

# Significances of place: Source of all interpretive themes

## **Significant places**

So, what's significant about a particular place? Why is it special? Why is it important? Compared to what? Who's to say? In America, we all have a say. We have a say as individuals when we talk to a neighbor or take our families to visit a place of special importance to us. We have a say when we participate in interest group activities and, indirectly, we have a say when such groups represent our interests, whether we participate or not. We have a say as a national culture through our representatives in government. As a nation, as states, as localities — we attach special importance or significance to certain places because of their distinctiveness, their contrast to other places.

This idea extends beyond America, of course. Nations have also gathered together from time to time to signify that particular places — some of which are in America — are of such importance to the global community that they are worthy of special worldwide recognition and attention. This idea of *place*, and the attachment of meaning to place, is a fundamental human trait. We ascribe significance to special places because of what existed there, what occurred there, what exists there today, or what may exist there in the future.

The whole of park management has always been about place and the many meanings attached to place, meanings ascribed to a place by people. Management serves to retain or restore the characteristics of place so that present and future generations will have the same opportunities to experience it as we have, and as those who preceded us have had. Interpretation is a function of management. Everything interpretation has done, does today, and will do tomorrow revolves around the core denominator of *place*. This is where the interpretive job begins.

## **Natural and cultural resources — an artificial distinction**

The discussion of place would be incomplete if it did not include the terms *natural resources* and *cultural resources*. As people study the world around us, and develop new methods and disciplines, it has often been useful to continually divide the world more and more narrowly to study its pieces in greater depth. So it is with the management of especially significant places.

In the quest for increased knowledge, it has been habitual to identify *natural resources* as resources primarily significant due to their lack of disturbance by people, while defining *cultural resources* as those resources that are primarily significant due to their associations with human action and manipulation. It is important to remember, however, that no cultural resource is divorced from the

natural world — and no natural resource is free of associated ideas, meanings, beliefs, and values assigned to it by people.

To a great extent, this division of resources into natural and cultural has been useful for the purposes of academic study, but can be harmful to a holistic exploration of what resources in parks mean, to whom, why, and how these meanings are changing or not changing. Interpreters need to reintegrate resource knowledge to best facilitate the exploration of those resources and the meanings they hold. To comprehend only the pieces without the context of the greater whole is to limit opportunities for people to forge deeper and more meaningful connections to shared heritage.

## **Interpretive themes explore multiple meanings inherent in the significances of park resources**

The significances of a place are embedded in its tangible and intangible characteristics. It is these elements that people find attractive, interesting, and engaging enough to want to experience. These significances caused the place to be set aside and managed for the enjoyment of all. These significances are what people want to explore, understand better, and appreciate more.

Since the desired outcome of interpretation is to provide opportunities for people to explore the meanings of a place — to enhance their own understanding and appreciation of the significances inherent in the park's natural and cultural resources — the development of interpretive themes must flow from those significances. The significances ascribed to a park are described in a set of *significance statements*. National Park Service documents containing the set of significance statements include general management plans, strategic plans, Comprehensive Interpretive Plans, and many other planning documents. The amount of detail, and the format of the information, may vary from document to document.

*Please see the following page for a workshop handout describing park resource significances.*

# Developing the set of significance statements

## How are significance statements defined?

Significances of place are expressed in a *set of statements*. Significance statements clearly describe the distinctiveness of the combined resources of the place (natural, cultural, scientific, recreational, inspirational, etc.). They embody the power of the place through a factual representation of what makes the place special. They are facts placed in relevant context that makes the facts meaningful, summarizing the essence of the importance of the park's resources to our natural and cultural heritage. Significances may evolve over time as a result of discoveries or other updates to knowledge about the place.

## How are they used?

In *park planning*, the set of significance statements focuses park management actions on the preservation and enjoyment of those attributes that most directly contribute to the importance of the place.

In *interpretive planning*, statements of significance comprise the core values — the central importance — upon which the park's primary interpretive themes and consequent interpretive program are built. They are the bedrock of thematic interpretation.

## How are significances expressed?

Significance statements are usually written as single sentences, and often use such descriptions as largest collection, most diverse representation, most authentic, oldest, best remaining example, etc. These broad statements of facts-in-context are sometimes supported by a hierarchy of more specific statements that detail what makes park resources special, valuable, and meaningful.

## What is a useful set of statements?

The following questions should be asked about draft statements of significance to ensure their quality and usefulness:

- Do the statements *clearly describe* the importance of resources (using enough detail, but not too much detail)? Are they understandable?
- Do the statements go beyond just a *listing* of significant resources and *include context* that makes the facts meaningful?
- Do data and consensus substantiate the statements?

- Do the statements reflect current scholarly inquiry and interpretation, including changes that might have occurred since the park's establishment?
- Do the statements describe why the park is important within a local, state, regional, national, or global context?

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**Examples.** *The following statements are excerpts from the complete sets of significance statements for each park cited. They, therefore, only address a portion of each place's significance.*

The attack at Washita was the first implementation of a strategic policy adopted by the U.S. Army to strike encampments of Plains Indians in winter when they were most vulnerable.

Washita Battlefield National Historic Site

There are seven species of sea turtles in the world, all of which are threatened and three of which are listed as critically endangered in the IUCN Red Book. Padre Island National Seashore is the only area on the Texas coast where nests from all five species of sea turtles that occur in the Gulf of Mexico have been documented. More Kemp's Ridley sea turtle nests have been found at the National Seashore than anywhere else in the United States. The Gulf of Mexico, Laguna Madre, and the Mansfield Channel provide important habitat for these five species of sea turtles.

Padre Island National Seashore

The monument has outstanding research potential because the petroglyphs are numerous, have retained their integrity, are an outstanding example of Rio Grande style, and are close to other associated archaeological resources.

Petroglyph National Monument

The unusually high degree of approachability to the park's active volcanism affords opportunities for fundamental and detailed research not duplicated (or even approached) in any other park in the world, offering relatively safe experiences with lava flows, fountains, and other products of active volcanism.

Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park

Old Dorchester, located at the furthest inland navigable point on the Ashley River, served as a strategic commerce center in colonial South Carolina.

Old Dorchester State Historic Site