

# Intangible Heritage and Vancouver Island Interpreters

## A Mock Proposal Attempts to Capture a Living Subculture



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By Liz Crocker

During a course in Intangible Heritage, we spent a lot of time simply defining the subject. A class assignment required that we apply this knowledge to a project of our own choosing. I chose to honour interpreters.

How do you document, preserve and interpret intangible heritage? What the heck is intangible heritage? These were the key questions explored in a recent course offered by the University of Victoria's Cultural Resource Management Program (CRMP).

Thirteen students spent six intense days with Professor Gerald Pocius of Memorial University of Newfoundland. Dr. Pocius, among other things, is a specialist in folklife studies, folk religion, popular music and Newfoundland culture. The whirlwind week included readings, lectures, assignments and discussions as well as field trips to the Royal British Columbia Museum and Maritime Museum of British Columbia. The CRMP courses are always excellent. It is a long and tiring six days, but I somehow manage to emerge refreshed and energized—if only intellectually!

Because of increased international



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**Course participants explore and discuss intangibles at the University of Victoria.**

interest in preserving intangible cultural heritage, organizations such as UNESCO have attempted to comprehensively define it. Though its definition is not universally agreed upon and is more of a list than a definition, it is useful. UNESCO states that intangible cultural heritage includes:

- oral traditions and expressions such as epic tales and stories
- performing arts including music, song, dance, puppetry and theatre
- social practices, rituals and festive events
- knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
- traditional craftsmanship
- the sites and spaces in which culturally significant activities and events occur

In short, just about any sort of cultural expression makes the list.

UNESCO has also created an inventory of "Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage," which is much like their world heritage site inventory, but for the intangible. The list includes cultural expressions such as the "Elche Mystery Play", a medieval religious play from Spain, and

traditional Lithuanian cross crafting.

Instead of describing more of the week's activities, I am going to share an abridged version of one of my assignments as an example of what an intangible heritage project might look like, from start to finish. The assignment was to write a proposal for an intangible heritage project of our choosing or imagining. I chose to create a proposal for the intangible heritage of interpreters on Southern Vancouver Island.

This was an interesting exercise as it forced me to act as an anthropologist (observing a cultural group as an outsider) towards a group that I am also a member of. It is one of the truths of intangible heritage that the practitioners of a particular group do not believe anything is special or noteworthy about their own traditions and customs. It is the outsider who often finds value in the cultural expressions first. Accordingly, it was a challenge to try to define some of the intangible heritage of interpreters on Vancouver Island. See my proposal on the following page.

Although this is just the skeleton of an imagined proposal, I found

# The Intangible Heritage of Interpreters on Southern Vancouver Island

## An Abridged Version of an Imagined Proposal

### Target Group

Workers in the field of informal public education based in parks, interpretive centres and nature houses are given various job titles. The most common of these are park naturalist, park interpreter, heritage interpreter or environmental educator. This proposed project addresses the intangible heritage of workers who identify with any of the above titles and any others I may have missed.

### Proposed Participants

Southern Vancouver Island interpreters who are members of Interpretation Canada's BC chapter will be invited to participate in this project. Major employers of naturalists on Southern Vancouver Island will also be contacted to identify potential participants who may not be members.

### Project Rationale

Traditionally, park interpreters were associated with one park for a long time, often for their entire career. Parks would sometimes provide naturalists with housing within the park. The end result was that the interpreter knew the cultural and natural history of the park in great detail and over a long period of time. As new interpreters came into the job, the senior staff mentored them. Today the situation within national, provincial and regional parks is vastly different. Workers are more transitory than they ever have been. Because of this, the living culture of interpreters, including their knowledge of particular parks and places are in danger of being lost. This project proposes to capture some of the intangible cultural heritage that is lived by and passed on through generations of interpreters in this disjointed new work world.

### A Vital Subculture

Despite the fragmented nature of the work, and the fact that it can be impossible to earn a living wage in this field, interpreters have a vibrant culture on Southern Vancouver Island. Increasingly, books about interpretation are being written and membership in the BC chapter is the highest it has been in years.

### Nature of the Targeted Intangible Cultural Heritage

Nature interpretation is frequently described as a "calling" by interpreters. They joke about "not doing it for the money". Interpreters are passionate about their work. The work they do is supported by a particular type of lifestyle and culture. Within the work itself is a distinct set of references and vocabulary. Words like "provocation", "Pojar", "tabling" and "roving" are immediately understood by members within this group. Although many naturalists wear a uniform in the workplace, uniforms, like personal garments, are predominately comprised of fleece, gortex, and other breathable fibres. Hiking boots, Birkenstock and Teva sandals are some of the main styles of footwear. Associated with clothing is the traditional knowledge of where to shop for these items. Information on seasonal sales and bargains of both clothing and outdoor equipment are frequently communicated.

