

A scenic sunset over a pond with a gazebo and trees. The sky is a mix of deep blue and orange, with clouds catching the low sun. The water in the foreground is calm, reflecting the sky and the silhouettes of the trees and gazebo. The gazebo is on the left side of the frame, and a line of trees runs across the middle ground.

Northern El Paso County Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park Master Interpretive Plan

a guide to sustainable, integrated,
and engaging
interpretive experiences



15 October 2020

Acknowledgements

The vision for the Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park is built on many years of successful operation, management, and community service at El Paso County's Bear Creek and Fountain Creek Nature Centers.

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Introduction

This Master Interpretive Plan offers key concepts and a structure that is designed to spin a web of connections for the visitor between what they are seeing in the Park and Nature Center, and their own experiences and lives. Strong connections will capture the visitors' imagination on a deep level. Although not possible in every instance, the more connections visitors can make to the stories portrayed in the Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park, the more often they will want to visit and become engaged.

Thoughtful planning is essential in the creation of effective interpretation. Within this Plan new interpretive ideas and approaches are blended with proven methods employed at existing El Paso County nature centers.

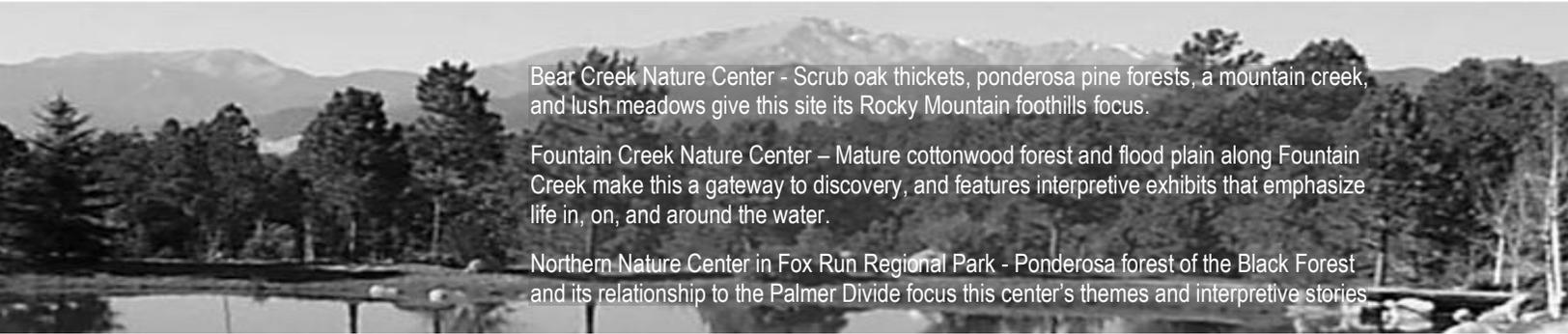
At the same time, there is an implicit obligation to convey scholarship to the wide range of visitors. Academic research should support all messaging, but not take over. Although good nuggets of academic research are informative, the interpretative messaging needs to be the translator.

This does not mean "dumbing down." Just the opposite. By engaging fully with difficult topics and complex ideas, visitors are challenged and engaged. Complicated issues or problems can have great resonance for visitors. As discussed in the Interpretation: Central Themes, Subthemes and Storylines section, topics related to influences of climate change on the forest ecosystem, American Indian regional practices, and historic fur trade all belong in the nature center. These topics are made more tangible and meaningful with a foundation of solid, up-to-date research as interpretation is crafted.



Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park in Context

The vision for the Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park is built on many years of successful operation, management, and community service at El Paso County's Bear Creek and Fountain Creek Nature Centers. The popularity and record of impact of these existing facilities illustrates the potential of the Northern Nature Center to educate and inspire a new generation of outdoor stewards in El Paso County. This location expands the ecosystem themes to include the ponderosa forest ecosystem of the Black Forest and the Palmer Divide.



Bear Creek Nature Center - Scrub oak thickets, ponderosa pine forests, a mountain creek, and lush meadows give this site its Rocky Mountain foothills focus.

Fountain Creek Nature Center – Mature cottonwood forest and flood plain along Fountain Creek make this a gateway to discovery, and features interpretive exhibits that emphasize life in, on, and around the water.

Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park - Ponderosa forest of the Black Forest and its relationship to the Palmer Divide focus this center's themes and interpretive stories

Interpretive Planning Model

This Master Interpretive Plan follows an interpretive planning model created for the Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park and reinforces, enhances, and complements the planning process selected by the Friends of El Paso County Nature Centers and the El Paso County staff. The model is based on the *Norway Regional Parks' Integrated Framework Planning Model* and the *Baltimore Woods Interpretive Plans' 5M Model*.

The main components: Interpretation Goals, Visitor Experience Goals and Resource Protection Goals create the framework and organization of this Plan.



“Through interpretation, understanding;
through understanding, appreciation;
through appreciation, protection.”

National Park Service
Administrative Manual (pg. 38)

Purpose of this Plan

This Master Interpretive Plan lays the foundation for the Northern Nature Center development. As a decision-making tool, it establishes the Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park's interpretive focus and envisions an engaging visitor experience. The concepts herein will shape the site, building and interpretive methods explored as the Nature Center becomes reality.

This Master Interpretive Plan will:

- Develop a set of interpretive goals on a long-range vision for interpretation and visitor experience;
- Provide key visitor experiences that dovetail with experiences in the Park as a whole, while protecting resources and enhancing stewardship;
- Determine what the likely and desired visitor experiences are and what visitors want to do, feel, learn, experience, and what take-home messages staff intend visitors to glean from the experience;
- Determine the essential themes, stories, and experiences to make available to visitors;
- Determine what the significant relationships are between resources and visitors; and
- Recommend immediate next steps to continue momentum towards the nature center completion.

This Plan is intended as a dynamic continuum that provides immediately implementable next steps, but that also supports a long-range vision for visitors and resources.

While the scope of planning effort was limited, the contributions by volunteers, and staff significantly enhanced the consultant's understanding of the potential interpretive opportunities. The previously completed *Northern El Paso County Feasibility Report* determined the optimal location and contains information on partnerships/collaborations, revenue sources, construction costs, and long-term maintenance and staffing.

