

Keeping the Legend Alive How Can We Help the “Lost Generation” Find the Value of Historic Trails?

Although it is hard to miss, many agencies and organizations in the cultural resource management business seem not to have noticed that they have a new, important audience in which to instill an appreciation of historic trails—one sporting tattoos and multi-colored hair, with a fondness for body piercing. Agencies and organizations, please meet Generation X.

A number of studies have concluded that this generation differs from its predecessor, the Baby Boomers, in several important ways. Understanding those differences is critical to the success of activities designed to teach the public about historic trails, especially interpretation and environmental education. After all, “know your audience,” is one of the most basic communications principles. Agencies and organizations that want to make sure Generation X-ers, who will soon be making critical decisions about the future of our historic trails, value them as much as Baby Boomers do, need to understand the distinctions and tweak their communication strategies to account for them.

Defining Generation X

Don't be embarrassed if you have never heard of “Generation X.” Lots of people have not, even though they have kids who are part of it! The term “Generation X” was coined by author Doug Coupland who wrote a novel by that name in

Many trail tour groups consist largely of retired history buffs. Will such audiences continue to grow?



1991. It refers to the 50 million Americans born between 1965 and 1983. This age group has also been dubbed the “Lost Generation,” the “Baby Busters,” and “Twenty somethings,” although the last term is falling out of favor as the oldest members of this generation turn 31 this year.

Even “grown-ups” who are not familiar with the term Generation X have probably noticed that there is something different about today's young adults. But what is so unique about Generation X that warrants agencies and organizations adapting their communication strategies in new, unprecedented ways? While sweeping generalizations about any generation are bound to be oversimplified, trend data from national studies demonstrate that today's young adults differ from Baby Boomers in many important ways. Here are highlights about our newest audience from the April 1995 issue of *American Demographics* magazine:

- * **Economic Prospects**—Between 1983 and 1992, the median weekly earnings of young men who were full-time workers fell 9% in constant dollars. Over the same period, inflation adjusted earnings of young women slipped 4%.
- * **Education**—Young adults are flocking to two- and four- year colleges at record rates. The percentage of 18-to-24-year olds currently enrolled in college or having completed one or more years of college is 11% percent higher than a decade ago.
- * **Family**—From 1977 to 1993, the percentage of women in their 20s living with their parents rose from 17% to 24%, while the proportion of young men living with their parents increased from 30% to 35%. Between 1970 and 1993, the number of unmarried couple households rose from 500,000 to 3.5 million, while the ratio of unmarried couples to married couples increased from 1 per 100 to 6 per 100.
- * **Arts**—The percentage of young adults who read any novels, short stories, poetry, or plays in the previous 12 months fell from 60% in 1982 to 53% in 1992 while the number who visited an art museum or gallery increased from 23% to 29% during the same time period.
- * **Leisure Time**—While 82% of 18-to-24 year-olds reported attending a movie in the past 12

months, only 33% had visited a historic park or monument. The proportion of young adults who went camping, hiking, canoeing, or took part in other outdoor activities fell from 51% in 1982 to 43% in 1992.

What Does It All Mean?

What do all these numbers mean for those of us concerned with protecting historic trails? In one sentence: **Although Generation Xers are more educated than previous generations and actively seek visual learning experiences, they have less interest in visiting historic areas and participating in outdoor recreation and have less money to do so.** In other words, agencies and organizations cannot count as much on today's young adults to come to us to learn about historic trails—we have to go more to them. That means increasing emphasis on off-site interpretation and environmental education.

Telling the Story in a Different Way

"Today, more and more young people have less and less of an opportunity to know a natural place," according to Sam Ham, Professor of Environmental Communications and International Conservation at the University of Idaho in Moscow. "Therefore the prospect of arguing convincingly that places like historic trails ought to exist becomes increasingly difficult."

Professor Ham believes that to teach people like Generation Xers, who have less direct experience with natural and cultural resources than earlier generations, to value historic trails, agencies and organizations should increase off-site interpretation. He defines that as presenting messages to people in their own environment, as opposed to places where natural and cultural resources are located or visitor centers. Off-site interpretation can be accomplished through traditional means like setting up exhibits at special events and placing stories in the mass media. But technological

Trail expeditions can be hot, tiring, and complex logistically. Will future generations take the time to enjoy remote trail resources?



advances have also created exciting new opportunities for off-site interpretation.

