

# Interpretation Effectiveness at Taylor Creek Visitor Center

**Carolyn J. Ward, Ph.D.**

**Steven R. Martin, Ph.D.**

Department of Environmental and Natural Resource Sciences  
Humboldt State University, P.O. Box 1185, Arcata, CA 95518

**James D. Absher, Ph.D.**

USDA Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Research Station  
4955 Canyon Crest Drive, Riverside, CA 92507

**Jennifer L. Tarlton, B.S.**

**Denise M. Newman, M.S.**

Department of Environmental and Natural Resource Sciences  
Humboldt State University, P.O. Box 1185, Arcata, CA 95518

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## *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

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### *Introduction*

Interpretation effectiveness was studied at the Taylor Creek Visitor Center (TCVC), a unit of the USDA-Forest Service's Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit. TCVC is located along the southern shore of Lake Tahoe, California and attracts over 300,000 visitors a year, all in a summer and early fall season of operation. The site has undergone extensive restoration and updating, including new interpretive signs and trails that were finished just before the study began in summer 2002.

The study's objectives were to determine the socio-demographic characteristics of TCVC visitors, assess their interpretive needs and expectations, better understand their preferences for

interpretive services, sources and content of information, and assess visitor satisfactions with TCVC.

On-site data collection occurred during July, 2002. Three instruments were used: A self-report questionnaire was administered to 406 visitors, another 182 visitors were interviewed, and 172 visitors were observed unobtrusively. Data from these respondents were used to evaluate the overall effectiveness of two separate interpretive trails (Smokey's and Rainbow), the Information Building,

and the Stream Profile Chamber. A third interpretive trail (Forest Trees) was too lightly used to be included in this sampling scheme. Each site or trail contains numerous interpretive panels or displays.

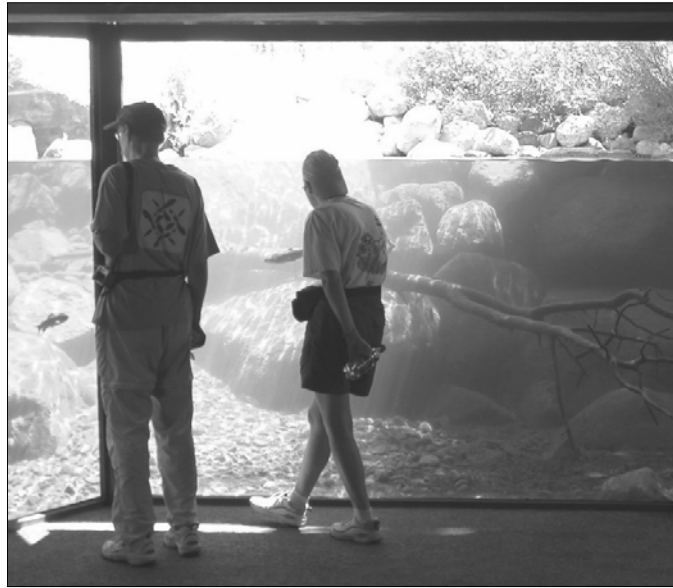


### *Visitor Characteristics*

Approximately 55 percent of visitors to the TCVC were female. A plurality of visitors (33%) were between the ages of 40-49, followed by visitors between the ages of 30-39 (24%). The ethnicity, education level, and income data were collected only from the questionnaire. Not surprisingly, a majority of users were white (90%), highly educated (over 40% attended graduate school), and most visitors were financially well off (37% reported a household income over \$100,000 a year). Over half of the visitors (52%) had no previous TCVC site experience. Groups were generally small. The most common group size was two (30%), followed by groups of four (21%). Family groups were the most common (71%) group type. The average time spent on site was 64 minutes.

### *Visitor Experience*

For most visitors (79%), Lake Tahoe was the primary destination for the trip. Visitors were primarily seeking an outdoor recreation experience (85%) or visiting family or friends (21%). There was a wide range of commonly cited



reasons for coming specifically to the TCVC. These included seeking Tahoe area information and just passing by, both cited 16% of the time; coming for site specific reasons (14%), outdoor recreation opportunities (13%), needing information from the information building or a ranger (12%), and 11 percent who came specifically seeking an experience on the Rainbow Trail and the Stream Profile Chamber.

Visitors were highly satisfied with their experiences while on-site. The most memorable feature of the entire site for 32 percent of visitors was the natural beauty of the place. Another 30 percent cited the Rainbow Trail and/or the Stream Profile Chamber as the most memorable feature of the site. Just over 28 percent indicated that signs, information, and learning experiences were one of the most memorable features of TCVC.

### *Information Needs and Uses*

Visitors sought out, used, and were satisfied with the interpretive information found on site. Prior to their visit most





visitors relied on information sources such as previous experience (42%) and family or friends (20%). Many visitors (26%) found out about the site simply by driving by and seeing a sign. While on the site, almost half of visitors sought out the self-guided signed trails (46%) and brochures/ pamphlets (45%). The rangers and maps were each sought out by 33 percent of users. The Lake of the Sky Journal and the guidebooks were each used by 13 percent of respondents. Visitors were highly satisfied with the information sources they used while on site and over 88 percent of them responded that they had their information needs fully met while on site.

#### *Interpretive Signs and Messages*

The interpretive information provided by the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit was sought out, used and effective at communicating the intended messages. There was consistency in the main messages visitors remembered from the site. The various trail themes, conservation/preservation, ecology, management/regulatory, and information about the fish were the most cited messages visitors remembered seeing while on

site. It appears that the knowledge acquisition aspects of the signs were working as intended. When asked what messages visitors remembered from the signs, one of the most common responses was a conservation/ preservation message. In addition, the specific themes of the individual trails were frequently cited as one of the prominent messages remembered by visitors.

Visitors liked the informative nature and visual appeal of the signs the most. Over half of the visitors indicated that they learned new information from the signs. Specific information was recalled by 57 percent of visitors during the interviews and by 19 percent of visitors in the surveys. (The difference in these results may be due to the ease of telling interviewers specific information rather than writing it down on a questionnaire.) Visitors rated the overall quality of the information in the signs as very high and thought the reading level was average, not too difficult or too easy.

Visitors spent an average of 23 seconds at each individual interpretive sign located throughout the site. This suggests that visitors had time to read about 100 words per sign, which is adequate to read most of the text on most of the interpretive signs.

Seven signs held visitors' attention more than others: four



on the Rainbow Trail and three on Smokey's Trail. These signs stopped an average of 62 percent of visitors and were clearly much more effective at promoting attentiveness. These signs also increased viewing time by about 10 seconds and prompted user discussions. These seven most effective signs were interactive, short, colorful, and/or offered something different from the others, and seem to be the most effective at making visitors more mindful.

#### *Overall Evaluation*

Visitors were generally highly satisfied with the information they received while at the TCVC. They sought out and used the self-guided interpretive trails more than other sources of information. In fact, the majority of visitors cited the Rainbow Trail or the Stream Profile Chamber as the most memorable experience they had while on site.

The signs were well done, attractive, short, and thematic in nature, and as a

whole, they were successful at capturing attention. Visitors stayed only a short time at each sign but long enough to read much of the intended messages. Those signs that successfully chunked information into meaningful

segments with sub-themes as headings seemed to be the most successful at conveying individual specific messages. The messages most remembered by visitors seem to be those not produced by one sign itself but those that resulted from the total experience of all the signs.

Effective signs were interactive and colorful. Many of them asked visitors to physically do something or cognitively act upon some new source of information. The signs that also incorporated something unique or different also drew attention. Those with unique bases also captured a high level of visitor's attention.