How to Use the Plan

This Master Interpretive Plan can be used in two ways. The first being a guide to aid the decision-making process. The second is to provide a series of suggestions and action steps to help direct interpretive efforts over the next few years.

To aid in the decision-making process, the Plan is organized into Three Goal categories: Interpretive Goals, Visitor Experience Goals and Resource Protection Goals. Each of these categories provides a set of filters for aiding decision makers. Whenever a question arises as to whether or not to pursue a project (programs, site development, or other interpretive approaches), the project must pass through these filters:

- Interpretive – Does the project promote a personal connection to nature and a sense of stewardship?
Is it relevant to our organizational themes and storylines ?
Does it meet our standards for interpretation?
Are we already doing this project?
Has it been tried before and how successful was it?
- Visitor Experience – Is there an audience for this project?
Will it improve the visitor experience?
Does the project appeal to a new or underserved audience?
Does the project provide a redundant service to an already served audience?
Is it appropriate for visitors to pay?
How will it be advertised?
- Resource Protection – What are the potential, positive and negative, impacts to the natural and cultural resources?
Are there existing site resources for this project?
In the case of site or facility upgrades, does the project have any programmatic opportunities?
Is this project on mission, financially fundable, sustainable?
Does it meet management needs?
Will it have positive impacts, or negative, for the organization?

If the project passes these filters, or at least does not detract from any of these areas, then it should be pursued. However, if it falls short in any given category, careful thought should be made as to the next steps. It may be that with the right revisions, the project can meet these standards; if not, then it should be abandoned. There is no hierarchy for the filters, each is equally important.

This Plan also lays out a series of suggested immediate action steps, to direct developmental efforts. These are found in the last section of the Plan.



Interpretive, Visitor Experience, and Resource Protection Goals



El Paso County wants to achieve many interwoven goals and objectives as the Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park is developed. Goals are further clarified by Objectives. Many of these ideas are repeated in greater detail throughout the rest of this Interpretive Master Plan and many will be integrated into site specific interpretive stories and media in the future.

Nature Centers' Mission

El Paso County Parks Nature Centers will connect people to their natural and cultural resources and inspire them to become stewards for the parks and the environment.

The staff and volunteers are passionate about the Fox Run, Fountain Creek and Bear Creek Nature Centers and the enduring values of the core mission.

These values include:

- A sense of wonder and awe for the natural environment
- Stewardship of the environment
- Connecting people to the environment
- Awareness and knowledge through high quality personal interpretation
- Awareness and knowledge for all ages but with a particular focus on children
- Hands-on experience (Nature in your hands)
- Experiencing the environment everywhere "Right here, right now"
- Respect, camaraderie, and honesty among those involved with El Paso County Nature Centers

While the above Mission and Values pertain to all El Paso County Nature Centers, the following Goals and Objectives focus on the developing Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park.



Interpretation Goals

Goal 1 - Promote awareness and knowledge of the natural world through high quality interpretive media and programs.

Objective 1.1: Create site specific interpretive stories for Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park platforms.

Objective 1.2: Develop specific interpretive stories and messages for all the Northern El Paso County properties.

Objective 1.3: Develop the website to include educational materials.

Goal 2 - Provide a community resource for environmental education and involvement within the Northern El Paso County communities where this nature center is based.

Objective 2.1: Create quality environmental education opportunities.

Objective 2.2: Increase involvement and visibility in the Black Forest and Palmer Ridge communities.

Objective 2.3: Provide numerous and diverse opportunities for people of all ages to have meaningful involvement with the Nature Center.

Goal 3 – Develop expertise in staff and volunteers.

Objective 3.1: Have one staff member be certified by NAI as a Certified Interpretive Trainer (CIT).

Objective 3.2: Have all educators take the National Association for Interpretation's Certified Interpretive Guide (CIG) course and achieve certification.

Objective 3.3: Promote networking and professional development among staff, volunteers, area experts and researchers.

Objective 3.4: Program, manage, and coordinate volunteers intentionally to facilitate intergenerational mentoring opportunities.

Goal 4 - Work with local schools and organizations to provide curriculum based on the Natural Sciences.

Objective 4.1: Revitalize and design all school programs to be developmentally appropriate and meet mandated science standards for specific grade level audiences.

Objective 4.2: Increase internship opportunities with area colleges and universities.

Visitor Experience Goals

Goal 5 - Provide opportunities for visitors to develop connections to the natural world.

Objective 5.1. Create outdoor interpretive opportunities that are convenient and accessible for all visitors.

Objective 5.2: Provide activities for visitors that promote positive and safe use, stewardship, and a sense of connection to natural areas.

Objective 5.3. Ensure opportunities for visitors to experience a sense of solitude and appreciation in a peaceful setting.

Goal 6 – Strengthen the relationship between visitors and the ecosystems and cultural histories of the Black Forest and Palmer Ridge.

Objective 6.1. Create programs, support facilities, signage, and interpretive services to enhance visitors' connectivity to the Black Forest and Palmer Ridge natural and cultural resources.

Objective 6.2. Integrate culturally inclusive concepts, language and activities.

Goal 7 – Ensure natural and built facilities are accessible, safe, and comfortable for all visitors.

Objective 7.1. Meet ADA accessibility standards.

Objective 7.2. Meet basic visitor needs for shelter, water, and comfort stations.

Objective 7.3. Create facilities, roadways, and parking areas to meet user demand and ensure the safety of all visitors.



Resource Protection Goals

Goal 8 – Design the Nature Center and site to accommodate a variety of recreational uses by all ages and abilities while preserving the Park's history, character, and environmental quality.

Objective 8.1. Ensure the impacts from the Center's popularity are mitigated through sustainable practices, quality design, and enforcement.

Objective 8.2. Ensure Park trails are sustainably designed, have adequate capacity, are well-marked, and maintained while providing a variety of experiences and connectivity within the Park.

Goal 9 – Set an example of stewardship in the natural areas by helping to protect and revitalize the areas utilized by the Nature Center.

Objective 9.1: Work with El Paso County Park Maintenance to create a progressive Land Management Plan for Fox Run Regional Park.

Objective 9.2: Develop interpretive media to educate visitors about land management decisions and practices at all Northern El Paso County sites.

Goal 10 - Provide interpretation in ways that are sustainable in both finances and human resources to ensure long-term viability and opportunities for expansion.

