

Linking Tangibles and Intangibles

Effective interpretation helps forge intellectual and emotional connections between the audience and the resource. The resources we work with (in this case marine resources) are largely tangible. The target behaviors we're hoping to establish with our audience are things like conservation, protection, political support—all intangibles. Audience research (i.e. the Ocean's Project) tell us that emotional connections are often more potent in motivating conservation behaviors than intellectual connections. So how do we do this?

Start with the tangibles

We connect with the world around us through our five senses. A “tangible” is anything (i.e. objects, places, media) that we can experience directly using our senses. Good interpretation often uses a multi-sensory approach, providing access to tangibles and encouraging audiences to explore these through personal interaction. Adding the use of vivid descriptions helps the audience lock on to these sensory experiences by verbalizing them.

We humans are very adept at “seeing” things with our mind's eye. We tend to integrate what we know about an object along with our sensory impression. So it can be helpful to focus strictly on the five senses to really experience an intangible. (Don't worry, the knowledge part is coming up shortly.)

To cultivate the ability to explore tangible properties, try practicing on some simple objects such as food (oranges, cookies), bottles/packages, pieces of wood or stone. List as many sensory descriptors as you can for the item.

Now add the intangibles

Intangibles include concepts, constructs, past experiences, theories, cumulative knowledge—in short the intangibles are what we may know or feel about the resource. Now our human gifts of intellect and emotion can be added to the experience. We can make more rich and complex connections with our world by considering the intangible properties. Simple objects may take on a variety of meanings; they may be symbolic of larger constructs.

Go back to the objects you explored at the sensory level and make a new list of the intangible properties you can relate to that object. This list of intangibles is often 4-5 times larger than the tangible list, and really starts to describe the true meanings and multiple dimensions of the object. Make a special effort to identify feelings that you may associate with the object.

On to universals

There is a special group of intangibles that nearly every human has experienced. We call these “universals” and they include things such as life, death, love, family, survival, joy, sorrow and many more. Whenever we include these universals in the interpretation of our resource (objects, places, etc.) we can guarantee the audience will find it meaningful and relevant.

Go back to your list of intangibles and underline the ones that you think fit into this universal category. Now you're focusing in on the true essence and meaning of this object for the largest number of people. You'll also notice that many of these universals

have an emotional component as well—they can be powerful in evoking feelings. Using universals is one of the most effective ways to build that emotional connection between our audience and the resource we interpret.

Bringing it all together

Our goal in interpreting Marine Protect Areas is to help our audience connect to a resource that they may have little experience with. We can use representative tangibles from this resource to help initiate those connections. However, the true connections occur at the intellectual and emotional level. Identifying and incorporating universals will be important ways to accomplish this.

For example, if you can't take your audience underwater to directly explore an MPA, you may start with images, specimens, rocks and shells as tangibles to help establish that first tangible connection with this resource. But the deeper connections will occur when we start to talk about survival, relationships, homes, heritage and other universals that our audience will relate to. Now our audience begins to develop a personal and meaningful connection with that resource.