

Sea Grant

Tourism
FACT SHEET
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DEVELOPING AN INTERPRETIVE GUIDE FOR YOUR COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

Many communities in New York State depend on tourist dollars to boost their economies. Interpretation can be used to expand and enhance community tourism programs and plans. Interpretation is explaining in easy to understand, imaginative, and entertaining terms about historical, natural, cultural, or recreational resources such as parks, museums, and historic districts. It can be used to attract tourists to an area, and to extend their visits by keeping them interested in their surroundings. Information can be communicated to visitors through interpretive signs and exhibits, audio-visual presentations, live presentations, and publications. Although interpretive techniques have been used extensively in many museums, nature centers, and other interpretive facilities, their potential for use in community tourism programs has not been met.

This fact sheet is designed to guide communities through the development of an interpretive publication. With enthusiasm and effort, your community can produce an accurate and interesting guide to local resources for visitors. Your interpretive guide or brochure can either be used alone, or as part of a complete community interpretive program (including interpretive centers, exhibits, and signs).

The purposes of interpretation are:

1. To expand visitors' awareness, understanding, and appreciation for the area they are visiting (Sharpe et al., 1983). An interpretive statement that would increase visitors' understanding and awareness of the large recreational fishing industry in a county might be, "The number of fish caught annually in our county would feed 1,000 people dinner for a year." Not only does this make visitors more aware of how extensive the county's fishing industry is, but it also gives them a figure (i.e., feeding 1,000 people dinner for a year) that they can relate to.

2. To orient visitors to an area (Paskowsky, 1983). Interpretive publications are frequently used to orient visitors by both directing them from one attraction to the next, and familiarizing them with background information of the area. When placed at rest areas and other tourist facilities (e.g., lodgings and restaurants), directories composed of interpretive text and maps can orient visitors to attractions.

3. To accomplish management goals by encouraging visitors to change certain behaviors (Sharpe et al., 1983). An interpretive sign posted to prevent visitors from walking along the banks of a river, causing erosion, might state, "Every footstep along the banks of this river adds to the several tons of eroded soil that washes downstream every year. Please help us prevent this — stay on the trail at all times!" This type of interpretive statement explains the management problem to visitors, and makes them feel as though they are helping the community to solve the problem. In contrast, a sign stating, "Stay on the Trail" would not help change visitor behavior patterns since it does not explain why it is important to stay on the trail, and would probably only make visitors more curious about what is located off the trail.

4. To promote public understanding of the goals and objectives of agencies, organizations, and communities (Sharpe et al., 1983). For example, an interpretive sign near a construction site could be used to explain the importance of the project to the community. Agencies and organizations frequently use interpretive signs in their offices or facilities to explain their activities and goals to visitors.

Interpretive Publications

Publications can be important outlets for interpretive information. Interpretive publications do not simply list specific attractions, but instead explain the interesting facts about them, including their importance, history,

and operations. Important industries and activities in the area, such as fruit growing or specific sporting events, are also frequently interpreted. Publications are especially useful since they allow visitors to learn about an area at their own pace.

Two basic types of interpretive publications are usually produced: brochures on single topics and touring

guides. Single topic brochures interpret only one general resource, such as the unique wildlife or historic architecture of an area (Figure 1). Touring guides to local attractions and resources interpret both general resource topics and specific attractions and activities. They often give directions for traveling from one attraction to the next, whether along nature trails, village sidewalks, or scenic road systems (Figure 2).

