CHAPTER 8

Interpretation and Public Art

Introduction

Interpretation and public art are important elements to consider at Mississippi Gorge Regional Park. Through interpretation and public art, people are connected to the unique history, culture and environment of the river gorge. The stories, places, events, exhibits and art in the regional park add meaning to the park, and reveal the evolving culture of the communities along the park. They activate the imagination, encourage people to pay more attention to their environment, and build a stronger sense of place and stewardship for the park. The following pages provide recommendations for interpretation and public art in MGRP.

Interpretation

This section establishes the overall direction for interpretive recommendations for Mississippi Gorge Regional Park (MGRP) and anticipates future interpretive planning in the park. The interpretive concepts and messaging have evolved during the broader master planning process. Interpretation can be developed in partnership with many organizations and agencies, based on compatible missions and funding availability. The key is that an interpretive planning, programming, and/or exhibit project within MGRP meets the interpretive framework provided here and a comprehensive interpretive plan. This shared vision and strategy will help partners to preserve, manage, and interpret the site consistently and effectively.

What Is Interpretation?

Interpretation seeks to connect visitors to a place or a resource. It is an experience more than a sign; a story more than conveying facts. Interpretation answers the questions: “So what?” and “Why should I care?” Good interpretation forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in a resource and
place. The Mississippi Gorge Regional Park master planning process considered the place-specific historical, cultural, and natural resources to be interpreted and the demographics of the people who use the site to develop relevant messages and inform planning decisions in support of the park’s mission and vision.

In *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Freeman Tilden, the grandfather of the interpretation profession, describes interpretation as “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.”

The National Association for Interpretation (NAI) defines interpretation as “a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource.”

People visit Mississippi Gorge Regional Park for a variety of reasons: scenic beauty, recreational opportunities, and the chance to relax and unwind. Interpretation adds depth to an already enjoyable park experience by providing context: a way to understand the park and an encouragement to engage further. Layers of interpretation connect people to this spectacular regional park and each other in a variety of ways. Exploring the park, visitors discover stories hidden in plain view, or in the flowing river as it rises and falls with the season. Events and programs bring people with shared interests together. An engaging, meaningful, and personal park experience allows visitors to formulate their own answers for why they care and what resources or experiences they want to steward for future generations.

For the park and community, interpretation is an integral part of fostering park stewardship—from awareness to action. Interpretation creates opportunities for resource awareness, encourages interest, develops understanding, and finally, provides a call to action. Interpretation encourages positive park experiences and can discourage negative ones. It forges connections and provides opportunities for visitors to learn about the world around them. Interpretation may not be the initial draw to the park, but it can welcome visitors in and encourage people to return again and again.

**Interpretive Principles and Goals**

Interpretation is built on the mission and vision established for the agency or site. From there, principles and goals for interpretation define what will be achieved and guide how the vision will be brought to life.

**The MPRB mission is:**

*The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board shall permanently preserve, protect, maintain, improve, and enhance its natural resources, parkland, and recreational opportunities for current and future generations.*
The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board exists to provide places and recreation opportunities for all people to gather, celebrate, contemplate, and engage in activities that promote health, well-being, community, and the environment.

The Mississippi Gorge Regional Park Master Plan vision is:

Residing within the only true gorge along the Mississippi River, MGRP is a wild, welcoming space that is actively managed and mindfully stewarded to balance and preserve its unique natural, historic, and recreational amenities for the wellness and enjoyment of all park visitors.

The master plan’s guiding principles define a set of basic, fundamental assumptions to guide the development of interpretation within the regional park. These principles have been developed based on input from the community, stakeholders, and the project team.

Interpretation within Mississippi Gorge Regional Park will:

- Convey factual information and authentic stories
- Convey different perspectives on the history of places and resources
- Foster preservation and restoration of historic resources
- Complement other interpretation and visitor experiences in the MPRB park system
- Be accessible to the greatest number of people possible
- Foster discovery and contemplation
- Encourage visitors to learn more about the stories and resources encountered in the park
- Focus not only on history but present stories of people and what the river and the gorge means to them.

Goals are essential for reaching a desired end-point. Goals establish a target and are used to measure progress toward achievement.

