

## On-site visitor information – a team effort

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### Abstract

Traditional information signs are not obsolete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but can be of value to visitors. We present our collaborative approach to creating interpretation panels. The well-developed workflow helps to design, set up and maintain all formats of on-site visitor information in the Gesäuse National Park.

### Profile

Protected area

Gesäuse National

Park, Alps, Austria

### Introduction

Today, vast amounts of information are available on the internet. This helps tourists when planning to visit a protected area. Popular websites, mobile apps and augmented reality are used to learn about attractions, accommodation, food and other points of interest. Nevertheless, people still appreciate the possibility of verifying digital information in the field by reading traditional signs. This is especially true when mobile reception is unreliable or absent, and when mobile apps fail to correctly identify geolocations in remote areas.

Therefore, interpretation panels are not obsolete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but can be of benefit to visitors when sited appropriately. Following the principles of interpretation, a sign can also stir curiosity and open a visitor's mind. "*The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation,*" said Freeman Tilden (Tilden 2008, p. 32).

### Designing signs and interpretation panels

Signs can be divided into two categories: information signs and interpretation panels (Gross et al. 2006). Information signs meet visitor's basic needs such as safety and orientation. But interpretation panels, rather, aim to provoke visitors into having their own thoughts, because in Tilden's words (2008, p. 38) "*Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection.*"

We strongly believe in the 3-30-3 rule, a very common approach in marketing (Gross et al. 2006): you have just 3 seconds to grab a reader's attention, 30 seconds to engage them, and roughly 3 minutes for them to spend reading the content. So, the title and any pictures have to be catchy and draw the visitor in. But panels must also present the most important information that we really want to communicate to our visitors. Too many words can put visitors off and discourage them from reading. In this case, we would miss the opportunity to communicate our most important information.

### Joint team benefits

For many years in the Gesäuse National Park, we have used the concept of *heritage interpretation* (cf. Tilden 2008) as our main approach in environmental education and visitor guidance.

Yet, we have found that each department has its own blindspots when it comes to creating signs. Often, scientists fail to take into account the importance of visitors and the fact that they do not generally share their own specific scientific knowledge. The use of scientific jargon makes it hard for general visitors and non-native speakers to understand text. Another aspect of this is that environmental education loves to present cute, spectacular-looking or so-called *iconic* animals, and hence fails to highlight hidden or less obviously attractive species. Therefore, many old signs created by single departments do not meet the current aims of understanding, appreciation and protection referred to above. Nor do they appeal to our present target groups or fulfil visitors' expectations. In addition, some hot environmental topics in our region, such as bark beetle management, wildlife hunting quotas and the role of rare endemic species within entire ecosystems, are not common knowledge. Occasionally, plants or animals mentioned or presented by way of example have led visitors to false conclusions about their presence, abundance and importance.

We started forming a project team in 2016, involving colleagues with different skills and from different departments, including Environmental Education, Nature Conservation and Research, Public Relations and Maintenance. Workshops followed to bring people together and to generate new ideas (Figure 1). This approach combines multiple points of view from biologists, interpretive rangers, communication experts etc. to great benefit.

First, we found inconsistencies when writing plain text: there was no common, agreed, wording. The problem was exacerbated when translating German into English because of the lack of experienced translators in this field. Today, we have a shared document that includes common phrases in both languages that we frequently use in our work. Knowing about the



Figure 1 – A working session of the project team. © Markus Blank

3-30-3 rule, we reduced the amount of text significantly. Additionally, we tried to simplify our texts to make them easier to read for everyone. Tests like the Flesch-Kincaid readability test or the Flesch Reading Ease score are designed to indicate how difficult a passage is to understand (Gross et al. 2006).

