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# Environmental Interpretation's Role in Ecotourism

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*"In the end, we conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught." - Baba Dioum, Senegalese poet*

Ecotourism is a relatively new form of tourism in which nearly every country around the world is engaging in. Environmental interpretation is a form of education "that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource" (NAI). Interpretation and ecotourism can be practiced together as a way to: fund conservation and scientific research, protect fragile and pristine ecosystems, benefit rural communities, promote development in poor countries, enhance ecological and cultural sensitivity, and instill environmental awareness (Honey, 4). The United States of America represents a nation with a historical account of environmental interpretation in the National Park System, with ecotourism principles beginning to emerge. Costa Rica represents a country dominating the ecotourism industry, while still developing effective interpretive methods throughout the park system. Although distinct in that regard, both countries understand and utilize the role that environmental interpretation can play in successful ecotourism strategies.

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## Literature Review

Tourism, one of the world's largest industries, is a well-developed and well-known concept. Ecotourism, on the other hand, is a fairly new idea. Some sources write that the term can be traced as far back at the late 1970's, while others write that it can only be traced back to the late 1980's (Fennel, 30). Ecotourism has developed into the fastest growing segment of tourism as an alternative to "conventional forms of tourism which have, in a general sense, ignored social and ecological elements of foreign regions in favor of a more anthropocentric and strictly profit-centered approach to the delivery of tourism products" (Fennel, 30). Putting aside the varied and comprehensive definitions of ecotourism, Wallace and Pierce suggest that tourism may be said to be true ecotourism if it addresses the following six principles:

- 1) It entails a type of use that minimizes negative impacts to the environment and to local people.
- 2) It increases the awareness and understanding of an area's natural and cultural systems and the subsequent involvement of visitors in issues affecting those systems.
- 3) It contributes to the conservation and management of legally protected and other natural areas.
- 4) It maximizes the early and long-term participation of local people in the decision-making process that determines the kind and amount of tourism that should occur.
- 5) It directs economic and other benefits to local people that complement rather than overwhelm or replace traditional practices.
- 6) It provides special opportunities for local people and nature tourism employees to utilize and visit natural areas and learn more about the wonders that other visitors come to see (Fennel, 39-40).

Environmental Interpretation, the other key element of this paper, is a type of non-formal education which helps individuals relate to an object, resource, or place. The National Park

Service defines interpretation as “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information” (Tilden, 33). The National Park Service undoubtedly developed this definition based upon the book *Interpreting Our Heritage* by Freeman Tilden. Tilden was invited by the National Park Service to tour their parks, write about them, and analyze what was happening with interpretation (Regnier, Gross, and Zimmerman, 3). Published in 1957, *Interpreting Our Heritage* was the first book written solely to define the profession. Just as with ecotourism, there is no single, universal definition of interpretation, rather it is based on six guiding principles written by Tilden. Tilden’s six principles of interpretation are as follows:

- 1) Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
- 2) Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
- 3) Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
- 4) The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
- 5) Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.
- 6) Interpretation addressed to children should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best, it will require a separate program (Tilden 17-18).

With the basics of ecotourism and environmental interpretation covered, we can begin to look at how the two are related and more specifically, the role of interpretation in ecotourism.

Education is a fundamental aspect of ecotourism (see principles 2 and 6 on page 1). An intellectual, emotional, and even spiritual connection between a person and a place is what lies underneath a positive ecotourism experience. As Weiler and Ham state in their chapter “Tour Guides and Interpretation”, interpretation lies at the heart and soul of what ecotourism is, and what ecotour guides can and should be doing” (549). An effective ecotour interpreter and experience can result in environmental and cultural conscious tourists, has the potential to protect biodiversity, and creates business benefits.

### The Interpreter / Ecotour Guide & their Visitor

Aside from the tourists themselves, the interpreter or ecotour guide is without a doubt the most important component of ecotourism. The majority of scholars who investigate concepts regarding tourism and ecotourism agree that ‘guides’, in general, hold accountabilities within their tour group and outside the group (Weiler & Ham, 550). Accountabilities within the group include: facilitate learning, client enjoyment, and manage interaction between clients. Those outside the group involve facilitating and mediating interaction between clients and host communities (Weiler & Ham, 550). Covering this wide array of accountabilities also means being a representative of a number of roles. Tour guides and interpreters represent the tour operator, the host community, the tourism industry, and act on behalf of land managers. On top of all this, these multi-skilled individuals must also present a meaningful experience to the visitor.

