

## Book Review

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Finding good, relevant reading material on interpretation can be difficult. We asked reviewers in India and Colombia to give us their views on two popular books. Here's what they thought.

### **Environmental Interpretation - A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets.**

by Sam H. Ham

American Press/Fulcrum

456 pp

ISBN 1-55591-902-2

All my praise for the author. The chapters have been written in simple English and are self explanatory. The case studies cited have made the book more enriching. To put it in other words, the author takes his readers on a trail explaining the nuances of environmental interpretation.

A very well written book and sure to serve as a lighthouse for every manager, zoo educator and all those people engaged in the business of operating national parks, sanctuaries, museums and zoos worldwide and, of course, people who advocate a non-formal system of environmental education.

#### **Bipul Chakrabarty, Scientific Officer, Indian Central Zoo Authority**

When you carefully review Ham's extensive and diverse compilation, you're tempted to agree with what it says on the back of the book - that the ideas presented by the author really work. However, this natural impulse should be carefully postponed.

Ham's publication certainly adds knowledge and expertise to environmental education and interpretation programmes. This is especially true in the Latin American context where environmental initiatives are still in early development.

Ham's guide, with its pragmatic focus, invites us to take action; it encourages us to avoid inadequate routes, and rejects all excuses linked to low budgets or financial problems.

However, there is an important issue missing in Ham's work which leads us to reflect on the ideas before putting them into action.

The first big omission is the lack of empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of the ideas. This is consistent with the absence of practical resources for the evaluation of the programmes and activities suggested.

Ham validates his proposals by reviewing case studies, successful, of course, from the perspective of their creators, but an "activist" tendency carries the risk of action for action's sake, without clear objectives, or even more importantly, without clear results.

Probably in the time frame in which Ham's book was published, the enthusiasm for action was much more important than the need for accurate evaluation.

Environmental educators in informal education settings should be much more concerned about balancing the priority between innovation and evaluation.

These comments aside, the clarity and profusion of practical ideas, and the review of interpretation experiences all over America make this publication a complete tool box suitable for use in a number of informal education settings. However, this is a toolbox which, for the sake of efficiency, we should evaluate carefully.

#### **Reinaldo Niebles, Head of Education Department at the Barranquilla Zoo**

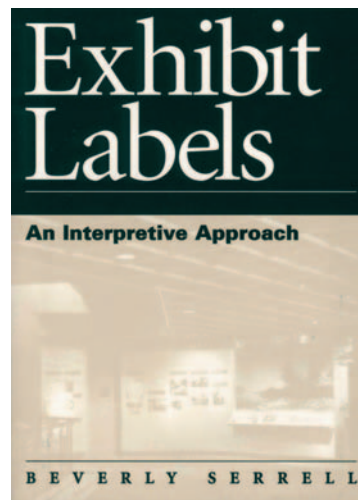
### **Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach**

by Beverly Serrell

Altamira Press

261 pp

ISBN 0-7619-9106-9



Surely a masterpiece. The author has done a great job in explaining to the reader about creating interpretive signage, where words compensate for sensory experience. Though of more use in a museum, it certainly has its role in guiding zoo managers in the preparation of interpretive signage. This book has filled the void that existed in the field of exhibit presentation in museums and zoos world-wide.

### **Bipul Chakrabarty**

Serrell's work is certainly a good "How to" guide for designing exhibit labels. It covers all steps in the process, from developing a concept as a "big idea" to actually designing and building labels.

From physical aspects such as space, layout, lighting and materials, to conceptual aspects such as objectives, ideas and messages to communicate, to finally human aspects focusing on visitors' expectations, backgrounds and learning styles, they are all part of this excellent step by step guide to designing and building successful exhibit labels.

In this easy to read book, Serrell thoroughly shares her vast experience on label design by explaining all aspects to consider, not only from the designer's point of view, but also, and most importantly, from the audience's perspective.

In fact, many of the discussions on this book focus on debating the argument that labels should provide different levels of information for different kinds of visitors, somehow discriminating the public into groups. On the contrary, this book stresses the importance of a holistic perspective, where simple, well designed labels can meet the needs and expectations of all kinds of public.

It is also a well-illustrated book, providing graphic images which complement the text, with both good and bad examples on label design. Case studies are also a part of each chapter, relating the reader with additional references for a clear understanding of the concepts and ideas expressed by the author.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson in this book is the urgent need for a systematic evaluation of exhibit labels, before and after they are built. It looks like we just don't do enough of it in our own institutions.

This is well received at a time when professionals involved in the field of environmental education are really questioning the effectiveness and impact of exhibit labels on the visiting public.

Probably most of us have experienced how much effort is required for label design and building, and also how time consuming and budget demanding it is. But it all could really go down the drain if the visiting public don't use or read labels, or if even using and reading labels, the message doesn't get through. And the only way to find this out is by implementing a serious evaluation throughout the whole process.

Serrell's work illustrates how developing front-end, formative and summative evaluations offers a thorough process for adjusting the designer's ideas with the public expectations. The book makes it clear that these two don't usually go together.

Only one observation could be added from the perspective of a zoological institution. Most examples and arguments on Serrell's publication refer to museum settings. Though probably most concepts and processes can be applied to a zoo environment, it makes you wonder if the fact that people go to zoos to see live animals will condition some of the concepts of label design exposed by Serrell, especially referring to the length and type of information, and also colours, typefaces and graphics, since probably labels would be competing for attention from the visiting public. This would probably be an interesting area of research to develop further.

**Rosamira Guillen, Executive Director,  
Barranquilla Botanical and Zoological  
Foundation**