

Module 13

PROFESSIONALISM



Ere long may nature guiding be an occupation of honor and distinction. May the tribe increase!

Enos Mills

Module 13

PROFESSIONALISM

What is it?

High quality standards for the interpretive program including conducting, training, and evaluating

Why do we do it?

To enhance the credibility and effectiveness of interpretation

How do we do it?

By providing high-quality programs and service

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be a “professional?” Now that we have uncovered the history, purposes, theories, and skills of practicing interpretation, we turn to a more philosophical discussion about the profession of interpretation. What does it mean to be an interpreter? What are the responsibilities of interpreters to the agency, the public, the resource, and to themselves?

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*When love and skill
work together, expect
a masterpiece.*
John Ruskin
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The Department's commitment to interpretation is evident not just in the broad scope of its program and in the fact that interpretation is one of the Department's six core programs, but in the dedication of its staff of paid professionals and volunteers. That commitment is also affirmed in various official documents—the DPR Mission Statement, a Parks Commission policy (#IV.6), and various initiatives and plans. It is the responsibility of staff at all levels of the Department to contribute to creating and delivering high-quality interpretive services for the public.

Department Operations Manual 0900

As you can see, California State Parks stresses professionalism in its programs, staff, volunteers, and cooperating associations. You will need to exhibit professionalism in your daily interactions with all those encountered. You have an ethical responsibility to the agency, the resource, the public, yourself, and to the discipline itself when you practice

the art and science of interpretation. These responsibilities along with standards of practice combine to form the backbone of the profession of interpretation. This module will propose issues and ideas for contemplation. Keep them in mind as you develop and grow as an interpreter and steward of California's precious resources.



Even the most informal interactions should be conducted with professionalism.

13.1 CHARACTERISTICS

Before we begin a discussion of the interpretive profession, we must understand what profession means. From the dictionary, we find:

DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS

Profession: *n.* a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long academic preparation (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1994)

Professional: *n.* one that engages in an activity professionally (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1994)

Professionalism: *n.* the standing, practice, or methods of a professional, as distinguished from those of an amateur (Random House Webster's Dictionary, 2000).

In more concrete terms, think about the following:

- Professionals are considered experts.
- Professionals have a high degree of generalized and systematic knowledge with a theoretical base.
- The primary orientation of professionals is to their public and/or community interest.
- Professionals have a high degree of self-control of their behavior and are governed by a code of ethics.
- Professionals exhibit enthusiasm and commitment to their audience or customers.
- Professionals are committed to continuous learning about the profession.
- Professionals are dedicated to services and institutions.
- Professionals take pride in the quality of their work.

13.2 RESPONSIBILITIES

As a professional interpreter, you have a responsibility to the science and art of the interpretation that you practice, the agency for whom you work, the audience you serve, and the resources with which you work. In addition, one of the most critical responsibilities is to yourself. Each of these areas interacts with the others to weave the tapestry of what it means to be an interpreter. Although we will discuss each separately, they are all interrelated. These responsibilities help us to begin to distinguish the mere **practice** of interpretation from the **profession**.



We have a professional responsibility to tell the resources' stories accurately.

INTERPRETATION

Every interpreter has a responsibility to know, understand, and apply the best practices of interpretation. It is the collective group that makes up the profession. **Staying current in the field is your responsibility. Every time an interpreter interacts with the public, he or she represents the field as a whole and CSP.** Administrators, managers, and visitors form opinions about the field of interpretation based on personal experiences with individual practitioners. It is your responsibility as a professional heritage interpreter to know how to conduct quality interpretation. To do this, you must stay current in the literature, continually learn new

skills and strategies, contribute to the discipline through articles, research, etc., and to participate in training and conferences. Networking is a critical component of improving and expanding the profession of interpretation. The profession is only as strong as the members creating and adhering to it.

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Every interpreter has a personal responsibility to research carefully the messages being conveyed, to represent their organizations faithfully, and to handle the facts, artifacts, and stories of culture and science ethically.

Lisa Brochu and Tim Merriman

■ ■ ■

CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS

As an interpreter, you have responsibility to represent your agency in an appropriate and ethical manner. In the field of interpretation, you work for the public you serve, the resources you represent, and for California State Parks. You have a responsibility to positively represent the Department, promote its mission, increase public support, and conduct ethical action in the Department's best interest. Personal agendas should be secondary to the accomplishment of the mission of the organization for which you work. Life is short. Be sure you are doing something you love.

In the field of interpretation especially, the love and passion for what you do plays a tremendous role in your job performance.