Goals for the MGRP’s master plan implementation with regards to interpretation:

- Build awareness of the park’s history and resources
- Strengthen the park identity with the MPRB system
- Create a cohesive visitor experience linked to the park’s theme and subthemes
- Provide visitors with engaging and relevant experiences
- Provide opportunities for visitors to engage in stewardship
- Ensure the interpretive experience is not intrusive on the natural environment
Organizing the Interpretive Experience

Interpretation helps to organize the visitor experience by identifying a theme and supporting subthemes.

The interpretive theme, subthemes, and potential storylines are developed from researching the cultural and historical resources found throughout Mississippi Gorge Regional Park, listening to input from community members and other stakeholders, and consulting with the project team.

Interpretive Theme

A theme is the unifying message of all interpretation at a site or, in this case, along a corridor. It may or may not appear in writing, exhibits, and programming, but all interpretive efforts should fall within the scope of the interpretive theme. A theme provides organizational structure and is the main message that visitors encounter when they visit the park. After their experience, visitors should be able to summarize the main point of interpretation in one sentence—this is the interpretive theme. A theme is different from a topic in that it expresses a complete idea or message. A topic is a broad general category, such as recreation, natural resources, or history. A theme should answer the question, “So what?” It should tell visitors why a specific topic is important.

A theme should:
» Be stated as a short, simple, complete sentence
» Contain only one main idea, if possible
» Reveal the overall purpose of the site
» Be specific
» Connect tangible resources to universally understood concepts

The interpretive theme for Mississippi Gorge Regional Park:

The gorge story is written on the limestone bluffs and heard in the songs and calls of wildlife and people. Here, people connect with nature, themselves, each other, and histories reaching back over the millennia.
Subthemes

Subthemes support and develop the theme. For Mississippi Gorge Regional Park, subthemes help organize the stories told, the resources revealed, and the experiences that park visitors will have when the park master plan is implemented. Interpretation throughout the park corridor is anticipated to inform the design of the park landscape, structures, and other features. Subthemes include:

1. **Spiritual Connection:** The flowing Mississippi River connects us to the waters of the world and to our innermost selves, reminding us to breathe deeply, reflect, and go with the flow.

   **Potential Storylines**
   
   Examples of topic storylines or questions that could be answered through interpretation:
   
   - Stewardship: We recognize our connection with the natural world and the need to act respectfully and responsibly.
   - Bdote and the Mississippi River: Collaborate with Dakota and other indigenous people to tell the story of their living, traveling through, or visiting this area.

2. **Geology & River Ecology:** This riverine landscape has been forming and changing for thousands of years. Today, climate change and people are the drivers most affecting this ancient landscape.

   **Potential Storylines**
   
   Examples of topic storylines or questions that could be answered through interpretation:
   
   - Changing landscape: The gorge emerged in the wake of waterfalls migrating upstream.
   - Locks and dams: Early settlers built locks and dams to harness the power of falling water and support navigation. Today, the need for this infrastructure is in question.
   - Geologic evidence and deep time: Today, you can witness geologic history in the limestone bluffs. The gorge walls are made up of St. Peter’s Sandstone and capped by a narrow layer of Glenwood Shale and a thick layer of the iconic Platteville Limestone. Above these is Decorah shale, which is very fossiliferous.
   - Ecological mosaic: The gorge comprises distinct habitats that make a cohesive whole.
   - The sand is white at the beach because it eroded from the St. Peter Sandstone, which is very pure quartz sand that was deposited 450 million years ago when shallow equatorial seas covered much of Minnesota.
   - The construction of the dams has caused the river level to rise, permanently inundating floodplain areas and rapids.
   - What are the effects of climate change on this riverine landscape?

3. **Flora & Fauna:** The gorge is home to plants and animals that thrive in this dynamic landscape—some stay year-round, while others are ephemeral.

   **Potential Storylines**
   
   Examples of topic storylines or questions that could be answered through interpretation:
   
   - Seasonal change of plants and animals seen throughout the park.
   - Stewardship: We recognize our connection with the natural world and the need to act respectfully and responsibly.
   - Flood tolerant wetland plant and tree communities along the gorge corridor can support migrating birds, reptiles, amphibians, and mammals similar to those found at the nearby Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge.
   - Native landscapes and wildlife: Before the locks and dams, the river rapids supported more than 100 fish species.
   - Remnant landscapes: Once mostly oak savanna and prairie, only remnants of both remain.
   - Bird habitat and migrations: Millions of birds follow the Mississippi Flyway on their annual migration. Park visitors can spot golden-winged warbler, indigo bunting, and bald eagles, as well as urban birds that require forested habitat such as blue jays, chickadees, cardinals, wood ducks, and woodpeckers.
   - Invasive species: The historic oak savanna and prairie have given way to other plant communities.
   - What are the effects of climate change on the plants and animals of the gorge?
4. **Recreation:** Whether active or passive, alone or in groups, park visitors explore every inch of the park and take in its views in all seasons and all weather.

