

Consulting with central Australian Aboriginal people about cultural interpretation

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Introduction

One of the goals of the Alice Springs Desert Park is to interpret the Aboriginal use and management of arid zone plants and animals through personal and non-personal media. Signs, interactive displays and guided activities to 'wow' our visitors with the fascinating stories of the people of arid Australia. We aim to provoke interest and curiosity, by minimising the 'telling' and maximising enjoyment and discovery.

Our interpretation is mainly focussed on the generic aspects of the local Aboriginal cultures like that of food, fire, water and medicine. We emphasise the living nature of these cultures. Visitors are taken on a journey from traditional life through the contact period to modern perspectives of Aboriginal life.

The interpretation of the human aspects of the environment brings with it a complexity of issues. Accuracy and appropriateness are paramount. There has been consultation with central Australian Aboriginal people from the beginning of the Park's conceptual planning in 1992. During my time as a Park Guide I have had the opportunity to consult with central Australian Aboriginal people about cultural interpretation. I have learnt that cross-cultural consultation is not something you can learn from a book and it is not something you can be good at overnight. I have learnt so much in such a short period of time and this is the most challenging, rewarding and enjoyable aspect of my work.

Non-personal media

Signs and displays provide information and interpretive inspiration at all times of the day. Visitors can read at their own pace as little or as much as they choose. Images of central Australian Aboriginal people prior to European contact are presented as simple line drawings. Images of people hunting, burning, gathering and preparing food are presented as photographs in a contemporary framework, to show that these activities are still happening. Where these photographic images have been used there are provisions so that they can be easily removed in the event of the subject's death. We have found that replacing the image with a notice explaining that *"The Aboriginal person depicted in this photograph has recently passed away. Family members, according to tradition, have asked for the image to be removed from public viewing. The image will be put back on display when the family is satisfied that a suitable period of mourning has passed"* promotes awareness and is therefore beneficial as an educational tool.

The use of language is a powerful tool for showing the extant nature of Aboriginal cultures. Species identification signs around the park show the common and taxonomic names along with the Central Arrernte name and phonetics. Most people are daunted when they first encounter the system used for spelling Arrernte. Arrernte has only been a written language for about twenty years and there are quite a few sounds in Arrernte that are not found in English. Instead of creating symbols to represent these new sounds

combinations of Roman letters have been used. The Arrernte people themselves have had the major input into the design of the spelling system and they have found that this system works well. (IAD Press 1994). The Guides have been through a language course with the Institute for Aboriginal Development and in time all Park staff will attend. Some people find it difficult to pronounce Arrernte words correctly by reading the phonetics on a sign, so for future developments we are considering the use of language on audio displays. The spoken language is consistent with the way Aboriginal people learned and is important for accuracy.

The spiritual aspects of local Aboriginal cultures have only been touched on at this stage, as it is extremely important that we have permission, input and approval from all of the right people. The moral-based children's level story of yeye apme kwerlaye-iperre (The Rainbow Serpent) is presented in Western Arrernte and English in a storybook in the Exhibition Centre. This story interprets the importance of the landscape to the Arrernte people; it stirs imagination in the visitor because they can see the McDonnell Ranges as more than just rocks (Brooks 1991). Many visitors are familiar with the term 'Dreaming' or 'Dreamtime'. These terms suggest something mythological and prehistoric, not a living experience and law that influences modern day life for many Aboriginal people. At the Park we interpret Altyerre, the Arrernte explanation of existence.

Interactive displays allow the visitor to play a part in what they are learning. In the walk-through Riverine Aviary visitors are encouraged to push "Leo's" button. Leo is a model of a real, contemporary Arrernte man; he engages and entertains visitors with his memories in the Coolabah country with his grandmother as a child and also during his stockman days.

Personal Media

Guided activities allow visitors to participate and ask questions and can be adapted to the visitor's level of understanding. The Alice Springs Desert Park Guides are a team dedicated to conservation through social change. We aim to stir curiosity, to promote responsible behaviour and to encourage a greater understanding and respect for the plants, animals and people of Australia's arid environment.

