable life-styles.

Wilderness interpretation took its start in the USA. Today in Europe some new aspects seem to take shape. By way of thanks - and also looking forward to a vivid dialogue - we like to send these impulses back over the Atlantic.

At the World National Park Convention in 2000, the discussion on this new view of wilderness interpretation started. We would be happy, if we could find a forum for this theme at *Interpret Europe*. If you like to join, please contact us at mail@interp.de.

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