**Potential Storylines**

Examples of topic storylines or questions that could be answered through interpretation:

- Recreation in the park has changed over time from leisurely drives along the scenic parkways to physical activities such as bicycling, walking, and hammocking, among others.
- What are the human-caused impacts of park recreational activities on natural systems?
- Why should I stay on the trail?

5. **People:** People have been drawn to and through the gorge for thousands of years—for sustenance and celebration, for work and play.

**Potential Storylines**

Examples of topic storylines or questions that could be answered through interpretation:

- Native people, such as Siouan, Missouria, Otoe, Iowa, and Dakota lived in this area for thousands of years and live here today.
- Immigrant communities have included Czech, Slovak, Swedish, Irish, and East African people. The University of Minnesota attracts students from all over the world.
- People have been employed by a variety of river industries, such as lumber, milling, and transportation. Today there is less industry on the river, but more recreation.

**Interpretive Recommendations by Location**

Recommendations for interpretation aim to enhance the visitor experience and achieve goals for interpretation at Mississippi Gorge Regional Park. Successful and sustainable interpretation requires an ongoing process of planning, implementation, and evaluation. For example, prior to implementing any site-specific interpretation, the MPRB should develop an Interpretive Plan for Mississippi Gorge Regional Park to develop the concepts presented here.

**Bohemian Flats**

This park is well suited to conveying the topics and storylines related to subthemes 1 and 5 through a variety of integrated and distinctive interpretive elements.

**Welcome Center**

Subtheme 1 - Space for active and meditative activities

» Interpretive elements integrated into the building and landscape could explore how water has been a centerpiece of spirituality and sacred healing practices around the world.

**Festival Space**

Subtheme 5 - Celebrate the people who live, work, and learn here now and in the past

» Interpretive elements integrated into the landscape design could express
the different cultural groups that have lived, worked, or played here. For example, different words of welcome carved into limestone seating blocks or integrated into fencing panels.

**Interpretive Play Area**
Subtheme 5 - River industries inform the play area design
» Logging and the timber industry, milling, and barge transportation could inform the design of playground features and other play elements.

**Interpretive Signage**
Subtheme 5: The immigrant communities who lived on Bohemian Flats; option to include audio in English and other languages
» Interpretive signage could describe the communities that lived here: what drew them to this place as well as the challenges they faced living on the floodplain.

**Interpretive Signage**
Subtheme 1: People/Nature connections, such as the calming effect of flowing water
» Interpretive signage could describe how people have approached the meaning of water from a spiritual perspective and explore the calming effects of nature, especially water.

**Additional Opportunities:**
» Interpretation in multiple languages, especially those of the people who have lived or are living near the regional park.
» Audio interpretation for greater accessibility and to engage audio learners.
» Plant and/or animal identification along trails could also promote subtheme 1 as another people/nature connection and promote stewardship.
» Subtheme 5: Native people lived in this area for thousands of years, and some still live here today.
» Continue building relationships with native people and collaborate on interpretive projects.
Annie Young Meadow & Riverside Park

These parks are well suited to conveying the topics and storylines related to subthemes 1, 3, and 5 through a variety of integrated and distinctive interpretive elements.

Stewardship Garden
Subtheme 3 - Pollinator garden
» A pollinator garden with interpretive signage could promote stewardship and encourage park visitors to plant their own pollinator garden at home or become stewards of the park’s garden.

Peace Garden
Subtheme 1 - Celebrate Annie Young and welcome everyone, acknowledge the multi-cultural community
» A peace garden with interpretive signage could encourage park visitors to promote inclusivity and be active in their community.

Interpretive Signage
Subtheme 3: Showcase the old specimen oak trees
» A small interpretive sign could describe what a specimen oak tree is and why people should care about these very old trees.