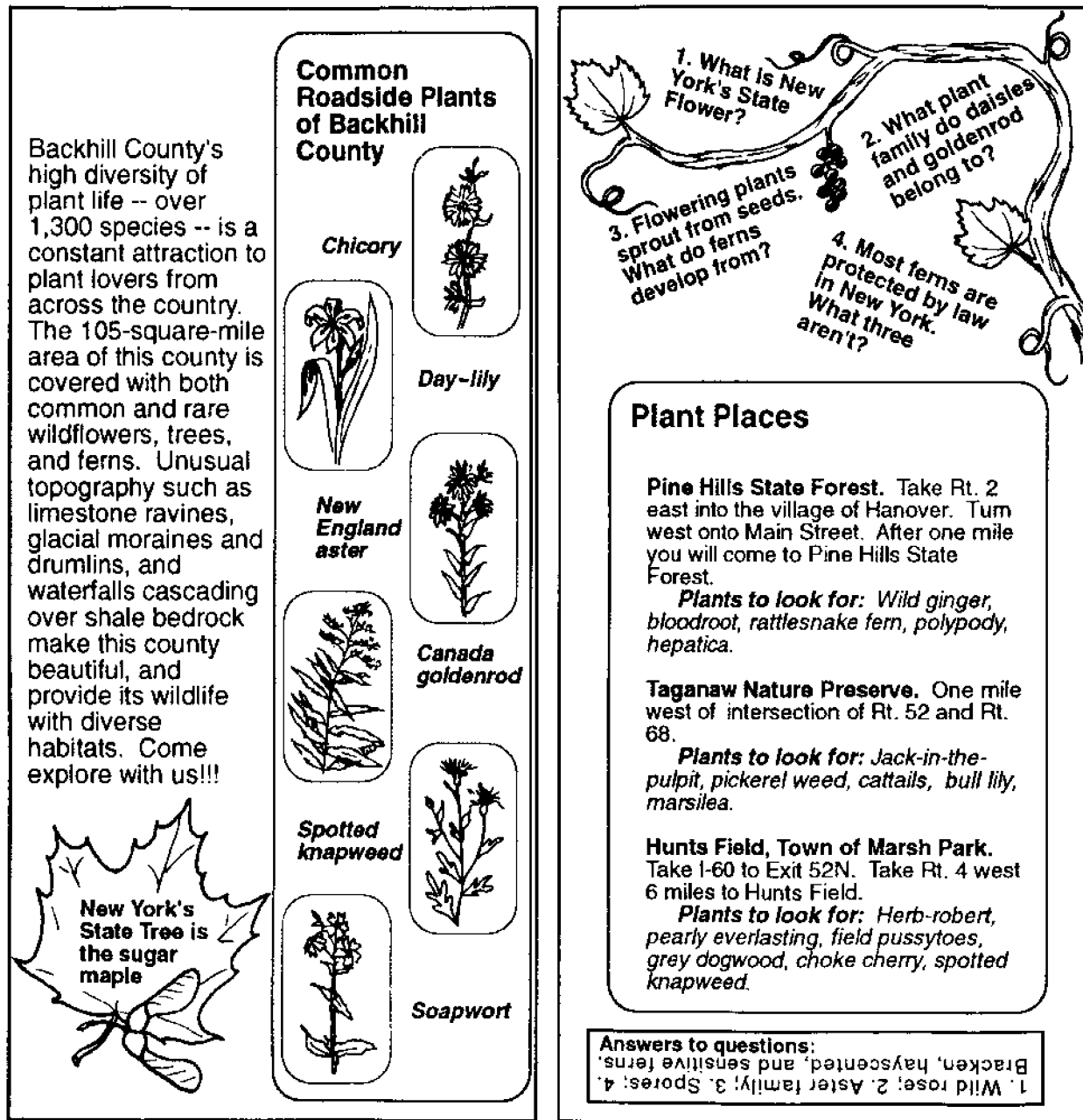


Figure 1. Two pages from a single-topic brochure interpreting the plants of an imaginary county. Illustrations, questions and answers, text, roadside plants to identify, and suggested places to visit are included.

