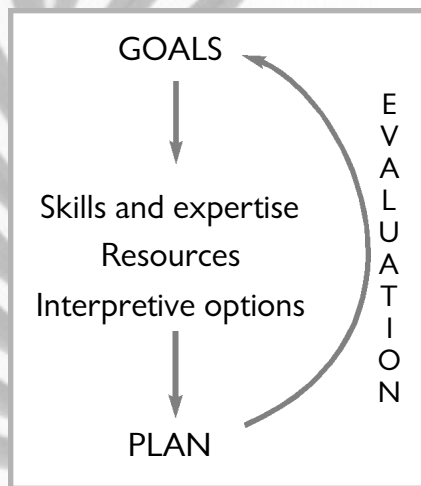




# 2 Planning an Interpretation

## Programme



Developing interpretive materials requires a lot of time and effort. However effort in itself does not guarantee success. Even a well-intended sign which looks very smart may not be noticed or read by visitors. In the end it's not the quantity of interpretive materials produced or the size of your budget which matters – success is determined by how effectively you communicate with the public. It therefore makes sense to spend some time thinking about and planning your interpretation programme.

Are you going to use guided walks, or brochures or signs? Or do you have another creative idea to make your garden come alive? Every place is unique, with its own special features and challenges, and this requires an equally unique interpretive plan. Interpretive planning is the process that sets out to determine the most effective form(s) of interpretation for a given situation.

### Begin with the end in mind

When planning an interpretation programme it is helpful to forget about interpretive products such as brochures and signs, and *focus on the visitor's experience*. How would you like people to experience your botanical garden? What would you like them to see? And to know?



Answering these questions will help you to visualise what you wish to achieve with the interpretation programme. Describe this in a short paragraph or list – these are the **goals** of your programme. Being clear about your goals helps to focus your efforts and enables you to choose the most appropriate interpretive products for your garden. It also enables you to evaluate the effectiveness of your programme.



The “reflect” symbol suggests you stop to think about the situation in your botanical garden. Better still, write your thoughts and ideas on paper.



## Match the programme to your needs

When planning an interpretation programme you need to be realistic – i.e. match your plans and expectations with available resources. Take time to consider the following:

### The mission of your organisation

What is the mission of your botanical garden? Try to think of ways in which the interpretation programme can help to fulfil this mission and promote the garden. This helps to generate support for interpretation both within the organisation (from the curator and garden staff) and among the general public.

### Types of visitors

Interpretation involves communicating with your visitors. The manner in which you do this depends on their interests, their age, language, education and culture. For this reason you need to know which are the main types of visitors coming to your botanical garden.


Are the visitors mainly adults, or children or family groups? Are they people who come for recreation or for learning (e.g. students)? Are they local visitors or tourists? What are the predominant language(s) spoken by visitors? Are there perhaps any other specific groups (e.g. visiting scientists, church groups)?

Spend time in the garden observing and listening to visitors. Make a list of the main visitor groups, and put them in order of priority. Decide on your target audience and always keep them in mind when planning your interpretation programme.

### Available staff and expertise

There is no point in planning an extensive interpretation programme with regular guided walks, educational theatre, interpretive signs and dozens of trails if you don't have the resources to do it. It's good to be ambitious but you also need to be realistic.

Consider the human resources which are available to you. How many hours per week can you dedicate to interpretation? Are there any volunteers who can assist you? Can you call upon the expertise of other staff members when required (e.g. botanists, horticulturists, artists)?



Remember that interpretation is not only about developing new materials – you need to put aside enough time for maintenance and programme evaluation.

### **Your strengths and abilities**

People have different talents and abilities. Some are confident with groups of people and love doing guided walks. Others enjoy writing signs and have an eye for layout and design. Consider your personal strengths and weaknesses. What do you enjoy doing most in terms of interpretation? This is the area where you are naturally confident and most likely to do well. Start by building on your strengths, and as you gain confidence, you can acquire skills in areas where you are less experienced.



### **Budget**

This will influence the type of interpretation programme which can be offered. Printed brochures and some types of signs are costly to produce, so these may not be possible on a small budget. However don't be discouraged if you have to operate on a shoestring budget. Remember that a simple hand-drawn sign may be far more effective than a fancy full-colour sign – it all depends on how well the message has been conveyed.

Sometimes there is an opportunity to recover some of the costs of interpretation. For example: you could charge for guided walks, or ask for a donation to cover the printing costs of brochures.


Now that you have established the goals of your interpretation programme and considered the available resources and expertise, you can start thinking about the best ways to achieve these goals. But before you do this, get some help from your team to get the creative juices flowing . . .

### **A team effort**

It is important to involve management and garden staff in the planning of an interpretation programme. Discuss your ideas with them and get their input. You could organise a workshop to identify what the goals are for interpretation and brainstorm ways to achieve these goals. The time spent planning together is well-spent – if your colleagues have been involved in the process, they will want to support you when you start implementing the programme.



### **The benefits of interpretive planning**

- The clarification of goals and objectives encourages a focussed approach.
  - Built-in evaluation helps to ensure that the interpretive product is effective.
  - It enables you to create a corporate image and ‘house style’.
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You could also speak to staff who are interested in interpretation and create an *interpretive team*. A team approach enables you to share ideas and stimulates creativity. This helps you to gain confidence and encourages you to experiment with new ideas.

