

**An Action
Research
Appraisal of
Visitor Center
Interpretation
and Change**

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Abstract

This study uses an action research framework to evaluate changes to the visitor center-based interpretation of a natural environment. The context for the study is Australia's Flinders Chase National Park, located in an isolated tourism region, namely Kangaroo Island in the state of South Australia. The island and the park are best known for the opportunities visitors have to see many forms of Australian wildlife. Surveys of over 700 visitors were conducted in 1999 and these results were used to inform the design of interpretation in a new and much larger visitor center. In 2004 further survey work with 450 visitors was conducted. The second study specifically reported on the overall effectiveness of the new center in influencing visitors' satisfaction with the interpretation. The results demonstrate the value of action research in shaping interpretive practice.

Keywords

visitor centers, action research, tourism research, southern Australia

Introduction

Visitor centers are an important part of the tourism and interpretation landscape in many countries. Such centers are common in North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and increasingly in Asia and Europe. The term *visitor center* as used in this research refers to clearly labeled buildings where staff provides information to the public for

the purposes of enhancing and managing the visitor experience (c.f. Pearce, 1991; Hobbin, 1999). Although there is a traditional association of visitor centers with national parks and public heritage sites, visitor centers are also common in urban areas and at transport nodes such as border crossings (Fesenmaier & Vogt, 1993). Visitor centers can have several overlapping functions and the pattern of these functions can be used as a way of classifying different types of centers. There are, for example, some centers that provide principally promotional material; others attempt to control and filter visitor movement patterns in an area and still others act as a substitute for an attraction by providing their own types of visitor entertainment and diversion (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003; Pearce, 2004). These patterns of activity often give rise to different names for visitor centers, with some cultures and countries preferring the label interpretive center for those focussed on visitor control and engagement. Such centers have a stronger visitor education component while terms such as *welcome centers* and *information centers* are used where the more marketing-oriented activities prevail.

The study reported in this paper showcases an opportunity in interpretation research. At core, the opportunity lies in the wider application of action research to interpretation planning and practices (Wadsworth, 2005). The organization of the present research on interpretation planning and conducted for one specific visitor center follows action research principles. The context for this research involves the replacement of an existing visitor interpretive center on Kangaroo Island in South Australia with a new and larger facility. The action research approach used in this study elevates the activities of researchers to that of valued partners in the interpretation team rather than external auditors and commentators. Such involvement does not amount to a compromise in researcher integrity, but rather requires independent appraisal of information and the delivery of the implications of research in a timely fashion for operational change. The specific task of this paper is to report the outcomes of an action research initiative achieved through two linked studies and associated meetings conducted in 1999 and 2004. These studies in turn shaped and then evaluated the interpretive efforts of the new visitor center at the Flinders Chase National Park.

Action Research

The roots of action research lie in the continuing attempts of social science researchers to make a difference (c.f. Cooper et al., 2004; Flyvbjerg, 2001). The derivation of the term action research is often traced to one of sociology's founding figures, Kurt Lewin, who suggested that one way of understanding an organization was to help change it (Lewin, 1947). He characterized action research as comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action. An important part of Lewin's writing about action research was to highlight that such research usually involves repeated research inputs to assess the state of a system and to monitor changes in the system. Action research is, however, unlike more traditional quasi-experimental studies that investigate interventions and change from a distance (c.f. Cook & Campbell, 1975; Shadish et al., 2002), because action researchers are themselves agents of change through collaboration, in that they feed research results directly into real world problems (McTaggart, 1988; Wadsworth, 2005).

O'Brien (1998) concludes that action research fundamentally seeks to study a system and concurrently to collaborate with members of the system in changing it. The nature of the change is a jointly negotiated and shared common direction deemed to be desirable by

all parties. More than one term is used to label this kind of research and synonyms for action research include *participatory research*, *collaborative inquiry*, and *action learning*. Action research has developed a considerable body of adherents and it is an important technique in educational and clinical research, counselling studies, and community development (Cameron & Gibson, 2005; Kidd & Kral, 2005).