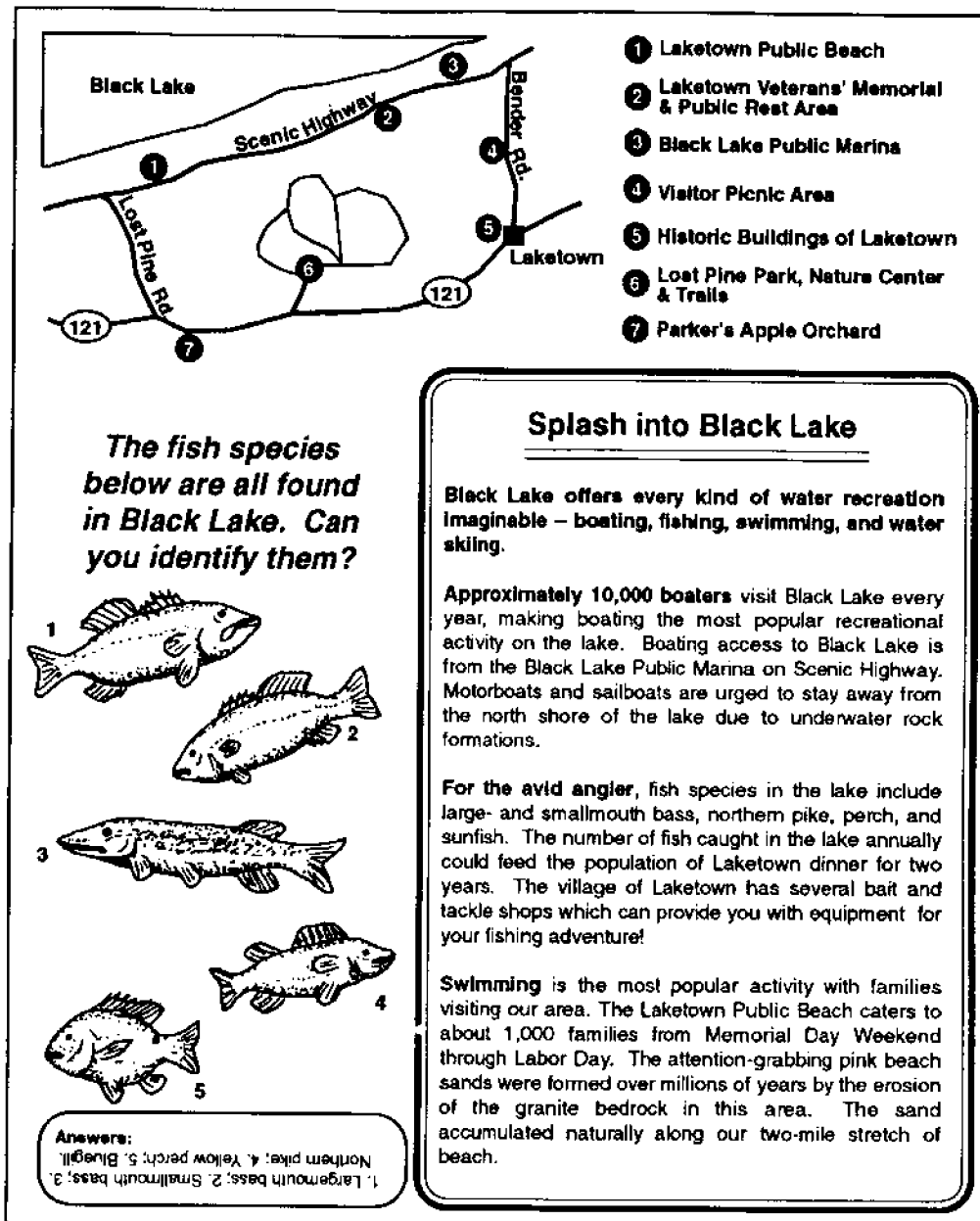


Figure 2. One page from a guide to the attractions and resources of an imaginary area. Illustrations, questions and answers, text, and a map are included.

DEVELOPING AN INTERPRETIVE BROCHURE OR GUIDE

STEP 1. Getting Organized

Form a project committee. Committee members should be chosen for their motivation and ability to work well with others, as much as for their knowledge. Local "resource experts" with knowledge of the topics to be

interpreted (e.g., historians, wildlife club members, state park officials, managers of local industries, and museum directors) should be part of this committee. Each committee member should be assigned a specific topic to collect information about. A committee chairperson should be elected to run the meetings and direct the production process. Meetings should be held on a regular basis to maintain member motivation. Project committees sometimes become not-for-profit incorporated associations in order to obtain grants and work with government agencies more effectively.

Get the public involved. An informational meeting for the public can provide a mechanism for obtaining input, and gaining financial and/or political support for your publication. Owners or managers of local businesses and attractions, directors of regional tourism agencies, and officials of local chambers of commerce can all assist in its development and distribution. If your community decides not to have local or regional agencies involved, it should still keep them informed about the project through letters and/or news releases to area newspapers. Agencies that support and are well informed about the goals of your project will be more willing to help with the distribution of the finished product.

