

# Chapter 1

## Defining Visitor Services



for Alberta Parks Properties  
in the David Thompson Corridor

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### Introduction

This chapter introduces Alberta Parks' current definitions of Visitor Services and its value and benefits to Alberta Parks and park users and the communities nearby. It is vital that Visitor Services field staff and their managers can clearly articulate these benefits in order to assure that appropriate Visitor Services offerings in the David Thompson Corridor are provided. Also, this knowledge will assist Visitor Services program managers to defend and justify their programs to the public, regional and provincial managers and political representatives.

As well, this chapter includes summaries of current concepts and ideas used in best practice by heritage interpreters and environmental educators. These ideas are the foundation for effective Visitor Services programming.

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## Interim Definitions of Key Visitor Services Program Areas

### Gap:

After consulting Visitor Services Planner, Ted Ritzer, it appears that currently Alberta Parks does not have a set of universally accepted agency-accredited definitions of some program areas.

According to district Visitor Services staff this will be addressed by a Provincial Visitor Services Strategic Plan in the near future. In the meantime, EcoLeaders has provided a set of interim definitions for the purpose of this plan. It is expected that Visitor Services staff will replace them when standard definitions are developed by Alberta Parks.

### Interpretation

Alberta Parks does not have an official definition of interpretation. Until one is developed we recommend using one of the clearest and most long-standing definitions developed by Freeman Tilden, a pioneer of heritage interpretation:

*“Heritage interpretation is an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.”*

District Alberta Parks Staff also include use the following definitions:

*Interpretation encourages people to develop positive attitudes, values, and behavior in regard to the natural environment. This fact allows interpretation to be used as a management tool to develop public support and involvement in protected areas.*

*Interpretive programs can provide messages, facilitate experiences, develop skills etc., which deal with the natural, cultural, aspects of the environment, as well as management concerns and initiatives. Interpretive programming should be directed by site specific interpretive themes and include concepts dealing with global environmental and provincial concerns.*

In Alberta Parks Visitor Services staff develop and deliver a wide variety of interpretation programs focusing on the natural and cultural history of a site or region.

### Education

Current offerings can be divided into two main areas:

#### Environmental Education

These programs are based on grade-specific science and social studies subjects, topics and learning outcomes developed by Alberta Education.

#### Extended Learning Opportunities

This is a term used by district Visitor Services staff. It takes in Informal and Life-Long Learning—terms used by some Alberta Parks districts and most parks agencies across the country. This programming is aimed at adults and families with topics aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of natural and cultural history and/or increasing skills in topic areas such as wildlife-watching, nature craft, and stewardship skills. In extended programs, such as the week-long paleontology field programs at Dinosaur Provincial Park, they encompass Learning Enrichment and Experiential Travel programming.

### Information/Orientation

According to district Visitor Services staff this program is:

*... a communications process that concentrates on providing people with facility and recreational opportunity information, safety and security information, management activities and regulation information, and marketing and promotional information*

Information/Orientation programs are designed to assist site users:

- how to find the park or protected area, and plan their visit
- how to find their way around
- know what amenities are available (e.g., camp sites, trails, boat launches, beaches, etc.)
- know activities they can take part in and where
- to know what services and activities are available (including interpretation, education, stewardship, recreation and special event offerings)
- know and understand rules, regulations and restrictions
- know the names and locations of key natural and cultural features

### Stewardship

Alberta Parks uses this definition:

*“Stewardship is an ethic of knowledge, caring and action toward the preservation, conservation and enjoyment of our rich natural and cultural heritage in Alberta.”*

Visitor Services’ stewardship programs are designed to increase participants’ knowledge and caring about an Alberta Parks site’s natural and cultural features. They may also help build capacity (knowledge, skills and inclinations) of individuals, groups and communities to take appropriate and timely action to care for these features.

Stewardship and its implications for Visitor Services is further defined on pages 1.9 and 1.10 of this chapter.

### Special Events

In these open-to-the-public events, Visitor Services staff and other park staff work with a variety of partners to promote and host special events on Alberta park’s properties. These events may feature appropriate recreation activities such as cross-country ski races or Parks Day events that offer a variety of family orientated activities.

