

How do Tourist Guides Add Value to an Ecotour?

Interpreting Interpretation in the State of Amazonas, Brazil

By Esther Periera

In Ecotourism, interpretation by a guide creates or shapes the experience for the tourist, differentiating one episode from another. As such, the guide's interpretation adds value to the tourism product and contributes to the visitor's experience. This paper discussed the role of interpretation by guides in the State of Amazonas, Brazil, finding in them patterns from which lessons may be drawn. Given the intangibility of the Ecotourism product, this paper argues that it is the guide who defines the quality of the product. The guide may draw the tourist toward or away from sustainable practices, and significantly contributes to the success or failure of the ecotouristic venture. The State of Amazonas in Brazil already has guides, but this study questions their education and training in interpretive skills as well as their professional organization and working conditions.

Introduction

Brazilian Amazonia, an area of 5.1 million km or 59% of the Brazilian territory consists of nine states; the largest one is the State of Amazonas, at 1.5 million km. Amazonia contains part of the world's largest rainforest and offers an attractive stage for both environmental and cultural interpretation. The region's rich plant diversity supports an equally diverse fauna, along with the area's many cultural groups, making Amazonia a high-ranking place on most tourists' "to-do" list. Development and implementation of a solid ecotourism program in Amazonia, to replace traditional industries that are incompatible with a rainforest environment, can translate into economic gains for the region and the country, and is already underway (SUDAM, 1999). Brazil received 4,090,590 international tourists in 2003 (EMBRATUR, 2003). In an article about the relationship between sustainable tourism and conservation gains, Cordeiro (1999) touts ecotourism as a viable option to boost the region's economy while curbing unsustainable practices such as logging and ranching. Tourism revenues can be increased through the development of sustainable tourism, such as ecotourism. One of the main players in ecotourism, but often the least appreciated one, is the naturalist guide.

This individual has the potential to add considerable value to an ecotour both in economic and conservation gains. In the State of Amazonas, the lack of a solid training program for naturalist guides, as well as the lack of a professional guide association that could organize, train, and support naturalist guides, limits the full educational and cultural experience most visitors could expect to have. Moreover, interpreters serve in many other capacities including that of host, public relations specialist, and good-will ambassador (Ham and Weiler, 2000).

In Ecotourism, interpretation by a guide creates or shapes the experience for the tourist, differentiating one episode from another. As such, the guide adds value to the product by providing new experiences. The experience, an intangible aspect of the ecotour, is principally facilitated through the interpretive naturalist guide. The role of this individual has evolved over time from tour management to experience management. Through interpretation, the naturalist guide assists the visitor in connecting with the place visited, understanding and appreciating its significance both in local and global contexts, and becoming more aware of cause and effect behaviors. Given the intangibility of the ecotourism product, it is the guide who defines the quality of the product, may draw the tourist toward or away from sustainable practices, and significantly contributes to the success or failure of an ecotouristic venture. The guide, as an educator, adds value to the visitor's experience while contributing to conservation and economic gains.

Interpretation: the cornerstone of ecotourism

The Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people' (Western, 1993, p.8). Essential to the goals implicit in ecotourism's definition is the education of the traveler so that this individual develops better understanding and appreciation for natural and cultural environments. Moreover, according to this definition 'responsible travel' is travel which respects the natural environment and makes a direct contribution to local people. Unlike traditional tourism, and even some nature-based tourism that may only use the natural environment to enhance a tour, ecotourism is based on purposeful travel. Ecotourism is a travel experience that helps travelers come to a better understanding of unique natural and cultural environments around the world (Epler Wood, 2002). Weiler and Ham (2002) contend that ecotourism is a special type of nature-based tourism for two reasons: first, it strives to offer the visitor a meaningful experience; second it does so in a way which is environmentally and culturally responsible. Because of this commitment to the natural and cultural environments, a key actor in ecotourism is the interpretive guide who can inform, involve, and offer the traveler a meaningful experience through his interpretation.