Set a time schedule. Decide when each of the following steps should be completed and stick to these dates. Have the chairperson of the committee routinely ask committee members how their responsibility is progressing.

STEP 2. Determining Your Objectives

Objectives are the results your community hopes to achieve with this project. By answering the following questions, the project committee will be able to determine what its objectives are.

What type of publication does your community wish to develop? The two basic types are the brochure on a single topic, and the touring guide. The type chosen depends on your community's current attractions, resources, and opportunities. For example, if your community has few attractions but has many natural resources, a brochure interpreting these natural resources would be more suitable than a touring guide to local attractions.

What does your community hope to accomplish by producing this publication? For example, do you wish to attract more visitors to your area, make visitors more aware of local attractions, accomplish a management goal, or convey a message to visitors (e.g., that visitors are welcome in your community)?

What audience are you developing your interpretive guide or publication for? Visitor groups such as families, bicyclists, anglers, and nature enthusiasts have different interests, needs, and experiences. These determine the information needed in your publication, and consequently what facilities (if any) should be improved or constructed for visitors. The audience chosen should be carefully considered so that the publication's use is not overly limited. For example, instead of developing a touring guide for bicyclists alone, you might decide to develop one for both automobile drivers and bicyclists, since more people use cars than bicycles.

What topics do you wish to include in your guide?

This is determined by the audience that you choose, and the resources that exist in your community. Suppose sportfishing is the topic chosen for your interpretive brochure, and you wish to interpret this topic for either anglers or families. For anglers, the technical aspects of fishing, such as which lures to use and where the fishing hotspots are, would be interpreted. Less technical subjects, such as the history of fishing in the area and the life cycles of local fish species, would be more appropriate for families.

What will the cost of producing the guide be? Certain project goals may be limited by your community's budget. Hiring an author, printing a large number of guides or a large number of pages in the guide, and using colored inks, photographs, and high-quality paper can be expensive. Find out from a printing shop before beginning how much the publication will cost to print (see also Step #10).

Where will funding come from? Fundraising is usually considered to be the most difficult aspect of implementing a project. Government agencies sometimes have grants available for community projects. However, the group requesting the funds may need to be a "legal entity," such as a not-for-profit incorporated association, chamber of commerce, or town board. Private funds can be raised through fundraising campaigns such as festivals, sporting events, and raffle ticket sales.

How will the finished product be distributed? Publications must be set up properly for distribution. For example, organizations and agencies often choose to leave the back cover of their brochures blank so that address labels and postage can be attached for easy mailing. Brochures distributed at information centers are usually 3.5" x 8.5", a size that fits into brochure racks. Local businesses, attractions, chambers of commerce, information centers, and regional tourism promotion agencies are often willing to assist with distribution.

STEP 3. Choosing an Author

The author(s) chosen by the project committee must be effective and creative, and have good organizational skills. Depending on the funding available, either a paid or volunteer author can be chosen. If the author does not have experience using interpretive techniques, someone who does (e.g., the director of a local nature center) should be asked for assistance. To prevent disorganization, it is suggested that no more than three people share this responsibility.

STEP 4. Inventorying Local Resources and Choosing Priorities

Inventorying consists of compiling a list of all local attractions and resources that meet the project objectives, even those that seem obvious to community residents, since visitors may find these interesting. From this inventory, a list of attractions and resources that have priority for interpretive development based on visitor demands and needs, and budgetary constraints, should be produced. Some key features to look for in attractions and resources (and examples of each) are:

- *Uniqueness* (natural areas, unusual wildlife, different cultures)
- *Aesthetics* (scenic overlooks, beautiful sunsets, fall foliage)
- *Recreational opportunities* (fishing docks, boat launches, hiking trails, campgrounds, beaches, golf courses)
- *Historic significance* (museums, monuments, village historic districts)
- *Educational value* (museums, nature centers, visitor centers in local industries)
- *Artistic appeal* (art museums, formal gardens, elaborate architecture).

