

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FACING GUIDED INTERPRETATION IN PARKS AND PROTECTED AREAS: A CASE STUDY IN BANFF, CANADA

Rosanna Maunder* and Norman McIntyre**

INTRODUCTION

In an organized bus tour, a guided hike or a rafting or horse-riding trip, a key element contributing to the quality of a visitor's experience of a park is often the capabilities of the guide. Interpretation- the ability to communicate effectively and to engage any audience – may lie at the heart of a memorable as compared to an ordinary or mediocre experience. With the continued growth in tourism in parks and protected areas (Page and Dowling, 2002), guides maintain a key role in ensuring that the tourism destination is friendly as they act as a conduit between the visitor and the local community (Pond, 1993). As indicated by a number of studies (Madin and Fenton, 2004, Tubb 2003, Gramman 2000), guided interpretation in parks and protected areas, may help develop a connection between the visitor and the landscape that potentially reduces depreciative behaviours. The various benefits accruing from professional guiding suggest that national park and protected area managers, private business owners, tourism operators and visitors all have stakes in effective interpretation.

Despite the acknowledged importance of guiding, few empirical studies have been conducted on the role of the guide in nature-based tourism (e.g., Haig and McIntyre, 2002; Weiler and Crabtree, 1998; Weiler and Davis, 1993). Furthermore, there is very little published research on the evaluation of the training of nature-based tour guides and the methods that have been put in place to assure quality in the industry (Christie and Mason, 2003).

ENSURING QUALITY IN TOUR GUIDING

Most recently, Black and Weiler (2005) have looked at methods that are being used in the tour guiding industry for quality assurance and as regulatory mechanisms. These include: codes of conduct, professional associations, awards of excellence, training and professional certification all of which have been implemented in many countries with varying levels of success.

One such highly respected eco-guide training program is the Australian EcoGuide Program developed in 2001 (Black and Weiler, 2005; Black and Ham, 2005). This program aims at promoting best practice in guiding standards in the nature-based tourism industry and is a method of eco-certification that was developed as part of the more comprehensive Ecotourism Australia Program (Black and Ham, 2005). Australia's Eco Certification program was developed in 1991 and is considered a world first in certifying tours, attractions and accommodations as products in nature-based and ecotourism markets (EcoGuide, 2007). Through guide certification, the EcoGuide program seeks to increase both the level of professionalism in the industry and contribute to an increase in the spread of natural and cultural interpretation throughout the industry (EcoGuide, 2007). The development and success of eco-certification in Australia has helped establish the credibility of professional associations and professional certification as methods of promoting quality in the tour guiding industry and has set a standard for similar programs elsewhere. As Black and Ham remarked:

Although differences both between and within countries will strongly influence the content and specific elements of a guide certification programme that will

work best in each place, lessons extracted from the Australian experience in developing its EcoGuide Certification Program may be applicable in most places. (2005:189)

The perceived benefits of guiding certification have over the past ten years assisted in the spread of professional certification schemes throughout the guiding industry worldwide (Black and Weiler, 2005). However, some researchers have pointed to negative aspects of using such certification programs. For example, Chisholm and Shaw (2004) discussed the development of audit and accreditation programs in the New Zealand outdoors industry and suggested that the process of certification has the potential to undermine the confidence that experienced guides who have not gone through the certification process can do their job. Additionally, certification can disadvantage those operators who choose not to conform to the accreditation system. This gives the governing accrediting body a high level of power that has the potential to be misused. Professional certification programs are also noted as being very costly to implement, and often there is a lack of industry support (Harris and Jargo, 2001).

Also guides may not be able to enter certification programs due to eligibility criteria, lack of time, or lack of finances (Black and Weiler, 2005). Issues such as guides being poorly paid and a lack of permanent employment may also increase barriers for guides wanting or willing to be part of the accreditation process. For guides to be interested in the accreditation process, a question that needs to be seriously addressed by the professional certifying association is: What benefits are there for the individual guide in obtaining the qualifications? (Harris and Jargo, 2001, p.387) So, though there appears to be value in guide certification as a method to assure quality in the industry, there also appears to be challenges in implementing such a system. And, as explained by Black and Ham,

The review of literature revealed the paucity of published material available in the field of tour guiding...with respect to the development of professional certification programs. Notably lacking was attention to program content, the program development processes used, program elements and stakeholders' views on certification. Opportunities exist for research into these issues within... (the) experiences of professionals. (2005:.194)

Given the benefits and issues associated with guiding certification programs outlined above, the obvious benefits to visitors and managers of effective interpretation and the lack of research on how these programs are viewed by the various stakeholders, a case study was undertaken on a specific accreditation program operating in Banff National Park in Alberta, Canada.

THE MOUNTAIN PARKS HERITAGE INTERPRETATION ASSOCIATION (MPHIA)

An interview-based case study of the Mountain Parks Heritage Interpretation Association (MPHIA) in Banff National Park was used to explore participants' and stakeholders', perceptions of a professional association offering interpretive guide certification and its programs. The research aimed not only to provide feedback for MPHIA and the guiding community of Banff but also to extend the knowledge base on professional guiding associations and professional guiding certification generally as methods of quality

assurance in the tour guiding industry.