Visitors can see the innate interest, passion, and care you have for your park and your programs. This cannot be taught through training, books, or manuals. It is you who must bring the belief and support in your Department's mission to the public.



Visitors can see the passion and care you have for your park.

AUDIENCE

The audience you serve depends on you to convey accurate, fair, and meaningful information. It is your responsibility to serve your clients in the most appropriate and ethical manner possible. Therefore, you have an ethical responsibility to ensure the information and messages you share with the public are conveyed with the utmost quality, discretion, and honesty.

Balancing the needs and mission of the agency with the demand to accurately represent the resource is your responsibility. The audience deserves the "truth" of the science, the place, the people, etc., and it is your job as a professional to provide this as ethically as possible.

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The audience and even the organization may not know when the interpreter fails to act ethically. Interpreters, as individuals, must protect the dignity and value of the profession in the careful handling of every action.

Lisa Brochu and Tim Merriman

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RESOURCE

You must represent the resource to the public in such a manner as to ensure its protection, promote visitors' respect and support, and encourage the development of future resource stewards. For many visitors, interpreters serve as the link between the resource and the meanings ascribed to it. Additionally, in many parks the interpreters are the ones most familiar with the resource and the effects of visitor use. **You have a responsibility to promote resource knowledge, understanding, and protection through your carefully planned programs.**

We “speak for the trees,” and in this role we must be able to know what they would say (Seuss, 1971). Research, research, and research are the keys to fulfilling our responsibility to the resource. **Know the resource:** walk the trails, uncover the past, discover the seasons, and learn the flora and fauna. **Feel the resource:** slow down and listen, lie on the ground with your eyes closed, step into the past. **Understand the resource:** read, learn the stories, dog-ear the field guides, and ask questions. There is no substitute for field experience, for walking trails, for being in the resource, and for knowing the place. As a professional, it is your responsibility to the resource to know it so well that you may accurately and appropriately “speak for the trees.”

INTERPRETER

The final responsibility you have is to yourself. In order to be an effective interpreter, you have to feel it, to believe in it, and to sincerely care about what you are doing. You



Discover the trail, remember your bliss...fuel the fire.

must fuel your enthusiasm, your innate interest, and your passion. Any fire, even one of the spirit, must be tended, or it will soon smolder and die. During the first weeks on the job, excitement permeates everything you do. As the interpretive season wears on, you become more comfortable with your programs, the public, and your resource. After the fiftieth time you give that same program—well, it is easy to become complacent. The other responsibilities of a professional interpreter that we have discussed will all be affected if you become bored, tired, or too comfortable. Keep your programs fresh; add new information, modify, read, learn, and always try to remember, **it is the first time visitors will hear it**. Most importantly, keep yourself fresh and renewed. The number one way to do this is to get out in the resource. Walk the trails and the historic sites, and remember why you entered this field in the first place.

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Do not burn yourselves out. Be as I am—a reluctant enthusiast...a part-time crusader, a half-hearted fanatic. Save the other half of yourselves and your lives for pleasure and adventure. It is not enough to fight for the land; it is even more important to enjoy it.

Edward Abbey

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13.3 PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Interpretation is one of the Department's six core programs. As stated in the Department Operations Manual, it is the responsibility of staff at all levels of the Department to contribute to creating and delivering high-quality interpretive services for the public. To accomplish this, you will need to be professional in your delivery of interpretive programs and use the support resources available to stay current and proficient in this area of your duties.



INTERPRETER'S CREED

As an interpreter for California State Parks, I shall endeavor to:

- Know, understand and apply the best practices of interpretation.
- Conduct evaluation of myself and my programs.
- Continually strive to meet agency goals and objectives.
- Stay current in the literature, techniques and skills of interpretation.
- Conduct meaningful thematic interpretation.
- Keep in touch with visitors' needs, goals and desires.
- Make all of my presentations, programs, and displays relevant and enjoyable to visitors.
- Create and conduct interpretation to protect and represent the inherent meanings in the resource.
- Be a role model for environmental responsibility.
- Strive to make interpretation universally accessible to all visitors.
- Be approachable, kind, and respectful to visitors and colleagues.
- Be a resource, mentor, and professional colleague for others.
- Create and strive to meet personal yearly goals.
- Continually rediscover and explore my park's resources.