### What is Natural Heritage Tourism

The Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation website defines this as encouraging

*“...Alberta residents and visitors to discover and enjoy the province’s natural heritage through a variety of outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism opportunities, facilities and accommodation services.”*

## What Visitor Services Is

District Alberta Parks staff provide the following definition:

*Visitor Services is a communication and learning facilitation program through which Alberta Parks informs, inspires and involves Albertans to increase their understanding of, respect for and connection to the natural world.*

Visitor Services Program is the public face of Alberta Parks. The Visitor Services program is a key tool used by Alberta

## What Visitor Services Does

Visitor Services provides Albertans and visitors to the province with opportunities to explore, understand, appreciate and participate in the stewardship of Alberta's natural and cultural heritage. Many of its initiatives enhance public awareness of our relationship to and dependence upon the natural world and our connections with the past.

The Visitor Services Program includes the following program areas:

- interpretation
- education
- information/orientation
- stewardship
- special events
  - see the sidebar on the facing page for definitions.
- natural heritage tourism (see definition on below)

### Natural Heritage Tourism

The Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation website defines this as encouraging

*"...Alberta residents and visitors to discover and enjoy the province's natural heritage through a variety of outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism opportunities, facilities and accommodation services."*

These programs can be delivered in a number of locations and via a wide variety of formats including:

- onsite using personal and non-personal media and methods
- offsite and outreach using personal and non-personal media and methods
- virtual/electronic using new media and methods ranging from real-time interactive (e.g., video conferencing) to passive real-time (e.g., critter cams)

For definitions of personal and non-personal media and methods and a detailed review and assessment of interpretive, educational and information/orientation media and methods see Chapter 6 of this plan.

Parks to achieve its mission, vision and goals and those of the Ministry of Tourism, Parks and Recreation (see Chapter 2: Foundations Review for a summary of Alberta Park's mandate and the provincial, Ministry, Department and site-level documents and initiatives that Visitor Services support). Visitor Services staff have a responsibility to follow the directions provided in these foundations and to explain the nature of the agency in ways that generate support for the agency, ministry and province.

## Benefits of Visitor Services

The benefits of Visitor Services can be understood from several perspectives. Visitor Services can help to achieve Alberta Parks' mandates and goals as they relate to:

### The Alberta Parks agency:

- a) be a visible positive presence in the community and throughout the province
- b) enhance the image of the agency
- c) inform the community about the purpose and nature of Alberta Parks programs
- d) develop advocates and support for Alberta Parks and its programs
- e) encourage public participation in management
- f) celebrate or commemorate, deepening bonds of belonging and identity
- g) revenue generation (fees for products and services)

### The Protected Area:

- a) foster appropriate use including engagement of visitors in stewardship activities
- b) minimize impacts to fragile features through education and carefully managing visitor pressure
- c) develop advocates and support
- d) minimize visitor/neighbour impacts and /or conflicts
- e) reduce the need for regulation, enforcement and rescue

### Beyond Protected Areas:

- a) engage citizens in stewardship activities that extend beyond the site to the natural region, province, country and the planet
- b) produce environmentally and culturally aware and literate citizens who value Alberta's natural and cultural heritage, and that of the broader environment
- c) develop advocates and support for values under management
- d) foster sustainability values and behaviours (changing values and behaviours, consideration for future generations)
- e) encourage a "greater ecosystem concept" in the management of neighbouring properties

**For the Visitor/Participant:**

- a) answer questions—provide information
- b) provide a better understanding of what to expect
- c) provide enjoyment and recreation
- d) heighten awareness and appreciation of the values under management
- e) inspire and add perspective to their lives
- f) enhance their safety
- g) provide explanation of current resource management practices
- h) promote and/or facilitate exploration, experience and life-long learning: “get out there and experience!”
- i) support national/provincial pride and citizenship
- j) provide opportunities to connect to and understand and steward the natural and cultural history of Alberta
- j) provide opportunities for spiritual, mental and physical rejuvenation

**For the Tourism Industry:**

- a) attract visitors to the site, region and province
- b) help to meet the increasing demand for educational visitor experiences
- c) provide interesting and memorable experiences that ensure visitor satisfaction, positive word-of-mouth advertising and repeat visitation
- d) develop a substitute experience for places that are fragile and/or difficult to visit, e.g., caves, sacred sites, and topics that are impossible to experience directly, e.g., geological time
- f) generate revenue

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## Established Best Practice Learning Models That can Be Applied to Visitor Services in The David Thompson Corridor

### Key Models and Definitions Considered

The literature on informal learning, interpretation environmental education and tourism contains many concepts and learning models that may have relevance to Visitor Services programming in the David Thompson Corridor. These models are based on current understanding of how people learn and how effective community engagement and stewardship initiatives work.