One example is the Internet. This network of computer networks offers agencies and organizations the opportunity to reach hundreds of millions of people worldwide in their homes, workplaces, and schools at a very low cost. Although many agencies and organizations have established home pages on the Internet's World Wide Web, most contain very little in the way of interpretive information about historic trails.

However, a history buff named Tom Crews created his own Pony Express National Historic Trail web site that illustrates the potential of on-line interpretation. The site features the history of the trail; the location of stations along the way; 1860s news articles from papers like the Sacramento Daily Union; and biographical information about Pony Express Riders like Johnny Frye, the first rider west out of St. Joseph, Missouri. One of the most interesting sections, called "People, Places, and Vocabulary," offers facts about various aspects of the Pony Express like the *mochila*, the Spanish word for knapsack, in which the mail was placed. The site features attractive graphics, historic photographs, and a minimum amount of large, easy to read text. People who have Internet access can find it at <http://ccnet4.cnet.com/~xptom>.

Professor Ham encourages agencies and organizations to experiment with new interpretive techniques but stresses that the underlying goal should stay the same. "The general goal of interpretive services, in whatever form they take, ought to be to leave people with the idea that historic trails are worthy and important to have," said Ham. "People should walk away feeling glad these trails exist."

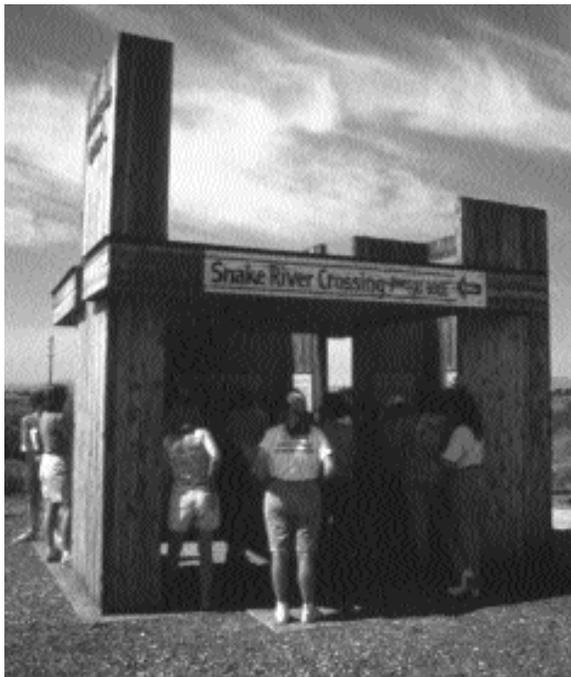
Increasing off-site interpretation of historic trails does not mean doing away with on-site interpretation. Proof that demand for on-site interpretation remains strong lies in the fact that in July 1996, the Bureau of Land Management's National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center in Baker City, Oregon, welcomed its one millionth visitor (see sidebar article).

"There is a lot of diversity out there in terms of what people respond to when it comes to interpretation," said Professor Ham. "We've got to provide opportunities across the spectrum knowing that people will self-select based on the types of experience that they are seeking."

In the Classroom

The best time to instill appreciation of the value of historic trails in people is when they are very young and forming opinions. The best place to do that is the classroom. For those reasons, in addition to increasing off-site interpretation, agen-

Interpretive facilities must be engaging for new generations—or such places will be ignored and become obsolete.



cies and organizations need to enhance their support for environmental education and curriculum guides.

Elaine Theiss has been teaching 4th grade in Marsing, Idaho, for eight years. She teaches her students about the Oregon National Historic Trail as part of an Idaho history unit. At a recent teachers' workshop on the Oregon Trail in Melba, Idaho, Theiss said she believes the studies that indicate that young people today respond more to visual images and hands-on experiences than the written word are right-on when it comes to teaching kids about historic trails.

"If a teacher just stands up at the front of the classroom and talks about a historic trail, or assigns the students dry, textbook reading with no supplemental activities, they just don't respond," said Theiss. "What really works are activities that put kids in the shoes of the pioneers, that let them experience what it felt like to walk on the trail, stubbing their toes on sagebrush and dodging snakes."

