

# **The Elephant in the Room: How You Can Reach People You Thought You Couldn't**

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## **Abstract**

This program will narrate you through a set of experiences designed to challenge the way you see your site's resources. Our programs tend to address familiar audiences, but our messages are sometimes too important to keep among the same crowds. Whether you're talking about ecology, climate, economics, or justice, we all have something at stake. We can reach new people by taking short steps outside our disciplinary bounds. Whether you've always wanted to teach Nascar enthusiasts about wetlands or you just want to preach outside the choir for a change, this workshop will help you look at ways to reach new audiences.

## **Keywords**

Audience building, marketing, nontraditional users, innovation, universal, meaning, resonance, experience, culture, context, background, diversity.

## **Introduction**

As our collective relationships with ecology and culture continue to change, our interpretive messages can be more important than ever.

I grew up in Pennsylvania—a state where the economy and culture are inexorably tied. The relationship Pennsylvanians have with their ecology is complicated: the same cultural and economic traits that define the place mean that it is simultaneously at odds with, and dependent on, its ecology. It is an industrial state, where coal, timber, and steel have traditionally put food on the table and defined cultural identity, but where farming, fishing, and rural and forest culture also play an important role. Though places like California are superficially different, we face some of the same challenges. Our culture here is defined by our relationships with water, air, and land.

Because people tend to relate to our programs, interpreters can help people to make sense of these sometimes-complicated relationships. We can reach new audiences with these important messages, but this means stepping outside our usual bounds as narrowly-defined naturalist or cultural interpreters and looking at how other resources on our sites can help us reach new audiences.

## **Body**

In my talk, I'll illustrate this by way of example, among other things. One of the first places I worked was in West Virginia, a place called Cass Scenic Railroad State Park. This is a former logging railroad, sawmill, and company town where you can ride a steam train to the top of one of the state's highest peaks. It's in one of the least-populated counties in the east, and is surrounded by National Forest land that was once, or twice-logged timber holdings in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Like many Pennsylvanians, I identified with the machinery, but over time, as I realized what a profound ecological story the rise and fall of the logging industry told, I became fascinated with all kinds of interdependent relationships between people and place. This enabled me to carry ecological messages to gear heads like me, and also provided an opportunity to connect recreational forest users and other ecologically conscious visitors with the fascinating history and technology of the place.

The back-story for the people who avoid your site, miss it entirely, or fall outside of its cultural context is almost always a complicated one, but there are always opportunities to find common ground. To help you see ways that this can work to your advantage, I'll tell you several stories like mine, and present to you some examples of other cultural sites that incorporate ecological messages, and of ecological sites that have made use of cultural features, or of current cultural events and issues, to bring environmental relationships meaning to new or nontraditional audiences.

## **Conclusion**

So, why “the elephant in the living room?” Sometimes the easiest solutions are right in front of you, but never get discussed. Your site almost certainly has resources that, at face value, fall outside your usual disciplinary bounds—that may not speak directly to the message—but that offer an opportunity for common ground with non-typical users. By identifying new audiences and taking the time to learn about who they are, and then exploring possible meanings that your overlooked resources may have to different people, you may well find yourself discovering new programmatic opportunities. As word gets out, you may build entirely new audiences, and as you do, you'll face opportunities to find common ground with them you didn't know you had. Your organization's civic presence and political capital can grow accordingly, and more people will be carrying your effective, important message home with them. We know that good interpretation builds meaningful relationships with our audiences, and that meaningful relationships build stewardship. Simple, outside-the-box thinking can help all of our sites to spread the word.

## **Note:**

**There are no handouts for this presentation, but participants should come prepared to write down and discuss their thoughts.**