MPHIA is an educational not-for-profit organisation established in 1997 as an accrediting organization for guides operating in the Rocky Mountain Park System (Banff, Jasper, Kootenay and Yoho National Parks). At that time, Parks Canada and local tour operators agreed that standards for guides involved in interpretive programs needed to be defined and an organisation set up to administer guide certification (Verhurst, 2005). As the management and controlling agency for the Rocky Mountain Park System, Parks Canada originally undertook the role of defining the knowledge standards required of interpretation guides working in the parks, a role which it continues to adopt to this day. These standards vary depending on the guiding role. For example, higher levels of knowledge and interpretation skills are considered necessary for hiking than for rafting guides. MPHIA's role in the accreditation system is to administer and deliver courses that are taught to those standards. MPHIA accredits guides as Standard, Professional and Master Interpreters. In addition, the Association considers the creation of a community of guides within the Rocky Mountain National Parks System a key part of its mandate.

As of January 2007, 279 individuals had been accredited as professional interpreters, 362 had completed the standard/apprentice course and 343 the Basic course. The majority of these accredited guides operate in Banff National Park (BNP).

At this time, MPHIA's courses and accreditation standards are focused on the ecology, geology, park management, and heritage of the Rocky Mountain Parks. Such information is considered essential by Parks Canada for guides choosing to work in the mountain parks. Involvement in MPHIA's programs allows new members of the community to learn the basic local knowledge that is needed to take up employment as a guide in the parks. These programs also assist business owners in hiring staff, as participation in the training programs assure a minimum standard of knowledge and skill (Crabtree and Black, 2000).

Gaining support of the individual guides is essential for certification and MPHIA's overall success. A major concern for MPHIA has been the small number of individuals choosing to become certified as Professional Interpreters (PI) and of those, the equally small number who are maintaining active membership. The number of guides with the Professional Interpreters (PI) level of certification as of Jan. 31, 2007 was 279. However only 169 of those PI certified guides were still active members (MPHIA Management, Personal communication, February 1, 2007). These statistics portray the reality that about half of the certified guides are not maintaining their certification to work as interpretive guides in the Park. This is one of the major challenges facing interpretation in the Mountain Parks generally and MPHIA particularly.

The Banff guiding community is comprised of individual guides, the operation owners and managers of guiding businesses and Parks Canada as the managing authority. The variety of guiding opportunities in BNP is broad and includes: day hiking, backpacking, scenic-bus touring, angling, climbing, rafting, horseback riding, mountain biking, historical tours, and cross country and back country skiing. Private businesses offer the majority of guided experiences in the park. However, there are also Parks Canada interpreters who provide what is referred to as 'roving' interpretation, theatrical campground presentations and historical site shows. In addition, key individuals in this guiding community are the directors and board members of MPHIA and the program instructors and examiners.

In order to better understand guiding accreditation systems and their role within a guiding community such as Banff, fourteen stakeholders (representing individual guides, business owners, Parks Canada, and MPHIA's management) were interviewed about their experiences with and perceptions of the MPHIA interpretation accreditation system. MPHIA and the Banff context were in effect a case study designed to reveal broader issues surrounding guiding accreditation.

CHALLENGES FACING BANFF'S GUIDE CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

The study of the Banff experience in the summer of 2006 revealed a complex mix of challenges faced by the accrediting association including: the specifics of curriculum and its evaluation; managing the many and varied needs and demands of stakeholders; dealing with the ambiguity created by the necessity to juggle quality assurance, as well as community credibility and regulation. In addition, it was evident that the difficulties experienced by MPHIA in developing an active membership were not confined to these programmatic and administrative concerns but extended to broader issues affecting the tourism industry more generally in resort communities. It is this latter area that is addressed in the remainder of the paper.

A significant number of the guides, administrators and operators interviewed indicated that the complexities of maintaining a professional association was linked to accommodating the peculiarities of a peripatetic workforce and the stresses individuals experience in living and working in an exclusive mountain resort community. These concerns appear not to be confined to Banff but to apply more generally in resort communities. For example, Weiler and Black (2005) remarked that in Australia, guides are often poorly paid, and because of the peculiarities of the industry often experience difficulties in finding permanent employment. Others have also pointed to a variety of other factors facing the tourism industry in resort communities more generally such as seasonality of employment (Baum and Lundtorp, 1999), cost-of-living (Hettinger, 2005) especially as regards to housing (Gober et al., 1993), and the personal characteristics of resort workers (Adler and Adler, 1999).

Seasonality of Employment

Banff is a mountain tourism destination with a major summer tourist season followed by a minor winter one. Most guides and interpreters (working for either the public or private sector in Banff itself and in the national park) are paid on an hourly basis and positions are often designed as seasonal (summer or winter) contracts. This seasonality of available employment was mentioned in the interviews of operation managers and owners as impacting on the enthusiasm of members for continued participation in Association programs, progression through the accreditation system and as a disincentive for the involvement of guides in the accreditation process.