Interpretation is not solely about factual information. It is not limited to simply identifying plants and animals during a jungle walk, or in the case of touring the Amazon, naming the great Amazon explorers of yesteryear, or showing a tourist the village's main shop. Freeman Tilden, the father of interpretation, defined interpretation as "An educational activity, which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experiences, and by illustrative media, rather than simply communicating factual information" (Tilden, 1957, cited in Ham, 1992). In Ham's 1992 definition the keyword is 'communication'. In other words, the main idea of interpretation is to communicate to the visitor in a way understandable to the individual the object or site being visited. There is a plethora of other terms defining what interpretation is or should be. Tilden's and Ham's definitions, however, are particularly apt in that they include the revelation of meanings and relationships through communication. To the traveler from afar or to the local day visitor, the meanings and relationships revealed to him or to her through interpretation about a particular area are what enriches their visit, and imparts the intangible value of the trip — the experience itself. While the education of the tourist may be viewed with a certain cynicism by some authors such as Wheeler (as cited in Orams, 1996, p.91) who said: "Education is seen by many as the way forward for nurturing a 'better' tourism. Dream on!", only *good* interpretation can contribute to the visitor's learning and understanding of a site.

The Interpretive Guide and this individual's education and roles

A tour guide can be defined as one with "a broad-based knowledge of a particular area whose primary duty is to inform" (Pond, 1993). In this sense, it appears that a formal education is not imperative, and that a person born in the region would know it well, thus potentially being able to inform through facts. This, however, is not interpretation.

Ham (1992) posits that an interpreter may use factual information "to illustrate points and clarify meanings, it is the points and meanings that he or she is trying first to communicate, not the facts" (p.3). An interpretive guide — one whose communication is first and far most about illustrating the meanings and the connections a place's natural and cultural environments encompass, may or may not have formal education. Ham also contends that the qualities of *good* interpretation can be learnt, suggesting that it takes training and not necessarily formal education. Likewise, the appreciation of sustainability as a holistic practice may not require formal education but training designed to fulfill this end. The guide can only explain to the visitor the meanings and relationships of a site and its inhabitants if he himself has these perceptions. This insight and ability to relate through interpretation is what may empower the guide to alter human behavior, so that intolerance for other cultures may be reduced and less environmentally-friendly practices may be replaced by more sound ones.

This is a compelling reason why specialized education is needed for the guide interpreter. Orams (1996) argues that a pedagogic approach is necessary to design and teach effective interpretive programs. "The intermediate steps of knowledge acquisition, attitude development, motivation and intention to act must be examined. Through understanding these processes, strategies can be designed which reflect the complexities of the human mind and the diversity of human behavior" (Orams, 1996, p. 86). Thus, it is suggested that trainers need education and competence in areas such as behavioral science to educate interpretive guides so that their interpretation can attain ecotourism goals.

Additionally, interpretation can facilitate economic and ecological sustainability by creating local employment and acting 'as on site regulators of visitor behavior' and potentially influencing tourists' beliefs about conservation (Ham and Weiler, 2002). Consequently, the education of the interpreter is of utmost importance and needs to be a priority for the responsible organization because poor interpretation hinders conservation efforts, leads to misunderstandings, and inhibits ecotourism growth. This study concerns the quality of interpretation in the State of Amazonas and the implications it may have regarding ecotourism goals.

In addition to being "pathfinder and mentor", referring to the guides' dual responsibility for the group and the individual, (Cohen, as cited in Black, 1999), and educator (Weiler and Ham, 2000; Pond, 1993), the guide is also a facilitator in the sense that this individual helps the visitor to understand and appreciate natural and cultural environments (Weiler and Ham, 2000; 2001). In this vein, the guide's role has evolved from simply managing the logistics of a tour to being a main contributor to the visitors' experience. Ecotourist guides have other roles as well, often interconnected with specific characteristics and needs of the visited physical and cultural environment.

