RAMBLINGS
OF A
PARK RANGER
(or Dennis-isms)

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Nature Interpretation
(& telling stories for better understanding)

Not too long ago I was tasked in an exercise to develop a definition of nature interpretation with a group of park managers. Fifteen minutes later we had a well-crafted progression of words into the finest "government-ease" I had seen in a long time. I suppose it made sense but was very difficult to grasp the idea behind it. Bureaucrats tend to do that, we make things more complicated than they really are or need to be. I am not sure why. It must be the environment. In fact, nature interpretation can be reduced to four words.

**Storytelling with a purpose.**

Another way to say it might be storytelling with a "mission" but I think purpose is more understandable.

What is that purpose you may ask? An old fellow with the National Parks Service said it best, "through interpretation, [storytelling] comes understanding, through understanding comes appreciation, and through appreciation comes conservation." And that's our purpose. Everything has a story to tell. The armadillo, the oak tree, the wildflower, the artifact, your car, your shoes, everything has a story if you care to discover it and every story is unique.

The catch is that only you can speak for them. That's why it is called Interpretation. So when I am in the public eye as an Interpreter my purpose is to create understanding. The rest will take care of itself.

When I stand there I am the fount of all knowledge regarding the Who, What Where, When, How and Whys of my site because of the patch on my shoulder. (If they only knew how little I know)

Obviously I cannot know all the stories but I do have stories to tell. I share the ones I do know, discover the ones that are hidden, and teach people how to look at things (another word for understand) in a new way. But don't tell everything you know, that's too easy. Frame your stories in such a manner as to encourage people to want to "see" for themselves. I also don't tell them what to think. I couldn't if I wanted to, only they can do that.

As far as nature interpretation is concerned I try to focus on the wonder of things not the names of things. I remember guiding some children on a nature walk that encountered an Inca dove.
"What's that bird?" they asked. Rather than tell them the name I asked them to look at its scale-like feathers, delicate head, what it was doing, (on the ground looking for seeds) etc. "What do you think its name should be?" I asked. The children thought for almost a millisecond and recalling the armadillo we had just seen, shouted roughly in unison as the dove flew away, "armadillo bird!, armadillo bird" "O.K. armadillo bird it is.!, and to those children now grown with children of their own it may still be an armadillo bird. It's the story; it's the wonder, not just the name. The children are the future. Seeds of wonder never die. There is so much more to say about "Interpretation". But I would like to you to mainly remember who you are, and what YOUR purpose is.

"People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Your stories and interpretation can do that and much more.

God Bless you all.

DJ

*Desire Larson*
Bears, Babies, and Rat Snakes

In the late 80's as the naturalist at BBSP [Brazos Bend State Park], I was guiding a group of 2nd graders on a hike around 40 Acre Lake. That in itself is not extraordinary but on the top of the observation tower I had a conversation with one of the children that I think surprised his teacher.

We were talking about swamps and alligators and the little guy asked me if Gus the bear lived here. I told him he did not, that he lived in the southeastern United States in Paddlecub County where Floyd and Jolene, the alligators, Gus's antagonists, lived as well.

The teacher was astonished. I could tell by the look of wonder, curiosity, and surprise in her eyes. It was if we had a private language we were speaking. He was satisfied with my answer and we proceeded with the hike. So what was that all about? He was referring to cartoon characters he watched on Saturday mornings on a program called Kissyfur about a bear cub, his dad, Gus and Floyd and Jolene.

Kissyfur (sounds somewhat like Christopher) and Gus protected the swamp. They had an airboat that the other animals used and Floyd and Jolene were always causing some kind of trouble...

So what is my point? I guess it is that I found a way to communicate with that little fellow on his own level and communication can occur on diverse levels and many different ways. Here's another example:

On numerous occasions, children on my hikes would walk up to me and slip their hand inside mine. We would walk down the trail holding hands, then another child would take my other hand and I believe if I had two more hands they would be filled also. At first it frightened me in this politically correct world of predators and prey. I certainly was not a predator but I was afraid I would be accused of some kind of inappropriate behavior nevertheless. Yep, these days it's probably best NOT hold hands with children on a hike but after thinking about it, I decided it was more important that the child not be refused by their innocent gesture. It was another way of communicating. Sharing the wonders of nature with a trusted mentor was more important political correctness.

Probably the hardest thing to do as an interpreter is to let nature do the communicating and recognize other ways to communicate besides talking. To be silent in the presence of nature and allow folks to use their senses; ...to resist the temptation to share everything you know with hikers.

