

Tips for Leading Successful Interpretive Hikes

Friends of the Columbia River Gorge

1. **Make sure that your entire group is with you and can hear you before you begin speaking.** Recognizing that the entire group is not yet together and waiting for the slower group to catch up is a sign of a good leader.
2. **Plan in advance to determine the *best stops for discussing your thought-out content with hikers.*** If at all possible, choose locations along the trail that can easily accommodate all hikers without blocking the trail. (Examples: Just above a switchback turn, where you can stand above and in clear view of all hikers and be easily heard, wide spot in trail, etc). Pay attention to not block a trail junction.
3. **Have a clear idea of the educational content you want to convey in an organized manner at specific locations on your route.** What specific things can you learn from that are on the trail? How does the landscape better tell your message/story? (Examples: Optimal stop where several plants/flowers from same habitat are located; Stop near key historical artifact; Stop where multiple geological features can be seen from).
4. If **planning to use any props** (e.g. handouts, reference books, phone apps, etc), be sure to have them well organized and know how/when you want to use each one during the hike.
5. **Provoke audience participation by asking content-relevant questions.** This keeps everyone paying attention and helps them feel part of the overall experience. Set this tone at the trailhead by asking your audience who knows something about the outing/educational content. Get them talking! This approach invariably adds interest and fun to any hike.
6. **Be able to relate content to your audience.** Examples: Use common names of plants (as well as Latin names if you know them); Discuss uses of plants, if any (this helps people remember them better); Relate geological features to the big picture of what was happening elsewhere at the same time (e.g. Eagle Crk Formation was result of pre-Cascades volcano, when gingko & sycamore flourished); Tell story around historical artifacts.
7. **Encourage hikers to interact with the environment directly via touch & smell.** Some people learn more effectively via non-visual modes.
8. **Demonstrate passion and enthusiasm for your subject!** This should go without saying - however, sometimes a leader's enthusiasm isn't as obvious to others as s/he thinks it is. Project your voice (without shouting, hopefully). Use your arms to point, to encompass the scene, etc. Get your body language into it!
9. **Between stops, defer audience questions until you get to a good stopping place.** Then, repeat the question(s) so all can hear it first and then go on to discuss. NEVER just answer the people around you who just happen to be at the head of the group. This results in other hikers further back on the trail wondering what the leader is saying and what they're missing.
10. **Keep explanations simple, relevant & concrete.** It is easy to get tripped up by giving a very detailed answer to what was in fact a simple question. This has the effect of shutting down further questions and giving hikers a sub-optimal experience.
11. **Don't be afraid to say "I don't know".** You can offer to research the hiker's question and send email to him/her afterward with relevant info.

Above all, make your interpretive hike fun for everyone (you included)!