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THE INTERPRETATION OF LANDSCAPES THAT DON'T 'SPEAK' TO US!

David Newsome
Environmental Science, Murdoch University
Murdoch, Western Australia, 6150.
Phone: (08) 9360 2614. FAX: (08) 9360 6787.
Email: D.Newsome@murdoch.edu.au

Background

The planet we live on contains a vast array of geological features that, amongst others, take the form of volcanoes, glaciers, fold structures, sequences of sedimentary rocks and fossil beds. Such features very often 'speak for themselves' in that they are visually impressive and elicit a sense of wonder in most visitors. Geotourists find it easy to appreciate the power of a volcano, the erosive forces at a waterfall and are able to follow the story of the creation of a canyon.

There are, however, many places in the world that do not reveal their story in such a dramatic or obvious manner. Such places include the flat landscapes of Australia where there are few mountains and only limited rock outcrops, with very subdued topography, often covered by a deep regolith, dominating the terrain. Such places can provide a substantial challenge for tour operators who are often transporting clients long distances to access a specific site. It is in these circumstances that creative interpretation can value add to a tour and increase the level of visitor satisfaction. Such interpretation requires the interpreter to engage the visitor and connect them to the landscape through which the journey is taking place. This can be achieved via a series of planned stops where the interpreter reveals the story of landscape through the development of theme, active involvement, maximum use of the senses and the fostering of self-discovered insight.

Geotourism and the journey across flat landscapes

In Australia nature based tourists and tourism operators alike often find themselves travelling long distances in order to access a highly valued destination. Such tours can be made much more interesting and interactive if the landscape en-route can serve as a focus for the final destination and provide opportunities for learning about the physical environment some distance from the prime site itself. The journey to the Wave Rock geosite (Fig. 1) in Western Australia serves as a good example of where such an approach can be applied. Wave rock lies 350 km east of Perth and is visited by around 100,000 tourists a year. Currently serviced by 6 accommodation providers and accessed via sealed roads many visitors arrive at Wave Rock on a tour which may be part of a larger group on a coach or a smaller group travelling in a mini bus.

The journey from Perth can be made via Brookton or York/Quairading through to Corrigin and Kondinin and then to Hyden where Wave Rock is located (Fig. 2). Today Wave Rock has good interpretive walk trails, interpretive panels and excellent supporting
field guides (Twidale and Bourne, 2000, 2001). Wave Rock and the adjacent area are thus well serviced with information as to local geology and how to interpret geology along self-guided walk trails on and around Wave Rock.

Figure 1 Wave Rock (above) and flat landscapes en-route (below) Western Australia
Figure 2 Indicative road journeys to Wave Rock

Although Wave Rock is an established geological attraction the further development of geotourism in Western Australia and in other areas of predominantly subdued landscapes around the world can benefit from a holistic landscape focus which connects isolated but impressive geosites, like Wave Rock, to surrounding landscapes. The real value of doing this, however, is in expanding the scope of geotourism beyond the obviously spectacular to less 'exciting' aspects of the physical environment such as regolith, soils and flat landscapes generally. With this latter approach the value of interpretive guiding is immense. Face-to-face interpretation provides a human bridge between tourist and the environment. A tour guide can deal with differences in client age and levels of education and respond to individual interests. Knowledge is vital in the appreciation of geological phenomena and face-to-face interpretation can make rocks and landscape, which are static in the sense that do not move and make sound like animals do, accessible to the visitor. Moreover, today people undertaking geotours and other nature-based activities are much more informed and more demanding of quality information than they used to be. Evidence is also accumulating that the acquisition of knowledge is a vital component of visitor satisfaction and that tourists are no longer content to simply view a site, but also want to learn something about it.

Designated interpretive trails have and are being developed in many situations. Self-guided tours can be made along such trails if they are supported with interpretive panels and site field guides. Such trails are often promoted via roadside signage, via information provided to local businesses, through websites, protected area information panels and visitor centres. In remote locations this approach might prove to be impractical and difficult to implement and guided touring is often the best and most suitable approach. An operator conducting a guided tour requires a plan that details the main theme of the tour, the concepts to be explored, details of what will be said and the techniques to be employed during the tour. Based upon the principles of interpretation originally discussed by Tilden and then built upon by others (see Tilden, 1957; Ham, 1992; Moscardo, 2000) the following account is a suggested approach for activities and client learning during a guided tour from Perth to Wave Rock (exact locations not specified) but also indicative of an approach that can be applied to flat landscapes anywhere in the world.