An initiative, by the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory, was to designate four, of the seven, Park Guide positions for local Aboriginal people. Garth, Lisa, Emmy and Veronica have grown up with their traditional culture at the interface of Western culture. Many tourists come to the Northern Territory to expand their knowledge of Aboriginal cultures. Garth, Lisa, Emmy and Veronica have the advantage of being able to speak from first-hand experience about past and present central Australian Aboriginal life. It is important to interpret local past and present life from a local's point of view in order to preserve cultural integrity (Forrester 1998 pers. com.). Cross-cultural interpretation is a way of bridging communication and promoting understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous visitors (Laughton pers.com. 1998). Garth, Lisa, Emmy and Veronica are role models for visitors and local people and their presence helps to enhance positive attitudes towards Aboriginal people.

Custodians

The Custodians of the Park site have been involved as consultants from the earliest stages of planning. Their knowledge has been, and continues to be, combined with the perspectives of the wider Aboriginal community to enable us to demonstrate the ethnobiology of Aboriginal people in the whole of the arid lands of Australia (CCNT 1994). Regular formal and informal visits are enabling management and staff to spend time developing relationships and engaging in meaningful ongoing communication to build trust and to prove that we are a genuine organisation. We want the Park to be a source of pride for Rosie, Frankie, Thomas, Patrick and their families and for them to feel that the Park is their Park too.

Cross-cultural consultation

The Guides consult with local Aboriginal people for training, to enhance our knowledge and confidence in relaying information to the public. We often go on bush tucker trips to learn how to gather and prepare bush food and to collect props for presentations and we invite local Aboriginal people to the Park to check our presentations for appropriateness and accuracy.

From my very limited yet invaluable experiences I would like to share a few things that I have learnt about cross-cultural consultation. I have had to take a look at my culture, my version of reality, in the abstract, which is a really bizarre thing to do. I discovered that things that I took for granted as being 'normal' are in fact 'cultural', even something as simple as a handshake. In Western cultures handshaking is used to greet and is usually firm, whereas a handshake between many central Australian Aboriginal people is used to show condolence after a death and is usually very restrained (Price & Price 1998). I try not to offer my hand first, if someone offers their hand to me it is a gentle, warm hold, rather than a shake.

Another cultural difference is eye contact. In Western cultures if you don't look someone in the eyes when they are talking to you, you are said to be 'shifty eyed'. To many central Australian Aboriginal people too much eye contact implies envy, lust and bad motives and it makes people feel very uncomfortable (Price & Price 1998). I am very conscious of trying to use my ears to listen not my eyes, which is quite a difficult thing to get use to. All of the people I have met have been very tolerant and forgiving and they understand that we do things differently. If people see that you are at least trying to make the effort they will appreciate that.

When arranging a consultation, it is important to explain who you are, what it is you want to consult about and what the information will be used for. It is a good protocol to ask and identify the preferred method of recording the information. Some people love being photographed, especially kids, others find it very objectionable. Always ask if you can bring a camera, if you don't get an answer, take it as a no. Tell those that you will be consulting with that other family members are welcome to come along for the ride and the feed but only as many people as there are seatbelts. Discuss payment and if copyright is an issue this must also be negotiated prior to the consultation.

I have benefited a great deal from Parks and Wildlife's compulsory cross-cultural awareness training. The course is presented by a cross-cultural couple and the objective is to explore the main differences between mainstream Australian culture and the culture of Central Australian Aboriginal people and how these differences impact on communication (Price & Price 1998). Through this course I have begun to understand that each Aboriginal group has their own cultural identity: a name to describe themselves; a different language or dialect; different creation stories, ceremonies and rituals; different names for creation ancestors; different ways of collecting and using plants; different ways of hunting and cooking animals; different restrictions on who can tell stories; different protocols following someone's death and different contact histories (Duigan 1998). There is so much diversity and gaining this understanding has made me acutely aware that what may be appropriate with one group may not be pertinent elsewhere.

The thing I love most about consulting is that it is always an adventure, you never know what to expect. You walk into the consultation with a completely open mind and it is important to be honest and willing to admit ignorance and learn from your mistakes (Johnson pers. com 1998). I generally start by apologising for the mistakes I am about to make and encourage the consultants to be my guides to better understanding.

The flexibility of the consultation is crucial. I have to throw away my Western concept of time, that eternal and panicked rushing towards an endpoint. Within an Aboriginal perspective time occurs within a cycle and all things are connected (Nurse-Bray & Wallis 1998). You can't expect too much too soon, it takes time to build trust and friendships. Long term associations are essential for effective consultation. It is important to try and develop a social relationship, start with social talk by discussing family, interests and shared experiences (Duigan 1998). I've found that it is a good icebreaker and fun to point things out and encourage your company, especially the children, to teach you the names of things in their language. Time spent together is the essential prerequisite for raising our awareness of each other's needs and awakening our senses of mutual obligation. Long term associations are essential for effective communication.

