



VALLES CALDERA NATIONAL PRESERVE

MASTER PLAN for INTERPRETATION

4.0 THEMATIC STRUCTURE

What is the single most important idea or theme to be passed on to visitors? How can the other themes be best organized into a structure that is intuitively clear to the visitor? What information should visitors leave with? Answering these questions requires the identification of the main goals, themes, messages, interpretive communication objectives, and storylines—the key elements that drive the development of the master plan for interpretation.

The primary challenge for interpretive communications is achieving three broad objectives commonly identified for interpretation: learning, behavioral, and emotional. Ultimately, the behavioral objectives are most important: How do you want visitors to apply the information you have given them to their own lives?

The key to achieving behavioral objectives is to address the emotional (or attitudinal) objectives in concert with the learning (or cognitive, or intellectual) objectives. There is a tendency for agencies to focus on the cognitive aspects of the experience they provide for visitors. But the emotional connections are most likely to survive in people's minds after the visit and to affect behavior. It is, of course, essential that both approaches and objectives be addressed in the visitor experience. Powerful emotional experiences become part of the brain's limbic system, our chief interface with the outside world. Cognitive experiences provide the intellectual support for those emotions.

The interaction of our emotions, intellect, and actions constitute the essence of human experience. A quality interpretive experience provides all of these connections in a way that offers the visitor with a special, personal and lasting experience of their own. Expressed from the visitor's perspective:

“When a person ‘buys’ an experience, they pay to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a site or facility stages to engage them in a personal way.”

Pine and Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*

Los Alamos Historical Society



4.1 Goals and Objectives

Maximize impacts on the site's users... hearts, minds & behaviors

Minimize impacts on the site... environmentally & experientially

Proposed Goals:

The visitor will appreciate and understand the complexity and significance of Valles Caldera National Preserve and Jemez Mountains Region cultural history.

The visitor will experience and come to value our forests and grasslands as living, evolving ecosystems that support many forms of life for many different purposes.

The visitor will appreciate and understand the complexity of ranching and managing rangelands in New Mexico—a history that needs to be told.

Interpretive Objectives are specific and measurable. Either they are accomplished or not, and evaluation should focus on determining this. Some interpretive planners advocate the division of objectives into three categories: learning, behavioral and emotional, which can lead to the best interpretative results. However, the learning and emotional objectives are critical tools for meeting the behavioral objectives. For example, VCNP objectives could include:

Visitors will appreciate the beauty and important resources that are managed in the VCNP.

Visitors will be able to name five kinds of animals that depend on the transition zones between grasslands and forests.

Visitors will grow native plant species in their yard.

4.2 Themes, Messages and Stories

The **Theme** is the central and most important idea for any site and its interpretation. It is usually expressed as a short phrase (some advocate a complete sentence).

Draft Overall Theme

VCNP is a bold experiment in managing a working ranch in a way that offers a broad range of public activities, preserves cultural practices, and sustains ecological integrity.

Subthemes are used as organizing elements within the overall theme, i.e., just a way to get a handle on what is often a complex story.

Messages are simple statements that summarize what must be interpreted to the visitor, and form the basis for objectives, e.g., *responsible grazing management is based on sustainable use of grasslands and water supplies.*

Stories (or topics, or subjects) are the content that forms the body of interpretative programs and media. Understanding the Preserve's stories is an essential prerequisite to identifying themes. This process is circular: initially, content determines themes; in the development of programs and media, themes determine the content.

Non-Interpretive Themes – The themes discussed above refer to interpretive themes, which, in turn, are related to objectives, exhibits, etc. Sometimes non-interpretive themes are used that place more emphasis on attracting the visitor than on the interpretive goals. For example, the Regenstein Journey Across Africa does not hint at the interpretive goals nor do some of the alternatives such as Africa Alive and Safari! These “themes” are sometimes referred to as “hooks.”

4.2.1 How Themes, Messages and Stories are Used

In addition to the documentation of themes, messages and stories found in this section and in the interpretive matrix in the appendix, a map of primary sites for interpreting specific subthemes and stories is included. These combine to provide the raw material for programming. Program themes, messages and stories may be organized in a number of ways:

- Introductory programs, i.e., those that strive to provide an overview of the Preserve and its goals, should incorporate all of the themes and as many messages as are practical to include. Examples of such programs include van tours of the site, exhibits in a visitor facility, outreach programs in neighboring communities and publications.
- Specialized programs, e.g., elk viewing or geology tours, may focus on a specific theme, but should incorporate the other themes as secondary messages. For example, a geology tour may focus on the caldera and obsidian stories, but should also include the cultural significance of this rich source of obsidian, and remind the audience that role of the Preserve is to manage all of these resources in the context of a working ranch.
- Interpretive panels function most effectively if they focus on subjects that require relatively little interpretive text. Generally, one or two stories are highlighted from the theme on each panel. An easy test of the subject's appropriateness is if another interpreter can immediately identify the theme of the panel.
- All themes must be interpreted, but the programming methods can vary; if a program does not focus on specific themes, then it should be assessed as to the appropriateness of undertaking it.

- Themes, and the related elements of subthemes, messages, and objectives, act as a filter for determining how to proceed with interpretive programming.





VALLES CALDERA NATIONAL PRESERVE

MASTER PLAN for INTERPRETATION

The following matrix provides an organization of the storyline for VCNP into subthemes, messages and content:



Subtheme	Subtheme	Subtheme
<p><i>VCNP preserves key components of the human history of the Jemez Mountains.</i></p> <p>Messages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valles Caldera and the Jemez Mountains have special spiritual meaning to the Pueblos and Tribes. • Valles Caldera has been used by Native Americans, especially by those of Pueblo heritage, since time immemorial. • The preserve was once the Baca Location No. 1 Land Grant. • Different groups have hunted in the caldera for countless centuries. • The caldera's grasslands attracted Hispanic and other shepherds and sheep ranchers. • Cattle grazing replaced sheep grazing in the caldera after World War II. • Past logging operations have left their mark on the caldera's forested lands. • The geothermal activity in the caldera once attracted prospectors and researchers. • Hollywood built movie sets in the preserve that capitalized on the caldera's beautiful vistas. 	<p><i>VCNP protects a remarkably diverse ecosystem of great biotic and abiotic significance.</i></p> <p>Messages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Valles Caldera is one of the best examples of a caldera formation in the world. • Volcanic activity over the millennia has created many dominant geologic features in and near the Preserve. • The Preserve's montane grasslands are one of the most dramatic features of Valles Caldera. • Most of the ponderosa pine forests and woodlands on the preserve are second growth, although some old growth stands remain. • Rare plant species of New Mexico are found in the Preserve. • Various aquatic habitats help shape the Preserve's unique landscape. • Noxious weed species have been found in the Preserve. • The preserve supports rich communities of flora and fauna. 	<p><i>VCNP inspires new directions in public land management by serving as an experiment in balancing natural processes with human uses.</i></p> <p>Messages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Valles Caldera Trust was formed to uphold the Valles Caldera Preservation Act. • The Preserve is operated in a manner that honors the history, traditions and ethics of a working ranch. • The values and vision of the trust are based on a ranching ethic. • A central goal of management is to increase the resilience and integrity of the preserve's ecological systems. • The Preserve is accessible by the public on a limited basis. • The Preserve's goal is to be a successful model of integrated land stewardship demonstrating the balance of ranching, recreation, cultural preservation, sustainable use and financial self-sufficiency.

Human history of the Jemez Mountains



Los Alamos Historical Society



Don J. Usner



VCNP

Diverse ecosystem



Don J. Usner



Don J. Usner

New directions in public land management



Don J. Usner



VCNP