It is essential that Visitor Services staff in the David Thompson Corridor understand and can apply these models. This will ensure that interpretation and education services are engaging and effective and meet the needs and interests of program participants.

EcoLeaders has identified important models that are discussed briefly in alphabetical order below:

These learning models will be referred to throughout this Visitor Services plan.

### Action Research

Action research is an ongoing process of trying new approaches, gathering and analyzing data on effectiveness, and making changes and improvements on-the-fly. It typically is designed and conducted by teachers and interpreters to try new approaches and to improve their current practice.

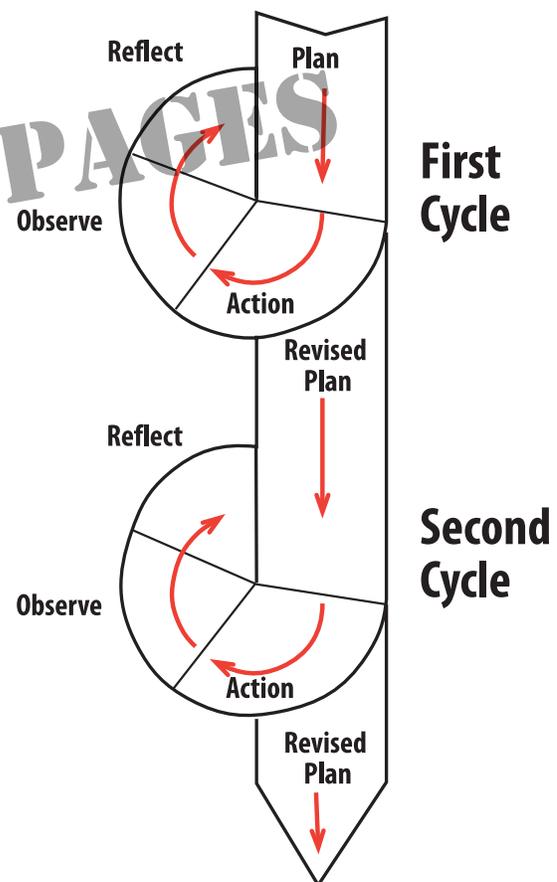
Action research is a family of research methodologies which pursue action e.g., Visitor Services programming) and research (assessment of learning) at the same time. This is done by using a cyclic or spiral process which alternates between:

- planning for specific learning outcomes
- action to achieve the specified learning
- observation and documentation of results of the action
- critical reflection and analysis of the results
- re-initiating the cycle by marking modifications in the learning plan and putting them into action (see diagram on facing column)

