

Applied Communications for the Red Sea Rangers

The Practicum Experience

Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt

June 16-24, 2002

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INTRODUCTION

In support of Egyptian Policy Measure 2.1, the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (EEAA) is developing its institutional and technical capacity to manage and protect the Red Sea. USAID has set Objective #2 in the Egyptian Environmental Policy Program work plan to assist the EEAA in its endeavor to enhance the management and conservation of Red Sea coral reefs, islands and linked ecosystems of importance. The Policy Support Unit (PSU) is leading on the tasks within this objective. Task # 6.2 of Objective #2 calls on AED to assist the PSU in developing and implementing ranger interpretive awareness skills, which includes the development of sensitivity and human relations skills in communicating effectively with users and conducting interpretive programs with youth and adults in formal and non-formal program settings.

As part of its strategic program, AED organized this Interpretive Communications Practicum for Red Sea rangers at the EEAA's Nature Conservation and Management Center in Sharm El Sheikh. The Practicum, conducted June 15-24, 2002, focused on principles of interpretation and nature-based tourism as a force for conservation, principles of effective speaking and guiding, theme development for sequential and non-sequential interpretive media and other types of interpretive media.



Practicum activities

THE FACILITATORS

Dr. Sam Ham of the University of Moscow, Idaho (USA) and Dr. Betty Weiler of the University of Melbourne (Australia) facilitated the intensive Practicum following their innovative approach for improving communications skills of conservationists and park rangers. They have had extensive experience in many countries around the world using and fine-tuning their approach (see CVs in Addendum 7). AED Deputy Chief of Party, Patrick Papania, and AED consultant for the Red Sea, Eng. Hany Farid, were also a part of the facilitator team. Several months before arriving in Egypt, Dr. Ham and Dr. Weiler worked diligently with the AED staff to adapt their activities, presentations and handouts to the Egyptian context to best facilitate the transfer of skills. AED consultant Ms. Hanan Wali translated two chapters of Sam Ham's book, "Environmental Interpretation", along with 13 power point presentations and approximately 15 activities. Hand outs of the translated documents were prepared for all of the participants, allowing the Egyptian rangers to tap into the trainers' wealth of knowledge on interpretive communications and begin compiling their own archives of resource material. (See Annex 6)



Ranger, Dr. Weiler and Dr. Ham

THE PRACTICUM



Dr. Weiler and Eng. Hany Farid

On June 15, Dr. Sam Ham, Dr. Betty Weiler, Mr. Patrick Papania and Eng. Hany Farid, traveled from Hurghada to Sharm El Sheikh with eleven Red Sea rangers. Upon arrival, they met with the assistant director and staff of the Nature Conservation and Management Centre (NCMC) where the Practicum was conducted. They were given a tour of the facility, shown the classrooms, and briefly introduced to the excellent support services and operating procedures of the MCMC. The rangers were lodged comfortably on the NCMC premises. On June 16, the Practicum commenced, attended by the eleven rangers from the Red Sea protected areas and eight guest rangers from the South Sinai Protectorates Sector.

The nine-day Practicum addressed thirteen learning outcomes through an intense schedule of practical exercises and introduction to the psychological underpinnings of effective communication, interpretation and public relations in protected area management. (see Program Agenda in Annex 1)

The Practicum was conducted as planned with some additional evening sessions discussing local issues and exploring communication strategies that could address these issues. Hany Farid translated the sessions simultaneously. His familiarity with the rangers and local issues, together with Patrick Papania's involvement in the development of the public awareness campaign strategy, added much value to the practicum. Field trips were taken to Nabq and Ras Mohammed National Protected Areas.

THE RANGERS

The Red Sea rangers participating in the Practicum were chosen from the four communities along the eastern coast of the Red Sea: Hurghada, Qusseir, Marsa Alam and Shalatin. Their participation in this training was proposed by Mr. Ayman Afifi, Manager of the Red Sea Marine Parks, based on a selection process that involved a written application, expression of interest, availability and personal potential in the field of interpretive communications. The Sinai rangers were invited to attend, not only to promote their skills in communications, but also to encourage professional relationship development, transfer of skills and ranger exchanges among colleagues working in different regions. These rangers were selected by the Director of the NCMC, Mr. Khaled Alam: two were from the Ras Mohamed National Park, two from Nabq, two from the administrative staff of the NCMC, one from Abu Ghalum and one from Taba. (see Participant List in Annex 2)

All of the rangers came with their own expectations of what they wanted to obtain from the Practicum. These expectations were shared and recorded on the first day. They were later reviewed at the end of the Practicum to demonstrate the efficiency of the experience in addressing these expectations. (see Annex 3)



One of two Practicum debates

THE EVALUATION

The post-practicum evaluation indicates that the practicum was well received by the rangers and that the learning objectives outlined in Appendix 3 were met successfully. The rangers were receptive both to the content of the Practicum and the energetic style of delivery. Roughly half to two-thirds of the nine days was spent in some type of activity or practical exercise. Lectures were largely interactive and conducted in the form of question/answer and discussion sessions. The rangers appeared to enjoy both the lectures and practical exercises, and repeated checks of understanding indicated that the material was being understood and applied correctly by most of the rangers.



