



**EarthRise design**  
Interpretive planning + architecture  
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### Creating an interpretive plan for your site

Every site that welcomes visitors should have a process by which to design and improve the visitor experience. The process is undertaken by organizational leadership and staff, often facilitated by an interpretive planning consultant / exhibit designer. The interpretive plan assures that there is a “thread” that ties all site and exhibit features together.

The “story” includes factual information, but the emphasis of interpretation is to provoke and engage a visitor in a direct connection to and appreciation of the site. Visitors may come to a site principally for passive recreation and outdoor experience. For the casual visitor, any educational intention may be informal and spontaneous. It is often shared with family, friends, or others in a group. The visitor’s attention is “self-directed,” although influenced by staff or volunteers who may assist as guides. In natural settings, such as parks and preserves, “nature is best left to speak for itself.” The interpretive plan for nature centers is a complement to the beauty and ecological uniqueness of the natural setting.

An Interpretive Plan is the **story of a place**. It combines images, factual information but also “stories” and educational content, along with a physical setting, that may include signs, seating, and educational media. Its purpose is to orient and inspire the visitor.

Because the visitor is combining both recreational and educational experiences, the orientation and learning is essentially “self-directed” and self-motivated. Therefore, interpretive planning utilizes the principles of **discovery learning**, recognizing the innate curiosity and also the great variety of learning styles of individuals of all ages, interests and abilities.

The Interpretive Plan informs and guides the design and content of educational programs, publications and signs, exhibits and facilities.

#### Steps in interpretive planning

The EarthRise approach to design of interpretive plans is collaborative, using **design workshops** that include staff, board, and constituent focus groups to create consensus around the set of key messages that best convey the values and educational/recreational themes that are unique to each place.

##### Step 1: Strategic plan and vision

Identify the most compelling aspects of the organizational mission and values. The key messages of an interpretive plan always derive from the vision statement of the organization, and in this sense, provide the easily understood images and values that represent the core organizational mission.

##### Step 2: Interpretive Plan Matrix

Create a summary matrix: EarthRise has developed the Interpretive Plan Matrix as a summary of an Interpretive Plan, expressed as messages/themes, program elements and evaluation methods.

##### Step 3: Interpretive Story Board

Once developed as key themes and messages, the elements of an interpretive plan are detailed. These elements include brochures, educational programs, interpretive trails, exhibits and (as appropriate) facility designs. The sequence of the visitor experience is documented as a “story board” of unique and redundant messages. Designing program elements in terms of the sequence of visitor experience assures that the interpretive plan is coordinated for maximum effectiveness.

##### Step 4: Design and evaluation of exhibits as learning opportunities

The Interpretive storyboard is executed in terms of specific settings through which a visitor will experience a place. Exhibits are best conceived of as places and opportunities for learning, connecting visitors to the place. Interpretive settings are carefully designed places and program elements, which combine educational and recreational goals. Evaluation of designs before they are fabricated assures that they fulfill their stated goals.

Source: Donald Watson / EarthRise *design*