STEP 5. Structuring your publication

Once the prioritized resources and attractions are chosen, the project committee must decide how to structure or organize the publication. Structuring enables visitors to easily travel from one attraction to the next and learn about the community and its resources. Your guide should be structured for a specific mode of travel, whether it's driving a car, walking, bicycling, boating, or skiing. The method of travel chosen will determine what facilities visitors will need (including access to attractions) and how they will relate the interpretive information in the guide to each attraction. Although this step applies mostly to touring guide development, single topic brochures can also benefit from some of the following structuring suggestions.

Travel directions. Interpretive guides often direct travelers from one attraction to the next using maps and written directions. Signs can be used in conjunction with the travel directions given in a guide to mark attractions

and clarify where to make turns, but this is not always necessary or affordable. Often officially designated road and trail systems have signs which inform visitors of the trail they are on and of any turn-offs.

Traveling from one attraction to the next along a designated "loop" of trails, roads, or sidewalks can make it easier for visitors to tour an area, since loops begin and end at or near the same place, and follow a designated route. By locating community attractions on a street or trail map, you can identify whether they are arranged in a loop (Figure 3). The loop should be kept simple (i.e., have as few turns as possible) and be well maintained.

Relaying information. Vandalism, changes over time in surroundings, and high production costs of signs often make it unfeasible to put interpretive information directly on signs. Because of this, signs along roads or trails are often used in conjunction with interpretive guides to relay information to visitors. One method used on interpretive trails is to have numbered sections of text in the guide correspond to numbered signs along the trail. When visitors reach the numbered sign on the trail, they can stop and read, at their own pace, the appropriate section of text from the guide that interprets their location. In situations where signs are not going to be used in conjunction with the guide, descriptive text, photographs, and illustrations should be included in the guide to help visitors identify points of interest. (Note: if on-site interpretation is constantly needed [especially for management objectives], signs are usually the best tool.)

Facilities. Although the presence and condition of facilities are not directly related to the production of your interpretive publication, they are crucial to the comfort and enjoyment of visitors to your area. The method of transportation used by visitors will determine the type of facilities required at and between attractions. For instance, if visitors use both automobiles and bicycles to tour an area, the roads must be well maintained, and have adequate signs and widely paved shoulders. Other facilities to consider include: rest areas, picnic areas, visitor information centers, parking areas, telephones, restaurants, campgrounds, lodgings, and recreational access (e.g., boat launches and parking areas at trail heads). Your community may need to improve its roads and facilities in order meet its goals.

STEP 6. Collecting Resource Information

Each committee member should be responsible for collecting information about the resources or attractions that relate to his/her area of expertise. Accurate facts, figures, quotes, and results from research projects, as well as credible anecdotes and folklore, can all be used. After this information is collected, it can be shared with the author(s).

