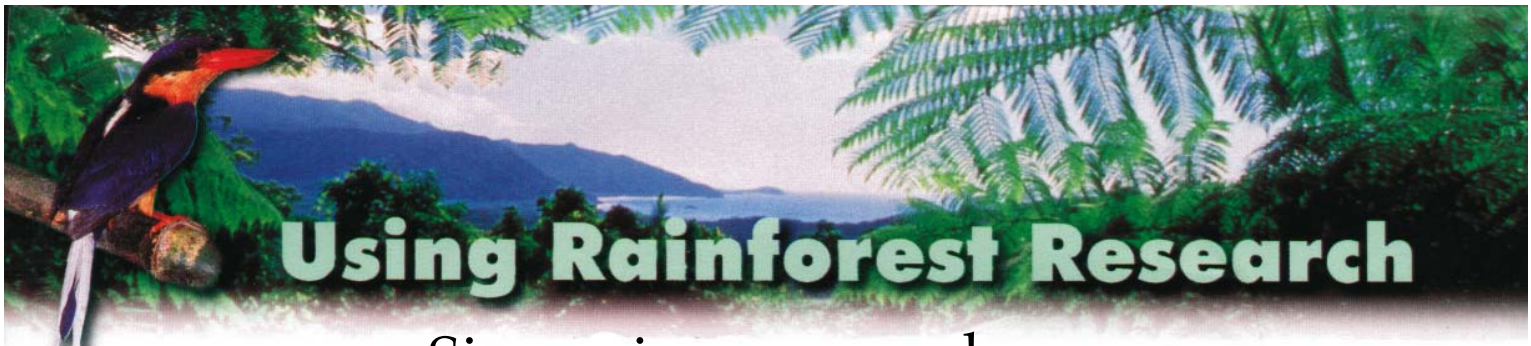


Using Rainforest Research

Signs, signs everywhere, but are they being read?

November 1997

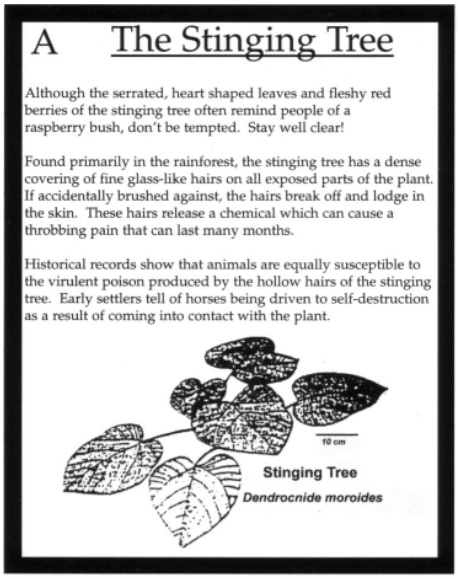
A visitor to the rainforests of north Queensland will almost certainly encounter a sign. Signs have become a popular method of relating information about natural places, interesting sights and historical features within the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. Because they are permanent they are likely to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

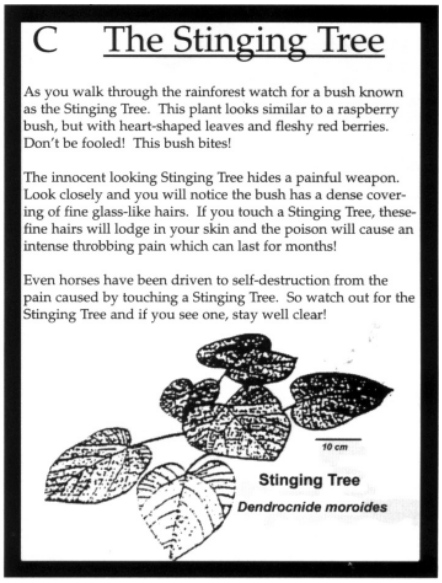
These signs come under the banner of 'environmental interpretation', and have the potential to enrich visitors' experiences and their understanding of the area they are visiting. Interpretation plays an important role in the management of protected areas by fostering favourable attitudes towards conservation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

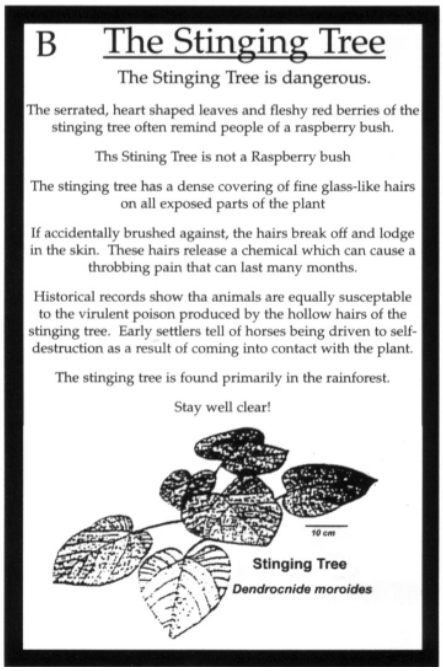
Will a visitor read your sign?