13.4 SUPPORTING THE PROFESSION

There are two groups that work closely with California State Parks in the design, delivery, and support of interpretation: cooperating associations and the Volunteers-In-Parks (VIP) program. These groups are closely aligned with what Tilden termed “happy amateurs” dedicated to the parks. These are people who love the parks and are passionate about helping achieve the mission of California State Parks, but are not necessarily professional interpreters. They may have special expertise, training, or interest in parks and the resources within them. In fact, many are uniquely qualified to act as interpreters of the resource. Because of the important role these groups play in conducting interpretation in California State Parks, we will discuss each one below. Their work in the parks affects the overall perceived professionalism of interpretation in the parks, and they should be closely nurtured, advised, monitored, and trained.

VIPP (VOLUNTEERS IN PARKS PROGRAM)

Volunteers have been helping out since before the official park system began. Starting in the 1860s with the caring volunteers who rallied to help establish Yosemite as the first state park, to well over 15,000 individuals today, volunteers play a key role in our parks. Volunteers perform many services, including working as docents, park hosts, and visitor center staff. They interact with the public daily, conducting roving interpretation and formal programs, promoting resource protection, and providing information and orientation services. These are some of the same critical duties performed by interpreters in the park. These individuals are not “professional,” as we have discussed; they support the paid interpretive staff. However, this does not mean they can not and should not exude professionalism in their actions.



Tilden described the “happy amateur” as the individual filled with enthusiasm and a desire to share that passion with others. “One does not need the background of a formal education to

Volunteers play a key role in California State Parks and need your support and guidance.

become an amateur of either art or science,” said Tilden (1977, p. 101). Others (Knudson, Cable, and Beck, 1995) have indicated there is no reason volunteers cannot interact with the public in a professional manner. It is up to the rest of the supporting staff and you—the professional interpreter—to ensure that professional standards are adhered to.

California State Park’s VIP program is coordinated statewide by the Volunteer Programs Manager. The purpose of the VIP program is to carry out California State Parks’ mission by establishing the highest standards and developing the best quality volunteer programs. **Working closely with volunteers in your park by providing training and oversight, you can ensure your volunteers are engaging in high quality interactions with the public.** This contributes to the overall professionalism of interpretive services.

NONPROFIT COOPERATING ASSOCIATIONS

Cooperating associations are another critical group of “happy amateurs” helping to fulfill the interpretive mission of CSP. Cooperating associations are nonprofit, charitable, IRS 501(c) (3) organizations committed to funding, supporting, and assisting California State Parks in its educational and interpretive mission.

Today, there are more than 85 cooperating associations raising more than \$12 million dollars to fulfill the interpretive mission of

CSP. These organizations provide program support, raise capital needed for interpretive projects, conduct community outreach, participate in annual training and workshops, and provide educational and interpretive materials for sale through numerous outlets. Wherever a visitor center or bookstore is found, chances are a cooperating association is involved. As with VIPs, working closely with your cooperating association to provide professional interactions with the public should be a priority. The presence of cooperating associations extends the reach of park personnel already stretched thin. Communicating with your cooperating association pays dividends and increases the overall effectiveness of your park’s interpretive services. Policies, guidelines and other essential information about the Cooperating Associations Program are available at www.parks.ca.gov/associations.



Bookstores are one of the most common interpretive services provided by cooperating associations.

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

National Association for Interpretation (NAI)

NAI is a professional association for those involved in the interpretation of natural and cultural heritage resources in settings such as parks, zoos, museums, nature centers, aquaria, botanical gardens, and historical sites. For more than 50 years, NAI and its parent organizations have encouraged networking, training, and collaboration among members and partners in support of their mission: inspiring leadership and excellence to advance heritage interpretation as a profession.

Currently there are over 5,000 members of NAI in the United States and in more than 30 countries throughout the world. NAI offers an annual national workshop that attracts more than 1,000 people, an international conference, regional and special-interest section workshops, two full-color magazines, certification and training, an association store, a publishing imprint (InterpPress), digital newsletters, and web-based services. The regional chapters offer outstanding networking opportunities as well as local training opportunities for you and your volunteers. For more information, visit www.interpnet.com.

North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE)

NAAEE is a network of professionals, students, and volunteers working in the field of environmental education throughout North America and in over 55 countries around the world. Since 1971, the Association has promoted environmental education and supported the work of environmental educators. The NAAEE takes a cooperative, non-confrontational, scientifically-balanced approach to promoting education about environmental issues.

In order to translate theory into practice and to provide support for environmental education and educators, NAAEE offers a variety of programs and activities. These include an annual conference, publications, and web-based support. For more information, visit www.naaee.org.

California Association of Museums (CAM)

CAM, founded in 1979, is a nonprofit organization that represents the interests of California museums and their employees and volunteers. CAM's members include educational and research institutions, as well as individuals associated with such institutions. Their function is to interpret and preserve art and cultural and scientific artifacts for public benefit.