Small group discussion

knowledge was comprehensive and they were always able to maintain the rangers' interest. All of the rangers thought that the facilitators dealt with the rangers' points of view in a patient way. Concerning program contents, an overwhelming majority of the participants found the topics discussed to be very relevant to their work and the use of visual aids very helpful. The overall evaluation of the program showed that 100% of the rangers found the administrative support to be excellent. Concerning the overall program, 91% of the rangers considered it to always be applicable in their work as a ranger.

In the qualitative section, comments indicated that the rangers would have liked more time to continue discussions. They appreciated the methods used describing them with such words as practical and suitable. Some rangers requested more training courses like this. Almost all of the rangers reported that the discussions helped them understand the role of communications in a ranger's work. The feedback also showed that the rangers felt the need for English language lessons to enhance their ability to make presentations to foreign guests at the Red Sea.

THE NEXT STEPS

One tangible outcome of the Practicum was a listing of feasible communication projects that the Red Sea rangers would develop with AED technical guidance in the coming months (see On-going Projects in Annex 5). Other steps to also be taken in the coming months to best benefit from the momentum of the Practicum include:

1. Intermittent communication with S. Ham and B. Weiler about progress on the various projects between July 2002 and early 2003. Technical advice or reviews will be provided when requested or as deemed necessary by AED.
2. Rangers from the Red Sea and the Sinai expressed interest in establishing a system of rotating on-site assignments, recognizing the benefits of interacting with rangers from different regions. An exchange program between rangers in the Red Sea and Sinai would be helpful in raising skills on both sides.

On the closing day, the rangers were asked to evaluate the Practicum. Unfortunately, the Sinai rangers did not participate in the evaluation due to a national test being conducted in Cairo.

A summary of the Post-Practicum Evaluation made by the eleven Red Sea rangers is included as Annex 4.

The evaluation summary indicates that the majority of the rangers were pleased with the Practicum for many reasons.

Concerning the program methods, 100% of the participants reported that the facilitators'

3. Discussions were held about the benefits of creating an Egyptian ranger association that links to a worldwide federation of rangers. The rangers were encouraged to pursue this idea and begin researching ways to implement it.
4. The rangers were all encouraged to begin the process of passing on the knowledge and skills to their fellow rangers at their assigned sites. The collection of resource documents in Arabic (power point presentation hand-outs and related activities) could serve as useful tools for them in raising the awareness of their colleagues on interpretation and skills in communications.
5. Follow-up trip by S. Ham in January or early February 2003 to visit selected rangers at field sites and to review projects completed and those in progress.
6. Strongly recommended for approximately six to ten of the rangers is an observational study tour to the US conducted by the University of Idaho in cooperation with a number of federal, state and local land management agencies. The overriding purpose of this activity is to expand the rangers' vision of possibilities, strengthen their ability to work as a team, and to increase their self-confidence to produce professional quality programs and materials for interpretation of the Red Sea and its environs. Logistical details of the trip were provided in discussions with AED and PSU officials in Hurghada.

SUMMARY OF THE PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE

The following is a summary of the key messages discussed during the Practicum.

I. Strategic Communication in Protected Area Management

Communication is a central and indispensable part of protected area management. If they are well planned and artfully delivered, communication programs serve a protected area in four main ways: enhancing visitor experiences, protecting resources, protecting visitors and generating public support for the protected area and the agency.

Communication is not a “cure all” for protected area managers. It does not replace physical site management (such as closing areas to public use or developing infrastructure to prevent visitor impacts) or law enforcement. But done well, communication can reduce the need for them.

Strategic communication is purposeful communication with important audiences (people whose behavior can affect protection efforts positively or negatively). Strategically important audiences may include visitors, local communities, businesses, government agencies, and even people within agencies.

Strategic communication activities may include public relations, on-site and off-site interpretive programs, school programs, and other activities that involve communicating desired messages to audiences.

In strategic communication, there is no such thing as the "general public." Rangers need to be concerned with many publics, each of whom can influence the Ranger's job in different ways.

Managing public relations is essential if Rangers want to be able to project and maintain a desired image with different groups.

Different media can be used to reach different audiences with strategic messages. In strategic communication, no medium is inherently better or worse than another media. Each medium has certain advantages and disadvantages depending on the audience, the message, and the available resources.

