



By Erica Wheeler

Last year I participated in my first ANPR Ranger Rendezvous. One thing that struck me was that, whenever I asked National Park Service employees where they'd worked, a dozen or so place names would roll off their tongues. I thought, for people who are best known for their connections to places, they sure do move around a lot!

Like myself, you've probably come up with tools and practices over the years that help you gain a feeling of rootedness, no matter where you are. I'm going to provide a few core tools I use and share with interpreters. I hope they remind you of the importance of feeling your own connection to a place, or give you fresh ideas to connect with people and place.

Personal sense of place

Wendell Berry, the Kentucky poet, author and farmer, wrote, "If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are." At one time, our ancestors' survival, identity and well-being were deeply tied to and dependent on the natural and historical knowledge of place.

Today many of us live far from where we were born. We may not even know where our ancestors are from. Many people do not realize how important having a sense of place can be in their lives. In a world where change is happening more rapidly than ever, slowing down to make sense of a place can help us make sense of our lives and the forces that shape them.

A lack of connection can be a pervasive source of stress and unease. It can feel like a deep yearning for something we can't quite articulate.

During interpretive trainings I often ask, "What does it feel like to have a sense of place?" Participants say: connected, home, tuned-in, belonging, aware. And when I ask, "What does it feel like to not have a sense of place?" They answer: rootless, disconnected, lonely, lost.

Stories and place

Our national parks are perfect places to learn and discover where we are, who we are, and how to gain a sense of place. Everyone has stories of place and belonging that are waiting to be remembered, evoked

and revealed. Our connections, knowledge and stories all help us to gain a sense of place.

Here are three simple yet powerful tools – three sources of engagement – I use to connect to places. They can be applied to personal or professional life and used anywhere – in a small urban park, battlefield or vast, wild expanse.

1. Engage the senses:

What does this place feel like?
What do I see, hear, smell, or taste?

2. Engage the mind:

What happened here?
Why is this here?

3. Engage the heart:

What does this remind me of?
What does this mean to me?

Visitors' sense of place

Terry Tempest Williams wrote, "Our parks are breathing space in a world that is holding its breath." When we add place-making opportunities and offer tools for reflection, we help people tap into the power of place.

Photo courtesy of Erica Wheeler

My work is grounded in the philosophy that finding personal stories of connection to place leads to caring, which leads to stewardship.

One way to help others develop a sense of place is by offering opportunities for them to slow down and integrate their knowledge, emotions and experiences.

Training helps interpreters give visitors the best experiences possible. It's based on ideas for balancing information and experiences and incorporating reflection, integration and sharing.

You can add place-making experiences to interpretive programs by exploring the following:

1. Initiate a sensory activity. Encourage dialogue based on what people experience through their senses. Provide an activity that allows visitors to "become" something they see, hear or smell.
2. Share a story about a natural or cultural resource and ask visitors to find evidence of the story. Invite them to become sleuths. Offer clues that can lead to a greater understanding of place. Every place has layers of stories and historical signs that can be seen, imagined or conjured, linking the past to the present.
3. Leave room for visitors to relate their park experiences to their lives. Ask what the park's story reminds them about. Inviting this type of reflection and sharing during or after the program can be a powerful way to activate a sense-of-place connection.

Encourage staff to "go deep" to find what is unique and sometimes overlooked at a park site. The intention is to uncover the inherent strengths and gifts of each person. It's important to bring to life site features, big and small, and find ways to share the layers of time and story a place holds. Explore challenges and opportunities for fostering sense-of-place connections.

Take the time to rethink what your park unit offers through a sense-of-place lens. It will help you make the shift from giver of information to facilitator of experiences, and from doing interpretation for visitors to interpretation with visitors.

In a world where it is easy to disconnect and tune out, tapping into the power of place can be just what people need to recharge. Infusing the best NPS traditions with fresh, empowering, site-specific ideas, creates opportunities to keep staff and visitors engaged.

For parks to thrive long into the future, we need to increase the ways we inspire caring for more visitors. If our national treasures are seen for their ecological, historical, recreational and social value, and as sources for personal wellness and meaning, they will be valued for what they truly are: sacred places that can help restore us in body, mind and soul.

Erica Wheeler is a visitor experience specialist, speaker and interpretive trainer. She has provided Sense of Place and the Art of Interpretation training at more than 30 NPS sites since 2013. Wheeler is also an award-winning songwriter with songs rooted in a sense of place. She was a keynote speaker at the ANPR Rendezvous in Bowling Green, Kentucky in 2018. Learn more at www.senseofplaceconsulting.com

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