### **Ask for help**

There are many people involved in interpretation with a wealth of knowledge and experience who can help you. Contact staff in other gardens, try to visit them occasionally and invite them to visit you. You can benefit a lot from their input, so don't be shy to ask for advice and assistance. Networking with staff from local museums, nature reserves and heritage sites may also lead to exciting collaborative projects. Don't feel that you are alone – you just have to ask for help.

### **Evaluating the programme**

For interpretation to be effective it must be evaluated on an ongoing basis. This simply means that you assess whether the interpretive product or programme is meeting its desired objectives. Go back to the goals which you hoped to achieve when the project began and ask yourself honestly whether these have been met.

Evaluation is not about deciding whether you have succeeded or failed. It's about looking for ways to improve your programme and forms part of an ongoing learning process. It's about being responsive to visitors and recognising that some things work better than others. Evaluation is something which benefits you personally because it encourages you to reflect on your work and seek new challenges, which leads to greater job satisfaction.



### **Sparkle-in-the-eye evaluation**

The simplest and most effective way to evaluate interpretation is to look at visitors and watch their response. How long do they look at a brochure or sign? What is the expression on their faces? Is there a positive response after reading it? Perhaps the best test is whether you see a sparkle in someone's eye!

Evaluation during an interpretive walk is easy. If your walk is interesting and entertaining, visitors will be attentive and respond to your questions. On the other hand if your group looks bored or confused, you'll need to make some changes and adjust your planned walk to suit their needs. Remember that you are there because of *them*, not the other way round.

### **Formative evaluation**

This type of evaluation involves visitors in evaluating and informing the development of new interpretive products. In practice it means testing draft copies of signs, brochures or trail guides, getting feedback from visitors and making changes until the products work. Formative evaluation makes a lot of sense because visitors feel more inclined to comment on a rough draft than a polished product and it is easier and cheaper to change.

The process of evaluation takes time, but saves both time and money in the long run. It ensures that interpretation is appropriate to visitor's needs and interests.

### **Questionnaires**

Visitor surveys can be helpful to find out more about the demographics and interests of visitors coming to your garden. However questionnaires take considerable time to fill in and to process the data, and they don't really give the qualitative information which you require to evaluate interpretation. Informal and friendly chatting with visitors can be much more useful to find out what they really think.

The more eyes and ears there are in the garden to observe visitors, the better. If you've got staff involved and excited about your interpretation programme, there is a good chance that you will get useful feedback and observations from them. Ongoing evaluation is the key to successful interpretation.





### Professional touches

- neat and tidy appearance
- consistent use of garden logo
- attention to detail
- visitor friendly
- standardise some elements (e.g. signage, clothing) to create a distinctive corporate image

## Adding a professional touch

Since interpretation forms the link between the garden and its visitors, it will have an influence on the public image of your organisation. Interpretive guides with a bored, disinterested attitude, or signage which is untidy or skew, will create a poor impression on visitors. On the other hand, a professional approach and neat, tidy presentation will create a good impression.

Do visitors know who runs the place? One of the ways to strengthen the **corporate identity** of your garden is to make consistent use of the name and logo of the garden. Get into the habit of using it on *all* interpretive materials, whether it is a guide's name badge, a brochure, a map or an interpretive sign. Use the logo correctly and don't be tempted to change the colours or the lettering. The more consistent you are, the greater the impact it will have.

You can further professionalise interpretation by standardising items such as clothing and signage. For example, if interpretive guides always wear khaki shorts and a white t-shirt with a name badge, they will be easily recognisable by visitors. Similarly, if you make consistent use of certain fonts and colours for interpretive signage, this will be recognised as a 'house style' and give you a distinctive image.

Your corporate image is invaluable when raising funds for the garden. Potential funders want to know that they are sponsoring a professional organisation which has wide public support. One of the goals of your interpretation programme may therefore be to promote the garden and its activities.



## **Game watching in a botanical garden . . .**

At first I found it quite difficult to do programme evaluation. Part of my problem was that I felt a bit shy walking around the garden and watching visitors respond to interpretive materials – especially since I wanted to go up really close to hear what they were saying. This made me feel as if I was eaves dropping! One day I discovered that carrying a camera helped; it made me look like a tourist, and allowed me to stand still for long periods of time without arousing suspicion. In this way I could ‘hang around’ visitors and get a lot of useful feedback.

It can be hard to be objective about one’s own work – especially if you’ve put a lot of time and energy into it. To avoid taking things personally and being too biased in my observations, I used to imagine that I was in a game park. To me the visitors were like animals browsing in different parts of the park (garden) and my job was to observe and record their behaviour. And wow! – it was revealing:

Some interpretive signs didn’t get more than a second’s worth of attention. Sometimes visitors would read a sign and move on, without looking at the plant display. This made me realise that I had not made a clear link between the subject of the sign and the display – I could just as well have put up a page of information from a book. On some occasions I watched visitors read a sign and start chatting enthusiastically to each other about the subject (my best!). That made it all worthwhile and strengthened my resolve to find new ways to make the garden come alive.

**Maryke Honig – Interpretive Officer, Kirstenbosch NBG.**