

CHAPTER 8

INTERPRETATION, RESEARCH, EDUCATION AND PUBLIC PROGRAMMING



INTRODUCTION

Interpretation, research, education, public programming, and visitor management are core activities of the RIWHS. These activities are addressed comprehensively in the present ICMP and its other supporting documents. An Interpretation Plan has been developed separately that addresses, among others, the definition of interpretation, interpretation objectives, and principles of interpretation. It also explains the purpose of the Interpretation Plan of RIM and how this plan will be operationalised to manage interpretation at RIM. This chapter discusses some key areas of the Interpretation Plan. (See Addendum 4)

INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERPRETATION PLAN

Definition of Interpretation¹

Interpretation is understood as the articulation of the value or significance of a site, object, and tangible and intangible heritage resources, to internal and external audiences of RIM. Interpretation is a critical tool for conservation as it communicates knowledge and information about the heritage for various audiences and visitors.

Some of the elements have emerged in dealing with interpretation² at RIM:

- Key words, such as, banishment, imprisonment, exclusion, resistance, dignity, resilience, hope, suffering, hardship, disease and environmental landscape, needed to find a place in a revised Statement of Significance;
- The historical value of Robben Island in different contexts should be highlighted and also the history of South Africa, which is inextricably linked to Robben Island;
- The value of the natural environment should be included in the revised Statement of Significance and the human impact on the landscape;
- Spiritual and sacred values should be combined and the associated sites to this value should stretch beyond the gravesites.

These views were taken on board and have enriched the updated Statement of Significance for the WHS.

Core Message

The core message of RIM is the thread which ties all the sites and landscapes together. While maintaining and communicating the significance of each site or precinct on the Island, the core message needs to articulate the universal symbolism of Robben Island as contained in its Statement of Significance.

Interpretation Objective of RIM³

The heritage resources of the WHS should be interpreted in such a way as to inspire and influence the local community, people of the region, and the international

community in their understanding of the range of heritage values and significance of Robben Island; and to use these resources for their enjoyment, education and lifelong experience.

Principles for Interpretation⁴

The principles of interpretation at the RIWHS are underpinned by the use of multiple voices and multi-layering. For a complete set of principles please refer to the Interpretation Plan. (See Addendum 4)

However, it can be summed up as:

- To actively seek multiple narratives and not to inhibit communication of contested memories and stories;
- To present to visitors variations of narratives which provide an inclusive⁵ story;
- To ensure that all narratives, where applicable, are contextualised within the South African and international context, using as much as possible the various resources, including reference materials from the UWC-Mayibuye Archive Collections.

Interpretation Routes

The Interpretation Plan proposes a series of Interpretative Routes across the Political Imprisonment Landscape which is prioritised within the ICMP. There are specific interpretation objectives for each of the sites or landscapes encountered on each route, but all are held together by the overall interpretation objective.

Visitor Management

The Visitor Management Plan is underpinned by the Interpretation Plan so as to enhance the visitor experience. The principles of conservation and interpretation inform the Visitor Management Plan. The value of the experience and the quality of the communication of the core messages and significance of Robben Island are the measure of successful visitor management for RIM.

Interpretation Tools

Careful, ongoing research should inform the didactic approaches used by RIM in all of its interpretative interventions. The tools should ensure a high degree of access and should uphold the significance of the site. A process of evaluation and ongoing monitoring should assist in the development of appropriate tools, guided by visitor needs.

Policy Framework

All policies of RIM underpin and provide the foundation for all the items and actions above.

PURPOSE OF THE INTERPRETATION PLAN

Interpretation of the site involves more than just the communication of its values and significance to the visitors, audiences and the public. It also involves careful, planned research, education and effective visitor management. It aims to make the legacy of the WHS as accessible and relevant as possible. This is done through public programming and formal educational activities.