Objective 10.1: Develop targeted marketing plans for each interpretive program or platform.

Objective 10.2: Develop a comprehensive program management plan that includes a strategy to plan, develop, implement, and evaluate programs.

Objective 10.3: Create and implement a multifaceted system to continuously monitor audience desire for programming.

Objective 10.4: Increase internship opportunities with area colleges and universities.



Interpretation: Central Themes, Subthemes and Storylines



A solid thematic platform enables the visitor to consider, react to, build upon, appropriate, and transform their visit.

Interpretation is an extremely specific communication process designed to reveal meanings and relationships of our cultural and natural heritage through first-hand experiences. The most effective interpretation engages and stimulates audience members and promotes deeper understanding and appreciation regarding the stories, feature(s) and/or topic(s) presented.

When planning this new park facility and program it is important to ensure the visitor experience is integrated and compatible with existing park practices, the natural settings, and the historical context.

Interpretation enables visitors to make important connections between their own experiences and beliefs and the stories and resources of the Black Forest and Palmer Ridge.

Thematic Framework

The thematic framework designates overarching themes, sub-themes, and storylines to be presented in the Nature Center and extended out into the landscape surrounding it. The *Central Themes* provide the foundation for all interpretive programs and media. *Subthemes* and *Storylines* zero-in on specific aspects of the general concept, and add texture, explanation, perspective, and detail. Central themes sub-themes and storylines help craft scientific, cultural and research information into engaging and meaningful presentations. They are important to the visitor experience by creating a well-thought-out sequence that reveals meaning through the expression of an idea.

This thematic framework outlines the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting The Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park. The themes do not include everything that is interpreted but cover those ideas that are critical to visitors' understanding of the Park's significance. To be relevant and engaging, exhibits must cohesively develop an idea or ideas over the course of their delivery. This thematic framework will benefit from additional focused attention to further expand the key messages visitors will take home.

Writing well-defined and successfully delivered interpretive themes will:

- Help ensure the visitor center is telling a complete story that is engaging and has a beginning, middle and end;
- Ensure the stories being told are accessible to an appropriate and diverse audience.
- Provide a logical guide by which to organize the exhibits spatially and inform the exhibit design process;
- Outline a necessary focus for the visitors' personal connections, and will give audiences the ability to consider resource meanings and understand and appreciate the resource in ways they otherwise might have missed;
- Provide guidance to interpreters and designers to ensure they are telling the most important ideas or stories; and
- Help organize media, facility, and visitor experience discussions by considering the question, "Where and how will we interpret these themes?"

CENTRAL THEME	SUBTHEMES	STORYLINES	VISITOR TAKE HOME MESSAGES
The Palmer Divide	Natural Resources	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Geology 2. Aspect 3. Vegetative communities <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3.1. Black Forest s 3.2. Succession 3.3. State Natural Heritage Plants in N EPC 4. Wildlife 5. Interconnectivity 	This place is shaped by its underlying geology
	Climate & Weather on the Palmer Divide	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Rainfall 7. Winter storms 8. How changing Climate and weather affect the Divide 	<p>Changes in weather impact habitat. Open space helps preserve habitat.</p> <p>I can help by reducing my use of fossil fuels</p>
	Water and Aquifers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. The Divide – Arkansas and Platte River basins 10. Historic springs in Northern El Paso County 11. Number and depth of aquifers in Northern El Paso County 12. Colorado water rights 13. Aquifer decline – quality and quantity 	<p>Water is precious to vegetation, wildlife, and humans</p> <p>Water is a vulnerable resource</p>
	Diversity for you to experience in Northern El Paso County Parks	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 14. Fox Run Regional Park <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 14.1. Manmade Ponds 14.2. Meadow 14.3. Forest 14.4. POG+2 ponderosa pine, oaks scrub land, grasslands and 2 ponds 15. Black Forest Park - a laboratory of fire recovery. 16. Drake Lake Natural Area 17. Santa Fe Open Space – Chautauqua and Railroad 18. Falcon Regional Park 19. Homestead Ranch Regional Park 20. Peyton Pines Open Space 21. Pineries – Tall grass prairie 22. Section 16 – school properties 23. Regional Trails 24. Bear Creek and Fountain Creek Nature Centers 	<p>You are here in Fox Run and this is what is special. Asterisk or a symbol in all the relevant stories.</p> <p>How the ecosystems of the other Northern El Paso County Park sites tie together</p>





CENTRAL THEME	SUBTHEMES	STORYLINES	VISITOR TAKE HOME MESSAGES
<h1 style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">The Black Forest</h1>	Ponderosa Forest	25. Monoculture challenges 25.1. What a healthy forest looks like. Prior to fire suppression in the forest there were 20 trees/acre. Even with post fire mitigation the forests are 400% over this historic density. 26. Kinnikinnik and other ground story plants 27. Succession 28. Disease – Mistletoe, Bugs 29. Role of Fire 29.1. How the Black Forest depends on fire to be healthy 29.2. Human role in fire suppression and ignition	Appreciation for the Forest how a healthy forest persists and what it looks like Sensitivity of the monoculture
	Meadows in and along the Black Forest	30. Diversity 31. Succession 32. Invasive species 33. Fire Role	Diversity meadows bring to the Forest Challenges of invasive species
	Animals of the Black Forest	34. Birds 34.1. Sapsuckers woodpeckers, stellar jays, all 3 nuthatches, turkeys 34.2. Woodpecker - rare only after fire 35. Insects and Spiders 35.1. State butterfly is linked to the Gambel oak. 36. Herbivores – deer, elk, pronghorn 37. Rodents 37.1. Abert squirrel 37.2. Rabbits 38. Predators 38.1. Control of herbivores -bear, fox 38.2. Birds of Prey -owls, raptors 38.3. Eradication by ranchers 38.4. Reintroduction and the social complexities	Animals are important Wildlife and how it moves – why wildlife corridors are important How animals contribute to seed distribution, insect consumption and other ecosystem functions

CENTRAL THEME	SUBTHEME	STORYLINES	VISITOR TAKE HOME MESSAGES
The Ponderosa Pine	The Life of One Tree	39. Pinecone to Seedling to Tree 40. Changes in the Bark as the tree ages 40.1. Fire resistance 41. Growth rate Height to girth 41.1. Vascular system 41.2. Root system. What's under the ground? 41.3. Tree Rings 42. Weather 42.1. Sound when wind blows 42.2. Struck by lightening 42.3. Response to fire 43. Abert squirrel 43.1. Abert Squirrels and mycorrhizal fungi in the ponderosa pine roots. 43.2. Impacts of other squirrel species 44. Other stories 44.1. Nez Perce helped the Lewis and Clark Expedition create ponderosa pine canoes to carry them on their way. 44.2. Felled for railroad and cabins	Appreciation for A TREE and why to protect it A personal connection to a 150-year-old tree and how it records both human history and responds to the natural systems through its tree rings.