CAM provides a variety of programs that address issues important to museums and advocates for museum interests at the local, state, and federal levels. CAM's programs

include workshops, an annual conference, an informational website, and a legislative advocacy network. CAM encourages the implementation of professional practices and standards in museums, and works to increase the public's understanding of and support for museums. CAM offers both institutional and individual memberships at reasonable prices. For more information on this organization, visit www.calmuseums.org.

American Association of Museums (AAM)

AAM is a national organization representing museums and their paid and volunteer staff. Founded in 1906, AAM currently has more than 16,000 members, with over 11,000 individual members who span the range of occupations in museums, including curators, educators, designers, directors, public relations staff, security officers, trustees, and volunteers. AAM is an advocate for museum issues, provides professional educational opportunities, and offers accreditation and guidance on professional standards. For more information on AAM, visit www.aam-us.org.

American Association for State and Local History (AASLH)

AASLH was officially founded in 1940, although its history dates back to an outgrowth of the American Historical Association in 1904. This professional organization for individuals and institutions associated with state and local history currently has close to 6,000 members nationwide. AASLH serves history organizations in the United States through a variety of programs and publications. Although the organization tends to have a museum focus, its members span the gamut of historical interests.

AASLH offers technical resources such as a free video lending library, and technical leaflets. It holds an annual meeting and periodic professional development workshops and seminars and produces a variety of publications including a newsletter, monthly magazine, and books. It



Professional organizations offer a wealth of resources and training opportunities.

has also created software and programming materials geared toward the needs of smaller institutions that may not have the funds to produce such items on their own. For more information, visit www.aaslh.org.

California Council for the Promotion of History (CCPH)

CCPH is a statewide organization committed to serving the interests of professionals across all the history disciplines. As such, CCPH's membership includes individuals and institutions associated with museums, historical societies, archives, historic preservation and archaeology, education, and government service. Founded in 1977, CCPH's program offerings include an annual conference, a quarterly newsletter, and a mini-grant program. CCPH also offers certification through its Register of Professional Historians and puts forward Standards of Professional Conduct for historians. Through a variety of committees, CCPH advocates for history-related interests at the local, state, and national levels. For more information, visit www.csus.edu/org/ccph.

Local Agencies

Many communities, cities, special districts and counties have museums, parks, cultural sites, recreational facilities, and zoos. They are managed by local government agencies and nonprofit organizations. Each varies greatly in their approach to interpretation. Some, like the East Bay Regional Park District and the Oakland Museum of California, are well established and have developed extensive facilities and programs that reach thousands of visitors each year.

These organizations have the ability to adapt and transform themselves, expanding their outreach to the perceived needs of their respective communities. They have adopted a regional or statewide approach to interpretation and offer comprehensive training for their staff and volunteers, as well as for individuals from other agencies. Others are much smaller or take a more modest approach to interpretation. Within most counties there is at least one organization that has focused on the preservation and interpretation of the area's natural or cultural history.

Association for Living History, Farms and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM)

ALHFAM is a museum organization involved with living historical farms, agricultural museums, outdoor museums of history and folk life, and those museums—large and small—that use “living history” programming. The organization is committed to supporting museum interpreters, educators, researchers, administrators, curators, and

volunteers in the fields of historical agriculture, trades and manufacturing, clothing, foodways, living history programming, historic site administration, care of collections, and program delivery. The organization is an affiliate of the American Association of Museums. For more information, visit www.alhfam.org.

Historical Societies

Throughout the state, a number of historical societies support the preservation of history and its interpretation. Many have scholarly journals, oral histories, documentary materials, and other useful collections. They may be organizations with a statewide interest, like the California Historical Society, or regional groups, such as the Historical Society of Southern California. They can also be smaller local organizations, like the Sacramento County Historical Society. Many have a considerable history themselves, going back fifty to one hundred years. Some groups take a specific focus of interest, such as the Chinese Historical Society of America or the National Japanese American Historical Society. Even the most remote locations in the state have historical organizations with resources that may be of value to interpreters developing programs. Use the American Association for State and Local History's *Directory of Historical Organizations in the United States and Canada* or the California Historical Society's *California Cultural Directory* to locate information. These can be found at www.californiahistoricalsociety.org.