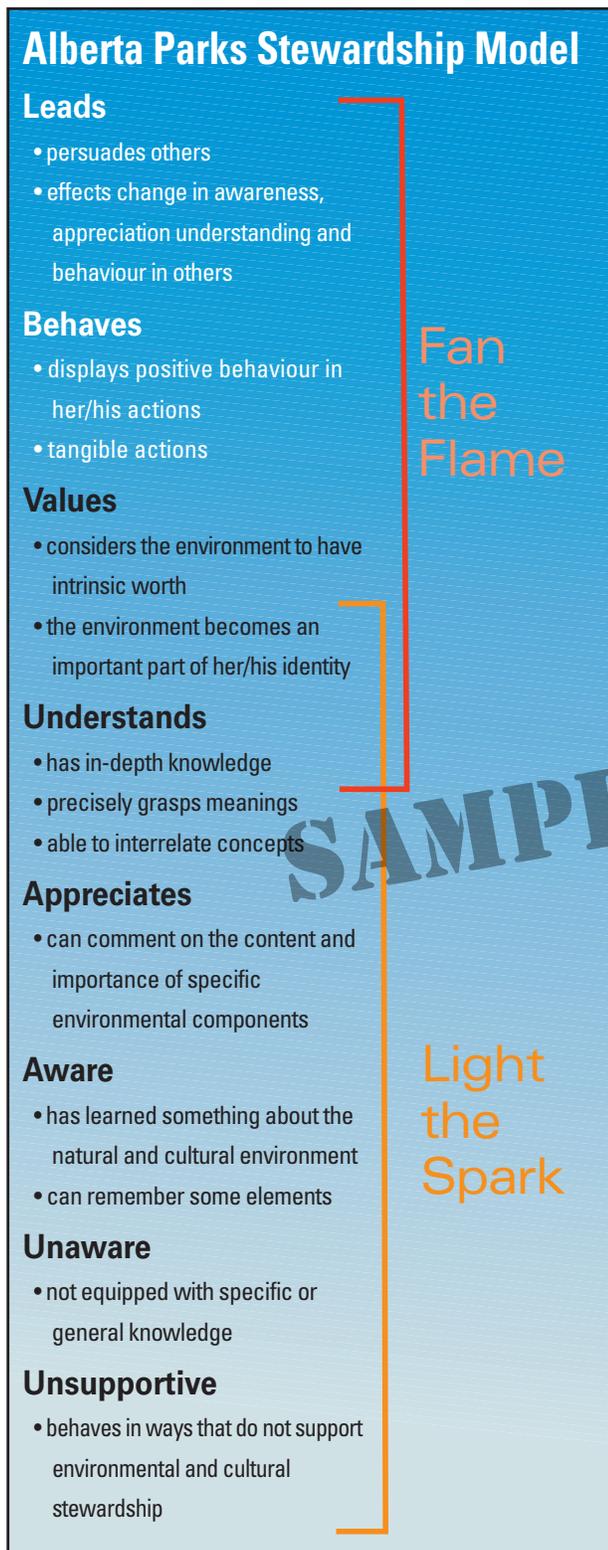
This repeating cycle results in a continuous refining of methods and increased understanding of new and traditional interpretation techniques.

#### Why This is Important

Action research has the potential to generate genuine and sustained improvements in education and interpretation programming. It gives Visitor Services staff new opportunities to reflect on and assess their teaching; to explore and test new ideas, methods, and materials; to assess how effective the new approaches were; to share feedback with fellow team members; and to make decisions about which new approaches to include in the team's curriculum, instruction, and assessment plans.



The Alberta Parks Stewardship Model



In 2002 and 2004, EcoLeaders Interpretation and Environmental Education developed Visitor Services development Plans for Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park and for the Beaver Hills District east of Edmonton. Through this planning process, we developed and refined the Alberta Parks Stewardship Model as a tool for recognizing the different levels of knowledge, skills and commitment that park visitors, park neighbours and the greater public have toward parks and protected areas in the province and to the stewardship mandate of Alberta Parks.

This model represents a learning progression in environmental stewardship ranging from unsupportive and non-awareness, through levels of awareness, understanding, to changing values and behaviours all the way to leadership in the community. The model recognizes that learning is not usually a linear progression. Rather, many people can be at various points on the scale at the same time. It focuses on learner populations rather than on individual learners.

**Levels in the Model**

In the Alberta Parks Stewardship Model, interpretation and environmental education are blended together.

**Interpretation: Lighting the Spark**

“Any communication process designed to reveal meanings and relationships of cultural and natural heritage to the public, through first-hand involvement with an object, artifact, landscape or site” (Interpretation Canada, 1976).

**Environmental Education: Fanning the Flame**

“Environmental literacy is the desired outcome of environmental education programs. Environmentally literate individuals understand both ecological and social-political systems and have the inclination to apply that understanding to any decisions that pose consequences for environmental quality. It includes four strands: personal and civic responsibility, skills for understanding and addressing environmental issues, knowledge of environmental processes and systems, and questioning and analysis skills.” (Environmental Education Training Partnership web site, based on Disinger and Roth, 1992).