Criteria to Qualify Interpretation

Interpretation is an indispensable tool to achieve ecotourism goals (Weiler and Ham, 2001), which are closely correlated to those of the broader term of sustainable tourism (Diamantis and Ladkin, 1999). It follows that for interpretation to be an effective tool it needs to include criteria which assists ecotourism in reaching its goals. Ham (1992) proposes four qualities for effective communication. "Communication must be *pleasurable, relevant, organized* and having a *theme*" (Ham, 1992, pp.8-28). Communication, albeit necessary, is not only about speaking a foreign language. Communication needs to be *pleasurable* in the sense that it is entertaining to the point of holding the audience's attention; it is delivered with a smile and in an informal manner, versus a serious face and classroom style. Ham refers to a classroom style when the audience needs to learn the subject, as for example to take an exam, and in this sense the audience is a captive one and needs to learn. This type of communication is not ideal for a tourist. A tourist who is on holiday might be more receptive to communication which is delivered with humor, yet it is informative and pleasant.

Relevance of the communication, the second quality, refers to communication which is *meaningful* and *personal*. *Meaningful*, as opposed to *meaningless*, refers to being able to connect the information to something the person already knows. *Personal* relates to involving the person in the communication. For example, asking something like this "Have you ever thought that one day your children/grandchildren could visit this place and only see ashes?" or "can you imagine what the implications the disappearance of the rainforest would have on our lives?" Therefore, this communication carries meaning while putting the visitor in a center stage position, right at the visited place.

The third quality, *organization*, refers to the easy flow of the information. Especially for tourist audiences, who, for the most time are looking for relaxation, it makes sense that the information is organized in a way that it does not require too much thinking. Organized

communication has a beginning, middle and an end. This quality is an important one as to keep the flow continuous, thus holding the audience's attention.

The fourth quality is the *theme*. Every story has a main theme or message. In this respect, the communication needs to be built around that main message to make it relevant, and a main point to take home. Topic and theme is not the same. To echo Ham's words, "the topic is merely the subject matter of the presentation, whereas the theme is the main point or message the communicator is trying to convey about the topic" (Ham, 1992, p. 21). When interpretation by interpretive guides includes these criteria it would qualify as 'good interpretation'. Interpretation which does not, or is closer to the traditional factual information of tour guides, would qualify as "bad" or "poor". For example, when interpreting the challenges and achievements of an area in the context of tourism development, the guide who understands his role in promoting ecotourism can be influential by sharing his understanding with the tourist. He can discuss the pros and cons of unregulated tourism and talk about the advantages of responsible tourism development. As discussed by several authors (Orams, 1997; Fennell, 1999; Honey, 1999; Buckley, 2001; Wearing, 2001) tourism can cause a plethora of environmental and social impacts. The interpreter can 'slate' impacts into his talks and gently provide the visitor with guidelines to avoid them. Likewise, the guide can explain the connection between unplanned tourism and its effects on the local economy, culture and environment. Consequently, the visitor may go away with an enlightened perspective, that not all tourism is responsible tourism. In future travels, this individual may inquire about, and participate only in trips offered by tour operators, hotels, and other tourism venues whose business ethics are compatible with the principles of ecotourism. Therefore, the cornerstone of ecotourism can only hold and succeed if the interpreter can provide good interpretation. There are, however, other techniques that can be used to enhance interpretation, thus enhance the visitor's experience.

Techniques to Enhance Interpretation

One of the techniques used in interpretation is that of making connections between the place and the visitor, as a way to incite this individual to question and discover new things (Ham, 1992; Weiler and Ham, 2001). In this respect the guide's ability to help the visitor *see* the not-so-obvious, such as the use of timber from slow growing trees, such as the mahogany, and the detrimental effects its harvesting can have on surrounding vegetation and the wildlife that depend on it, may help the visitor in seeing the connection between the place visited and some of his or her own practices at the place of residence.