Scientific research found out by eye-tracking that people often read signs and screens in an F or Z pattern (Gross et al. 2006): Z – left to right along the whole line of text; F – reading the first line of the sign, the left-hand side, and a little bit in the middle of the lines. In our design, we try to place the most important information in areas corresponding to the F reading pattern. Additionally, we aim to include appealing drawings of plants and animals to reach the visitor emotionally. By using drawings by the same artist in the same style on most of our information boards, we hope to create a recognition factor. Inspired by the *unigrid* of the US National Park Service (Harpers Ferry Center 2022), we also created a template for all signs and boards, to make it easy for our staff to create signs. All our signage and information panels follow our corporate design (Figure 2).

The position of an interpretation panel is chosen from the visitor's point of view. The locations for practical-information signage are considered thoroughly by the joint team. Locations for both types of signs may change when surrounding habitats change or information becomes outdated. When prerequisites are no longer met (e.g. when forest stands have collapsed and been replaced by young vital trees, and the habitat no longer supports what had been a particularly noteworthy species), the sign must be removed or replaced. Even the best signs cannot reach visitors when conditions result in serious damage to posts or poles. From time to time, we are faced with damage to our infrastructure by wildlife. Even the smallest animals, like ants and beetles, can create huge damage. And unfortunately, vandalism is increasing, even in our remote area. Involving the maintenance crew helps increase the longevity of hardware, simply by



Figure 2 – Information panel at the Tamischbachturm, showing the NP Gesäuse's corporate design. © Markus Blank

choosing the most suitable material, or manufacturing, installation and mounting techniques.

### Successful implementation

Team-building and team spirit were boosted during the preparation of our exhibition *Planspitze – mountain of contrasts* (Figures 3a and 3b). To develop the interpretive concept for this exhibition, at least one representative from each department was included in the process. During the planning phase, it was particularly helpful to have inputs from people with different perspectives on the same phenomenon (Brochu 2014; Gross et al. 2002). Additionally, this approach creates a sense of ownership for each participant. As all the park's departments were involved, there was an overarching sense of ownership of the project and a high level of agreement amongst employees about the types of information to be given to the public.

Today, we have an agreed standard operating procedure for creating signs, brochures and any other kind of visitor information. The step-by-step guidelines include whom to involve in which phase of the project. Our products share common visual features, draw on proven educational approaches and latest research findings. The consistent method allows participation at the level of the national park's administration and can include more experts when needed.

### Evaluation and revision process

*Blindness* can occur when a member of staff passes by a sign every day and has long since stopped reading it. In addition, design and text are subject to constant change. Older signs that no longer meet the prevailing taste may not hold visitors' attention. Although the national park does not compete with marketing and product promotion, it does participate in the struggle for attention.

On a regular basis, we review the accuracy of the information presented and ensure that it contains



Figure 3 – Exhibition “Planspütze – mountain of contrasts”: Interesting facts about rare species in the national park. © Peter Hans Felzmann

nothing false or out-of-date. This review process is supported by the use of sophisticated software, which includes data on the location of a sign or panel, its dimensions and an inventory number, as well as topic and content. So far, we have evaluated several thematic trails (Pichler 2014; Bartosch 2019; Presslauer 2021) in the national park and focused on visitor experiences as a whole. To date, we have not applied any scientific approach to evaluate signs and their various individual components. Nevertheless, we have received sufficient feedback from visitors for the team to adapt and update information. Valuable comments are gathered during visitor tours, from discussions with national park staff in the field, and even from groups of regular visitors. Collecting information as a team in order to update signs across the whole park is also an efficient and sustainable way to necessary innovation.

By 2021, the national park’s administration agreed on 77 strategic goals. Goal number 32 is dedicated solely to signs (both basic signage and information panels), giving this topic great importance. In order not to detract from the *untouched wilderness*, the total number of signs is strictly limited, and only panels that follow our guidelines closely are permitted. Face-to-face communication, however, remains our most powerful tool to engage visitors.

### 8 easy steps to creating best-practice visitor information

1. Involve relevant people
2. Agree on design guidelines
3. Identify target groups
4. Identify visitor needs
5. Create connections between the visitor and the phenomenon
6. Create text using plain, succinct language; check readability
7. Design hardware to withstand damage, by wildlife and vandalism
8. Define lifecycle of the hardware and its messages

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