Somewhat unique when compared to the institutional ideal of environmental interpretation, ecotourism interpretation has five brief integral principles. Interpretation: is not teaching in the academic sense, must be enjoyable for visitors, must be relevant for visitors, must

be well organized, and should have a theme, not just a topic (Weiler & Ham, 554). These are skills an interpreter must gain through experience. Unlike a captive classroom audience, ecotourists are voluntary participants and therefore “the only motivation they have to pay attention is that [the tour] promises to be a rewarding expenditure of their time” (Weiler & Ham, 554). A sometimes overlooked concept among guides, enjoyment and fun is something all tourists look for. The method that covers the scope of almost all groups is informality (relaxed competition, role play, etc). Relevance is a shared principle among modern researchers and Freeman Tilden, people pay attention to what they can understand and what they care about (Weiler & Ham, 555). People will lose focus if they have to put too much effort into following a presentation. It is suggested that an ecotour be organized around no more than five main ideas (Weiler & Ham, 556). Lastly, themes can be understood as whole ideas, morals, or an overriding message a tourist takes home with them (Weiler & Ham, 556). Participants will not easily remember specific facts or figures but have a greater likelihood in internalizing an overall theme or message.

This isn't to say that an interpretive tour should not include any factual information. In fact, there is evidence that visitors want accurate, timely, and relevant information during the experience (Ham & Weiler, 37). Many site visitors and ecotourists especially, will “seek information about the places they visit not only while they are *on-site* but also *before* and *after* their visit” (Ham & Weiler, 37). This suggests that although interpretive programs generally do not result in behavior change due to the fact that they are short in nature, they have the capability to stick with an individual for some time.

## Biodiversity Protection & Conservation

What is the impact of sending ecotourists along with these overarching themes? Many sources attest that an effective interpretive ecotour will result in the protection of biodiversity and conservation efforts. In “Interpretation as the centerpiece of sustainable wildlife tourism”, Ham and Weiler state that “Interpretation acts, firstly, as an on-site regulator of visitor behavior... Secondly, interpretation influences not only what people know and do on-site, but potentially what visitors believe about conservation generally” (39). This requires a general understanding of human behavior. Research based on the theory of reasoned action and the theory of planned behavior have determined that human intent is consistent with our attitudes which are consistent with our beliefs (Ham & Weiler, 39). It is in this regard that certain interpretive skills become vital, relating themes and messages to the audience. Once that individual acquires an understanding and care for the site’s resource, animal, or culture, it has the potential to have profound effects.

Interpretation can also influence how much money a site has to develop conservation efforts. In “Environmental Interpretation versus Environmental Education as an Ecotourism Conservation Strategy”, Kohl states that environmental interpretation is a tool that can be used as “a source of financing for biodiversity conservation, especially in legally protected areas” (127). Kohl determines this through examination of site-based concept models and public-use planning programs and how each achieves resource conservation. Results of studying these models conclude that visitors who leave with a better experience will feel a greater connection to the site and its resources. Those who have come to appreciate the site are more willing to support the

land and its resources as they have emotional involvement with the site (Kohl, 136). This opens the site up to receive various contributions which can be put toward conservation efforts.

Interpretation which results in tourist appreciation also allows incentives for local communities to contribute to conservation efforts. Kohl suggests the idea behind this is that “as the quality and quantity of visitation goes up, earnings of local service providers increases, also increasing their appreciation for the site” (137). This may even result in an increase of local community members working as the ecotour interpreters. Some suggest this is a positive thing, that local people as guides exhibit site-specific knowledge and passion and may add to the authenticity of the experience (Ham & Weiler, 38). Employing local people who are effective interpreters not only establishes their motives for protecting the site, their livelihood, but also results in satisfied customers who can make charitable contributions.