Some suggestions for tour operators

What is interpretation?

Tilden stated that interpretation is "an educational activity which aims to reveal meaning and relationships through the use of original objects, by first hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information. Interpretation commonly consists of an overarching theme that sets the scene for an idea delivered via a number of messages. Various techniques can be employed to get the messages across and these include demonstrations, activities, visual aids and specimens all of which can be supported with printed materials."
The principles of interpretation

In the case of engaging tourists with the environment when travelling across a featureless landscape, en-route to Wave Rock, the following principles (1-5) originally proposed by Tilden (1957) can be applied.

1. Development of theme: A suggested theme is overall geology of the Yilgarn Craton and the geology of granite rocks. The question as to why this landscape is so flat could be considered thereby introducing ideas regarding plate tectonics and landscape stability. The mineral composition of granite can be highlighted. The question of how we recognise minerals could provide the focus for close inspection of rocks. This provides the capacity to investigate mineral properties such as colour, lustre and cleavage. The question of what minerals are made of could be raised. Mineral response to weathering and the development of regolith could also be explored.

2. Active involvement: Active involvement actually means doing something. Scope therefore exists for clients, who are willing and able, to dig or auger a hole and examine regolith/soil materials. Coarse sand grains can be washed and the shape and surface features of various grains can be investigated with a hand lens/microscope. Shape can reveal stories of weathering, erosion and transport and thus provide a platform for interesting discussion. Such content can be supported with laminated photomicrographs of sand grains.

3. Maximum use of the senses: Humans are visual animals and respond positively to colour. Colour can thus be used to engage tourists with the landscape. One way of doing this is to introduce clients to the Munsell system of assigning colour to soils and regolith (Munsell Soil Company, 1975). The activity involves comparing a sample of soil to a soil colour chart (Fig 3). The question of what colours predominate in the landscape can be discussed. People engaged in the exercise can compare notes. Sources of colour can be discussed and participants can be encouraged to compare and contrast soil and regolith colours that they find on tour with those in their home environments. The sense of touch can be employed in support of discussions regarding the grain size make up of soils and regolith. The field bolus test, commonly used by soil scientists as a quick assessment of the particle size make up of a soil (Murphy and Murphy, 2000), can therefore be utilised to connect tourists with landscape materials (Fig. 4). The soil bolus test can be carried out by young and old and families can compare their results. This combination of active involvement and use of a sense other than sight and hearing (which are dominant in most learning situations) will mean that visitors have another avenue to remember aspects of the landscape they have travelled across. This technique will work best if materials of contrasting particle size (sand v clay) can be assessed.
Figure 3 Assessment of soil colour using the Munsell Soil Colour chart

Figure 4. Soil bolus test being performed on a clay soil (Derived from Murphy and Murphy, 2000)
4. Self discovered insight; Through the use of active involvement and maximum use of senses tourists can discover aspects of a landscape for themselves. Such self-discovery, coupled with discussion on aspects of scale and geological time, can provide awareness and meaning in an otherwise featureless and apparently unrevealing landscape.

5. Relevance to the visitor: It is always important to provide scope for emotional engagement in interpretive activities. This is most often achieved when clients can personally relate to the activities and what is being said. Although the question as to why the landscape looks like it does is powerful enough, the issue of how landscape, soils and regolith influences our lives can be a profound experience for some of the audience. The agricultural significance of soils and how regolith controls the distribution of soils is one example.

Conclusion
While Wave Rock can ‘speak for itself’ the flat and subdued landscapes that comprise most of the journey to it generally do not illicit the ‘wow’ response that Wave Rock itself can command. The case presented here maintains the idea that flat and apparently featureless landscapes can reveal their story if time is spent investigating materials and exploring reasons why the landscape looks like it does. The importance of this lies in value adding the tourism experience through interpretation and in doing so fostering increased tourist satisfaction. The best way that this can be achieved is through face-to-face contact with a tour guide. Such tour guides need to be knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the landscapes they are traversing. The ability to inspire people about featureless terrain makes every landscape a potential geotourism destination.

References
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