Building on the foundations laid down by lighting the spark activities, “fanning the flame” takes people’s interest further into the life-long learning arena and linking more directly to Alberta Parks’s long-term environmental stewardship mandate.

For details about the use of this tool is also discussed in two recent articles in *InterpScan*. (Husby, W. 2005. “Towards Stewardship: Developing a Suite of Programs Part 1” *InterpScan* 31:1 8-10, Fast, S. E., 2005. “Graphing Learners: Developing a Suite of Programs Part 2” *InterpScan* 31:2 15-17).

## Why This is Important

The Alberta Parks Stewardship Model focuses on audience prior knowledge, interests, needs and abilities and incorporates current best-practices of interpretation, environmental education, inquiry learning, and experiential education. In this model, VS staff facilitate discovery and encourage questioning through hands-on activities, and through longer-duration workshops and courses.

They also provide opportunities for two-way communication where participants can ask questions and share their discoveries, experiences and expertise with VS staff and other participants. VS staff must know what their audience already knows, what they already feel and believe and how they behave. Knowing this, VS staff craft offerings that are both appealing and satisfying to their audiences, as well as interesting and intellectually challenging.

## Blooms Taxonomy

In 1956, Benjamin Bloom headed a group of educational psychologists who developed a classification of levels of intellectual behavior important in learning.

Bloom identified six levels within the cognitive domain, from the simple recall or recognition of facts, as the lowest level, through increasingly more complex and abstract mental levels, to the highest order which is classified as evaluation. Recently Bloom's model has been updated by a number learning researchers who retain six levels by merging two of Bloom's mid-level and add a final upper level, "creating". Typical learning activities and products for each level are listed below.

### Remembering (Knowledge):

#### Learning Activities

arrange, define, duplicate, label, list, memorize, name, order, recognize, relate, recall, repeat, reproduce, state

#### Learning Products

definitions, fact sheets, recitations, lists, work sheets

### Understanding (Comprehension):

#### Learning Activities

classify, describe, discuss, explain, express, identify, indicate, locate, recognize, report, restate, review, select, translate

#### Learning Products

drawings, paraphrasing, peer teaching, summary

### Applying:

#### Learning Activities

apply, choose, demonstrate, dramatize, employ, illustrate, interpret, operate, practice, schedule, sketch, solve, use, write

#### Learning Products

collect, interview, models, presentations, role-playing, simulation

### Analyzing:

#### Learning Activities

analyze, appraise, calculate, categorize, compare, contrast, criticize, differentiate, discriminate, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, test

#### Learning Products

chart, plan spreadsheet, summary, survey

### Evaluating:

#### Learning Activities

appraise, argue, assess, attach, choose compare, defend estimate, judge, predict, rate, core, select, support, value, evaluate.

#### Learning Products

critique, report, recommendations, self-evaluation

### Creating:

#### Learning Activities

combine, create, compose, design, formulate, hypothesize, invent, predict

#### Learning Products

puppet show, cartoon, poem, skit, story, play, multimedia production, video

## Why This is Important

It is essential that Visitor Services staff understand Bloom's Taxonomy and apply it to their school and public programming. Interpretation and education must extend beyond remembering and understanding (the lowest levels of learning) and extend through applying and analyzing into the high levels such as evaluating and creating. This is especially important when developing programming for multiple repeat visitors and LEET Tourism. Participants in these programs will likely have acquired significant levels of knowledge and understanding and are looking for opportunities to expand and apply their knowledge and skill through upper-level learning opportunities.

### Constructivist Learning Theory

The key notion in the constructivist theory of learning is that people learn best by actively constructing their own understanding. The learner builds on prior knowledge and understanding to construct new knowledge and understanding from authentic experience. Learners are allowed to confront problems full of meaning because of their real-life context. In solving these problems, learners are encouraged to explore possibilities, invent alternative solutions, collaborate with other learners, Visitor Services staff and experts, try out ideas and hypotheses, revise their thinking, and finally present the best solution they can derive.