CENTRAL THEME	SUBTHEMES	STORYLINES	VISITOR TAKE HOME MESSAGES
People on the Palmer Divide and Black Forest	Indigenous Peoples	45. Hunter gatherers 46. Culturally modified trees, or not	Hear stories directly from Native Americans about their ancestors in the area
	European and Non-indigenous Settlers	47. Long Expedition 47.1. Columbine recorded and named near Elephant Rock on the Divide 47.2. Black Forest references Germany Black Forest – currently the details of this story require research 48. Logging 49. Railroad 49.1. General Palmer's railroad names Palmer Divide 50. Fox Fur Farm 50.1. How the Park was named 51. Ranching Heritage - Ranching, Farming, mining, Alpacas, Bee Keeping 52. Artist Community – Chautauqua, Black Rose Society, School in the Woods	How non-indigenous people have shaped the Divide and Black Forest State Flower Section 16's and public schools



CENTRAL THEME	SUBTHEMES	STORYLINES	VISITOR TAKE HOME MESSAGES
Seasonal Exhibit Rotation		53. Birds by the Season 54. Nature art 55. Snowshoeing	Encourage locals to revisit the Northern Nature Center

CENTRAL THEME	SUBTHEMES	STORYLINES	VISITOR TAKE HOME MESSAGES
Conservation – What you can learn/start/do today	In Fox Run Regional Park	56. Trail Etiquette 56.1. Yielding to different user groups – how to step off the trail and stop 56.2. Social Rogue Trails and damage to ecosystem 57. Disturbance impacts and timeline to recovery	How you can preserve the Park ecosystem by your behavior Remove dog waste I can apply this to my property
	Forest Health and Fire	58. Forest Health 59. Post fire restoration and revegetation 60. Fire Mitigation 60.1. Mulch Facility	County is taking care of the forests How science informs care of the Park and its ecosystem I can apply this to my property
	Meadows	61. Rangeland Management 62. Introduce diversity	County values for meadows I can apply this to my property
	Near your Home	63. Solar and Passive Solar 64. High altitude xeriscape – other garden resources in Northern EPC (nursery sponsor) 65. Rain barrels	County is implementing green infrastructure I can apply this to my property

Interpretive planning and design are about making choices. We must choose what experiences we want visitors to have, what stories to tell, whom to tell them to, and how best to tell them. Storytelling is a compelling interpretation method and builds on the interpretive practices currently employed in El Paso County's nature centers. The following descriptions closely follow the *Toolkit for Storytelling Interpretation by Irelands Ancient East* and the *Individual Site Interpretive Inventory and Story Development Forms* developed by *John Veverka & Associates*; both are referenced in the bibliography.

Storytelling interpretation uses storytelling to connect people to the places they visit.

Storytelling interpretation builds meaningful relationships between places and communities and the people who visit them. It does this by focusing on the visitors and being rooted in authentic first-hand experience of a place. Storytelling interpretation is engaging, entertaining and accessible. It creates powerful encounters and leaves memories that last a lifetime. Storytelling interpretation enlivens permanent and seasonal displays as well as interpretive programming.

Storytelling interpretation requires careful planning and skillful delivery.

All interpretation must rest on bedrock of good scholarship, so involve scholars and other experts early and often. Engage actively with scholarship, reading new material in your field regularly. When developing interpretive planning documents, staff and volunteers should conduct their own research and build their own knowledge foundations.

- Adhering to current museum standards and best practices
- Providing access to collections
- Communicating effectively
- Encouraging curiosity
- Creating partnerships with community organizations and local schools

It's not just the story you want to tell, it's the story your visitor wants to hear.

Storytellers always have their eye on the audience and how they are reacting. Creating enjoyable storytelling interpretation requires the same tight focus on your visitors. Often visitors like:

- to be independent and wander off the designated sequence of displays
- to discover unusual and stimulating experiences
- to 'connect with the past'
- to delve deeper into history and culture
- to 'get under the skin' of a place
- to interact with the Fox Run Regional Park ecosystems

Good storytelling interpretation will deliver all of these.

Individual Site Interpretive Inventory and Story Development Forms

- A. Site resource location/inventory map. This map would show the locations of each interpretive site, feature, facility, etc. that an interpretive planning form set would be completed for (existing or proposed).
- B. Interpretive Site Index list. This is a list of all the interpretive sites inventoried and included in the interpretive planning form sets that follow.
- C. Interpretive Planning form sets for each interpretive site inventoried including orientation sites, facilities, trails, demonstration areas, historic sites, natural resource areas, etc.(existing or proposed).

For each planning form set include:

a. Site Inventory Form Set

1. Site Index Number (keyed to map)
2. Site Name
3. Site Location (reference site index map, etc.)
4. Site Description (refer to photos if available)
5. Interpretive Significance (why are we interpreting this site?)

b. Story Development Form Set:

1. Main Interpretive Theme/Topic for each individual site.
2. Site Objectives. These are physical development objectives such as building a stair way, add a viewing deck, etc.
3. Interpretive program/services objectives. These are the specific objectives (learn, feel or do) that interpretive programs, services or media are to accomplish at this specific site.
4. Recommended Interpretive Media for this location. This is a list of the interpretive media that could best be used to accomplish the stated objectives (i.e. self-guiding trail, interpretive panel, outdoor demonstration, guided walk, exhibit in a visitor center, etc.).
5. Any budget issues or estimates. This helps make each individual interpretive planning form set a "mini" work plan for each individual site or feature that is part of the interpretive plan.

D. Total interpretive program/services objectives (Learn, Feel, Do).

(This is for the total interpretive program/services effort - site and/or visitor center combined. This usually comes from a focus workshop and edited based on the interpretive site resources review.)