Interpretive Signage
Subtheme 5: The WPA workers who built many park and parkway structures
» A series of interpretive signs at WPA-built park features could describe the WPA program as part of President Roosevelt’s second New Deal, its influence in bringing economic stability to Minneapolis, and its lasting impact on the park system.

Interpretive Signage or Landscape Element
Subtheme 5: Park stewardship partners and call to stewardship action
» Public art or another integrated landscape element could be changeable to identify stewardship partners and promote stewardship activities in different seasons.

Additional Opportunities:
» Interpretation in multiple languages such as Somali, Spanish, and especially Dakota.
» Audio interpretation for greater accessibility and to engage audio learners.
» Plant and/or animal identification along trails could also promote subtheme 1 and/or 3 as another people/nature connection, to promote stewardship, or to identify native and invasive species.
East River Flats
This park is well suited to conveying the topics and storylines related to subthemes 2, 4, and 5 through a variety of integrated and distinctive interpretive elements.

Climbing Wall
Subtheme 2 - Highlight gorge geology-climb through time
» Climbing wall markers and/or interpretive signage could identify different stratigraphic layers such as St. Peter Sandstone, Platteville Limestone, and Decorah Shale.

View-Through or Interpretive Signage
Subtheme 5 - Showcase Cass Gilbert’s UMN design that connected the University to the river
» A view-through interpretive element could show how Gilbert’s design would have looked compared to the current river access from campus.

Interpretive Signage
Subtheme 2: Highlight the geologic and ecologic features along the boardwalk to “Southeast Flats”
» Interpretive signage could describe the ecological mosaic of the gorge.

Integrated Element (stepped seating area)
Subtheme 2: Highlight the river level over time
» Flood-level markers could show various flood levels and describe how dam construction has caused the river level to rise, inundating floodplain areas and rapids.

Interpretive Signage or Landscape Element
Subtheme 4: Celebrate the wide variety of recreational opportunities throughout the park
» Interpretive signage or integrated elements could encourage year-round use of the park for recreational activities.

Additional Opportunities:
» Interpretation in multiple languages.
» Audio interpretation for greater accessibility and to engage audio learners.
» Plant and/or animal identification along trails could also promote subtheme 2 as another way of conveying how nature has responded to human-driven changes to the riverine landscape.
» Mississippi River gorge meander, contemporary and historic, etched in concrete could express subtheme 2 related to the changing river.
“Southeast Flats”

This park area is well suited to conveying the topics and storylines related to subthemes 2, 3, and 4 through a variety of integrated and distinctive interpretive elements.

**Interpretive Signage or Landscape Element**
Subtheme 2: Highlight river ecology and acknowledge neighborhood stewards
» Interpretive signage, public art, or another integrated landscape element could be changeable to identify stewardship partners and promote stewardship activities in different seasons.

**View-Through**
Subtheme 2 - Showcase view of the white sand beach
» A View Through interpretive element could highlight the white sand on the other side of the river and explain that it’s eroded from the St. Peter Sandstone layer, which is pure quartz sand deposited 450 million years ago when shallow equatorial seas covered much of Minnesota.

**Interpretive Signage**
Subtheme 2: Meeker Dam
» Interpretive signage could describe Meeker Dam and its role in river development.

**Interpretive Signage**
Subtheme 4: Bridal Veil Falls
» Interpretive signage could describe Bridal Veil Falls and its role in seasonal river recreation.
» Subtheme 2: Bridal Veil Falls
» Interpretive signage could describe what the waterfall originally looked like prior to humans encasing it in concrete.

**Interpretive Signage or Landscape Element**
Subtheme 3: Plant identification
» Interpretive signage or integrated landscape elements could identify native and invasive species, and promote stewardship of fragile plant communities.

**Additional Opportunities:**
» Interpretation in multiple languages.
» Audio interpretation for greater accessibility and to engage audio learners.
» Animal identification along trails could also promote subtheme 3 as another way of conveying how nature has responded to human-driven changes to the riverine landscape. Flood tolerant wetland plant and tree communities along the gorge corridor can support migrating birds, reptiles, amphibians, and mammals similar to those found at the nearby National Wildlife Refuge. In addition, before the locks and dams, the river rapids supported more than 100 fish species.
“Longfellow Flats”
This park area is well suited to conveying the topics and storylines related to subthemes 3 and 5 through a variety of integrated and distinctive interpretive elements.