There are a number of divisions recognized within action research and studies on interpretation can be seen as fitting most directly into one of these groupings. McTaggart (1991) identifies two sub-classes of particular interest, practical action research and emancipatory action research. Practical action research exists when a facilitator or external party (such as a university research team) establishes cooperative relationships with practitioners. The external party assists the practitioners to articulate their values and concerns and then, further, helps to plan and evaluate the actions. Emancipatory action research is a more radical social process and involves changing the consciousness and values of the group. Studies of interpretation are more likely to fall into the category of practical action research whereas research in communities involving power and social inequity issues are more likely to be involved in emancipatory action research.

There are some important guidelines in the literature on action research which help plan and guide such studies (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Many of the specifications for good action research are common to those applying to research in general but there are some specific areas for attention. Action research should be conceived in phases or stages and these phases are critical to the assessment of intervention effects. In the academic reporting of action research, attention should be given to the nature of the relationships established between the researchers and the community of interest. The kinds of rapport established may help explain the extent to which the initial research was adopted or stimulated change. Further, the rapport may help explain access given to researchers to help evaluate and monitor change. In a methodological sense the nature of action research also raises some scientific dilemmas. It can not always be expected that action research is guided by neat theoretically derived hypotheses, as many real-world situations are over-determined, in that many competing forces produce the observed outcomes. This is not an apology for poor social science but recognition that results may be complex and need careful examination and inspection due to multiple situational forces. As Wadsworth (2005) suggests, action research may be underreported in the academic literature because it is localized and outcomes oriented rather than neatly designed to be publication focused.

Several considerations from the literature on action research guide the study reported here. It is important to specify the context for action research initiatives so that any generalization or wider implications from the localized study can be fully appreciated. It is also important to report the nature of the relationships with the community or organization, as this helps define the kinds of researcher access and inputs to the process of change. Additionally, while reporting of results is likely to follow general social science reporting standards, there must be detailed explanations and descriptions of the research process to help track any deviations from conventional research methods (such as changes in survey instruments) caused by the relationships or political processes. It is perhaps important to return to Lewin (1947) in setting out these caveats about action research. In particular, it is valuable to emphasize that action research is not just problem solving or consulting advice to management, but a genuine attempt to record systematically "research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social actions" (1947: 34).

The Setting

The English navigator Matthew Flinders provided the name Kangaroo Island in 1802. Flinders, having survived a ferocious gale somewhat typical of these stormy waters, was surveying Australia's southern coast and landed on the island to investigate the black shapes seen by his men. The abundance of a darkly colored, thickly coated species of kangaroo prompted the name (Toft, 2002). In the 21st century, Flinders Chase National Park at the western end of Kangaroo Island is on the periphery of the periphery; that is, it is an 800-square-kilometer wilderness little touched by human settlement. Altogether the island is 100 kilometers long by 40 kilometers wide and has only 4,000 inhabitants, most of whom live near the eastern shoreline. This community is removed from the rest of the state of South Australia by a rough and deep strait across which there is limited daily boat transport, but there is some access by air to the state capital of Adelaide.

A combination of the remote location and the sparse human settlement has preserved Kangaroo Island as an area of exceptional abundance of Australian wildlife. The Flinders Chase National Park borders the entire western coastline of the island. It includes large tracts of densely vegetated and slightly rolling low hills. It is thus an extensive, untouched sanctuary for not only kangaroos, but also echidnas, seals, penguins, goannas, koalas, platypus, numerous birds, and snakes. The geological formations on the coastline are striking examples of wind- and sea-eroded granite caverns. The stirring tales about the shipwrecks, which were plentiful along this wild coast, provide a further diversity of sites and themes for visitors.