- a. Learning Objectives
- b. Behavioral Objectives
- c. Emotional Objectives

John Veverka & Associates

Storytelling interpretation, like all storytelling, is characterized by a well-planned structure.

It will have:

- A great beginning that hooks people into the story by building anticipation and curiosity. This will usually set the scene and give 'the point' of the story;
- A continuous thread that runs through the interpretation and links back to the point of the story;
- Dramatic highlights that form compelling moments and contrast with the quieter parts of the story; and
- A strong conclusion that leaves visitors with something important and memorable to think about, a 'twist in the tale.'

Structure is important because visitors do not read in sequence. They often do not want to be organized so will read or listen to interpretation in the order they choose. Good storytelling interpretation will be designed to attract people's attention to the most important elements. It will be organized to give all visitors the bare bones of the story.



Make your storytelling interpretation into an experience to remember

Plan the experience of the interpretation in detail. And make the most of your place.

1. Break down your story into incidents and match each to a place-based activity. These 'activities' may be quite minor things, such as looking at a view, unlocking a door or climbing some stairs.
2. Consider the mood of your story. Is it humorous, tragic, heroic, or romantic? Choose places where you can heighten this mood.
3. Look for specific places that relate to people in the story. Choose places that they would have used.
4. Ensure that people with restricted mobility can access as much of the experience as possible. Offer alternative experiences if necessary.
5. Engage the senses.
6. Always aim for multi-sensory interpretation that uses sight, sound, and touch. This will be particularly helpful for visitors with sensory impairments.
7. Add smell and taste experiences wherever possible. This may be harder to do but can be immensely powerful.
 - Enhance and focus the dominant sense by directing and enriching the experience.
 - Add background sounds to an audio tour.
 - Give people specific things to look for e.g. finding patterns or objects, looking for places in a view.
8. Create action and interaction.
9. Give people things to do. Even remarkably simple things like the opportunity to touch an object can change the experience profoundly.
10. Have props for people to carry, use, or wear.
11. If you are demonstrating any activity, find ways that people can join in.



Create a conversation

- Be friendly. Tour guides should be remembered as warm, enthusiastic people who loved telling us about the place. (Panels and other non-personal media need to work exceptionally hard to create a similar effect!)
- Ask people speculative questions that get them thinking about the people in your story.
- Build surprises, or even mild shocks, into the visit.



Programs and Interpretive Methods

While developing this Master Interpretive Plan, many ideas surfaced for Programs and Interpretive Methods. While not the focus of the Plan or an exhaustive list, these ideas are recorded below to preserve the concepts for future programmatic and interpretive display planning and design.

Programs and Events

proposed during development of this Plan

1. Ongoing Programs

- 1.1. Geology and photograph programs aimed to adult audiences
- 1.2. Identify and direct visitors to other interpretive resources in El Paso County, The City of Colorado Springs and private
- 1.3. Create a passport – with three questions from each nature center with a prize
- 1.4. Recreational/Health Hiking and Biking Programs
- 1.5. Xeriscape demo garden program

2. Seasonal Events

- 2.1. Bike tour of Northern El Paso County Parks
- 2.2. Farmers market
- 2.3. Vegetable garden program
- 2.4. Recreational/Health cross country skiing and snow shoeing – renting family affordable snowshoes and cross- country skis. Lead beginner workshops as well as advanced events

3. Special Event

- 3.1. Geo caching – renting family affordable maps and GPS equipment Lead beginner workshops as well as advanced events
- 3.2. Orienteering – renting family affordable maps and compasses. Lead beginner workshops as well as advanced events
- 3.3. Forest Health Management and Fire – Continue current family program to create slash piles and photo ops with firetruck during winter burn. Firemen teach classes for children at these events





Initial Interpretive Methods
proposed during development of this Plan

1. Hands on displays
 - 1.1. 3D relief map of area 25 miles each way from Fox Run Regional Park
 - 1.2. Telescopes pointed to other El Paso County Parks and Open Spaces and interpretive locations
 - 1.3. Handouts on fire mitigation strategies
 - 1.4. Stumpery
 - 1.5. History of the area through role playing with the opportunity to dress up in the roles



2. Resource Naming/Personification
 - 2.1. Name a talking ponderosa pine in the nature center and the stories it can tell
 - 2.2. Naming magical microecosystems to tell stories by the resource. For example, "Rabbit Hollow"

3. Photography and Videos

- 3.1. Photo timeline of past to present
- 3.2. Photo inventory and photo catalog of fire restoration
- 3.3. Photo catalog is a compelling story method
- 3.4. Videos of what the crew is doing for fire mitigation



4. Involve equestrians in the exhibits and activities – integrate trail impact/usage/etiquette for all users in messaging
5. Consider communicating all themes and interpretive written content in Spanish as well as English





Visitor Experience

The Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park will strive to provide meaningful experiences for visitors that build understanding of the Palmer Divide and Black Forest ecosystems and enable them to incorporate conservation and advocacy of these ecosystems into their lives.

Meaningful Experiences



Providing meaningful experiences for visitors includes telling the stories they want to hear. The storylines, while building and illuminating the relationship between natural resources and the visitor should be culturally and physically accessible to all visitors. As detailed in the previous section, identifying, and artfully telling these stories will take focused, skilled attention.

Meaningful experiences for the diverse ages must be considered. A complete focus on children, with the hope of educating youth and families through children's programming eliminates the opportunity to engage pre-teens, high school age, young adults, adults, and older adults. Programs and displays with broad audience appeal as well as displays with specifically targeted audience focus both have a place in the Nature Center.

For visitors to enjoy meaningful experiences, their basic needs must be addressed. These include access, parking, safety, and comfort. Inclusive facilities are also needed including accessibility for wheelchair users, the sight impaired, individuals on the Autism spectrum, and senior or age-related challenges. The Northern Nature Center strives to better serve equestrians, dog owners and bicyclists by providing facilities to "safely hold" their companions or transportation while visiting the Center. Comfort facilities including restrooms, shelter and food concessions can attract visitors that may otherwise not have engaged in Northern Nature Center while in Fox Run Regional Park.

Visitor Take Home Messages

The primary goal for the Nature Center's interpretation is to enable and empower each visitor towards conservation and advocacy through understanding of the surrounding ecosystems. While the previous section outlines the major interpretive themes, sub themes and storylines, the thematic framework will benefit from additional focused attention to further expand the key messages visitors will take home.