II. Protected Area Management and Tourism

Nature-based tourism is travel, whether for business or pleasure, which depends on seeing or experiencing relatively undisturbed natural places or phenomena.

Ecotourism is a value-added form of nature-based tourism that involves interpretation and education and is managed to be ecologically sustainable.

With the growth of environmentalism comes a growth in nature-based tourism (including "ecotourism"), which can create an increasing number of direct and indirect jobs and other benefits for all Egyptians.

Protected area rangers play an important role in nature-based tourism (and "ecotourism") by providing a quality experience for the visitor and protecting the environment.



Focus group Activity

Providing quality experiences through interpretation is part of a Ranger's job and ultimately makes managing the park's natural resources easier, not harder.

Providing a quality travel experience begins before the visitor ever leaves home by considering the visitor's needs, expectations and aspirations during the anticipation and planning stage of travel, followed by their travel to the destination, their experiences on site, their travel home, and their recollection.

Ecotourists have special needs, expectations and aspirations, and in particular, they are often highly motivated by opportunities to learn something new and by the desire to be environmentally responsible.

III. Communications Principles

It is important that visitors' logistical needs are met—they need to be able to access the site safely, stay healthy, and have their basic needs met. This is not enough to satisfy visitors, however – you will need to provide good customer service, communication and interpretation for a quality experience and visitor satisfaction.

Good communication involves using not just words, but effective non-verbal and para-verbal communication techniques.

Good communicators actively listen, question and involve their audiences.

You can make your visitors feel welcome and valued by being sincere and personal, and showing interest in them as individuals.

A responsible ranger treats every interaction with a visitor as a moment of truth worthy of careful and sensitive communication.

Good communicators are good listeners, deal with conflicts or complaints by staying calm, and involve the visitor in finding solutions to problems.

Your culture is of interest to people from other cultures, and you can use cultural differences to enhance your interpretive activities.

Effective rangers use their communication skills to bridge differences that are due to culture.

IV. Interpretive Approach to Communication



The land and sea are always talking to us, but not all humans are capable of understanding what they say. Red Sea rangers are the medium through which the land and sea can speak to all people. You are their spokespersons.

Interpretation is not the same as traditional “instruction.” Rangers who try to “teach” their audiences in the academic sense will not be very successful.

Large group presentation

In interpretation, **EROT = SUCCESS** (Enjoyable, Relevant, Organized and Thematic). An interpreter can please an audience through simple entertainment. But protected area rangers who want to make a difference will build thematic communication into their interpretive activities and devices. The best interpretive rangers are *both* entertaining *and* thematic.

In interpretation, a "theme" is a message or "moral of the story." It is not the same as the topic or subject matter. The theme is the take-home message about a topic that the visitor leaves with.

People forget facts, but they remember themes. Strong and powerful themes may be remembered forever. In this way, protected area rangers that practice thematic interpretation can make a long-term difference in conservation.

Preparing tours and talks around themes that are already interesting and provocative for an audience almost guarantees that those tours and talks will be successful.

Some ways to improve and strengthen a theme include making it personal, connecting it to things that have deep symbolic significance for visitors, using a metaphor or analogy, selecting visual and active verbs, and where possible, avoiding the verb "to be."

Being organized is the best way to make your interpretive activities easy to follow. Good organizations include four or fewer main ideas.

It is not enough for an interpreter to know his or her organization. To be most successful, s/he needs to share the organizational framework with the audience.

There are two parts to making an interpretive activity relevant for visitors. First is being *meaningful*. Second is being *personal*. When you make an interpretive activity both meaningful and personal to visitors, it will be highly relevant to them.

You can use many techniques to make an interpretive activity meaningful. The easiest way is simply to avoid unnecessary jargon and technical words. But if you must use them, be sure to use examples, analogies and comparisons to build "bridges" of understanding.

You can use many techniques to make an interpretive activity personal. Some common methods are using the word "you" frequently, lots of eye contact, self-referencing, labeling, and connecting to "universal concepts" (things or ideas that are deeply important to visitors).

You can use many techniques to make an interpretive activity enjoyable. Some common methods are smiling, using active verbs, linking scientific information to human history, and using a "vehicle" such as "personification" and "focusing on an individual."

All interpreters have their own personal style, and *any* style can be effective. The best style for you is your *natural* one.

V. Sequential Communication

Different approaches to theme development are required for "sequential" and "non-sequential" interpretation media.

Interpretive talks and walks are examples of “sequential communication” activities. In sequential activities, the interpreter always controls the order in which information is presented. **Self-guided trails are unique** among conventional interpretive media because they are *both* sequential and non-sequential.

Smart interpreters take full advantage of sequential communication techniques such as transitions, foreshadowing and mystery (or suspense).