### The Business Aspect

Although there is a bit of overlap from the previous section, the business side of interpretation’s role in ecotourism is not one to be overlooked. According to Ham and Weiler, “Interpretation can facilitate economic sustainability in two main ways: first, by satisfying customer demand, and second, by creating local employment” (37). To address the first idea, we can look again at how satisfied customers tend to care more about the site, and elaborate. Ham and Weiler’s research shows that when visitors are questioned in regards to their satisfaction on a particular tour, they often disregard volume of facts they received and rather focus on ways in which the guide helped them relate, connect, and care about the place and the wildlife that live there (38). In addition, these researchers found that “guided and self-guided interpretive services contributed more to the satisfaction of nature-based tourists in Panama than did their use of most

types of recreation facilities such as swimming and fishing areas, campgrounds, restrooms, and trails” (Ham & Weiler, 38). This alludes to how important interpretation is to the ecotourism industry and how sites can economically benefit from effective interpretive tours.

Interpretation is economically sustainable for the tour operator in the long run as it establishes credibility for the operator or company and creates positive word-of-mouth. High quality interpretation “can also improve business by increasing the quality of guests’ experience, increasing repeat visitation and occupancy rates, providing unique marketing opportunities and allowing hotels to charge higher rates” (Ham & Weiler, 38). A site that can establish these business opportunities is more likely to be economically sustainable compared to competitive sites that do not offer the same types of programs. Successful ecotourism businesses that understand this should allocate financial resources to improve the interpretive capability of their guides (Weiler & Ham, 559).

To conclude, ecotourism is a huge industry in not only well-developed countries, but emerging countries as well. The role of environmental interpretation is just a small, but very important, aspect of this broad topic. The importance of environmental interpretation and effective ecotour guides is pertinent to customer/visitor satisfaction, increased conservation and protection of biodiversity. In addition, it has the ability to enhance the economic sustainability of a site if done properly.

## Case Studies

### Costa Rica

In recent years, Costa Rica has become the poster child for ecotourism. According to Martha Honey, author of *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development*, “ during the first half of the 1990’s, the number of tourist arrivals to Costa Rica grew by a vigorous 17 percent per year and tourism became the country’s top dollar earner” (170). In 1998, 943,000 people visited Costa Rica and contributed 884 million dollars in tourism revenue and 1,100,000 people visited the country in 2000 and tourism revenue increased to 1,138 million dollars (Dasenbrock). Home to 5 percent of the world’s biodiversity within only 0.035 percent of the earth’s surface, Costa Rica was “propelled onto the world stage” when President Oscar Arias Sanchez received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 (Honey, 131). The Costa Rica National Park Service is being used as a case study in this paper because their parks provide a great number of various ecotourism experiences, they are being used as a model for other countries, and they utilize environmental interpretation in the park system.

There are currently 26 National Parks of Costa Rica. Some of the more well-known parks include: Corcovado National Park, Manuel Antonio National Park, Tortuguero National Park, and Santa Rosa National Park. Costa Rica’s National Parks are managed under SINAC (Sistema Nacional de Areas de Conservacion), an umbrella under the country’s Ministry of Environment and Energy (MINAE). Martha Honey argues that while Costa Rica’s ecotourism industry is built on its national park system (as is the case in many developing countries), “[Costa Rica] is complemented by other ingredients lacking in many developing countries: its well-functioning democracy, its political stability, the abolition of its army, its respect for human rights, and its

(generally) welcoming attitude toward foreigner, particularly the *gringo* variety” (132).

Throughout Latin America, Costa Rica has one of the highest standards of living, the largest middle class, the best public health care system, the best education, and the highest literacy rate (Honey, 132). Not only is the country itself well-structured for high-quality ecotourism, its role as a biodiversity hotspot provides the right conditions for sound nature tourism.

Studies show that the natural beauty of the country is enough to bring in people from all over the world. Martha Honey states in *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development*, “a survey conducted by Costa Rica’s government showed that most tourists were entering Costa Rica for ecotourism-related reasons” (131). Honey goes on to suggest that although many countries new to the ecotourism industry only have a “handful of really fine ecotourism experiences”, Costa Rica offers a “cornucopia of choices, ranging from rustic to luxurious, from counterculture to indigenous culture, from spiritual to scientific, from purely Costa Rican to undeniably North American, to eclectic, cross-cultural blends” (131). This vast array of ecotourism experiences wouldn’t be possible without the Costa Rican ecotour guides, or interpreters.