#### Why This is Important

This is a well established learning model used in environmental education, interpretation and LEET Tourism. Its central premise is that learning is an active collaborative process. Here the place of the group leader is not a *"Sage on The Stage"* telling participants facts and information rather they are a *"Guide on the Side"* facilitating learning through encouraging participants to ask questions and solve problems through active observation, forming and testing hypotheses and sharing their discoveries and theories with others.

Visitor Services staff should understand and apply constructivist learning principles to school and public programming.

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## Inquiry Learning

Inquiry is the process of finding answers to questions. The skills of science inquiry include asking questions, proposing ideas, observing, experimenting, and interpreting the evidence that is gathered. Observation and evidence are key elements.

*An inquiry may be initiated in a variety of ways. It may be based on a question brought to the classroom by a teacher or student; or it may arise out of an activity, an interesting observation, an unexplained event or a pattern that appears worth pursuing. Engagement in inquiry is not a linear process; it can have a variety of starting points, and the steps followed may vary from one inquiry activity to another. When an unexpected observation is made or a procedure does not work, there is opportunity for new ideas to emerge and a new set of procedures to be followed.*

*Alberta Elementary Science Curriculum 1990*

Scientific inquiry refers to the diverse ways in which scientists study the world and propose explanations based on the evidence derived from their work. Inquiry also refers to the activities of students in which they develop knowledge and understanding of scientific ideas, as well as an understanding of how scientists study the natural world.

*Inquiry is a multifaceted activity that involves making observations; posing questions; examining books and other sources of information to see what is already known; planning investigations; reviewing what is already known in light of experimental evidence; using tools to gather, analyze, and interpret data; proposing answers, explanations, and predictions; and communicating the results. Inquiry requires identification of assumptions, use of critical and logical thinking, and consideration of alternative explanations. Students ... should develop the capacity to conduct complete inquiries.*

*National Science Education Standards 1996 developed by the US National Academy of Sciences.*

### Why This is Important

Inquiry learning follows modern scientific methods and approaches. It is an ideal model for science-focused school programming, Citizen Science projects and science-based LEET Tourism programming (e.g., study of wetlands at Crimson Lake Provincial Park or dryland ecology and archeology projects at Kootenay Plains Ecological Reserve).

Visitor Services staff should understand and be able to apply the principles of Inquiry Learning as a component of most of their Environmental Education and advanced public programming.

## Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow published his theory of human motivation in 1943. Its simple, common-sense approach is very appealing.

Maslow's theory explained that human needs are hierarchical. For a person to effectively learn and perform tasks, certain environmental and social criteria must be met. Many people represent Maslow's five criteria as a pyramid (see the sidebar below) – the base being the lowest, most essential level of needs and the tip representing the needs concerned with a person's highest potential. Each level of the pyramid is dependent on the previous level. For example, a person does not feel the second need until the demands of the first have been satisfied.

### Why This is Important

All Visitor Services staff working in the David Thompson Corridor must understand and be able to apply Maslow's Hierarchy. Understanding the hierarchy is important to successfully lead a group, especially in outdoor situations.

Visitor Services program participants will take part in activities most effectively if they are comfortable, feel safe and welcome. Conversely, they will perform poorly when they are uncomfortable, scared or humiliated. The following are some general tips for using Maslow's criteria to make your program more effective.

### Physical Needs

Experienced group leaders dress for the seasonal conditions to ensure that they are comfortable and effective leaders throughout the program. However, the leader must constantly monitor the comfort of all members of the group throughout the program, altering it to ensure that comfort levels are kept at a maximum. Watch, listen and regularly ask participants how things are going.