The South Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (SANPWS), the administrative body responsible for the Flinders Chase National Park, began operating a small, single room visitor administrative facility in the late 1980s. The center was sited at the southern and principal entrance to the park. The rise of national and international interest in wildlife tourism during the 1990s created a surge in visitor numbers to Kangaroo Island. Visitor numbers more than doubled in the decade of the 1990s, reaching a record high for a total annual figure of almost 200,000 by the end of the period. Although only a portion of these visitors (circa 40%) came to the western end of the island, the increasing numbers were causing several stresses. In particular, there were pressures on the unsealed roads at the key sites and the physical capacity of the small visitor facility was of concern. A state government political decision was made to construct a new, large-scale visitor center as both a symbolic and operational management tool. It was intended to function as an interpretive facility to maintain the image of Flinders Chase and boost the island's tourism standards and experiential quality. Additionally, the possibility of influencing visitors' travel patterns and movements in the park were seen as possible through the visitor center's interpretation and information. The scale of this visitor center construction was not trivial with over A\$7.5 million (US\$6 million) being invested in the new complex. This figure represents one of the more expensive efforts at interpreting an Australian environment (c.f. Fallon & Krikowoken, 2003).

The Conceptual Basis of the Studies

While action research is the key guiding methodological style of the study and its requirements dictate a number of issues in conducting the work, the model of mindfulness was employed as a guide to assessing the interpretation itself. Evaluation studies in interpretation are increasingly being buttressed by theoretical and conceptual schemes to guide the survey



Figure 1. The visitor center at Flinders Chase in 1999



Figure 2. The visitor center at Flinders Chase in 2004

and interview work of researchers (Bitgood et al., 1988; Uzzell & Ballantyne, 1998; Moscardo, 1999). One guide to understanding interpretation lies in the application of the generic concept of mindfulness (Langer, 1989; Moscardo, 1999). The mindfulness-mindlessness distinction draws attention to the mental state of visitors interacting with interpretive materials and proposes that there are key stimulus factors as well as key visitor factors that promote visitor attention to information, retention of information, and ultimately satisfaction with the visitor experience. Mindfulness refers to the active processing of information where visitors are concentrating on adding new information to their existing knowledge. By way of contrast, mindlessness represents the process where individuals are following existing routines and scripts in the processing of material and, while they may appear to be concentrating, they are not actually renovating and reorganizing what they know. Some of the key stimulus factors promoting mindfulness include communication efforts that are novel, multisensory, use questions, connect to visitors' previous interests, promote good orientation, and offer variety across the whole interpretive experience (see Moscardo (1999) and Pearce (2005) for a full discussion and outline of the mindfulness model in tourism settings). In this study the mindfulness model was integral to the design of the research effort and was particularly used to offer advice to the new visitor center planning team.

Outline and Goals of the Research

Working within an action research framework, two linked studies were conducted. The first study reports work carried out on visitor needs for interpretation as assessed in 1999. At that time (refer Figure 1) and as noted previously, there was only a very small visitor facility at the park. There was very limited interpretation in this small building. The second study reports on the work carried out in 2004 after the construction of a new visitor center. The goal of the first study was to describe the needs of visitors for interpretation at the park. A second goal of this first study was to use this description of visitors' needs for interpretive information to make recommendations for interpretive content in the new visitor center. The purpose of the second study in 2004 was to describe visitors' evaluation of interpretation at the new Flinders Chase National Park Visitor Center. The dominant goal of the research overall lies in examining visitors' reactions to the newly provided interpretation resulting from the outcomes of the action-oriented research built on the mindfulness model.

Methodology

Overview

The research is presented in two stages. The 1999 study and its implications for interpretation planning are considered first. Then the second study, conducted in 2004 and appraising the visitors' reactions to the interpretive efforts in the new center, is portrayed. In order to be consistent with the requirements of action research the researcher-practitioner relationships are initially outlined.

Researcher-practitioner Interaction

Initial contact was made between the researchers and staff from SANPWS as a part of a national project evaluating wildlife based tourism management issues. At that meeting interpretive staff from SANPWS reported that funding for a new interpretive center for