When it comes to tourist education, most tour companies and private parks employ well-qualified, bilingual naturalists guides who are well-versed in the country’s history and culture (Honey, 172). ‘Anywhere Costa Rica’ is just one of many ecotour companies which offers its services to visitors of Costa Rica’s natural and protected areas. Their website has a link to a number of “tours and activities” in which tourists can participate, including: adventure tours, cultural tours, educational tours, leisure tours, marine tours, and nature tours. The cultural, educational, and nature tours are those most likely to apply the basic principles of environmental interpretation which were discussed in the literature review, but unfortunately, these ecotourism experiences are often not common in Costa Rica’s national parks. According to Honey, “the

national parks frequently are understaffed and their best guides are often drawn away to better-paying jobs” (172). This issue often comes down to the tourists themselves. Many tourists coming to Costa Rica are demanding less physically and intellectually rigorous experiences, resulting in tour operators “watering down” their programs to include only quick overviews of both nature and the country (Honey, 172). On the plus side, the tours are continuing in some form.

Due to the fact that ecotourism took off with such a boom in Costa Rica, much of the local population is able to benefit from the industry. Two main criteria for sound ecotourism in which Costa Rica has succeeded are: 1) provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people, and 2) respects local culture (Honey, 171). Many Costa Ricans operate concessions (horseback riding, tour boats, white-water rafting, trout fishing, bird-watching, etc), some build tourist cabins and hiking trails on their farms, and some open small restaurants serving local food. In addition, an increasing number are being trained as naturalist (interpretive) guides, park rangers, tour drivers, or multilingual tour operators (Honey, 172). An article titled “The Littlest Interpreters” by Heidi Bailey describes their guide at the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge, Jose, who used to make a living by hunting pacas, a now endangered animal of Costa Rica (25). Jose now uses his knowledge to educate others in addition to running a breeding program for pacas. Benefits of employing locals as interpreters were discussed above.

Costa Rica is taking initiatives at the university level to improve environmental interpretation and influence ecotourists. For example, a group of six students at the University of Costa Rica collaborated with CATIE, a postgraduate university for natural resource management, to fulfill a course in Environmental Interpretation. The students developed an interpretive trail plan for Los Espaveles, a trail on CATIE’s campus (Kohl, 4). According to Jon

Kohl, the Professor of Environmental Interpretation at the University of Costa Rica, “my students went to work to interpret the message, expand it, research its implications, identify the audience, break the message story down into a series of stops, and then defined what they will say and which materials they would need to interpret the trail” (4). Kohl argues the trail will connect visitors to higher meanings about international development and the learning process. The fact that the University of Costa Rica has a program in Environmental Interpretation is a positive sign for the future of the profession in the country.

Additionally, a group of students currently enrolled in the Practicum capstone course of the Environmental Education & Interpretation program at the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point are developing interpretive panels for Santa Rosa National Park. The students are designing three 3 by 5 foot posters for the park because they currently do not have any interpretive media on the site aside from a brochure. As desired by Santa Rosa National Park, the three posters will provide information, in both English and Spanish, on 5 to 10 commonly seen mammals, birds, and reptiles & amphibians of the park.

### United States of America

The United States National Park Service (NPS) safeguards’ more than 400 places, including national parks, monuments, battlefields, military parks, historical parks, historic sites, lakeshores, seashores, recreation areas, scenic rivers and trails, and the White House. These places bring in more than 275 million visitors each year, with 278,939,216 recreation visitors to the national parks in 2011 (National Park Service). According to former National Park Ranger Charles “Butch” Farabee Jr., “Interpreters are the heart and soul of the National Park Service. They inspire visitors to seek out and understand the mysteries couched in wonder and beauty

before them. This is done through talks, walks, demonstrations, pictures, living history, storytelling, and in a hundred other exciting ways.” Interestingly, early forms of interpretation were practiced on land to become national parks before the park system was formalized.

Among the first undeclared interpreters was Enos Mills. In the early 1900’s, Mills was an American pioneer in “nature guiding” who led hikes through the area that was to become Rocky Mountain National Park, promoting appreciation of the site’s natural value (Mackintosh, 2). Early examples of historic artifact displays, museum exhibits, and specimen collections represent various interpretive methods, but media publications reached the largest audience. The Department of the Interior’s clerk in charge of publications in 1911, Laurence F. Schmeckebier, promoted a handbook series that interpreted major park features including: *Mount Rainier and Its Glaciers* (1914) and *Fossil Forests of Yellowstone National Park* (1914) (Mackintosh, 3). Schmeckebier’s efforts led to Stephen T. Mather and Robert Sterling Yard’s “See America First” movement, which was “aimed at encouraging affluent vacationers to spend their dollars at home rather than abroad” (Mackintosh, 4). Mather and Yard’s movement succeeded and Yard went on to create and distribute 275,000 copies of *The National Parks Portfolio* (1916) to prominent Americans (Mackintosh, 4). In this publication’s introduction, Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane wrote, “It is the destiny of the national parks, if wisely controlled, to become the public laboratories of nature study for the Nation”, setting the stage for the educational purpose of the parks (Mackintosh, 4). Additionally, the publication aided in the establishment of the National Park Service bill.