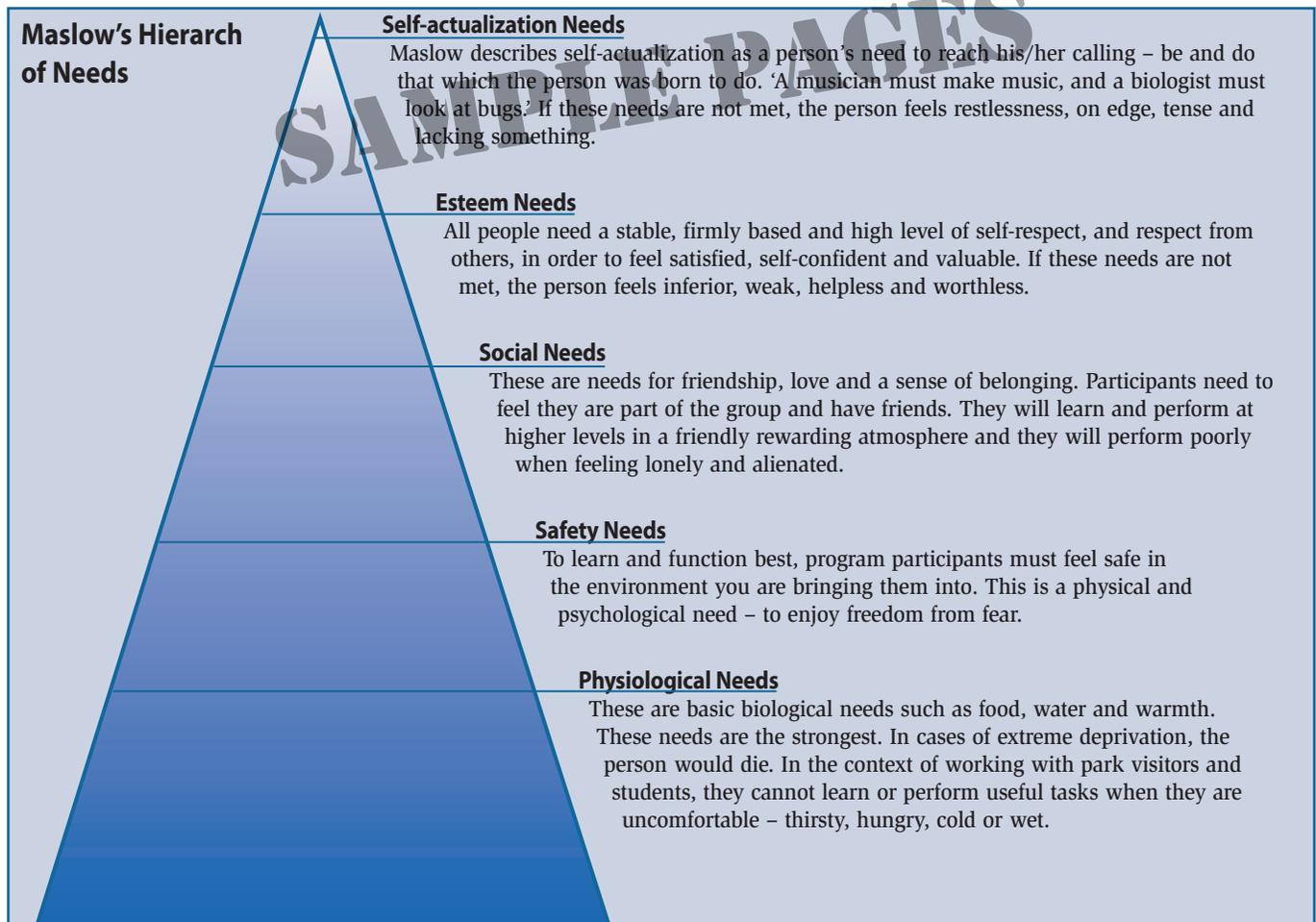
Key points to remember are:

- children have smaller bodies that cool off and tire more quickly than adults. They need access to sanitary facilities sooner and more urgently as well.
- some people come dressed in less than adequate clothing
  - make sure you stress the need for season-suitable, outdoor clothing in program promotions

Proper clothing may be critical to the success of your program.

### Safety Needs

Many outdoor leaders recognize that safety has both a physical and psychological aspect. They think about participant safety issues in terms of real risk (specific quantifiable safety factors like the real risk of electrocution crossing an open hilltop during a lightning storm) and perceived risk (how safe the participant thinks the situation is – e.g., a participant from another country may have an all-consuming



fear of being attacked by bears when they enter a forest). Conversely, many people may be oblivious to the deadly effects of hypothermia resulting from falling through ice on a lake.

Group leaders must pay close attention to what participants perceive as risk. Experienced group leaders do not expect them to have the leader's understanding of the safety issues. The leader asks questions and makes sure they provide both appropriate reassurance and clear warnings.

