

# ACHIEVING SELF-IDENTITY AND SELF-WORTH

Jon Kohl looks at how participatory interpretative frameworks can strengthen community identities.

Interpretive planners with development experience and facilitation skills can guide communities through the creation of meanings held and displayed in interpretive frameworks, which contribute to community self-identity and self-worth. These frameworks not only allow them to design more authentic heritage products, but also to more fully participate in development projects of all kinds. The interpretation community has underestimated the role of interpretation in community development.

## INTERPRETATION AS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

The difference between heritage and resources are the meanings that a community ascribes. Once a consensus emerges that a resource indeed embodies significant meanings, we call that resource 'heritage', even though no such consensus may exist on what those meanings are. Though consensus may seem elusive, the

 Interpretive Framework <small>29 nov 2012</small>			
<b>A New Leadership Emerges from the Integration of Different Forms of Understanding Natural Resources</b>			
A new leadership in natural resource management built on the integration of academic and community knowledge is iteratively applied and improved in practice, offering solutions to complex socioenvironmental challenges.			
<i>Description to come</i>			
<b>Postgraduate Academic Training for a New Leadership in Natural Resource Management</b>		<b>The Use of Natural Resources as a Conservation Strategy</b>	
The globalization of knowledge and sharpening of socioenvironmental problems demand a postgraduate academic training to create new leaders capable of working with communities to resolve complex challenges facing natural resource use.		Far from promoting preservation as a principal conservation strategy, the rational and permanent interaction of people and natural resources foments learning to achieve sustainable development objectives.	
<i>Description to come</i>		<i>Description to come</i>	
<b>From the University to the Field</b>	<b>New Leadership in the Region's Natural Resource Management</b>	<b>Sustainable Development in Rural Communities</b>	<b>Conservation of Genetic Plant Material</b>
Socioenvironmental problems cannot be solved from a university campus; they require both virtual and physical extension to communities in order to generate and transfer knowledge, both academic and community-based.	Each year thousands of students graduate around the world from renowned natural resources master's and doctoral programs; but resolution of complex environmental challenges requires leaders with social, economical, and environmental consciousness, capable of integrating different forms of knowing, such as scientific and community knowledge.	Despite the international trend of short-term projects, in order that rural development truly become sustainable and lasting, theoretical knowledge about conservation and use of natural resources must be created, applied, and improved over and over in practice.	Only with the conservation of a vast collection of genetic material from diverse parts of the world and in all of its forms, can institutions innovate new varieties important for humanity's food security and economy.
<i>Description</i> For centuries, the great universities have erected their buildings in the hearts of metropolitan areas, enjoying privileges that flow from civilization. But with the increase in the dynamic complexity of challenges emerging today requires that universities leave behind the ancient concept of ivory towers and look to extend and integrate themselves with other forms of knowledge especially local in order to transcend problems that grow increasingly resistant.	<i>Description to come</i>	<i>Description</i> The current development model emphasizes short-term projects and results. This model nevertheless does not allow sufficient time to forge trusting relationships with communities or to learn by means of trial and error in a world increasingly uncertain and complex. Instead, a new model emerges that promotes sustainable development that seeks long-term relations that integrates theoretical and local knowledge as well as foments learning critical to overcoming socioenvironmental problems.	<i>Description to come</i>
<b>Attractions and Stories</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Principal Building Wallace</li> </ul>	<b>Attractions and stories to come</b>	<b>Attractions and Stories</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Los Espeveles Trail</li> </ul>	<b>Attractions and Stories</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seed bank</li> <li>Botanical Garden (specimens)</li> <li>Experimental forest (native trees)</li> <li>Live collections (cultivars of cacao, café, Bixa, etc.)</li> </ul> <b>Visitor Products</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Botanical Garden Tours</li> </ul>

RIGHT: Figure 1: Partial interpretive framework from a university community (CATIE, in Costa Rica) showing examples of descriptions, attractions and stories matched to messages.

RIGHT:

**Figure 2: Residents of Union Island, the most southern island in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, used the historical scan technique to identify stories, eras, and themes in their island's history. This participatory tool is the first of three principal steps in developing a community interpretive framework.**



prize well merits the hunt. A community's self-esteem, self-identity, pride and even market potential all depend on meanings that people both inside and outside the community assign to the place. Often residents may perceive only a shadowy notion of their site's worth or its central story and have never joined their thoughts with those of fellow members in a facilitated, consensus-based conversation.

Most communities cannot boast the attractive power of, say, Paris and not just because they do not share such outstanding heritage. Often they have never even articulated a collective meaning. Thus they suffer a confused self-identity and self-worth that can inhibit development, especially in poor, underdeveloped communities, leading to a lack of self-confidence and dependency on outsiders.

If indeed interpretation can be used by skilled interpretive facilitator-planners to help people forge collective meanings, (meanings that help them to more deeply understand and appreciate their own community), then perhaps interpretation could be not only a therapeutic tool, but a force to promote development, especially in heritage tourism.

Communities that cannot articulate their meanings, or have been wooed into declaring marketing slogans or have lost inherited meanings can fall victim to uncontrolled tourism that threatens the very heritage and value that attracted tourists in the first place. To avoid meaninglessness or to pull communities from a negative story that chains them down, interpretation can meet the need, but first interpreters must cast down the traditional consultant-driven approach. Instead, interpretive planners need to become meaning facilitators and one tool that can help is the participatory interpretive framework.

## INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS GUARD COMMUNITY MEANINGS

An interpretive framework holds local and universal meanings, stories, attractions and symbols relevant to a community on a single page so that people can view the entire framework. Aside from the hierarchical, interrelated web of interpretive messages themselves, the framework may include brief descriptions of each message offering evidence for perspectives revealed in messages as well as how messages connect to the local site. They may also include short lists of principal site attractions and stories that correspond to different messages in the framework (Figure 1). It is through attractions and stories, as well as interpretive products, that visitors encounter and experience messages.

While the bottom row may have messages that directly refer to the interpreted site (Figure 3), the upper echelons display universalised messages that express some truth applicable throughout the world, for which the interpreted site proves an outstanding illustration. Through this universalisation of meaning as we ascend the pyramid, local stories enjoy a direct connection to revealed truths relevant to people around the world, thus tying local reality into greater arcs of consciousness and importance, granting even the most forlorn place its rightful place in the evolving universe.

## MEANING MUST BE CO-CREATED

For an interpretive framework to have any chance of success, a wide and diverse slice of the community must participate in its forging. If they do not co-create, they will not own, and when the intervener leaves, the framework will fall into disuse. If key community perspectives are left out, people who represent those perspectives may not support the framework. Co-owning is not enough though; a community must be accompanied in its learning to use, practise, know and create a new habit to integrate it into daily work. There must be enough awareness of its utility and even leadership to try out the initiative.

## INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS ARISE THROUGH PARTICIPATION

The methodology herein described comes from the PUP Global Heritage Consortium's Interpretive Framework module, part of its Public Use Planning Process ([www.pupconsortium.net](http://www.pupconsortium.net)). The one-day workshop consists of two principal exercises:

*Historical Scan.* While site history may be well documented in books, when a community reconstructs it collectively its members come to understand its evolution and its eras in a new collective light, out of which arise stories that will later populate the framework as well as possible theme ideas that feed into the afternoon session (Figure 2). While this step is not essential to an interpretive framework, its

Overarching universal message	<b>Glacial Routes, Biological Routes</b> With the passage of time, glacial routes open and close routes for humans and other species.				
Universal messages	<b>Throwing Salt on the Sacred Wound</b> Commerce along the Salt Route unleashed a wave of desecration of indigenous territory.		<b>Glaciations and Biodiversity</b> The millennial expansion and retrocession of glaciers in El Cocuy National Park created refuges that permit speciation along altitudinal gradients.		
Local messages (small committee)	<b>The Salt Route</b> Commercial traffic along the Salt Route, whether indigenous or Spanish, drove the cultural and territorial domination of El Cocuy and its surroundings.	<b>Desecration</b> Despite the fact that the Spanish brought the Holy Cross to extend their religion over the indigenous cosmivision, in reality, they desecrated their land.	<b>Glacial Masses</b> Although the snowcap mountains of Güicán, Cocuy and Chita have one of the most extensive glacial masses north of the equator, the peaks that were once covered in ice, one by one, are melting.	<b>Biodiversity and Endemism</b> Given the altitudinal gradient that cuts across extensive forests and paramos and the resulting abundant of habitat, El Cocuy National Park is the heart of high levels of biodiversity and endemism, such as the Frailejón <i>Epeletia clefti</i> and collard lizard ( <i>Stenocercus lache</i> ).	<b>Without name</b> Too few cards to reflect a consensus
Message groupings (workshop)	<b>Thoughts of the locals</b>		<b>Biophysical characteristics of the place</b>		
Emerging messages (workshop)	Cocuy, Art, Beauty, and Culture	History of the magic and religious	The Sierra Nevada in its majestic height	5300 meters in biodiversity	

LEFT:  
Figure 3: The interpretive framework for El Cocuy National Park in Colombia illustrates how a framework is built from the bottom up, from emerging messages produced in plenary through local and universal messages written by a small committee with the approval of the plenary.

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absence lessens the group's ability to develop a collective flow and work together, which will be well served in the upcoming exercise.

*Consensus creation of emerging messages.* The steps follow the Consensus Workshop Method, a participatory tool, along with the 'Historical Scan' within the Technology of Participation, developed by the Institute for Cultural Affairs. Essentially, the facilitator asks participants to brainstorm significant attributes about the site which participants then group, name, and analyse into short thematic phrases, called 'emerging messages' (Figure 3). Later the facilitator works with a small committee of participants to convert emerging messages into interpretive messages and then to fill out the hierarchy of 4-7 messages, local to universal.

## INTERPRETIVE PLANNERS REQUIRE NEW SKILLS

Carrying out an interpretive framework in a community development context requires a new job description for conventional interpretive planning consultants. Such workers need training in participatory process facilitation, experience in community development, and a deep sensitivity to interior issues of both individual and collective minds, such as concerns, motivations, values and consciousness. Anyone who works in

development should also be emotionally mature, have an ego in check, and be willing to accompany communities during extended periods. Of course, they also have to be expert interpreters, especially capable of helping others make connections between local stories and universal meanings and then help them capture these meanings in well-crafted messages.

BELOW:  
Figure 4: The co-ordinator for the historic centre of the World Heritage City of Evora, Portugal leads individuals from throughout the city in creating its interpretive framework, drawing on thousands of years of history.



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