

THESIS PROJECT: 2021 NATURE AREA AND RITA STEINER FRY NATURE TRAIL INTERPRETIVE PLAN

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FRAMING

“A public garden is an institution that maintains collections of plants for the purposes of public education and enjoyment, in addition to research, conservation, and higher learning.”

The American Public Gardens Association

Many public gardens are beginning to embrace this definition and follow in the footsteps of other informal learning institutions, such as museums, zoos, and aquariums, when it comes to interpretation. With missions focused on public education, gardens are utilizing interpretation methods to teach visitors about a variety of subjects, most often centering around climate change, biodiversity, and other environmental topics. Common methods of interpretation include guided or self-guided tours, signage, maps, and brochures. While gardens are beginning to recognize the importance of interpretation, many have yet to implement interpretive concepts on a larger, more organized scale.

Through the use of interpretive plans, institutions can define learning goals and objectives for an area or exhibit, which strengthens the overall educational and engagement opportunities for visitors. Studies show that visitors go to public gardens for restoration and relaxation, so interpretive efforts need to be more subtle than those found in other informal learning institutions. While there have not been a large number of studies focusing on the effectiveness of interpretation in public gardens, knowledge and resources gathered from the museum field can be applied to help public gardens develop effective and engaging content.



Photograph of the Rita Steiner Fry Nature Trail along Pringle Creek, 2021, Salem, Oregon. Photograph by Sarah Purdy.

PURPOSE AND IMPACT

The purpose of this project is to create an interpretive plan for the Nature Area and Rita Steiner Fry Nature Trail (RSFN Trail) at Deepwood Museum & Gardens, located in Salem, Oregon. There are over forty native plants within this area, and there have been efforts in the past to make it an educational resource for those looking to learn more about native plants. But due to its “wilder” nature and a lack of dedicated volunteers to keep the area maintained, this area has not had consistent interpretation. With a defined interpretive plan, the area has the potential to be a source of

outdoor education while creating meaningful engagement opportunities for visitors. There are four interpretive goals outlined in the plan:

The Four Goals

- Continued preservation of a historic asset of Salem
- Increased accessibility for multiple audiences
- Increased engagement with multiple audiences
- Utilization as a natural educational resource

To help achieve the stated goals, the idea of community ownership of the Nature Area and RSFN Trail will be encouraged through various interpretive efforts. By encouraging a sense of responsibility, visitors will feel more attached to the Nature Area and RSFN Trail and be invested in the preservation of the area, feel welcome with more accessible trails, be more engaged with the area, and utilize the area as a natural educational resource. The three target audiences this plan focuses on includes the residents of Salem, families (especially those with young children), and senior visitors.

DELIVERABLE

The specific deliverable is an interpretive plan for the Nature Area and RSFN Trail, in the form of a PDF document. It includes an introduction and purpose, intended interpretive goals, stakeholders and target audiences, a mock up of the potential interpretive sign, a list of further actions for the museum to work on over the next three years, a map, and a brief timeline of the history of Deepwood. This will be used as a reference document to help guide Deepwood as they work to increase interpretive efforts for the area and find a dedicated group of volunteers to help maintain the trails and remove invasive species.

PROJECT TIMELINE



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge that I am living and learning on the ancestral lands of the Kalapuya peoples, whose descendants are now represented by the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians of Oregon. They continue to live and thrive throughout Oregon, acting as stewards of both human and natural resources.

PROCESS

The first phase of this project was research, which had three main areas of focus. First, I read research that looked at interpretation in botanical gardens to get a broader context for the project. Second, I looked at example interpretive plans, such as the plan for the Smithsonian gardens, as well as past project theses that also created interpretive plans. These helped me figure out the scope and structure of my own plan. Third, I researched best practices and methods of interpretation within the field as a whole. While working on research, I reached out to Deepwood to see if they would be interested in acting as the host site for my project. After the first meeting with the executive director, we formed a plan and I continued with my research.

After confirming the host site, I visited Deepwood and walked the trail to get a better sense of the area and potential interpretive methods. While working on this project, staff members, volunteers, and visitors were the primary stakeholders that I kept in mind. Since this was not a traditional exhibit with objects, a list of resources was not needed. The knowledge of the area and documents provided by the executive director, as well as guidance from my thesis committee, made up a majority of the resources that I utilized. After a majority of the research was complete, writing the rough draft of the plan began. There were multiple drafts and committee meetings, where we talked over feedback and changes to the evolving plan. There was another site visit where I walked the trail with the executive director, and we finalized what the plan should include to best help Deepwood.

REFLECTIONS

When making an interpretive plan, even one of a smaller scope, there are multiple factors and perspectives to keep in mind. The book that guided this project, *Interpretive Planning for Museums Integrating: Visitor Perspective in Decision Making*, emphasized the need for museums

to focus on intended audiences, visitor impacts and outcomes while creating an interpretive plan (Wells, Butler, & Koke, 2013). Other stakeholders, such as museum staff, volunteers, and board members, all will ideally benefit from a clear and decisive plan that can be followed as an institution moves forward with interpretive efforts. As this was my first interpretive plan, I wanted to make a useful document for Deepwood while applying all the knowledge and research I had found on best practices in the field.

The plan was created to guide the museum for the next three years, and the Further Actions sections has a list of actions for the museum to focus on as it begins to develop more interpretation for the Nature Area and RSFN Trail.

REFERENCES

American Public Gardens Association. (n.d.) What is a Public Garden? <https://www.publicgardens.org/about-public-gardens/what-public-garden>

Wells, M., Butler, B., & Koke, J. (2013). *Interpretive Planning for Museums: Integrating Visitor Perspectives in Decision Making*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.



Photograph of the Rita Steiner Fry Nature Trail sign at the beginning of the trail, 2021, Salem, Oregon. Photograph by Sarah Purdy.

I would like to thank my thesis committee members Wilson O'Donnell, Yvonne Putze, and Regan Pro, for their help, support, and guidance throughout this project. I would like to thank my parents for their continued support throughout my graduate school experience and the rest of my existence. And I would like to thank my friends Dani and Abby for supporting me throughout this thesis project.