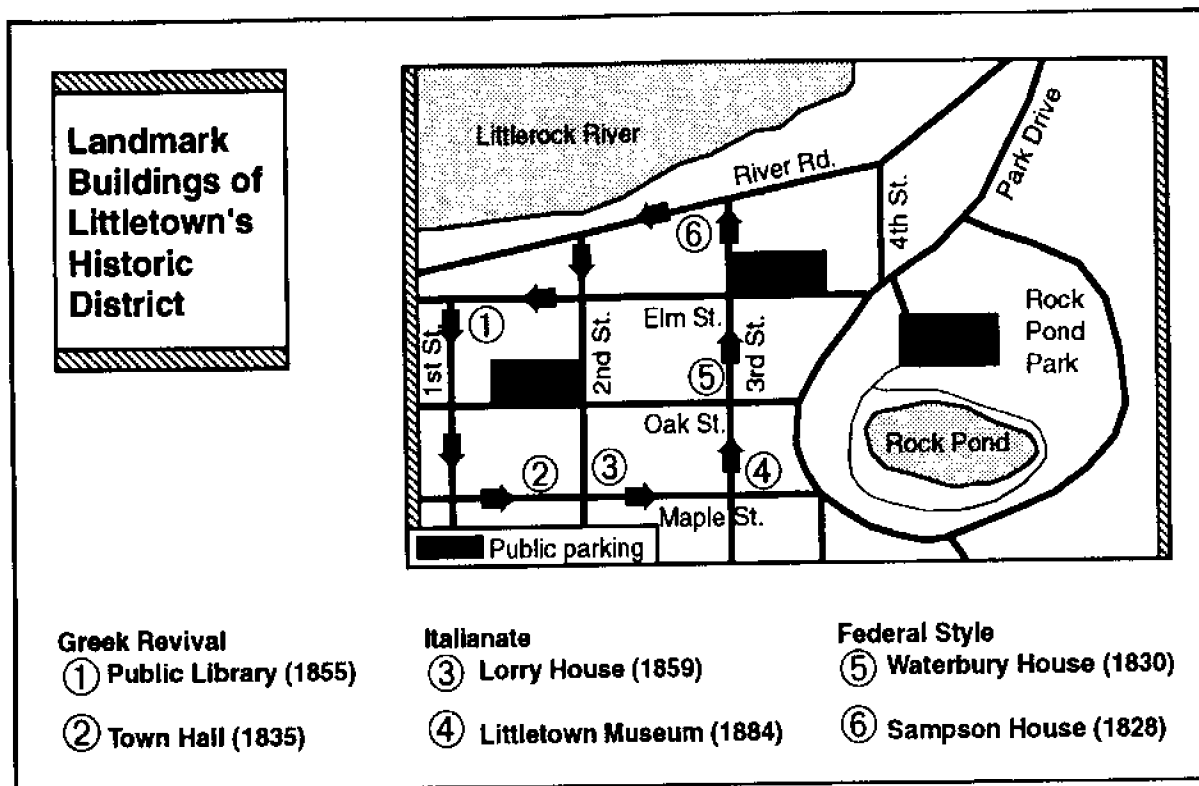


Figure 3. Designating a loop tour of community attractions.

STEP 7. Writing Your Publication

The author is responsible for compiling all of the information given to him/her, choosing what information to include, and writing the guide. The needs and wants of the visitors you are writing for will determine the information to include. The following writing suggestions may help.

Keep it simple. Write all text on an eighth grade level; a person from any background should be able to easily understand it. Do not include so much information or detail that the reader becomes confused. Explain the "basics" of each topic, even if you think the topic is easy to understand (e.g., in a geology guide you would first define what "geology" is).

Choose words carefully. Include jargon and technical terms only if they are defined. Avoid "loaded" words, such as "environment," "ecological," "kill," and "conservation," since each can be interpreted in several different ways (U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1984).

Make it easy to read. Include only short paragraphs of text; many readers skip lengthy ones. Use headlines to

separate different sections of text, and captions to identify diagrams and photographs. This will make skimming for information easier.

Use the active tense of verbs (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1984). Some examples include "thrives," "grows," and "explores." Historical information should be presented in the past tense (i.e., thrived, grew, and explored).

Present all information accurately. Do not exaggerate or misinterpret information.

Keep the message positive. For instance, when interpreting community problems, explain how your community is trying to overcome them. Instead of telling visitors that they cannot do something, explain why (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1984).

Organize your writing. Explain first the basic concepts of each subject (i.e., who, what, when, where, why, and how), followed by more detailed information (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1984). Use an outline of the information while writing.

Explain all sides of each issue. Interpretation should not force judgments on visitors, but instead should help them decide matters on their own (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1984).

Be creative! Provide different types of information in different ways to maintain reader interest (Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate this approach). In addition, you may wish to:

- Include puzzles and games for families to play such as games played by the original settlers of your area.
- Use illustrations and photographs to explain information.
- Provide travel directions through maps and written instructions.
- Challenge the reader by asking questions. Also, answer any questions commonly asked by visitors in your community.
- Insert entertaining quotations from famous local people.
- Discuss the folklore and different cultures of your area.
- Involve the reader in your community by suggesting recreational activities to try.
- Identify scenic spots for visitors to photograph.
- Explain and illustrate how to identify interesting flora and fauna in the area.
- Add any other creative ideas you might come up with — the possibilities are endless!

STEP 8. Editing Your Publication

Editing is a crucial step. Ask at least five people with different educational and occupational backgrounds to edit your publication for grammar, clarity, and content. The author should decide which editorial comments to use. The following suggestions identify what basic corrections to make while editing.

Check all grammar and spelling. This is crucial in developing a high-quality publication.

