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*By Larry Berrin*

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It was another foggy morning on the coast of Maine as I prepared to lead a guided walk as an Interpretive Park Ranger for Acadia National Park. The focus of this particular hike was enjoying the sights and sounds of Mount Desert Island's coastline while learning about its colorful cultural and natural history. Unfortunately, the major focus of my program was the ocean that was still not visible as my group began to gather in the parking lot. Luckily by this point in my life, I already had a number of years under my belt as an environmental educator and had developed a comfort level for dealing with these situations. This was especially helpful considering that my supervisor was joining us this morning to evaluate my program.

On one particular stop, where I usually would point out the various species of birds that feed in a nearby cove (still not visible at this point), I notice a tall white pine. I decided to switch gears and explain the importance of the tree. I described how these particular trees were used for ship masts because they were so tall and straight, only to find as I looked up, that this was indeed the most crooked pine I had ever seen. As I looked over to see the confused look on my supervisor's face, I quickly explained how this was not the best example of the normally straight tree that was so prized by the British that they would mark them for the King's fleet, thus the nickname "King Pine". As we moved on, I couldn't help think of the mistake I made and how my supervisor would react to my obvious blunder and great recovery.

As an environmental educator, I had been in many situations where I had to think quickly on my feet and try as best as I could to stick to my lesson plan, even when nature didn't cooperate. There were many times when I would go to my "bag of tricks" when something I had planned on doing didn't work out. I knew that in an environmental education program, your participant's primary reason for taking part in the program is to learn. Later that day, during my evaluation with my supervisor, I quickly learned that this is not the case with participants taking part in an interpretive program. I was told that a good interpretive program enhances what the visitor is seeing, hearing or experiencing. I was told that in the future if I can't find a straight tree to explain the ship mast construction, then I should find something else to talk about. This was contrary to my training as an environmental educator and this is when I decided to explore the differences between environmental education and interpretation. To this day, I still have trouble convincing my peers that there is a difference and that knowing how they differ can greatly improve your programs.

When preparing to lead an environmental education program for an organized group (e.g. a school group), you should think of your role as both a teacher and a naturalist (thus the title

“Teacher/Naturalist”). Many would argue that this should also be the case when you lead an informal public program. Instead I would contend that a leader should prepare for these particular programs thinking of themselves as a different kind of “slash”; Naturalist/Entertainer (Henry David Thoreau meets P.T. Barnum!). To illustrate this point, imagine if a child were to go to a nature center with his class to take part in an environmental education program focusing on trees and then was asked to come back to the nature center with his parents for an interpretive tree walk. If you were to ask the child to comment on his/her experience afterwards, then you would find that he/she had two unique experiences. Hopefully, they would feel that the visit with their class was a more structured learning experience and the visit with their family was less formal and more recreational. This would give the impression that the person who led the programs was aware of their audience and the goals of the programs. Interpretation is the art of enhancing recreational activities while a strong environmental education program should be a formal learning experience.

It all goes back to the simple concept that we as naturalists learn early in our careers – *know your audience*. A school group is not a casual group of visitors and their reasons for visiting are different. According to Civitarese, Legg, and Zuefle in an article in *Legacy* (“More Thoughts on the Differences between Environmental Interpretation and Environmental Education”, Nov/Dec 1997) “interpretation is a communication activity designed to enhance the quality of the recreational experience of the visitor and to inspire greater appreciation of the resource in an enjoyable manner.” This is contrary to education that they refer to as an experience where “its audience has chosen to learn.” They also refer to interpretation as “informal, taking place in leisure time, and that therefore interpretation is a recreational activity with the primary goal of enhancing the leisure-time experiences of visitors.”

It has been ten years since my eye-opening experience on that foggy morning in Maine. I often fantasize about going back to that spot with a group, and finding that crooked pine and showing my old supervisor that I’ve learned a thing or two about interpretation. I imagine now that I would focus on what could have caused the tree to grow crooked and skip the talk about ship masts; that is unless we found a nice *straight* pine further down the trail.

*Larry Berrin has worked as both an interpreter and an environmental educator throughout New England, including Interpretive Park Ranger at Acadia National Park in Maine, Assistant Director of the National Environmental Education Development Collaborative in Massachusetts, and State Education Director for the National Audubon Society in Vermont. He is the author of Vermont Birds, An Introduction to Familiar Species and Birds of the High Desert, An Introduction to Common Species. Larry served on the NEEEA Board and is presently the Senior Manager for Interpretive Programs at the High Desert Museum in Bend, Oregon.*