The United States Congress passed the National Park Service bill in August 1916, with increased park tourism being the focus of publications. During the first decade of the operation, the educational potential of the parks was not widely accepted, and outside sponsorship was

required (Mackintosh, 6). Some of these parties included young women as nature guides who were working at local hotels and professors lecturing on various topics. Not surprisingly, Yosemite and Yellowstone National Park were the first parks to develop “reasonably comprehensive interpretive programs” in 1920 (Mackintosh, 7). The Yosemite Free Nature Guide Service was organized and included daily guided hikes, evening campfire talks, and lectures while Yellowstone employed the Service’s first officially designated park naturalist, Milton P. Skinner (Mackintosh, 8). Although these programs received positive response, naturalists were slow to be integrated into park management.

Today, the National Park Service employs over 20,000 individuals, with the largest sector being park rangers at 3,861 employees, interpretive rangers included (NPS). Interpretation in the national parks today directly supports the mission of the NPS, which is as follows: The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations (NPS). One of the guiding principles followed to achieve this mission is ‘heritage education’, educating park visitors and the general public about their history and common heritage (NPS). In *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Freeman Tilden explains where heritage interpretation comes into play. He says, “the first thrill, is merely to be there, to trend the very soil where great actions have taken place, or where great men have live and labored and died...But again, after this first feeling passes, you wish to know the story of it; how such events affected the flow of your nation’s history, and therefore how it affected your own life and lot (Tilden, 190). This heritage interpretation is one method of environmental interpretation utilized in the United States National Park Service which leads to preservation and safekeeping of the parks. A sense of

personal custody, “this is my legacy, I must protect it”, is the result of that fuller understanding which interpretation provides (Tilden, 190).

Those employed by the National Park Service as park rangers or park interpreters follow a “Foundations of Interpretation Curriculum Content Narrative” developed by various interpretive rangers and specialists from various National Park “places”. The first paragraph of this document states that “interpretation is driven by a philosophy that charges interpreters to help audiences care *about* park resources so they might support the care *for* park resources” (Bacher, et. al., 1). Entry level interpreters in the NPS use this philosophy and best practices as inspiration to create interpretive products. Best practices, as described in the document, include using tangibles and intangibles, understanding “interpretation as A.R.T.”, and following the Process Model (Bacher, et. al., 5-19).

Interpreters can relate to a greater number of people in a program if they can build a connection between a tangible resource, such as a tree or a mountain, and an intangible meaning, such as freedom or loss. For example, “when the home of former United States president Harry Truman is linked with the concepts of social equality and democracy, the site becomes more meaningful to the visitors” (Bacher, et. al., 6). Interpretation as A.R.T. can be translated to A = knowledge of the audience, R = knowledge of the resource, and T = appropriate techniques (Bacher, et. al., 11). Effective interpretation is developed through knowledge of the audience, resource, and utilizing appropriate techniques. Finally, the Process Model is a 7-step model is a means to put all the pieces together. Step 1; Select a tangible place, object, person, or event that you want the audience to care about, 2; identify intangible meanings, 3; identify universal concepts, 4; identify the audience, 5; write a theme statement, 6; use interpretive methods to develop links into opportunities for connections to meanings, and 7; use theme statement to

organize opportunities for connections and cohesively develop and idea or ideas (Bacher, et. al., 19).

These best practices and the NPS's philosophy as stated above evolve through an interpreter's career and are the foundation in which visitors to the United States' National Parks develop a connection to the site, which gives the public something to care about. As stated in the "Foundations of Interpretation Curriculum Content Narrative", "the NPS cannot preserve these national treasures forever without the public taking an active role in their preservation" (Bacher, et. al., 9). For the US National Park System, interpreters are the backbone in which future generations will be able to enjoy the parks.