Variation in seasonal demand for guiding services also results in high employee turnover and limits the ability of businesses to recruit and retain full time, high quality staff (Krakover 2000, Butler, 1994; 2001). This inability to retain experienced tour guides was noted as impacting negatively on the quality of interpretation services in Banff. Also, respondents remarked that a lack of mutual employer/employee commitment to full-time employment induced by the seasonal nature of demand for guides was a limiting factor in maintaining the viability of the professional guiding association (MPHIA). In general, the comments of respondents reinforced the observations of researchers (e.g., Gober et al, 1993; Baum and Lundtorp, 2000; Williams and Hall, 2000) that seasonality of tourism

created unemployment during off-seasons, temporary outward migration, and short-term employment rather than full time sustainable jobs for those involved in tourism related employment.

Cost of Living

The lack of permanent full-time work can create challenges for guides who live in resort communities to maintain a desirable standard of living. According to the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association, nature-based guide salaries, depending on experience, often range between \$9, to \$15 dollars per hour (Alberta Parks and Recreation Association, 2007). This is well below the provincial average wage of \$23.90 per hour (Alberta Wage and Salary Survey, 2007) and perhaps encourages guides to seek out careers in more financially rewarding areas. Finding suitable and long term housing also continues to be a challenge for many in the Banff area and is a concern for not only the guides but for those who aim to employ them. Though many guide businesses in the Banff region supply staff accommodation it could be compared more to dorm style living and may not appeal to those wanting to make a career and life for themselves in the national park. The lack of a suitable accommodation may play a significant role in an individual's desire to continue a career as a professional guide with affiliations to the guiding association.

Characteristics of Resort Workers

The absence of permanent, long-term, appropriately remunerated careers in guiding created by these various influences has the potential to impact the standards of service quality throughout the tourism industry (Braun & Lundtorp, 2000). Adler and Adler 1999's research presents additional understanding that many workers in resort communities can be classified as 'seekers' and are attracted to specific locations for the lifestyle and leisure pursuits it provides them rather than for career advancement. Seekers are known to gain qualifications to allow them to move easily and gain employment in new locations (Adler and Alder, 1999). These same influences impact the potential for creating a profession of interpretive guides with high levels of site specific knowledge who are capable of providing high quality interpretation to visitors to the national park. This has been highlighted in the Banff case study and is seen in the number of Professional Interpreters that are maintaining their affiliation with the guiding association. MPHIA's board members envisioned a Professional Interpreter as a guide choosing a career in interpretation in the Rocky Mountain Parks. Although many of those interviewed favoured the concept of knowledge standards and the certification process to enhance guided interpretation, it appears that the broader tourism related challenges of living and working in a resort community may be hindering the achievement of this vision and, as a consequence, the success of the Association.

MOVING FORWARD The larger challenges related to seasonality, poor working conditions and the characteristics of those willing to work in tourism are perhaps inherent in the nature of resort communities and may only be able to be addressed on a case-by-case basis through better resort planning to provide adequate accessible living and housing for employees and a commitment by employers and local authorities to the tourism industry itself to provide appropriate levels of remuneration and career opportunities to employees.

While these broader issues may well fall outside MPHIA's mandate, the very specific nature of the knowledge-based programs provided by MPHIA and the lack of emphasis

on interpretive skills and core competencies were noted by interviewees as discouraging their participation in the system due to a lack of transferability of the knowledge base and skills to other contexts. Another key issue in the same vein was the lack of national or international recognition of the accreditation. This contrasts with Alpine Guides Qualifications, SCUBA diving certification and the successful Australian EcoGuide Certification program which is recognized nationally and is gaining increasing recognition internationally (Weiler and Black, 2005). Research in this area has indicated that one of the perceived benefits of gaining professional certification is obtaining a recognized industry qualification (Crabtree and Black, 2000).

In order to generate more interest in the accreditation program among guides and in the interests of enhancing long-term career opportunities MPHIA may consider collaboration with existing organisations such as Interpretation Canada, or the National Association for Interpretation. A first step may well be negotiating broader recognition of its interpretation based training programs throughout the National Parks and Historic Sites of Canada through Parks Canada.

CONCLUSIONS

This research into stakeholders' perceptions of an interpretation accreditation scheme in Banff, Canada revealed a number of areas of concern both locally and more generally. Although overall there was general acceptance of the need of MPHIA and its programs among stakeholders, some specific criticisms were linked to program content and evaluation procedures, and transferability beyond and recognition outside the Rocky Mountain Park System. These concerns were seen as instrumental in creating a lack of commitment and involvement among guides to the MPHIA accreditation system which was compounded by the insecurity and seasonal nature of employment available to most employees. The issue of tourism seasonality and its associated impacts on retaining qualified staff and its effects on participation and commitment to guide certification highlighted in this study is a fruitful area for future research.

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