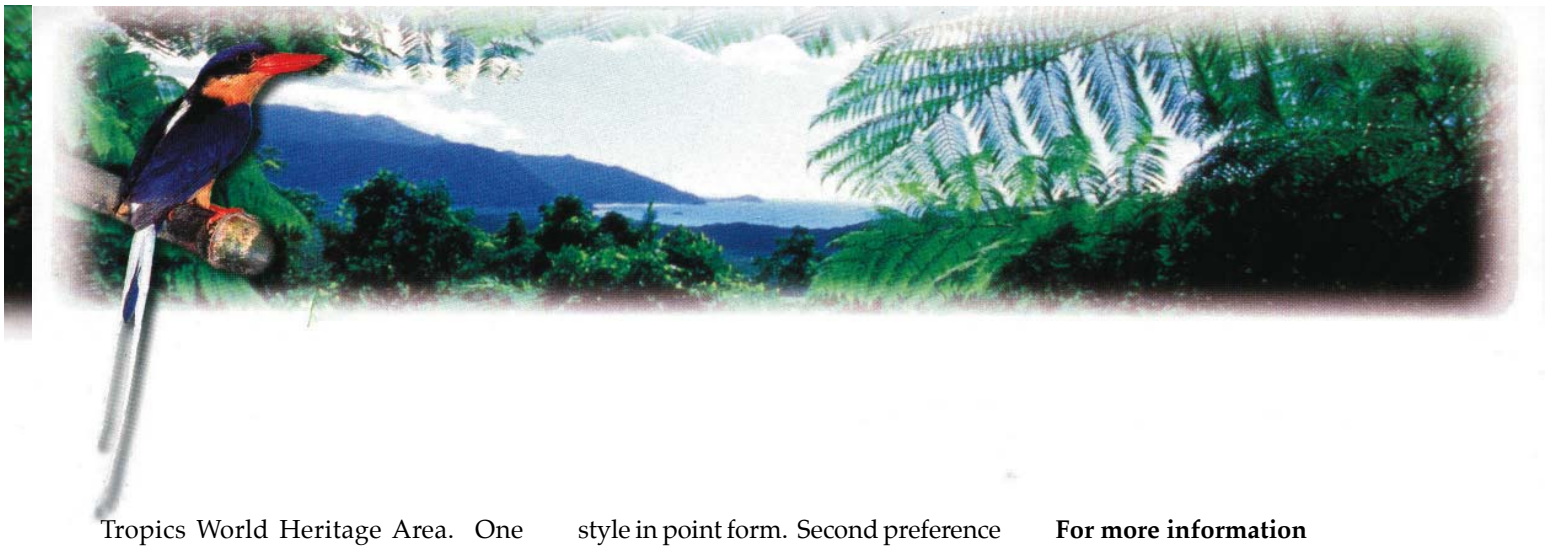
Signs can only be effective if visitors bother to read them. Yet, many signs in the area fail to hold visitor interest because the text is too lengthy or they are difficult to understand. Poorly designed signs may be ignored, or worse, they may irritate, confuse or bore visitors. Books and guidelines 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









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 read 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 tat 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.

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For more information

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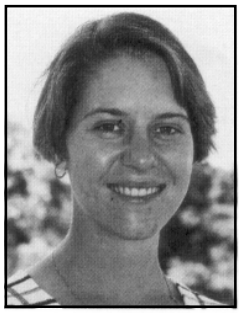
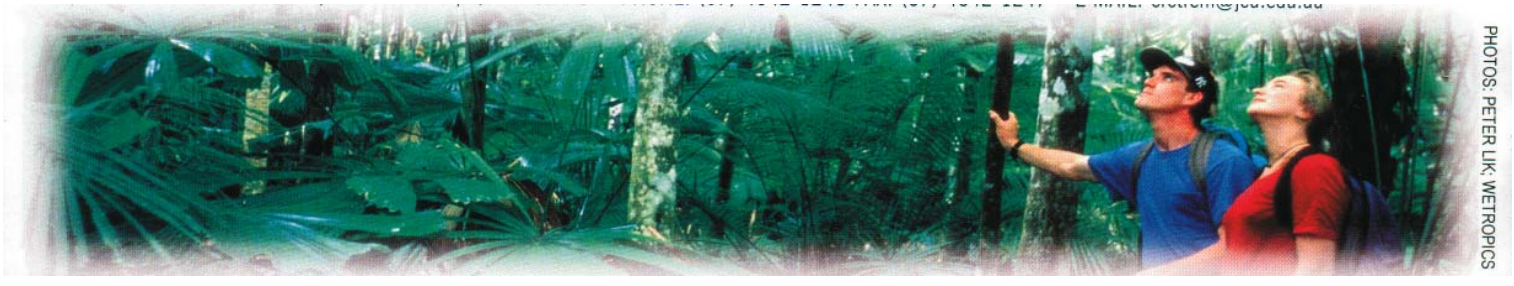


Ms Barbara Woods



PHOTOS: PETER LIK: WETROPICS