

Using Rainforest Research

Signs, signs everywhere, but are they being read?

November 1997

A visitor to the rainforests of north Queensland will almost certainly encounter a sign. Signs have become a popular method of relating information about natural places, interesting sights and historical features within the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. Because they are permanent they are likely to be encountered by a large number of visitors.

These signs come under the banner of 'environmental interpretation', and have the potential to enrich visitors' experiences and their understanding of the area they are visiting. Interpretation plays an important role in the management of protected areas by fostering favourable attitudes towards conservation in addition to helping people learn about and enjoy their experience more.

Will a visitor read your sign?

Signs can only be effective if visitors bother to read them. Yet, many signs in the area fail to hold visitor interest because the text is too lengthy or they are difficult to understand. Poorly designed signs may be ignored, or worse, they may irritate, confuse or bore visitors. Books and guidelines on interpretation suggest using a conversational tone and point form, yet this recommendation had never been systematically tested.

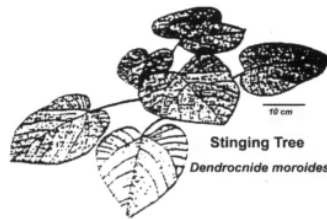
Dr Gianna Moscardo from the Tourism Department at James Cook University, is leading a team of researchers who have been testing the strengths and weaknesses of various interpretation methods used in the Wet

A The Stinging Tree

Although the serrated, heart shaped leaves and fleshy red berries of the stinging tree often remind people of a raspberry bush, don't be tempted. Stay well clear!

Found primarily in the rainforest, the stinging tree has a dense covering of fine glass-like hairs on all exposed parts of the plant. If accidentally brushed against, the hairs break off and lodge in the skin. These hairs release a chemical which can cause a throbbing pain that can last many months.

Historical records show that animals are equally susceptible to the virulent poison produced by the hollow hairs of the stinging tree. Early settlers tell of horses being driven to self-destruction as a result of coming into contact with the plant.

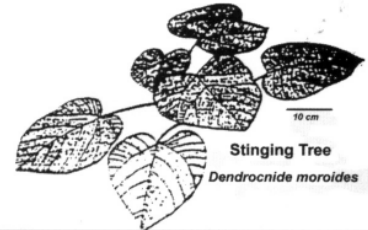


C The Stinging Tree

As you walk through the rainforest watch for a bush known as the Stinging Tree. This plant looks similar to a raspberry bush, but with heart-shaped leaves and fleshy red berries. Don't be fooled! This bush bites!

The innocent looking Stinging Tree hides a painful weapon. Look closely and you will notice the bush has a dense covering of fine glass-like hairs. If you touch a Stinging Tree, these fine hairs will lodge in your skin and the poison will cause an intense throbbing pain which can last for months!

Even horses have been driven to self-destruction from the pain caused by touching a Stinging Tree. So watch out for the Stinging Tree and if you see one, stay well clear!



B The Stinging Tree

The Stinging Tree is dangerous.

The serrated, heart shaped leaves and fleshy red berries of the stinging tree often remind people of a raspberry bush.

This Stinging Tree is not a Raspberry bush

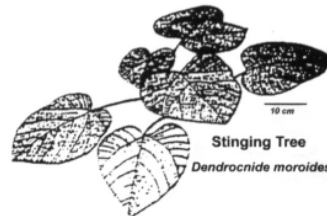
The stinging tree has a dense covering of fine glass-like hairs on all exposed parts of the plant

If accidentally brushed against, the hairs break off and lodge in the skin. These hairs release a chemical which can cause a throbbing pain that can last many months.

Historical records show that animals are equally susceptible to the virulent poison produced by the hollow hairs of the stinging tree. Early settlers tell of horses being driven to self-destruction as a result of coming into contact with the plant.

The stinging tree is found primarily in the rainforest.

Stay well clear!



D The Stinging Tree

Watch out- this bush bites!

This innocent looking bush may look like a raspberry bush, with heart shaped leaves and fleshy red berries.

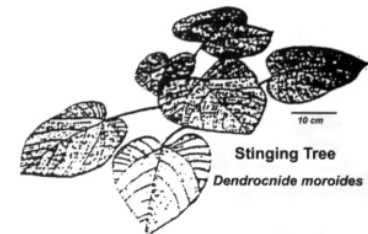
Don't be fooled!

The innocent looks hide a dangerous weapon - the fine glass-like hairs which contain a nasty poison.

If you touch a Stinging Tree, these fine hairs will lodge in your skin and the poison will cause an intense throbbing pain which can last for months.

Even horses have been driven to self destruction after touching a stinging tree.

Watch for stinging trees as you walk through the rainforest. If you see one, stay well clear!!



Providing science for the conservation and management of Australia's World Heritage tropical rainforests.



COOPERATIVE RESEARCH CENTRE
FOR TROPICAL RAINFOREST
ECOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT





Tropics World Heritage Area. One study in particular investigated reader preferences for a particular sign. Their work found that visitors are more likely to read signs which attract their attention and those which they find clear, and easy to understand. The result confirmed the opinions of hands-on interpreters.

The study

An interpretive sign was selected from within the Daintree National Park. The information in this original sign (sign A on the front page) was presented in paragraph format, and written in a standard narrative language style. Without altering the basic content, three additional signs were created for the evaluation:

- B) in point form with a narrative style,
- C) in paragraph form with a conversational and reader focused style, and
- D) in point form with a conversational and reader focused style.

First year university students carried out the surveys to find out which sign format was preferred by visitors.

The verdict

The majority of the visitors surveyed clearly preferred sign D which was reader focused with a conversational

style in point form. Second preference was sign B, followed by sign C. Sign A, which was presented in paragraph form in a narrative style was the least preferred.

Respondents indicated they preferred sign D because the information was clearly stated and it was easy to read and understand. The readers liked the language style and use of point form, and they felt the sign format attracted their attention. They did not find the warning effective in sign C because it didn't attract their attention, and generally found the text too long and 'wordy'.

This research suggests that one way to improve signs is to write them in a conversational language tone with descriptive and colourful words. Signs are more likely to hold visitors' attention if they engage them in a 'conversation' rather than present them with a statement of facts. The team's research results also suggests that text should be short, succinct and emphasise the main issues in point form.

This research can provide simple suggestions which can improve a sign's effectiveness without increasing the cost of its production.

Barbara Woods
JCU - Department of Tourism

For more information

For more information about this study, please contact:

Dr Gianna Moscardo
Ms Barbara Woods
Department of Tourism
James Cook University of North Queensland
Townsville QLD 4811

Tel: (07) 4781 4254



Dr Gianna Moscardo



Ms Barbara Woods