Thought provocation is another effective technique in interpretation (Ham, 1992; Orams, 1996; Veverka, 1998), and the one that Tilden contended to be at the heart of interpretation (Pond, 1993). In fact, Tilden was accused of discounting the importance of education and emphasizing the benefits of thought provocation (Pond, 1993), a point also brought up by Ham and Weiler (2002) but to salient the importance this interpretive technique has in helping the visitor "to attach new and profound meaning to a place or feature" (p.30).

The use of visual aids, whether they are books, laminated sheets representing local fauna and flora, or a small artifact made of local materials can be a skilful way of interpreting the site for the visitor (Ham, 1992; Knudson, *et al.*, 1999; Pereira, 2004). Interpretation is not about "teaching" visitors about the place, rather, it is about revealing why it "matters" (Ham, 2002). The Amazon rainforest is one of those places whose conservation matters, and could gain through interpretation that uses the above mentioned qualities and techniques.

Working Conditions

Working conditions are often seen as a contributor to high performance levels (Brown & Mitchell, 1993; Ostroff, 1992). The work of these guides contains various types of demands, including responsibility for the guests' safety on tours, quality of the program,

being a link, and sometimes an ambassador between the guests and their social and structural environment, and also working in hot, humid and wet environments. Their working schedules can be taxing at times, keeping them away from family and home for up to 25 or more days at a time. One should expect that working conditions would be an issue in discussing the quality of the guides' professional roles and performance. The climatic conditions in the State of Amazonas, as well as the vast distances that need to be covered by uncomfortable and unreliable transportation, make guiding especially daunting. Although most nature walks are conducted during the cooler hours of the morning, late afternoon, or after dinner for nightlife viewing, allowing the visitor the opportunity to rest in between activities, the guide has other responsibilities and cannot take a break. To be constantly tending to the needs of visitors and the logistics of a tour can be exhausting, thus leading the way to professional burnout (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Zapf et al, 2001).

Guides' Training and education in the State of Amazonas

In Brazil, the public sector, which has primary responsibility for training, lacks a system that would encourage the development and implementation of solid programs in both interpretation and guide certification. The highest governing tourism entity in Brazil is the Ministry of Tourism under whose jurisdiction falls the National Tourism Agency (EMBRATUR), the agency responsible for tourism at the national level. In addition, each state has its own tourism agency. In the state of Amazonas, the agency was called the Secretariat of Tourism and Culture (SECTUR) until the change of government in 2002; it is now called Amazonastur. There are numerous municipalities within each state, and many have their own tourism office that oversees local tourism development. The agencies at the national and state levels are the promoters, developers, and implementers of tourism programs, and are, therefore, the entities responsible for overseeing training and certification of guides. The existing training programs are at regional, national and international levels, but the programs are not applied on a systematic basis. The last time a guides' course was applied was in 1995 (Senac, personal communication, March 31, 2004). The programs, when applied, are conducted under the auspices of EMBRATUR, with the National Service for Commercial Training (SENAC), and the Support Agency to Micro Companies (SEBRAE) as collaborators. Participants in these training programs need to have a high school diploma, and speak a second language.

Countries with a well-developed sustainable tourism policy, and who have invested in sound interpretative training, such as Costa Rica, are successful in part by having added that intangible value to their tourism operation, as well as sending conservation messages to the world at large. A quality-training program designed for Amazonia would address areas in guides' interpretation skills and performance, while simultaneously empowering them in areas of communication, risk management and customer satisfaction. In addition, quality training increases guides' awareness of environmental and socio-economic impacts that ecotourism may cause (Black, 1999). At the writing of this paper, neither the national nor state agencies in Brazil have adopted a high quality guide/interpreter training program that would prepare and certify skilled interpreters in their fields.

How can we articulate the conservation and economic value of an ecotour guide?

Ascribing a dollar value to what good interpretation brings to ecotourism is difficult. It is easy, however, to emphasize that the many roles played by the interpretative guide are central to the operation's goals of sustainable development.

In using the qualities and techniques of good interpretation the ecotour guide has many opportunities to communicate the significance of an area's conservation to the visitor. Consequently the guide can potentially contribute to the sustainable development of a region in two ways: conservation gains and economic gains.