I recall a time when I was talking to a group of youngsters when a Rat Snake appeared. Initially the screams and shouting were uncontrollable but when the initial shock wore off the children we astonished to see the snake climb a tree. I couldn't improve on that... I could later answer the questions the snake generated and use the opportunity to grow knowledge. That is what nature interpretation should be about; guiding ...not forcing reasonable conclusions... arrived at through personal experience and observation.

DJ
THE WISE GUYS

Night hikes are significantly different from day hikes and the difference goes beyond light and dark. Walking in the "wilds" at night engages all the senses.

Eyes strain to see beyond the through darkness' smells gone unnoticed in daylight float in the air at night; sounds in the shadows come from everywhere and out of nowhere; you can feel the trail beneath your feet and the breeze against your cheek. It's a mysterious place because it's unfamiliar, different, dark, and maybe even a bit scary.

When you guide a night hike you never know what to expect. There's no guarantee you will see wildlife, in most cases that's about being at the right place at the right time. When leading a dozen or more people down a darkened trail the likely hood of being in the right place diminishes; especially when you've got some "Wise Guys" on the hike.

I begin each night hike with a talk to get everyone's eyes adjusted to seeing in the dark. Bless their hearts, they reminded me so much of myself when I was a 9 year old cub scout out on a lark with my pals. Having said that, the five of them were a handful from the get-go.

I tried to get "cosmic" with them and encourage them to engage their senses, I should have known better, but some of the other participants appreciated what I was trying to say. You have to lead a hike for everybody even if the wise guys want to lead it instead.

I talked about how white light damages one's ability to see in the dark and how on many nights a flashlight is not even needed. I immediately got a double shot of white light in my face by the "wise guys". I did my "disappearing stick trick", where I make a stick disappear into the darkness, hoping to impress them into attention. Nope, no deal, been there, done that, nothing I did could reach them.

We started down the trail and the parents of the "wise guys" had persuaded them to take up the rear of the hike and keep their white light to a minimum.

Everyone else was walking the trail by moonlight.

About halfway down the trail I had a surprise for my hikers. Above us in the trees was a vulture roost. As we approached they began to stir, raspy sounds came from above and the rustle of feathers could be heard.

Suddenly scores of vultures took to the air with a thunderous clamor. We weren't at risk of being pooped on, as vultures are inclined to do when disturbed thank goodness, but our nearness made the silhouettes of the birds look huge as they resettled. It was wondrous and amazing to my hikers, except for the wise guys. They were terrified.

We stopped a while later and used a predator call of an injured rabbit to see if any animals would approach. The "wise guys" were clutching their mother's legs as if they were baby opossums on a mama 'possum's back. The sound of the call was blood curdling and it seemed to unnerve the wise guys even more. I cut the session short because the guys were really frightened and prolonging their agony would be cruel. We headed back to the railhead and safety. Hopefully there were not permanently traumatized by their experience and I certainly hope they will give the outdoors and the dark another try, but I would be willing to wager that next time they venture out into the darkness they won't be "wise guys".

Take care. DJ
Prairie Thoughts

I walked out onto the prairies the other day. I had the place to myself even though the park bustled with visitors and people going places. The wind gently blew the tall grasses and that made them seem to roll like the waves on the ocean. I could hear the wind rustling through the grasses and was encompassed by the sound of the earth turning. What a wonderful feeling. Prairies are windy places. I looked in one direction and I saw a barn, a fence line, the park road, and it leads one to imagine what the world will be like when all the prairies are gone. Will anyone even notice?

I recall playing in great fields of tall grass as a boy growing up on the coastal prairies. Big bluestem, little bluestem, Indian Grass, Switch Grass, I didn't know their names, it didn't matter, they were my friends.

The prairie was my playground, it was my companion, my comforter, and it embraced me as a mother would its child. The grasses towered over my head and even though I was surrounded by the grasses I was set free by the openness as the sky stretched from horizon to horizon. I would climb my mountains, the pimple mounds that dot the seemingly flat prairie, and gaze out across the openness to the edge of the earth.

Sometimes the grass would fold over into loops that formed open spaces in their center and I would crawl along the prairie earth and pretend I was a pocket gopher or a wily rabbit. I could hear the song of the meadowlark singing everywhere and knew the prairie was his home and mine. The box turtle and even the occasional diamond backed terrapin crossed my path from time to time but I never tried to keep one as a pet. I wanted them to be free like I was when I was on the prairie. I would sit and watch the red harvester ants for hours coming and going along their roadways and wished they would let me go inside their volcano like mound and explore their tunnels and chambers. I never did like fire ants though but there weren't as many of them as there is now. On cold winter days when the grasses were all brown I would sit and shiver with them waiting for the coming of spring.