The site of the consultation is an important consideration. We always avoid the 'hub-bub' of the office and find a natural area where everyone feels free to contribute. An outside meeting is more in accordance with traditional methods of meeting. We pick a comfortable, shady spot and provide plenty of healthy food and drinks.

We are very fortunate to have Central Australian Aboriginal people on staff who are family of the people we consult with. They help to bridge cultural differences, act as interpreters and help make the consultation more friendly and relaxed.

I have to be very conscious of the complexity of my language. We tend to use different kinds of language in different situations and we do this unconsciously. All of the people we consult with are multilingual, speaking three or four languages, one of which is English. Some people have an excellent knowledge of English while others have only a basic grasp of it. I try to use clear, simple, Standard English. It is possible to make your language simple without sounding childish or patronising. Technical terms should be

explained when they are used, perhaps several times. I have discovered that repetition is more tolerated in Aboriginal conversations than in English, so it is quite acceptable to explain things in a few different ways if there is some difficulty in understanding. If you are trying to explain something and you are not being understood, be careful that you don't increase your volume.

Notice when an informant avoids an issue, that can mean they don't want to talk about it but don't want to be rude. The information may be restricted or the informant may feel criticism or disapproval about the issue (von Sturmer 1981). Try not to ask too many questions. Direct questioning is considered rude. Try to let people talk without making too many interruptions. In Aboriginal cultures, a wise person learns by personal experience and careful observation, not by asking questions (Price & Price 1998).

Shame or respect may lead people to give false information. Aboriginal people may nod their heads, smile and say 'yes' to a question like: "*Does everybody understand*" or "*Is everybody happy with that?*" when they have no idea what they are being asked. This is done out of politeness, to tell their questioner what they think they want to hear. Old people in particular are more concerned that the person addressing them is sent away happy rather than with what we call 'the truth'. This particular habit gets Aboriginal people into a lot of trouble when dealing with the police and law courts (Price & Price 1998).

It is always a good idea to seek feedback, that what is being said has been understood. People generally need time to absorb and assimilate new ideas and information. Aboriginal people need more time if the new information is in a strange language and outside of the scope of their worldview and cultural values. They also need time to discuss with others in their group or in other groups before agreement can be arrived at (Price & Price 1998).

Decision-making is a matter of reaching consensus in Aboriginal society. The person who tries to make a decision without gaining the support of others with responsibility in that area can be in real trouble (Price & Price 1998). Sometimes those who need to be consulted may live some distance away or may be busy with other business such as sorry business. Thus the process of consultation and consensus takes time, often not just days or weeks, but sometimes months.

In most Aboriginal languages there is no word for 'thankyou'. People do things because they want to or because, through relationships, they are obliged to (Duigan 1998). However these days, in many areas, the concept of 'thanks' has been introduced. So it is always important to thank people for their time and involvement.

Effective communication depends on mutual respect and acceptance, it is about feeling relaxed and comfortable and making those around you feel relaxed and comfortable (Price & Price 1998). To establish an effective consultation process you need to establish a personal integrity. It is only at this personal level that conditions will occur which promote the type of trust necessary for successful communication (Nursey-Bray &

Wallis 1998). Not surprisingly it all comes down to common sense, common decency, mutual respect and good manners. Respect what you don't have in common and nurture what you do.

Conclusion

By involving local Aboriginal people in the interpretation of their cultures at the Alice Springs Desert Park we are ensuring that accurate and appropriate information is passed on to the visitors to promote a greater understanding and respect for one of the world's oldest surviving nation of indigenous cultures. The value of preserving this knowledge means more than dollars and cents, it is important to local and national self-identity and pride and it promotes cultural exchange and reconciliation. We want people to leave the park understanding that the Aboriginal people as well as the plants and animals are important parts of Australia's arid environment.

If we, as a species are going to survive on this planet we have to learn to coexist and the only way to do this is through mutual respect and understanding. Our most precious resource for coping with life in an uncertain and unstable world is the resource of our personal relationships. What we need most on the threshold of the 21st Century is each other.

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