Audience

The Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park will have several audiences with different needs and interests. The two main audiences can be categorized as local residents and tourist visitors.

The Northern Nature Center will advertise to El Paso County tourists and travelers on the I-25 corridor. While engaging visitors at Fox Run Regional Park, the Center will also inform visitors of additional El Paso County, City of Colorado Springs, Palmer Lake and Monument, and private interpretive opportunities. Through interpretive experiences, tourist visitors can better appreciate and shape their behaviors to care for local ecosystems.

The Northern Nature Center will strengthen community engagement through exhibits and programs that speak to the interests of our local residents. Many local residents do not regularly attend the Fountain Creek and Bear Creek Nature Centers with the exception of infrequent exhibit receptions or other special events. This Plan encourages programs, rotating exhibits and management practices meant to increase local resident's involvement with the Northern Nature Center. This involvement will go beyond regular visitation with the goal of offering programs and events that strengthen community ties with the Center and inspire an interest in local history and ecosystem preservation.

When implementing the interpretive plan, it is essential to keep the needs and interests of these two audiences in mind.





Resource Protection and Stewardship

El Paso County is committed to safeguarding Fox Run Regional Park's natural and recreational resources for this and future generations. This Master Interpretive Plan emphasizes natural and cultural resource protection and restoration, while accommodating sustainable interpretive opportunities.

The intent is to create more engaging and positive visitor experiences that dovetail with resource management prescriptions—tying the stories of Fox Run Regional Park to the intended experiences out in the physical landscape. Ultimately looping the visitors' meaningful experience to build an understanding of the Palmer Divide and Black Forest ecosystems and empower them to incorporate conservation and advocacy of these ecosystems into their lives.

“Not the least of the fruits of adequate interpretation is the certainty that it leads directly toward the very preservation of the treasure itself, whether it be a national park, a prehistoric ruin, an historic battlefield or a precious monument of our wise and heroic ancestors. Indeed, such a result may be the most important end of our interpretation, for what we cannot protect we are destined to lose.”

Freeman Tilden, interpreter, and author

Natural and Cultural Resource Stewardship

The Northern Nature Center in Fox Fun Regional Park offers the opportunity to intertwine and showcase the Parks' maintenance and resource management stewardship with the interpretive stories. This linkage enhances both aspects by engaging the public in understanding and supporting the management, preservation, and protection of the Park. While current stewardship practices are incorporated into the interpretive stories, the presence of the Northern Nature Center may lead to opportunities and funding for additional stewardship efforts in the Park.

This stewardship ethic message transcends the boundaries of Fox Run Regional Park to encompass the Black Forest and most of the Palmer Divide ecotones.

Stewardship Concepts for the Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park

Operational Considerations

1. Communication
 - 1.1. Identify effective way to communicate with the broader community
 - 1.2. Identify effective way to communicate with Park users
 - 1.2.1. Utilized existing Fox Run Regional Park bulletin board
 - 1.2.2. Coordinate programming schedules considering the existing high use periods in other areas of the Park
 - 1.3. Preplan seasonal exhibits
 - 1.3.1. Encourage creativity by volunteers, interns
 - 1.3.2. Engage with programs at the School in the Woods
2. Research
 - 2.1. Consider partnering with local colleges
 - 2.2. One part-time intern/ researcher
 - 2.3. Sponsor a resident scientist/researcher
 - 2.4. Incorporate Citizen Science opportunities
 - 2.5. Create County repository for archaeological and cultural artifacts – similar to Douglas County's
 - 2.6. Identify candidate Open Space and Preservation Areas in Northern El Paso County
 - 2.7. Wildlife rehabilitation
 - 2.7.1. Consider as supported or complementary program
 - 2.7.2. Reintroduction and rehab of Abert squirrel
 - 2.7.3. Consider partnership with zoo
 - 2.8. Consider soliciting stewardship enhancing Eagle Scout projects
3. Sustainable Funding
 - 3.1. Partner with City of Colorado Springs, Monument and Palmer Lake, private businesses, and private donors to make the Northern Nature Center special
 - 3.2. Include operational costs in all planning – staff costs, facility maintenance costs, operational costs (interpretive display rotation, program development costs program operational costs, others)
 - 3.3. Link the Fox Run Regional Park's wedding venue to a potential wedding reception at the Nature Center
 - 3.4. Plan for fiscal sustainability and viability for the long term



Site Development Considerations

4. Context Sensitive Design

4.1. Compatibility with the Park ecosystems

- 4.1.1. Keep big trees near building
- 4.1.2. Compatible, culturally, compatible, ecologically, compatible physically, compatible visually

4.2. Green Infrastructure

- 4.2.1. Site development with sustainable development practices including: bioswales, sustainably designed trail access; sustainable trails for all Park visitors; and context-sensitive adjustments to address vehicular impacts in the Park and runoff from impervious surfaces including roof, paving, and parking

4.3. Provide trash receptacles with recycling opportunities

5. Interpretive Amenities

5.1. Accessibility

- 5.1.1. Provide accessible facilities for persons with all physical and developmental challenges
- 5.1.2. Comply with ADA requirements and guidelines

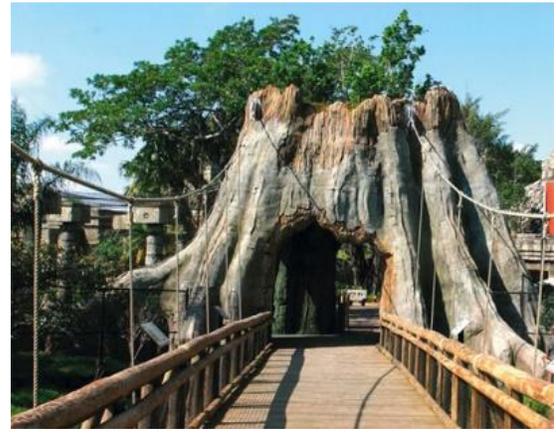
5.2. Trails

- 5.2.1. Create self-guided single-use interpretive trail with walking tour brochure and interpretive signage
- 5.2.2. Design fully accessible trail opportunities
- 5.2.3. Create treetop "trail"