***Be knowledgeable, be skillful, be ethical, be passionate—
Be an interpreter!***

13.5 THE FUTURE

The future of the profession depends on you, the practicing interpreter. The role you play in the development of the discipline is significant. We all determine what interpretation is, how it will be managed, and what the accepted standards will be. You are already well on your way to becoming a professional by completing this training. There are many paths to an end, and which road you choose to follow is up to you. The profession of interpretation is a noble and distinguished one, deserving the dedication and participation of its members. **THAT IS YOU!** Ask questions, contribute, grow, change, challenge, and discover. The profession begins to die when the members become complacent and stop learning.

Our mission is one of distinction and importance. “It is a worthwhile life work and one that will add immeasurably to the general welfare of the nation” (Mills, 1920, p. 140). Especially in this day and age of dissolution, environmental degradation, terrorism, fear, and general unease, the parks and our connections to them are critical. Not only is connecting the public to natural and cultural resources important to the overall health of the nation, but interpretation of the critical issues facing the country and our people is important. Who better than an interpreter to help make sense of the issues we face? Is that not our job, to translate the science, link people to the places, and speak for the issues? We cannot and should not restrict ourselves to just the simple topics. Instead, we should tackle those that are difficult, complex, and unclear. These critical managerial, political, and emotional issues are the worlds we should help illuminate for the public and for ourselves.



The future of interpretation is up to each of you.

WHAT'S AHEAD?

You now have the theories, tools, skills, and techniques of an interpreter and are ready to begin practicing the art and science of interpretation. There will be many new opportunities and experiences that will teach you more about the essence of interpretation than could ever be imparted in a training session. Learn, grow, and teach others. As an interpreter, you wield enormous strength, influence, and responsibility. Use it well.

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Module 13

PROFESSIONALISM**SELF ASSESSMENT**

Answer each question in the section below before reviewing the material in *Module 13—Professionalism*. The answers are not provided. Check your answers with your colleagues and as you read *Module 13—Professionalism*. Items from the self assessment may be reviewed and discussed in class.

1) Name three characteristics of a profession.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

2) What will you do to exhibit professionalism as an interpreter?

3) What is the NAI?

4) There are set “standards” for being a professional interpreter. (Explain your answer.)

a) True

b) False

5) What is the difference between being a “professional” interpreter and a “happy amateur?”

6) What are your responsibilities to the audience to whom you present a program?

- 7) What are VIPPs, and what role do they play in meeting the interpretive mission of CSP?

- 8) There are approximately _____ volunteers in CSP.

- a) 5,000
- b) 10,000
- c) 15,000
- d) 20,000

- 9) What roles do cooperating associations play in CSP?

Now that you have completed the self assessment questions, review the material in *Module 13—Professionalism* to confirm your answers. After reading the module, move on to the workbook learning activities, which will assist you in developing your skills.

WORKBOOK LEARNING ACTIVITIES

To help you review and apply the material covered in *Module 13—Professionalism*, a selection of review questions and/or activities is provided. Again, no answers are included. Use the material from the module, outside sources, and your colleagues to help you complete the activities and answer the questions. There may be more than one right answer. Use the questions and activities to generate discussion about the material. Be prepared to discuss, perform, or demonstrate your answers in class.

- 1) Describes someone you know who approaches their work in a professional manner. What characteristics do they exhibit?

- 2) What does it mean to you to be a “professional” interpreter?

- [illegible]

- [illegible]

Take it to YOUR Park

Answer each question with the information specific to your park. You will have to conduct some research in order to answer each question. Use the answers as a guide for enhancing your career in California State Parks.

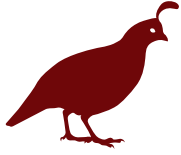
PROFESSIONALISM

Park name: _____

- 1) List the volunteer and cooperating associations that exist at your assigned park unit and explain their purposes.

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- 2) Brainstorm some ideas about how you, as a new employee, can work with the volunteers or cooperating associations in your park to increase the overall professional image of the agency.



INTERPRETER'S CREED

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- Know, understand and apply the best practices of interpretation.
- Conduct evaluation of myself and my programs.
- Continually strive to meet agency goals and objectives.
- Stay current in the literature, techniques and skills of interpretation.
- Conduct meaningful thematic interpretation.
- Keep in touch with visitors' needs, goals and desires.
- Make all of my presentations, programs, and displays relevant and enjoyable to visitors.
- Create and conduct interpretation to protect and represent the inherent meanings in the resource.
- Be a role model for environmental responsibility.
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- Be approachable, kind, and respectful to visitors and colleagues.
- Be a resource, mentor, and professional colleague for others.
- Create and strive to meet personal yearly goals.
- Continually rediscover and explore my park's resources.