As examples of effective ways to teach kids about historic trails, Theiss cites *Wagons Ho*, a traveling living history demonstration that gives students a chance to saw wood, help prepare dinner in a dutch oven, and rope livestock like the pioneers did. She says interactive games like *Idaho Bingo*, a twist on the traditional game where kids match facts about Idaho history, including historic trails, with clues from the teacher also work well.

Theiss has also used high-tech tools like the Oregon Trail computer game, a simulation where kids play the role of a pioneer and have to make choices as they travel on the trail, choosing what

kinds of supplies to buy and which routes to take. She says the game gives students a good feel for what the trail was like because the game shows them the consequences of their decisions, including the possibility of disease and death to all in their wagon party.

Although Theiss encourages agencies and organizations to experiment with new technologies and techniques to support environmental education, she urges them to remember that they do not need to wow kids with the latest high tech gadgets to teach them to value historic trails.

"You do not have to razzle-dazzle them with a laser show," said Theiss. "They just need something that relates to their own life and has meaning to them."

Where Do We Go From Here?

So, now that we know that we have a new audience to introduce to historic trails, and we have got some ideas about how to reach them, what are we going to do about it? Understanding that we need to develop new strategies and techniques is one thing; doing it is another—especially for those of us who have been around a while. One of the things that could hurt the ability of federal and state agencies to connect with Generation Xers and other young people is the inability to hire them. As budgets and staff continue to be cut, particularly in communications, agencies will have to rely on aging Baby Boomers to ensure that Generation Xers (plus the as-yet unnamed generation beyond) to value historic trails. That makes it imperative for current agency employees to keep their skills sharp.

"Continuing education is so important, especially now, because skills that are fresh one day become obsolete the next," said Professor Ham. "Agencies need aggressive continuing education programs with strong incentives that have real meaning for employees."

Learning about new audiences and keeping up with new techniques and technologies is not easy. In fact, it is hard work. But finding ways to help the "Lost Generation" discover the value of historic trails will be worth it in the long run. After all, that girl with the nose ring and that guy with the ankle tattoo are the ones who will decide the fate of our beloved ruts.

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Photos courtesy the author.

Interpreting History for Visitors of All Ages

Since it opened in May 1992, the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM's) National Historic Oregon Trail

Interpretive Center in Baker City, Oregon has drawn more than one million visitors from every state and territory in American and more than 65 foreign countries.

The \$10 million, 23,000-square-foot interpretive center is perched on Flagstaff Hill, offering spectacular views of the broad Baker Valley and the Elkhorn Mountains. The main attractions are life-size displays that depict the trail experience. One re-creation of a typical trail scene shows pioneers, struggling to get their wagons over rocks

Right, entrance to BLM's Oregon Trail Interpretive Center near Baker City, Oregon.



Above and below, full-scale displays of life along the Trail make history come alive for all ages. Photos courtesy BLM.

and ruts, stopping to mop sweaty brows. Motion sensors triggered by approaching visitors activate recorded messages of realistic pioneer voices and creaking wagon wheels.

"We want visitors who go through the center to feel like they have been on the trail," said Amy Galperin, BLM Lead for Interpretation. "We want them to know that the trip on the Oregon Trail was

tough and to understand some of the reasons that pioneers kept making it."

Many displays are designed to provide visitors with hands-on experiences. One such display, designed to show the difficult decisions pioneers had to make about what to take and what to leave behind, offers visitors the opportunity to fit wooden blocks that simulate items like water, tools, and family heirlooms, into a model wagon.

Quotes from pioneer diaries breathe life into several exhibits. A row of buttons at a camp display gives visitors a choice of subjects including camp cooking, fun on the trail, and illnesses and cures. When visitors push a button, the lights dim, and they hear a corresponding message recorded from a pioneer journal.

Outside the visitor center, living history displays re-create an Oregon trail wagon encampment with three replica wagons. Volunteers dressed like mountain men are there on weekends to share their knowledge and demonstrate skills. Another living history display features a working hard rock lode mine similar to the ones that once stood on the ridges and mountains of northeastern Oregon.

Visitors who want to see the real thing can walk on a 4.2-mile trail system that loops around Flagstaff hill to a series of viewpoints and historic sites, including still visible wagon wheel ruts.

The Oregon National Historic Trail Interpretive Center is located off Interstate 84, five miles north of exit 302. It is open daily from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. For more information, write or call the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, P.O. Box 987, Baker City, Oregon 97814; 541-523-1843.