5.3. Gathering Spaces

- 5.3.1. Provide shade structure(s) with lightning protection, water, electricity, and access to outdoor classroom spaces
- 5.3.2. Create outdoor classroom spaces for up to three groups of 30 students with both sunny and shaded areas, and including an area to use a solar oven, and a fire pit for cast iron cooking, roasting hotdogs, roasting marshmallows, and building s'mores.
- 5.3.3. Create Nature Play or Sensory Garden area encouraging stimulation of all the senses.
 - 5.3.3.1. Examples discussed included Toledo Zoo (stream, music) and Cheyenne Mountain Zoo (stumps, holes, suspension bridge, rocks to walk on)







Site Development Considerations - continued

5.4. Wayfinding, Trail Etiquette and Safety Signage

- 5.4.1. Provide wayfinding signs including trail maps, trail length, distance to key destinations and difficulty level
- 5.4.2. Provide information on ADA access
- 5.4.3. Provide information on possible wildlife encounters
- 5.4.4. Provide educational signage addressing trail etiquette including:
 - 5.4.4.1. Leave No Trace Outdoor Ethic
 - 5.4.4.2. Trail etiquette and yielding right-of-way for passage
 - 5.4.4.3. Dog etiquette, including on-leash and pet waste cleanup and pet waste bag dispensers
- 5.4.5. Provide relevant interpretive signage at equestrian height

5.5. Additional Interpretive Amenities

- 5.5.1. Incorporate water feature
- 5.5.2. Provide benches in quiet areas place to relax
- 5.5.3. Create nature study areas
 - 5.5.3.1. Meadow and track as diversity develops
 - 5.5.3.2. Stumpery to observe what comes
- 5.5.4. Night sky viewing area
- 5.5.5. Treetop "trail"

6. Maintenance

- 6.1. The Park's geological, vegetative, water, and other natural resources are protected through forest management, fire mitigation, and control of erosion, noxious weeds, and insect infestations
- 6.2. Focused management recommendations to guide forest health and synchronize new sustainable trail development with effective closure of unsustainable trails
- 6.3. Record and log daily and occasional maintenance surrounding the Nature Center for interpretation opportunities

7. Parking

- 7.1. Provide dedicated parking for the Nature Center with 2-3 bus spaces and calculated vehicle parking. The Nature Center's carrying capacity will be limited by the parking lot size
 - 7.1.1. Create directions and accommodations for overflow parking including education on the impacts of illegal parking
- 7.2. Provide drop off zone to accommodate buses
- 7.3. Provide hitching post at the Nature Center front door
- 7.4. Designate parking for volunteers and interpretive guides

Building Considerations

8. Context Sensitive Design

8.1. Compatibility with the Park ecosystems

- 8.1.1. Keep big trees near building
- 8.1.2. Compatible, culturally, compatible, ecologically, compatible physically, compatible visually
- 8.1.3. The ideal form for the Nature Center building should 'grow' from the unique character of the rolling hills and pine trees in the Park.

8.2. Green Infrastructure

- 8.2.1. Energy efficient
- 8.2.2. Passive and active solar
- 8.2.3. Green Roof
- 8.2.4. Allow for anticipated expansion

8.3. Provide trash receptacles with recycling opportunities

9. Building Spaces

9.1. Internal Building Spaces

- 9.1.1. Consider opportunities for wildlife viewing from inside the Nature Center
- 9.1.2. Space needed for launching point for hikes and programs
- 9.1.3. Provide Community Room
 - 9.1.3.1. Include AV capabilities, flexible furniture ,wall space
 - 9.1.3.2. Consider room finishes suitable for a wedding reception
 - 9.1.3.3. Consider optional catering kitchen and/or sink access
 - 9.1.3.4. Consider separate or joint community room, classroom, meeting room , wedding reception venue
 - 9.1.3.5. Arrange floorplan so that when the community room is rented there is access to a restroom while the remainder of the nature center is secured
 - 9.1.3.6. Incorporate punch in code to access community room
- 9.1.4. Include puppet show space
- 9.1.5. Consider a small retail area with books, art, and other items for purchase
- 9.1.6. Provide gathering spaces indoors for up to 50 children





9.2. External Building Spaces

- 9.2.1. Provide outdoor seating
- 9.2.2. Provide outdoor gathering area with outdoor seating
- 9.2.3. Adhere to ADA requirements and guidelines
- 9.2.4. Potential future wildlife rehabilitation center

9.3. Restrooms

- 9.3.1. Provide public washroom with ADA toilet and diaper-changing stations
- 9.3.2. Include interpretive/educational material in restrooms

9.4. For more detail see pages 26-30 of the Northern nature Center Feasibility Study, 2019

10. Building Features

- 10.1. Use ponderosa pine in the nature center construction
- 10.2. Fire Tower
- 10.3. Treehouse to allow seeing what life is like in the treetops
- 10.4. Consistent signage naming and wayfinding at the entry and throughout the building
- 10.5. For more detail see pages 26-30 of the Northern Nature Center Feasibility Study, 2019





NEXT STEPS

The following inventory lists potential activities and projects to undertake in preparing for design and development of the Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park. This list is not all-inclusive; it is not hierarchical; it serves as an initial guide for expanding the interpretive framework. It is intended to further prepare El Paso County as the Northern Nature Center planning progresses and interpretive consultants are engaged.

Initiate a detailed site inventory survey of environments, ethnographic and historical resources to further document and clarify potential interpretation subthemes and storylines.

Document interpretive details from volunteers, staff, and resource stakeholders. Consider interview/recordings or written narratives.

Staff and volunteers currently do a great job of engaging visitors, leading tours and hikes, and interpreting complex concepts in meaningful ways. With guidance from this Master Interpretive Plan, support from well-designed exhibits, and access to interpretive trails, waysides and a mobile app, staff and volunteers can be even more equipped and effective in their interactions with visitors.

Expand visitor take home messages in the interpretive framework matrix.

Initiate Fund-Raising campaign planning. Identify money needed for fundraising effort including staff time, marketing plan for fund-raising, logo development, fundraising messaging, fundraising documentation (printed and electronic).

Consider initiating preliminary components of interpretive design and research and/or site and building concepts planning so that illustrations and images can be included in the fundraising messaging and documentation.

Planning should include outreach to select donors to test run the fund-raising approach, identification of the specific “ask,” and consider sponsorships.