Little boys grow up and I found myself occupied by other things that seemed so much more important at the time. But every time I find myself back on the prairies I recall those times of wonder and freedom.

I hope you had a place like my prairies when you were growing up and I hope you still get to visit them from time to time. If you never had one, it's not too late; I'll share my prairies with you while they last. 18 thousand years ago when the glaciers from the last major ice age receded and left fertile soils behind the prairies flourished. 1.4 million square miles!

Presently, 99.9 to 96 percent of the prairies that once comprised the area that 65 million years earlier had been a great inland ocean are gone.

Gone!
Little Kids, Nature, and Park Rangers

Our smaller park visitors, the children and their trials, tribulations, wonder and humor remind me of why my life took the course it did. Sadly, many children today are isolated from nature. What they do know about the outside world, they have usually learned from television.

To me, "Nature" television is both a blessing and a curse. In 60 short minutes children can see the entire life history of a "band-tailed widget", not realizing that it took years to acquire the footage for those 60 minutes of programming. It gets them interested but makes my job much harder. Having been inspired by what they have seen on T.V. they venture into "nature" expecting an experience similar to the one they saw on the tube.

To them nature soon becomes BORING. Where are the animals? There is not the continuous action they are accustomed to seeing in the comfort of their homes. There are only bugs and discomfort of one sort or another, it's too hot or too cold or too wet or too dry or they are hungry or tired.

One Saturday I was conducting a lecture on birds and their ability to fly. (There were no creepy crawlies in sight.) I had a mixed audience of young and old. I was trying to speak to all the members of my audience but one little fellow sitting anxiously on the front row was about to burst with a question. When I found a good place to pause I called upon him to ask his question. He happily asked, "When does the movie start?" I don't know who was more shocked, him or me. I had no movie and he was certainly expecting one. I had to tell him I was as good as it was going to get and I thought he was going to cry with disappointment. I suspect without a movie my lecture was too much like school. Here it was, a Saturday, and he was in school! Poor kid, he survived though.

On another occasion I was guiding a nature walk along a lake. The children were about 9 years old and not especially keen on learning...anything. The trail was devoid of animal life as I lead my herd of little buffalos along the path. I saw a water bird (a grebe) ahead and somehow got the group to actually see it. I told them it was going to dive under the water, almost as soon as I said the words it submerged. Then I told them it was going to pop up right about...NOW! As if on cue, it popped up exactly where I was pointing.

"How did you DO that!" was the response. "It practice" I lied, "if you spend time outdoors, you will learn such mysteries too." That wasn't actually a lie. I suppose there was some skill involved in predicting what the little bird was going to do but I had nothing to lose at that point. I had gotten lucky with the bird and the kids. From then on my hike took on a new aspect and so did the kids.

Honestly, I'll take whatever I can get if it gets them to enjoy the outdoors.

Happy trails.

DJ
Guiding Guarantees

- A scheduled hike for 15 will blossom in an unscheduled hike for 35
- Just about the time you are going to cancel a program due to no attendance 2 people arrive for the program.
- Snake programs fill to capacity, wildflower programs do not.
- The bus is always late
- The bus driver always gets lost
- The time spent at the restrooms by a class of 2nd graders is nearly equal to the amount of time they have to spend at the park
- There is always a kid that knows more than you on the hike.
- 7th graders know everything
- Anytime you speak in absolutes you will be proven to be wrong, absolutely.
- Live animal programs can go bad....quickly.
- 20 kids walking on gravel trail is reminiscent of thundering herds of buffalo.
- No school tour is complete without the "are there lions, anacondas, cobras, elephants, tigers, etc., etc.?" question/s

![Oh My!](image)

- If you need props to conduct your program, they will be missing when you need them.
- You can never have enough pockets
- You can have too many pockets
- If you are knee deep in kids and questions you are on a school tour.
- Kid stories have no end.
- Kid questions have no end.
- If kid questions begin to compare sharks and alligators in combat, question time is over.