## Critique

The role of environmental interpretation in ecotourism in the developing country of Costa Rica and the developed nation of the United States is quite different, yet certain elements remain the same. One inarguable aspect is the fact that ecotourism is an industry that has exploded onto the scene over the last few decades, and it continuing to increase. The Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve in Costa Rica is a small community in which “tourist numbers grew from 450 in 1975 to 8,000 in 1985, to more than 50,000 in the late 1990’s” (Honey, 4). In the United States, a survey conducted in 1992 by the U.S. Travel Data Center estimated that approximately 8 million U.S. travelers had taken at least one ecotourism trip and another 35 million planned to take one in the next three years (Honey, 6). No drop off in ecotourism is predicted for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Environmental interpretation, a relatively young profession, is the most common means by which ecotourism achieves its many goals and objectives, some of which include protection of pristine ecosystems, enhancement of ecological and cultural sensitivity, and building environmental awareness. In general, interpretation is implemented in a similar fashion in the National Parks of both Costa Rica and the United States. Differences in the overall effectiveness of interpretation in popular ecotour destinations are found if the historical background, developed curriculum, and unique site-specific opportunities are analyzed.

The United States National Park Service has the benefit of having been established for a longer period of time. While the Park Service itself wasn’t formed until August 25, 1916, Yellowstone National Park was the U.S.’s first national park and was established March 1, 1872. Comparatively, Costa Rica’s first national park was the Poas Volcano National Park, established in 1955. Today, Costa Rica’s National Parks are managed under Sistema Nacional de Areas de

Conservacion, as mentioned above. SINAC was created just 19 years ago, in 1994. With the U.S. National Park Service being nearly 100 year in existence, it has had time to develop into the well-regulated, structure park system we see today. Interpretation in the U.S. National Park Service has historically been a career in crisis, according to Barry Mackintosh, “managers consider interpretation nice but nonessential, cutting it first when funds are tight” (90). Mackintosh continues to explain that this may be due to poor-quality, lack-luster ecotours. Because the national park system is relatively new in Costa Rica, tour operators and interpreters there have the opportunity to develop well-focused, memorable interpretive experiences. One way the National Park Service in the States has addressed this issue is by creating the “Foundations of Interpretation Curriculum Content Narrative”, addressed previously.

The interpretation curriculum developed by Park Service employees in 2007 is a means by which the NPS can ‘mold’ seasonal, entry, or experienced employees into effective interpreters. Whether U.S. National Park Service visitors have been more satisfied with interpretive experiences in the parks since this curriculum has been in effect is unknown. The fact that there is a formal document outlining the competency standards of park interpreters in the system is a step in the right direction. With hired park interpreters following the curriculum content narrative in their interpretive programs, the Park Service will be better able to achieve their mission. Since many interpreters in Costa Rica’s National Parks are not trained professionals, rather local residents, parks would most likely benefit from a curriculum content document with a structure similar to that of the U.S National Park Service. The U.S. NPS would have benefitted from having a standardized outline of what is expected from park interpreters at the time of the Service’s establishment and Costa Rica’s park system will benefit from something of the like sooner rather than later.

Aside from the historical differences between the National Parks of Costa Rica and the United States, it is important to note the unique ecological foundations of each country and how that affects ecotourism. While the U.S. park system has an advantage over Costa Rica in terms of length of existence, Costa Rica has the upper hand in attracting ecotourists in the first place. As mentioned before, Costa Rica is an ecological hotspot; containing 5 percent of the globe's biodiversity yet is no larger than the state of West Virginia (Bailey, 25). In this regard, Costa Rica doesn't have to work hard to get visitors into their parks and are able to focus their tours on an distinctive ecosystem in which people want to help preserve. While many interpretive programs in the U.S. National Parks are focused on heritage interpretation and historical reenactments, Costa Rica's parks don't have that rich history. Instead, they focus on their rich rainforests, which are known through common knowledge to be at-risk areas. Using environmental interpretation effectively, Costa Rica can receive funding to support conservation and research programs from visitors who have been influenced.

To conclude, the parks and preservations of Costa Rica and the United States of America utilize the role of environmental interpretation in ecotourism in quite different ways. The two countries attract a different audience and their visitors come away with different messages and experiences, yet these experiences contribute to the vitality of the local economy, the cultural understanding of the area, and future conservation and preservation efforts.

## Resources

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