There are many similarities in the culture of interpreters outside of work as well. The stereotype of the new age, left-leaning, organic-fruit buying, west coast vegetarian (i.e. will eat salmon), folk-festival-loving tree hugger is not far off from the lifestyle, traditions and culture of many Southern Vancouver Island Interpreters. In short, the vocation of nature interpretation in this region is intimately linked with a kind of group politics and way of being. Interpreters tend to be motivated by personal convictions and beliefs more than paycheques. How this lifestyle and living culture are expressed and communicated by interpreters in and outside the work environment is what this project aims to document.

Examples of intangible cultural heritage that may be documented in this project:

- interpretive techniques, methods and tools (e.g., stories, songs, prop construction suggestions)
- knowledge of place, natural and cultural history
- stories and lore told by interpreters outside of work about programs and program participants (espe-

cially disasters and/or humorous instances)

- naturalist language and unique terms
- advice and warnings to other interpreters, especially rookies, about where to shop and how to get work on the island

### Documentation

This project will primarily use interviews with participants to document the intangible cultural heritage. Interviews will be transcribed to paper as well as stored in a digital format. Photographs of participants will be taken, collected and copied. These may record images of interpretive work in the field, training sessions, parties or other relevant activities. Participant videos of programs or nature walks, excellent, terrible, memorable or ordinary, will be collected as well as created during the project.

### Presentation and Promotion:

The results and documentation of this project will be presented on a website that will be hosted by Interpretation Canada. Visitors to the site will be able to listen to interviews, view photographs and videos, read transcriptions and information about participants. Visitors who did not participate in the project will be able to contribute their own expressions of this living culture in an evolving, online journal of interpretation culture. The site will be linked to other prominent websites for promotion purposes, such as Parks Canada, University of Victoria and others. Other sub-groups of interpreters, from other sectors such as museums and other geographical areas, would be encouraged to document and preserve their own cultures.

### Intended End Results:

The intent of this project is to not only capture some of the living culture and folklore of Southern Vancouver Island interpreters so it is not lost, but to create a tangible place where this vibrant culture can be celebrated and tended to by group members and outsiders. Project results and materials may also be used by employers for training purposes.



myself believing such a project might not only be viable but could be really great. And having to conceptualize and write about intangible heritage within a concrete and familiar framework did sharpen my understanding and appreciation of it. Now—if only the imagined funding part of this proposal were more tangible!

### References

*An Approach to Aboriginal Cultural Landscapes* - a Parks Canada resource  
[www.pc.gc.ca/docs/r/pca-acl/index\\_e.asp](http://www.pc.gc.ca/docs/r/pca-acl/index_e.asp)

*The Newfoundland Salt Fisheries Digital Exhibit* - be sure to turn your speakers on for this one  
<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/fisheries/>

*The American Folklife Center website* - dynamic work in intangible heritage south of the border  
[www.loc.gov/folklife](http://www.loc.gov/folklife)

*Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in the 2003 UNESCO Convention: a Critical Appraisal* by Richard Kurin, Museum International (journal), 221/222 May 2004

*One Space, Many Places: Folklife and Land Use in New Jersey's Pinelands National Reserve*  
Mary Hufford, Washington: Library of Congress, American Folklife Center, 1986  
- a really chewy, detailed study of folklife and place

## Interpreting Nuu-chah-nulth Treasures

Some of the challenges of interpreting and presenting intangible resources were addressed in an informative lecture given by Dr. Martha Black, ethnology curator at the Royal British Columbia Museum. Dr. Black spoke about the HuupuKwanum/Tupaat: Out of the Mist, Treasures of the Nuu-chah-nulth Chiefs exhibit created in collaboration with Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council. Nuu-chah-nulth interpreters were hired by the tribal council to work with the exhibit at the RBCM and to travel with it to the Denver Museum of Nature and Science and the Autry Museum of Western Heritage in Los Angeles. This was a great expense, but a vital one.

The interpreters were the only ones who had permission to speak for the chiefs about the exhibit objects. The interpreters were free to wander throughout the exhibit and speak to visitors. Interactions ranged from casual conversation to detailed information about the objects, including personal family anecdotes. (As an interpreter, I appreciate how much interpretation was valued and supported in this project.)

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