

Something to SHOUT about!



**Rufus Bellamy,
BH&HPA national adviser
on conservation and environmental
management, encourages BH&HPA members
to consider the importance of interpreting the natural world**

Environmental information and interpretation, even if it is 'just' a simple sign or leaflet detailing what trees people can expect to see during their stay, brings a new and important dimension to a park. Once people know what they can look out for and importantly, can put a name to it, then they are drawn in to discover more for themselves. A flip through the postcards received by the David Bellamy Conservation Award Scheme shows just how much of a 'holiday highlight' spotting wildlife can be. Helping these highlights to occur is what interpretation is all about.

It is one of the ironies of the David Bellamy Conservation Awards that it is often those parks with most to shout about from an environmental point of view that have to be persuaded to provide some information about what visitors or residents can see. Understandably many park owners and managers argue that too many signs can spoil the whole feel of a park; however not having any interpretation at all is a missed opportunity. Parks that get the right balance of

signage and information add something invaluable to the holiday experience. They also benefit everyone by getting people more interested in the natural world around them - and in its conservation.

Of course parks are not in the tourism business primarily to nurture the next generation of amateur naturalists, but it is amazing how many people come back to parks because of the wildlife they have seen during their holidays - sightings often brought about through good interpretation. Arguing that biodiversity brings repeat businesses is perhaps a hard-nosed way of looking at things, but it is a strong argument for good environmental management backed up by good interpretation. If you've got it, you might as well flaunt it!

There are many different approaches to environmental interpretation. From photocopied leaflets to close-circuit nature 'cams', park owners and managers can do a wide range of things to let people discover the plants and animals around a park - and to let them know what the park itself is doing in the name of environmental sustainability. In this feature, we take a look at some of the things BH&HPA members can consider on their parks. *continued...*

Signs of Activity

The first thing to do when planning any interpretation or information is to decide what to achieve and for whom. Obviously the scope of what is possible will be dictated by the park. A park that has a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) within its boundaries and is surrounded by a nature reserve obviously has slightly more to talk about than an urban park on the fringe of a housing estate. But interpretation is just as important in the second, where people will probably need more of a helping hand to find something of interest. And what if finding anything worth talking about is difficult? Then get in a bit of help - the local natural history club or Wildlife Trust will be able to come and find hidden gems on

a park that put up environmental information about the latrines in the gentlemen's lavatories!

The environmental notice board is an opportunity to give people an overview of what they can expect to see on a park and to remind people that they should follow the countryside code and *'take only photographs, leave only footprints'*. If there is a particularly fragile area, then it is a good idea to use the notice board to let people know why they should treat it with particular respect.

Put up a map showing any wildlife walks or special conservation areas and give people an introduction to what a park is attempting to do for wildlife. Other things to include are:



almost any park, even if its just the trees and shrubs along the dog walk, or the creatures at play in the ornamental pond.

Introducing visitors to the environmental delights they can expect to see on their holiday can start before their arrival with details - and suitably enticing photographs - included in any promotional literature or advertisements. Once guests do arrive, the welcome pack is a perfect place to provide a wildlife map and information about a park's environmental approach. Of course, the reception building can also be a place where visitors can start their environmental journey of discovery.

The reception is one of the best places to put an environmental notice board. Such a board is perhaps the most widely used way of putting across environmental information and the cornerstone of any good interpretation strategy. However, such a notice board need not be at reception. Some parks that do not have lots of space to play with have found the laundry to be the ideal location, since it's somewhere where almost all guests will visit - and giving people something to read while they are watching their washing spin is a very good idea. I've even seen

- details of your programme of environmental activities, including forthcoming events and competitions
- on-the-park photographs of wildlife or recent environmental activities such as tree planting or pond dipping
- species lists for the park
- results of any environmental surveys or competitions held
- details of any environmental projects or charities linked to the park (and how visitors can get involved)
- details of any local environmental attractions (e.g. local nature reserves) and any activities that are taking place there (e.g. a diary of guided walks)
- if there is space think about putting out a spotting book, for people to write down their wildlife sightings and their thoughts about what the park is doing for the environment including any feedback on areas of improvement or ideas.

When park owners and managers put this information together, they need to make sure they get a feel for what their visitors are interested in (ask them!) and make the information produced accessible to all, especially children.