Weed out unnecessary words. (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1984). For example, change "Our community

is trying to develop a guide that interprets our local resources" to "Our community is developing an interpretive guide to its resources." This makes the sentence simpler and shorter.

Remove any irrelevant topics. For instance, in an interpretive guide focusing on the local sportfishery, detailed facts about the apple orchards in your area should be removed.

STEP 9. Laying Out Your Publication

The layout is the arrangement of informational materials (including text, illustrations, photos, and maps) in your guide. Although your printing shop may have specific guidelines for layout, most printers request either a "camera-ready" copy of publications, or typeset the publication themselves. "Camera-ready" means that all illustrations and text are glued to white paper in the exact arrangement that the brochure or guide will be printed in. A "photograph" of this copy will be used by the printer to make all final copies. The camera-ready copy should have no mistakes or smudges on it since these will show up on the final product. Having the printer typeset the publication for you is faster and easier than producing your own camera-ready copy, but is also usually more expensive (Performance Seminar Group, 1986). Seek professional assistance if it's not available within the committee.

STEP 10. Printing Your Publication

The actual printing of your brochure or guide can either be done by a professional print shop, or by a local agency or industry with printing capabilities. Obtain estimates from several printers with regard to typesetting, printing from camera-ready copy, paper, and ink costs before choosing a printer (do this in conjunction with Step #2).

STEP 11. Distributing Your Publication

Distribution is the key to making the publication work for your community. Community and regional information centers, as well as many regional tourism promotion agencies, chambers of commerce, businesses, and tourist attractions, can distribute interpretive publications. You may also choose to mail them out on request.

Marketing your brochure or guide is important if you want visitors from outside areas to use it. News releases about its availability can be submitted to newspapers in the areas you wish to draw tourists from. Though some-

times expensive, advertising in tourism and recreation magazines may also be useful. Your regional tourism promotion agency may be able to give you other marketing tips suitable for your area and budget.

STEP 12. Evaluating the Guide's Impact on Your Community

Evaluation is necessary in order to discover whether a project has achieved its original objectives (especially if interpretation efforts are going to be expanded). It is important that the same evaluation tool (i.e., survey or questionnaire) be used by each attraction so that the results from each attraction can be compared. If after summarizing survey results you find that the impact from the publication in your area is not as great as expected, a change in marketing or distribution strategies, or in the guide itself, may be needed. The assistance of an experienced researcher is recommended when developing any evaluation tool. The following is a suggested evaluation technique.

Survey visitors. How visitors found out about your community, what attractions they visited, if they used your interpretive guide and found it useful, and how much money they spent while in your town are examples of information that can be obtained through visitor surveys. Questions on visitor sign-in lists at local attractions, written surveys given to visitors as they enter attractions or information centers, and questions asked by receptionists can all be used to obtain this information.

THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

After your guide is complete, your community can breathe a sigh of relief. But don't relax too much — if this publication has been a benefit to your community, you may want to expand your interpretive efforts by installing interpretive signs and developing interpretive centers

(such as nature centers and museums). These projects will only make your community a nicer place to visit and live!

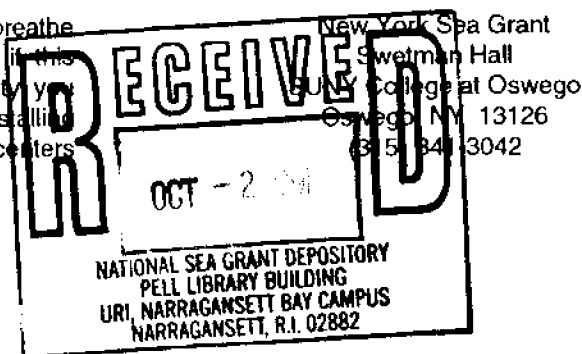
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Copies of this publication are available from:



New York Sea Grant Extension is a state and federal program designed to help people solve coastal problems along New York's Great Lakes, St. Lawrence, Niagara, and Lower Hudson Rivers, the New York City waterfront, Long Island Sound, and the State's Atlantic Ocean coast. It is administered through the State University of New York and Cornell University. Sea Grant funds research projects and conducts educational programs on issues ranging from off-shore mining and erosion control to commercial fisheries, coastal tourism, and aquaculture.

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