- **Conservation gains**

The quality of the experience provided by the ecotour guide allows the visitor to establish an emotional attachment to the area visited. For example, by communicating the value of a region's biodiversity to the visitor, or the threats thereto, the ecotour guide can enlist support for conservation efforts either locally or globally. One example set by Lindblad Special Expeditions in the Galapagos Islands demonstrates the connection that can be made with the visitor. This ecotourism travel company established a conservation fund to assist the Darwin Research Station and the National Park. Their effort is successful in part because of the guides' high level of interpretive skills, and the conservation message they give to each visitor. Thus far, the conservation fund has collected over US\$ 1 million since its inception in June, 1997 (Lindblad Expeditions, personal communication with program manager, November 11, 2003).

- **Economic gains**

Because of the guide's pivotal role in the visitor's experience, his expertise can translate to economic development. It is often said that a guide "makes or breaks a tour" when referring to the success of a trip. Implicit in this statement is that the experience the visitor had will affect his future travel decisions, whether or not he will use the same travel organization, or visit the same region or country. Word of mouth is also very influential in peoples' travel decisions and a good report will generate increased business. Often times, the quality of the interpretive guides a company employs is the deciding factor in choosing one company over another. Many successful travel companies are well aware that the quality and interpretive skills of their ecotour guides are directly related to their repeat business. These operators use interpretation as a value-added exercise to attract higher-yield markets (McArthur, 1998). International travel companies with expedition vessels that ply Amazon waters often feature well-known interpretive naturalists in their brochures (A&K, 2003). Although this maybe part of a marketing technique, it also empowers the individual and establishes him or her as a professional. The travel company gains greater credibility while increasing its sales revenues.

Putting a dollar value on the contribution of the ecotour guide to an operation is difficult, but one study by Conservation International (CI), (CI, 1997) can shed some light on the question. In an attempt to understand the economics of conservation, CI compared the financial impact of deforestation versus forest preservation along the coast of southern Bahia in Brazil. Tourism revenues would decline by one-half if the forest were gone, but would increase by \$52 per visitor if the forest were preserved and forest attractions or activities were added. It is not known how much of this dollar amount can be ascribed to simply the presence of the forest itself, and how much to visitor activities led by ecotour guides. It is clear, however, that the guides' work would generate revenue.

Conclusion and afterthoughts

This paper discusses the importance of good interpretation for tourists when visiting the State of Amazonas. Moreover, criteria for evaluating the quality of guides' interpretation in the State of Amazonas are proposed, and also how to enhance the quality of the guides' interpretation. To develop ecotourism in the area, the quality of interpretation will have to be improved. Four main criteria for high interpretation quality and three techniques have been identified and briefly discussed, towards which the quality actually can be compared. The point of departure for the paper is that there is a gap between the level of understanding of ecotourism and the factual competence of the guides. Moreover, it is expected that the guides lack professional skills in interpretation, thus leaving the visitors with a sub-optimal level of understanding of rainforest, cultural and natural environments. As a consequence, this also leads to reduced contributions to the development of the local communities.

A guide who understands qualities of good interpretation and applies them can contribute to the visitors' travel experience, while promoting conservation and economic

gains. These can be at the local, regional or global levels. Training and education of the guide is proposed as a first tool to contribute to ecotourism development. There is no training in the State of Amazonas which addresses interpretation. Likewise, the course that does exist is applied at several years' intervals, and not all guides have taken it. Along with a better training, there is also a need for a continuous planning process, where the organizing of the guides is also included. Guides working conditions should be considered in the planning process. It is also argued that, most likely, the guides can contribute to these planning processes along with politicians and ecotourism experts. A serious association that envisages guides' development and supports their profession is yet another immediate necessity. Considering the central role that the Amazon Region plays in global human and natural systems, the issues discussed here reach, undoubtedly, far beyond the State of Amazonas.

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