Of course the environmental notice board is also the obvious place to put up details of everything else the park is doing in terms of saving energy and water and reducing waste through recycling (see more on this below). It is also a good place for feedback forms (either the park's own, or the post-cards that are part of the Conservation Award Scheme) and if the park has received any wildlife or green tourism awards an opportunity to display them.

Help!

Once park owners and managers seize the environmental opportunities open to them, they are really only limited by their resources and imagination. Many parks have put together wonderful folders with amazing photographs and identification charts of all the wildlife that can be seen by their guests. The next step is to make this type of information into a colourful display that elaborates and adds to the information on the notice board - if it is well located, this is probably more likely to make an impact, especially on children. It is amazing how some parks have managed to squeeze a really effective display into a spare corner in their reception area or games room. Even if there isn't room for a display, it is still possible to keep a stock of natural history 'spotting guides' on everything from butterflies to birds, to help people name what they see.

However far park owners and managers decide to take things, they shouldn't forget that there are many places to look for help. Perhaps regular visitors (or residents) who have taken photographs of the things they have seen might be willing to let the park have copies for their notice board? At the other end of the scale, the local Wildlife Trust should be able to help provide information.

Many groups will happily give parks relevant resources to help them. For example, the RSPB has supplied informative coloured posters to a number of parks, including Trethias Farm Caravan Park in Cornwall. The group was checking on Corn Buntings at the park, where steps had been taken to ensure that the nests of this bird were not being disturbed. The RSPB then gave the park 'You are in Corn Bunting Country' posters to educate visitors on the rarity and fragility of this particular species.

Other organisations have taken an even more pro-active approach with parks. In Dartmoor, the National Park Authority has put in place the Wealth of Wildlife Project. This is designed to raise awareness and encourage the enjoyment of wildlife on Dartmoor by visitors. Around 50 businesses, including a number of holiday parks participating in the Conservation Award scheme, have been visited by an ecologist who surveyed the grounds and produced a tailor-made folder of wildlife information for each establishment for their visitors to use. The message for all park owners and managers is that it makes sense to look for help - they might be pleasantly surprised!

The Internet is also a fantastic resource for information on all aspects of conservation and the environment. From fantastic facts about mini-beasts at the 'bug club' site of the Amateur Entomological Society (www.projects.ex.ac.uk/bugclub/), to information about interpretation from Scottish



Natural Heritage (www.snh.org.uk), the answer to many specific questions is only a 'google' away.

The step up from an information board is a dedicated conservation centre. Although this will be beyond the resources of most parks, it is something that bigger parks might consider. Such a room gives a great opportunity to provide a place for guests, especially kids to get involved in environmental activities - even if it's just colouring in activity sheets on a rainy afternoon. It also offers a place to display photographs, for example the winners of wildlife photography competitions and a place for talks and slide shows. Some of the real pioneers in this area have TV monitors in their environmental rooms linked up to CCTV cameras on site; cameras that are trained on key habitats to follow the activities of nesting birds and the like.

Of course a great place for an environmental 'room' is in a bird hide or similar structure, if you are lucky enough to have one. For example, as previously highlighted in this Journal, at Kippford Holiday Park in Kirkcudbrightshire, the owners have erected a hide in a woodland area at the edge of their park complete with an infra-red camera system to capture the red-squirrels that live there alongside the wood's adders, owls and badgers. *continued...*

On-site Interpretation

Of course the best way for visitors to learn about the animals and plants they can see, is to actually to get out around the park and see them. The next step is therefore to help them to understand what they are seeing out in the great outdoors. There are a number of obvious ways to go about this - signage, leaflets and walks and trails - which can be used separately or combined.

Probably the first type of on-site interpretation that parks could consider is a series of signs. These can highlight many things, for example:

- the animals and plants that can be found on the park
- the history of a park's development, or of the surrounding landscape
- the importance of a specific habitat to wildlife.