Adding a sense of “*prägnanz*” to a talk, guided walk or self-guided trail requires designing the introduction and conclusion to work together. *Prägnanz* is a German word for closure and unity.

Good talks, good guided walks, and good self-guided trails have good “parts.” These are the introduction, the body and the conclusion.

The best interpreters make sure that their talks, guided walks and self-guided trails have a strong introduction, a strong body and a strong conclusion, each of which is designed to achieve different objectives with respect to developing the theme.



Rangers reporting from small group activity

The “2-3-1 Rule” is simply a guideline for sequential communication that reminds us to prepare the introduction last—that is, after the body and conclusion are already prepared.

Every face-to-face interpretive activity should be started with a warm welcome to the group.

Every face-to-face interpretive activity should be ended with a warm goodbye to the group.

On guided walks and tours (as well as during patrols and "roving interpretation"), the best interpreters think carefully about the items they put in their knapsack. What they take with them often adds quality to the tour.

VI. Non-Sequential Communication

Exhibits, signs, outdoor interpretive panels, brochures, information boards, and roving interpretation (patrols) are examples of "non-sequential communication" media. In non-sequential communication, the audience (not the interpreter) always controls the order in which information is presented. **Each stop on a self-guided trail is a non-sequential communication problem**, even though the trail in its entirety is a sequential communication medium.

Like all interpretation, non-sequential communication should be thematic, that is, it should be aimed at communicating important messages to visitors.

Although "roving interpretation" during patrols is a non-sequential activity, rangers can still purposefully communicate strategically important themes to visitors.



Action Planning

The conceptual design of written communication devices (such as exhibits, signs, outdoor panels, brochures and information boards) should begin with "theme titles" (not topic titles). This is because many visitors will read no more than the title.

Designs for non-sequential interpretive media must take into account three primary audiences that are different in the amount of time they will spend reading. These are (1) the "streakers" who will spend 3 seconds or less, (2) the "browsers" who will spend 30 seconds or less, and (3) the "students" who may spend 3 minutes or more reading the text. The best conceptual designs successfully communicate their themes to all three audiences.

VII. Conceptual Design for Thematic Self-Guided Trails

Thematic self-guided trails are both sequential and non-sequential interpretive devices. In their entirety, they are sequential (with an introductory sign, body stops, and a conclusion stop). But each stop on the trail is a non-sequential communication device.

The main purpose of a thematic self-guided trail is to use the observable features of a trail or other corridor to communicate a unifying theme to visitors.

Self-guided trails can be developed for visitors walking or driving on land, for visitors on tour busses, on trains or boats, and even for visitors who are under water snorkeling or diving.

The best self-guided trails draw visitors' attention to things that can be seen, that is, *observable features*. Self-guided trails that interpret things visitors can't see aren't very engaging.

Many media can be used for a self-guided trail, but the most common are signs and brochures keyed to numbered posts or markers.

Most thematic self-guided trails begin with an introductory sign at the trailhead. The introductory sign is the only sign on a thematic self-guided trail that does not require a theme-title.

There is NO optimal or ideal number of stops for self-guided trails. Each trail will be different depending on the theme of the trail and the number and quality of observable features available that can be used to develop the theme.

The conceptual design of a self-guided trail begins with an interpretive inventory of the site or corridor. An interpretive inventory is a compilation of observable features that have interpretive potential.

Developing a "thematic map" of a self-guided trail allows planners to see thematic relationships between each stop and all the rest, as well as between the stops and the introduction and conclusion of the trail.

Sequential self-guided trails are always one-way trails. If visitors can use the trail in either direction, it is better to consider the trail as a collection of stops, each with its own theme but with no necessary connection to the other stops.

VIII. Minimizing Impacts

An ethical protected area ranger accepts and abides by a code of ethics that honors his or her profession and protects both the environment and the rights of tourists and host communities.

An environmentally responsible protected area ranger practices minimal impact principles and involves visitors in implementing and monitoring minimal impact.

A good protected area ranger strives to maximize the positive and minimize the negative economic, social, cultural, environmental and experiential impacts of the tours they conduct.

A protected area ranger communicates respect for the natural and cultural environment and acts as a role model by:

- demonstrating an understanding of and respect toward local cultures and environments;
- operating in accord with relevant legislation and regulation;
- operating in accord with any guidelines or local rules of the host community, expressed or implied;
- conveying to visitors the value of local cultures, traditions and environments, and the need for sensitive protection;
- portraying realistic images of the host community and the environment in question;
- explaining what it is that constitutes accepted behaviour in the areas being visited;
- leading by example, using positive reinforcement and taking corrective actions where necessary, to gain visitor compliance with suggested practices.



Practicum participants and facilitators