*Social and Esteem Needs*

Group leaders often work hard at welcoming participants and providing positive feedback throughout a program. They work hard to avoid put-downs. An effective leader treats all questions and answers with respect, especially wrong answers. An effective leader tries to give participants opportunities for social interaction with each other and with the leader.

In many cases, a program will be pushing participants to try new things and look at old ideas in a new light. To do this, they must feel confident to take mental and emotional risks without fear of humiliation.

*Self-actualization Needs*

Group leaders realize that they will never provide the self-actualization needs for an entire group of participants. However, many will tell, with great pride, of the individual that did start a lifetime interest as a result of participation in their program. These are valuable moments.

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## Stewardship

Stewardship of the natural and cultural values of Alberta Parks properties and by extension those values of the province as a whole is a core mandate of Alberta Parks (see Agency Foundations in Chapter 2). Stewardship is defined by Doug Marvin (personal communication), head of Alberta Parks stewardship services, as:

*“... an ethic of knowledge, caring and action toward the preservation, conservation and enjoyment of our rich natural and cultural heritage in Alberta.”*

Doug Marvin (personal communication)

This definition is supported further by one articulated by Ken P. Gurr on the Land Stewardship of Canada’s website ([www.landstewardship.org/learnabout.asp](http://www.landstewardship.org/learnabout.asp)) as:

*“the practice of carefully managing land usage to ensure natural systems are maintained or enhanced for future generations.”*

Gurr further expands this definition to include:

*“... stewardship is about re-discovering our long-forgotten natural ‘instincts’ of awe and respect for Nature: restoring some of our sense of wonder and magic from childhood...[and] preserving the capacity of the land for self-renewal.”*

### Guiding Principles of Stewardship

Gurr’s principles are:

1. Caring for the System as a Whole
  - understanding the fundamental roles and values of natural systems
  - incorporating an understanding of the ecological cycles on the landscape (water, energy, nutrients)
  - understanding how land-use practices can either benefit, be in harmony, or negatively impact these cycles and other land-users, flora and fauna
2. Maintaining, Building and Enhancing Stability in Nature
  - maintain and encourage natural biological diversity and complexity
  - maintaining natural areas and functions on the land (this includes wildlife habitat conservation)
3. Cultural Values and Ethics

- caring for the health of the land for future generations and long-term economic stability
- recognizing the link between civilization, urbanization, and the land-base and ecosystems that are vital to survival
- recognizing the intrinsic value and right to exist of all life on earth

It is in this principle that the essence of land stewardship exists.

*“A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity...” Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac.*

### 4. Resource Conservation

- maximizing efficiency and striving to reduce the one-time consumption of renewable and non-renewable resources
- aiming for long-term optimization versus short-term maximization of production

### Why This is Important

Stewardship is a central mandate for Alberta Parks. It is also a core motivation for park users to volunteer to take part in projects that take care of specific sites in Alberta parks. Visitor Services staff must understand and be able to repeat the Alberta parks definition of stewardship. They also must be aware of the broader definitions included here in order to communicate effectively with park visitors and current and potential partners about specific stewardship issues in parks and protected areas in the David Thompson Corridor and within the greater Alberta Parks system. Knowledge and understanding of stewardship concepts and initiatives will be especially important to Visitor Services staff leading or participating in Citizen Science and LEET Tourism programming.

## Two-Way Communication

The two-way communication model is also useful in heritage interpretation and environmental education programming. The constructivist learning model (see entry earlier in this chapter) requires learners to articulate, discuss and revise their learning based on their experiences in relation to their prior knowledge. These steps often require dialogue with Visitor Services staff, program leaders, teachers, and other learners. Through this dialogue both learners and learning facilitators develop new understanding and insights.

### Why This is Important

Two-way communication is central to most meaningful interpretive and education programming. Visitor Services staff must design opportunities for it in all personal programming. Two-way communication can also be incorporated into new media non-personal media such as websites, blogs, and smartphone applications (e.g., visitor comment and idea and photo-sharing sites).

As well, two-way communication is a central component of programming for knowledgeable multiple repeat visitors, Citizen Science Projects and LEET Tourism programs.

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