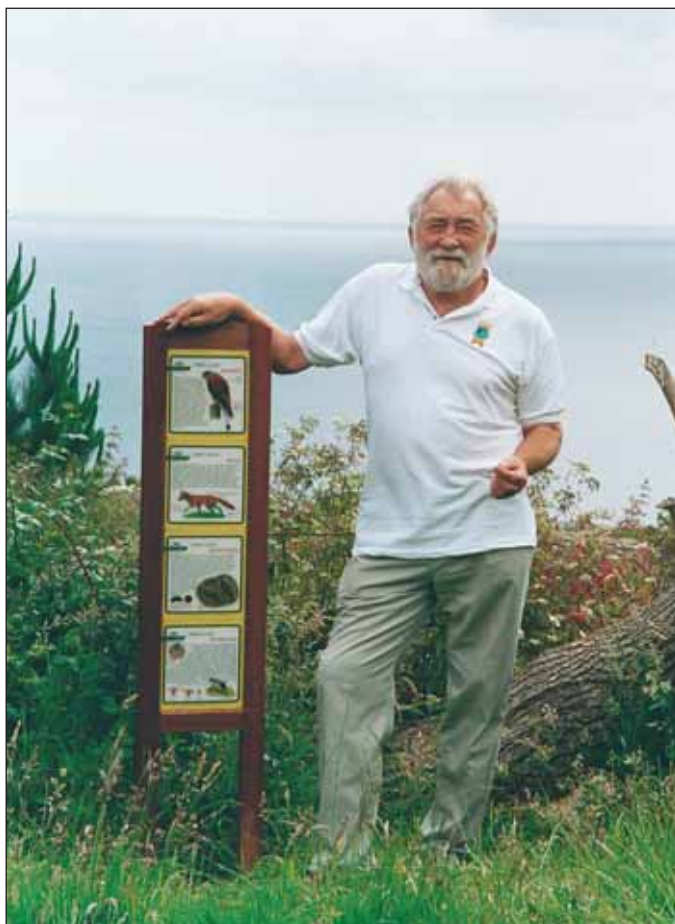
It is also very important to use signage to let people know why the park is doing a particular thing. For example, it is alarming for many visitors to see a tree being cut down, but a simple explanation that the park is thinning dead wood to make room for younger trees or woodland wild flowers will prevent upsetting misunderstandings. Guests may also complain when grass is left long or nettles and brambles allowed to grow - a sign explaining that the park is simply creating a wildlife area will pre-empt most questions or complaints. Of course signs and information can also be used to point people in the right direction, or alongside appropriate fencing, to discourage them from straying into fragile habitats that can easily be trampled under foot.

With all types of signage, the goal should not be to plaster a park with interpretation but to use signs judiciously to encourage people to go exploring on their own. Well-placed, well-designed interpretation boards are a great way of providing lots of easily accessible information about the most interesting parts of the park, so it is well worth getting them right.

External signage is usually either attached to a building (e.g. shower block wall) or on a purpose-built stand (e.g. on the edge of a wood or wetland feature). They are usually printed on special paper that is then encased in weather-proof material such as acrylic, glass reinforced polyester (GRP) or melamine. They can be as simple or fancy as taste (and budget) decree. Of course this doesn't have to be the case - some parks have had great success making simple signs using a normal office laminating machine. At the other end of the spectrum, many parks have also made beautiful carved signs using wood felled (and recycled) on the park.

Wildlife interpretation boards are usually predominantly pictorial, using maps, pictures or photographs to help people with their wildlife spotting and to interest them in reading any informative text. This means park owners and managers will probably have to find a local artist to help them out.

Keep any text straightforward and interesting - less is more is a good rule of thumb here. Each sign should only try and communicate one, or at most two, main messages. Use



headlines, bullet points and pictures to capture people's attention. But if there is a good story to tell, perhaps linked to the history of the park or some unique aspect of the flora and fauna, use it to bring the information to life. Don't use jargon and keep the tone chatty and lively - for example, say *'We are doing x'*, rather than *'The park's environmental management plan is doing y'*. Again, if you are not sure what to put on your signs, contact your local Wildlife Trust and ask for advice.

Remember it is not necessary to interpret everything; just whet people's appetites and leave the rest for them to discover themselves (with the help of the guide books thoughtfully provided back at reception!)

Advice and information

Of course environmental interpretation and information doesn't stop with the wildlife. It is an incredibly important way to get people involved with the other aspects of environmental action on a park, most importantly those relating to energy and water conservation and waste minimisation and recycling.

