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Story Telling

What We've Found

There is no better way to find out what is valued by a community than by asking people to tell their story. Simply inventorying the resources of a place can be too removed from the emotional experiences that are part of a community planning effort but are often overlooked. A story makes the character of the place come alive for the residents and visitors.

Just the Facts

Stories capture the essence of a resource and its community by highlighting historical, cultural, or environmental characteristics. Telling the story is a creative process that includes many types of residents in the community: from the young to the old, newcomers to longtime residents. It is through the story that people can express what is unusual and special about their community.

Stories can serve four purposes in a planning process: (1) they help people identify what is important; (2) they can act as a starting place for where to begin a detailed inventory; and (3) they provide a framework that integrates the resources with a program for promotion and resource management; and (4) they provide the text and images for interpretive exhibits and materials.

How To Do It

1. Discover it through people

Create a list of 10 to 15 people who know a lot or hear other people's stories such as history buffs, longtime residents, amateur geologists, folk culturalists, and politicians. Ask them what stories or facts are most interesting about the people, land, and history of that area.

Public meetings can also offer important opportunities to find story ideas that have support from the community. Simply ask people to think about what is great about their community and how they would recommend telling that story. These meetings can be fun and energizing.



Definition

Capturing what is important, interesting, and meaningful about a particular place then relaying it to others.

Use It If...

You want to help people begin working together: An engaging story will serve as a unifying emotional and experiential tool.

You are trying to develop a vision and need to first find agreement as to what people believe is important.

You see people not engaged or too focused on the details of the inventory and losing sight of what is trying to be accomplished.

Forget It If...

You need action. There's a clear, single threat people are ready to fight and telling stories slows down the response unnecessarily.

Timing is Everything

Tell stories in the beginning of a project to help focus a group and give direction.

2. Discover it through resources

Go into the field and look around. Take on the role of a tourist and, with fresh eyes, drive, bike, hike and see what is most intriguing. This can be done with a group of people and even be turned into a community-wide event.

3. Discover it through research

Go to the library or other research sites. Read up on local history, ecology, culture and issues. Also consult with experts such as state historic preservationists, local planners, university professors, cooperative extension agents and tourism professionals.

4. Validate it

Run a story by as many people as possible. See if they can connect to the place through it. This is also the time to confirm and enhance a story obtained from an individual or group with field inventory verifications and review of research documents and reports.

5. Tell it

Just like a story that is read, the story about a resource and its community should have a single theme and be organized with a plot, anecdotes, and a moral. Or it may be told in stages: conditions (context), challenges (tension), and resolutions (conclusion).

Share the story with others through narrative such as speech or slideshow presentation, in a pamphlet or other publication, as art, or even in song. How the story is told will depend on what the story is and who is telling it.

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