Develop an Exhibit Design document with a professional consultant. When soliciting an interpretive design consultant, consider including the following tasks in the request for proposal scope of work.

Designing and selecting interpretive media solutions is as much art as science. There is rarely only one way to achieve a goal, and each situation has its own particular mix of factors to consider. Hiring professional exhibit and media designers to rethink and modernize exhibits will be imperative in determining which media are best suited to which tasks. Besides the design of beautiful, professional, creative, and compelling interpretive exhibits, a good exhibit design document can ensure that the audience is able to access and comprehend the information.

An Exhibit Design Document will:

- Ensure interpretive exhibits follow a consistent style, set of materials, fonts, colors and written style and voice;
- Develop designs that dovetail with the interpretive plan and thematic framework and employ the most creative, accessible, and effective ways to communicate those themes;
- Determine what priority the information has in relation to the overall interpretive program and if the information is most useful before, during, or after experiencing the Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park;
- Provide experiences of varying complexity, allowing visitors to select the depth they choose;
- Include an appropriate balance of different media, and an understanding of the recognized strengths and limitations of each medium;
- Include exhibits that are appropriate to cultural differences, languages, literacy patterns, ages, and group types;
- Creatively incorporate artifacts, artwork, digital and mixed media to produce high quality, professional atmosphere, and effects;
- Determine if the message is simple or complex, and if it is an abstract concept that can only be presented verbally or are graphic components needed;
- Determine if it is helpful or necessary to involve many senses to tell the story;
- Determine if the story requires a certain chronology or sequence to be understood;
- Ensure exhibits are appropriately designed for all ages and abilities;
- Develop exhibits that are engaging, interactive, and thought provoking;
- Make the messages attractive, compelling, and relevant;
- Determine if the messages rely heavily on the use of artifacts and are these artifacts extant and available, and if the artifacts can be adequately protected while on display;
- Determine if the accuracy of the information has been certified;
- Decide if the message should be understood more experientially or didactically;
- Set specific desired outcomes for the communication; and
- Give staff an accurate sense of the feasibility and cost of production.

Develop a Strategic Information Plan to attract tourist, and new and return visit local citizens to the Northern Nature Center. This may be most effective as component of the exhibit design document if this service is part of that consultant's skills, otherwise this can be a separate, tandem effort. This does not need to be a big undertaking; it can be a simple plan that outlines what, when, and how informational and outreach tools might be beneficial to the Nature Center.

Information and outreach are a critical aspect of any interpretive program. They raise awareness among visitors of educational opportunities and compels them to come back for return visits. Successful communication efforts provide consistent messaging, help improve the visitor experience, and extend interpretation beyond the walls of the physical nature center. Outreach is not necessarily just advertising. The essence of outreach in visitor centers is the effort to align exhibits and programs to audience interests and behaviors, as well as to seek the best ways to inform potential visitors that the nature center has an exhibition that they will appreciate. A strategic information plan will provide a road map to an ongoing effort, since audience demographics, attitudes, and non-nature center environments are constantly changing.

A strategic information plan can greatly influence how people get their first impression of the Park and how their expectations of programs and experiences are derived. A strategic information plan should support the visitor center's mission.

A strategic information plan can:

- Give the Park a stronger and more consistent web presence;
- Help attract new, nontraditional visitor center audiences;
- Help design a promotion strategy to make potential visitors aware of the exhibitions and other programs through advertising or promotions;
- Facilitate distribution of ideas, programs, and services;
- Help determine how current informational and outreach efforts complement each other and ensure they are not redundant;
- Ensure exhibits are aligned to audience interests and behaviors;
- Give visitors realistic expectations of their experience in the Park and Nature Center;
- Determine how social media can be used most effectively to communicate messages that are consistent with what is being presented at the Center;
- Help orient visitors, and introduce interpretive stories and histories;
- Notify people of upcoming events;
- Orient people to where the Northern Nature Center and interpretive trails and waysides are located within the Park;
- Promote the mobile app and make it available for download;
- Ensure messaging of the Friends of El Paso County Nature Centers is in lockstep with the County's;
- Give a professional and accessible first impression of the Park;
- Ensure merchandise for sale supports and is consistent with the mission and messages of the Park; and
- Determine how easily, why and through which channels people are learning about the Park and planning visits.

As part of the Strategic Information Plan it is recommended that a **Social Media Outreach Plan be developed.**

It will be important for the Northern Nature Center to keep current on new technologies and continue to use social media. These digital communication outlets, like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and tools like digital newsletters and blogs will allow staff to reach a younger generation and, thereby build its outdoor recreation participant base, community engagement, and stewardship.

A formally documented strategy for starting a social media campaign will outline goals, target audience, and how the campaign will grow over time. This document will provide a template that can be incrementally improved over time. Successful social media strategies are consistent in delivery frequency, themes, and visual layout, complementing the in-park experience and reinforcing all Park interpretive programs. Like arriving at the Nature Center, followers want to know what they can expect. Social media is a platform for exchanging value; if you want your customers to engage, or even give you a “like” or a comment, you need to give them some value in exchange.

Developing a social media information campaign can:

- Help set a tone, mood, or emotion – these tend to influence decisions more than facts;
- Help the visitor center keep current, stay relevant, embrace technology, and stay connected;
- Provide a clear strategy for staff and volunteers to follow when using social media;
- Provide a consistent connection to the community throughout the year;
- Build the Northern Nature Center brand, recruit supporters, and increase exposure of the Park 's recreation resources, natural wonders, and cultural sites; and
- Complement more personal sources of information and word-of-mouth recommendations to visit the Northern Nature Center in Fox Run Regional Park.

Focus on staff and volunteer led experiences and interpretation. Continuing to focus on in-person interpretation with guidance from the Master Interpretive Plan and Exhibit Design documents, interpreters can:

- Easily customize messaging and themes to meet visitor needs or changing conditions;
- Use group/visitor reactions to stimulate interest in exhibits;
- Employ hands-on interactives and digital media;
- Add unique perspectives, connections, and charisma to the interpretive stories through their own personalities;
- Be a cost effective, versatile, and relatively easy way to communicate messages to large groups; and
- Be an effective way to convey complex messages, and help visitors connect tangibles and intangibles to universal concepts.

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