It is however important to note that a significant amount of work has already been done at RIM with respect to interpretation. The achievements so far include, tours, narratives, educational programming, development of RIM publications, RIM conference and seminar series, events, the exhibition at the Nelson Mandela Gateway to Robben Island, travelling exhibitions, and Conservation Management Plans for the Sobukwe Complex, MSP, Limestone and Bluestone Quarries. However, these initiatives lacked the support of a comprehensive and coherent Interpretation Plan which has now been developed.

This Interpretation Plan has taken into consideration a number of core issues that include, but are not limited to, basing interpretation on sound research, coherence in narrative and messaging, institutional accountability in development, implementation and monitoring of interpretation, and an integrated approach to the development of programmes, activities and products. A monitoring mechanism will be developed for quality assurance (of content and presentation), collaborative partnerships with institutions that have a linkage to the World Heritage Site's legacy within or outside the Island will be developed, as well as an interpretation that is grounded in a sound institutional policy framework.

The Interpretation Plan therefore addresses a number of issues pertinent to the management of a WHS, which include:

- The need for easy understanding of the site: Managing a WHS demands that visitors must be enabled to understand the site when they visit and that even those who do not, can have access to it, its significance and values. This interpretation should not only be available to all, but also should be understood and be relevant to all – the general public as well as visitors. All attempts should be made to understand and appreciate the site through various interpretation mediums, including publications, films and audio visual material, information boards, exhibitions and exhibition catalogues, outreach programmes and the media, among others. This is important as interpretation is the means by which the public can and do understand the values and significance of the WHS.
- The need for continuous education and to use the site as an educational tool: As a unique heritage of humanity, holding numerous and important layers of history and experiences, as well as being a unique biodiversity area, RIWHS has a great potential as an educational, enjoyment and a healing place. Its uses should include lifelong learning for all, irrespective of status, and should encourage professional training in heritage management, community outreach, school education programmes, space for debate, contestation and advocacy, as well as a place of multiple voices.

The term 'lifelong learning' is used to indicate that learning and education are ongoing and continuous throughout a person's life, and is not limited to a set period of time or to a formal setting, such as a school or college. During the political imprisonment period under the apartheid regime, prisoners took responsibility for their own ongoing education and training, for example, they taught those who were illiterate to read and write; they engaged in political education and debates, and later in a full academic and education programme; some prisoners studied for degrees or furthered their school education. It is in this spirit that Robben Island is recognised as a centre of lifelong learning and this is a tradition that will continue on the Island.

- The need to promote research on the site: To be able to successfully manage RIWHS, it is imperative to comprehensively understand its various layers, its significance and values, and the challenges facing it. This calls for continuous and focused research on its history and symbolism, its built heritage, its conservation, archaeology, environment, oral history, visitor impact, transportation impact, management regime and population impact, among others. Robben Island is unique for its living heritage resources that include memories of ex-political prisoners, warders and families, and a rich archive that it should use both in the interpretation of the site as well as in promoting further research and academic co-operation beyond the World Heritage boundaries. Many of these resources are crucial to the sound management of the site through informed conservation that would lead to the retention of the values and significance, and therefore the site's integrity.
- The need for sound scholar, public and visitor experiences.

CONCLUSION

A number of key issues have emerged from this chapter. RIM has developed an Interpretation Plan. (See Addendum 4) This should be seen as a first step towards communicating and interpreting heritage values and developing a comprehensive plan to manage the visitor experience. However, in order to achieve this there is a need to carry out a needs survey, to gauge, for example, visitor needs, carrying capacity of the site, new visitor experiences, routes and locations, transportation needs, to establish the impact of tourism, and other uses of the site. These activities will form part of the deliverables of the current ICMP (2007-2012).

ENDNOTES

- 1 - RIM Workshop, 8 February 2006.
- 2 - IMP Operations Committee and stakeholder workshops, 2005.
- 3 - RIM Strategic Objectives 2006-2011.
- 4 - RIM Workshop, 8 February 2006.
- 5 - The Research and Development Programme should be equipped with proper channels through which 'silences' and / or silenced narratives can emerge.