- When kids are on field trips, the teachers are usually on vacation.
- Parents with the wildest kids do not notice.
- Young people cannot walk without talk.
- The IPod is today's cuddly security blanket or teddy bear.
- Bees are scary, dragonflies are scary, spiders are scary, snakes are scary, ants are scary, and nature is scary except on T.V., flowers are boring.
- Flowers are for picking
- Rocks and sticks are for throwing.
- Rocks & sticks make alligators "move"
- Everyone must have a walking stick even if they are still on the tree.
- Walking sticks are also whacking sticks.
- Give an interpreter a theme and information and they can produce an interpretive program in 15 minutes.
- Sometimes it seems that teaching natural history is like sweeping the sand off a beach.
- Just about the time you think you should just give up, a little person will show you that you have made a difference.
People and Trees

People and trees have a very special relationship.

I not sure the trees are of aware it but it exists nevertheless. Generally speaking we love trees, our ancient ancestors likely spent a good deal of time in them and almost everywhere people have lived there have been trees. Ancient Druids worshiped trees and primeval forests partly because they recognized their special role in the survival of mankind.

Consider all we owe to trees; log houses, lumber, paper, firewood, fruit, furniture, boats to name just a few. The things we have learned to do with trees is staggering when looked at over the course of human time. Today we have a variety of substitutes for trees former uses but I can hardly imagine what civilization would be like if we had never had trees. I am not sure there would be a human civilization without them.

I think we like trees because oftentimes they seem greater than ourselves. Stately oaks, massive redwoods, they are indeed impressive. When we consider how many trips they have made around the sun compared to our own, we are also impressed. Old trees are venerated. Great trees almost shout "look at me!"

When I talk to children I like to talk to them about trees.

What is your house made of? Wood! You live in a tree! You just changed the way the tree looks.

I tell them that we have a lot of thing in common with trees. Trees have limbs, so do they. Trees have trunks, so do they. Trees have crowns, so do they. Trees have blood (sap) so do they. Trees breathe (through their leaves), so do they. Some trees have knees (bald cypress), so do they. Trees have skin (bark), so do they. They suddenly realize that they have more in common with trees than they thought and they give us so much. The point is to get the kids to understand their relationship to/with trees. Who doesn't like peaches, oranges, avocados, plums, pears, pecans, bananas, etc.

If you get a chance to tell or read the story of The Giving Tree, by Shel Silverstein to a group of kids please do so. Rose Aden, one of our long time volunteers, once read The Giving Tree at a monthly volunteer meeting and it touched everyone there.

The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein

Once there was a tree...and she loved a little boy.

And every day the boy would come and he would gather her leaves and make them into crowns and play king of the forest. He would climb up her trunk and swing from her branches and eat apples. And they would play hide and go seek. And when he was tired, he would sleep in her shade. And the boy loved the tree very much. And the tree was happy.

But time went by. And the boy grew older. And the tree was often alone. Then one day the boy came back to the tree and the tree said" Come, Boy, come and climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and come and eat my apples and play in my shade and be happy.

"I am too big to climb and play," said the boy. "I want to buy things and have fun. I want some money. Can you give me some money?" "I'm sorry said the tree, "but I have no money. I have only leaves and apples. Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and you will be happy." And so the boy climbed up the tree and gathered her apples and carried them away and the tree was happy.
But the boy stayed away for a long time... and the tree was sad. And then one day the boy came back and the tree shook with joy and she said, "Come, Boy, climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and be happy."

"I am too busy to climb trees," said the boy. "I want a house to keep me warm," he said. "I want a wife and I want children, and so I need a house. Can you give me a house?" "I have no house," said the tree. "The forest is my house, but you may cut off my branches and build a house. Then you will be happy."

And so the boy cut off her branches and carried them away to build his house. And the tree was happy.

But the boy stayed away for a long time and when he came back, the tree was so happy she could hardly speak. "Come, Boy," she whispered, "come and play."

"I am too old and sad to play," said the boy. "I want a boat that will take me far away from here. Can you give me a boat?" "Cut down my trunk and make a boat," said the tree, "then you can sail away...and be happy." And so the boy cut down her trunk and made a boat and sailed away. And the tree was happy... but not really. And after a long time the boy came back again.

"I am sorry Boy." Said the tree, "but I have nothing left to give you—my apples are gone" "My teeth are too weak for apples," said the boy. "My branches are gone," said the tree. "You cannot swing on them." "I am too old to swing on branches," said the boy. "I am sorry," sighed the tree, "I wish that I could give you something... but I have nothing left. I am just an old stump. I am sorry...."

"I don't need very much now," said the boy, "just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired. "Well, said the tree, "straightening up as much as she could, "well an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest" and the boy did.

And the tree was happy.

Be a "Giving Tree". Give the folks, and especially children, an appreciation for nature and our friends the trees.

"See you later alligator."

DJ