Some parks use information and signage to really underline their commitment to the environment. Many include a folder of information on all aspects of their resource conservation work next to their environmental notice board. Others really put their money on the line. For example, on the confirmation of booking form for Trethias Farm Caravan Park, it is stated that *'if you are not prepared to recycle, please contact us and we will fully refund your deposit and cancel your booking.'*

As with wildlife signage, it is as important here to get the balance of information right - guests do not want to feel



brown beaten into going green, so use a minimum of high-impact signage and information leaflets that encourage people to switch off lights, turn off taps and recycle their waste. Getting the placement of these signs right is crucial - it is best to put signs right where they will be most effective, next to taps and light switches, for example.

One important thing to do is to include a 'green sheet' into welcome packs that highlight the park's commitment to sustainability and give straightforward advice and information on what people can do and where key facilities (such as recycling bins) are located. This information can be repeated in communal areas and on the environmental notice board.

The notice board can also be a treasure trove of other key sustainability information, such as local public transport information, local footpaths, bike hire shops and details of eco-friendly products that can be purchased at the park shop. The other key green idea that can be put across here (and in welcome packs) is the 'eat local' message, which encourages people to buy local produce and shop at local stores, thereby supporting the local economy and reducing the environmental impact of food production and distribution. Useful 'eat local' information might include:

- directions to good local pubs and restaurants
- directions to good local food and provision shops
- the best local delicacies and where to buy them
- farmers' market information
- directions to local farm shops. *continued...*



Trails and walks

Linking signs together to make a marked trail is a fantastic idea - kids love them. Just like signage, such trails can be as simple or complex as you like. Some just involve a string of numbered posts, linked to a simple printed map, which describes what can be seen as each 'stop'. This approach not only adds a 'treasure hunt' element, but also keeps costs down. Other trails do away with signs altogether and are just based on maps - again, a cost-effective approach and perfect for a park with many walks or in situations where park owners and managers want to help people explore surrounding countryside. Marked walks can be based on a wide range of themes, for example, they can introduce visitors to all the different trees on the park, all the different types of habitat and all the things the park is doing for the environment.

Of course one of the key things to keep in mind regarding interpretation is that it has to be factually correct and, of course, spelled correctly. This not only means double checking, but also being aware of any potential changes that might make the signage 'out of date' sooner than anticipated. One park in the Conservation Award Scheme has signs that feature field poppies. These are sadly no longer in evidence as surrounding vegetation has closed over and the poppies, a pioneer species, had disappeared. The lesson here: it is always a good idea to do a bit of research into the life history of a species before investing in signage.

Use the local wildlife experts for advice on what to include in the interpretation and how to obtain the best value for money. They've got lots of experience when it comes to making and using interpretation boards and can put BH&HPA members in contact with local sign-makers and designers if they don't already have their own contacts. Commercial sign manufacturers will also be able to give help and advice. Two that specialise in signage with an environmental theme are Osprey, in Berwickshire (01890 883127; www.signsbynature.co.uk) and Shelley Signs (Shropshire 01952 541483; www.shelleysigns.co.uk)

Activities

Signage and information is a fantastic first step in bringing the environment of a park alive for visitors. The next step is to develop some activities. Describing the possibilities here would require another article (at least!), but at their most simple, these can be in the form of an green 'I-spy' type treasure hunt along the lines of the David Bellamy Passport to the Countryside used on many parks (this has a whole series of pictures of the animals that people might be able to spot - the challenge is to spot as many as possible). Another obvious idea is to run guided nature walks through the park - perhaps led by a local amateur natural historian.

Photo and art competitions, bird watching walks, pond dipping expeditions, bug hunts, tree bark rubbing and leaf collecting rambles are just some of the other activities that can be laid on for kids and adults alike to enjoy. Again the local Wildlife Trust is a great place to look for help with activity ideas (and practical assistance), as is the web.

Of course, if the park has a particularly 'special' environmental feature, such as a badger sett or wetland SSSI, then base activities, such as nature watch rambles, around these. If the park is fortunate enough to be in the heart of the countryside, then it is even possible to consider running themed nature holidays with a timetable of visits to local nature reserves and attractions. Some parks even run environmental activity breaks on which visitors learn a range of green skills such as coppicing and hedge-laying and then help out with the park's environmental management in a really hands-on way. Now how's that for really getting the message across! ●