Binoculars and Birding Book
Subtheme 3 - Feature gorge birds
» Interpretive signage with a multi-page, outdoor flipbook and dual base binoculars for ADA compliance could encourage birding and identify some of the birds that people might see such as golden-winged warblers, indigo buntings, and bald eagle, as well as urban birds that require forested habitat such as blue jays, chickadees, cardinals, wood ducks, and woodpeckers.

Interpretive Signage
Subtheme 5 - Winchell Trail
» Interpretive signage could provide information about the people who influence park system development as whose name is memorialized in some park features.

Interpretive Signage or Landscape Element
Subtheme 3: Highlight the oak savanna and remnant prairie
» Interpretive signage or integrated landscape elements could identify these distinctive landscapes and plant communities and promote a broader understanding of their significance.

Interpretive Signage or Landscape Element
Subtheme 5: Celebrate the MPRB forestry management practices and partners
» Interpretive signage or integrated landscape elements could identify the management practices undertaken by MPRB and its partners and explain why the landscape is managed in this way.

Additional Opportunities:
» Interpretation in multiple languages.
» Audio interpretation for greater accessibility and to engage audio learners.
» Plant and/or animal identification along trails could also promote subtheme 3 as another way to promote stewardship or identify native and invasive species.
Oak Savanna

This park area is well suited to conveying the topics and storylines related to subthemes 1, 2, and 3 through a variety of integrated and distinctive interpretive elements.

Binoculars and Birding Book

Subtheme 3 - Feature gorge birds

» Interpretive signage with a multi-page, outdoor flipbook and dual base binoculars for ADA compliance could encourage birding and identify some of the birds that people might see such as golden-winged warblers, indigo buntings, and bald eagles, as well as urban birds that require forested habitat such as blue jays, chickadees, cardinals, wood ducks, and woodpeckers.

Interpretive Signage

Subtheme 2 - Show the beach and its views

» Interpretive signage at the top of the stairs could show park visitors what they will find on the beach. This content and placement will encourage people to explore the gorge and offer those with limited mobility an insight on the beach landscape.

Interpretive Signage or Landscape Element

Subtheme 2: Storm water management (What’s that smell?)

» Interpretive signage could explain the storm water management system that culminates in several outfalls along the river, which are often identified by unpleasant smells and conveyors of trash. This signage could function as a bookend to storm drain stencils that ask residents “Please don’t pollute. Drains to the Mississippi River.”

Interpretive Signage or Landscape Element

Subtheme 3: Plant identification

» Interpretive signage or integrated landscape elements could identify these distinctive plants and plant communities and promote a broader understanding of their significance.

Interpretive Signage or Landscape Element

Subtheme 1: Celebrate the people/nature connection

» Interpretive signage could describe how people have influenced natural systems and explore the positive effects of nature on wellbeing.

Additional Opportunities:

» Interpretation in multiple languages.
» Audio interpretation for greater accessibility and to engage audio learners.
**Public Art**

Integrating public art created by local, regional, and national artists into Mississippi Gorge Regional Park provides opportunities for supporting health and wellbeing, reinforcing identity, sense of place, and beauty. As the popularity of public art continues to grow so does the practice of public art. Today public art is an expansive area of enquiry and expression ranging from sculpture and murals to temporary digital media, and built environments to artist-led community events. Public art and Interpretation go hand in hand. Stakeholder interest for integrating public art (in multiple forms) has been relatively strong with suggestions for its use in interpreting and celebrating aspects of the Mississippi Gorge’s natural and culture history, flora, fauna, and geology.

The MPRB generally hosts rather than owns art on public land. Sponsors of artwork are responsible for funding, fabrication/acquisition, installation, maintenance, and deaccession of the artwork. MPRB staff administer public art project implementation. Currently, artwork is rarely funded through MPRB capital projects.

Specific locations for public art are left open in this master plan for the purpose of truly creating public art that is a product of the community and art that is time and location specific. A community or artist can sponsor art work and propose locations for it within the regional park. The process includes the drafting of licensing and maintenance agreements, community engagement, and approval by the Board of Commissioners. Artists, community members or groups, and organizations may submit proposals at any time through the MPRB website.