EVOLUTION OF A SPACE

A NATURAL APPROACH TO ENHANCED INTERPRETATION

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Catalina Island may be just a 90-minute trip from mainland California, but it can feel like a voyage to another time and place. Trask's Trail, a new outdoor learning experience created by the Catalina Island Conservancy on protected land, was an effort in placemaking within a natural landscape that sought to balance the benefits of enhanced interpretation with the power of a preserved environment. The many recreationalists that use our land cite the total immersion they feel in nature (devoid of formal interpretation and signage) as one of the elements that makes Catalina such a unique place to visit.

For Trask's Trail, we focused on the aspect of placemaking that emphasizes transformation, endeavoring to use interpretation in ways that would

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This aerial view of Catalina Island highlights the high percentage of undeveloped land.

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help create connections between the environment and our audience. As the new trail is in an area that is protected from invasive species, it provided staff with the opportunity to educate visitors on what the Island could be if external threats are managed and controlled *and* to immerse visitors in the uniqueness of the Island's natural biodiversity. Our deliberate placement of interpretive markers, paired with our careful selection of concepts, allowed us to align physical engagement with the space with visitors' natural inclinations for movement and comfort and to inspire sociability around concepts that are personally relevant and allied with Island visit motivation.

ESTABLISHING PLACE

Santa Catalina Island lies 22 miles off the coast of California (intro image). Part of Los Angeles County, 88 percent of Catalina (roughly 42,000 acres) is owned by the Catalina Island Conservancy, which stewards the Island through a balance of conservation, education, and recreation. It is the only one of the eight Channel Islands with open public access.

Avalon, the only incorporated city on the Island, occupies three square miles, or just 4 percent of the Island's total landmass. Of the over one million visitors who travel to the Island each year, many will never leave the shopping and restaurants of Avalon. However, approximately 25 percent will venture out of the city limits to connect with nature through EcoTours, hiking, biking, and camping.

The Island's visitors represent a vast spectrum of environmental knowledge. For those thru-hiking on the rugged 38.5-mile Trans-Catalina Trail, environmental understanding and nature appreciation run deep, while for those taking part in a two-hour EcoTour as part of a cruise-ship stop, this may be a first experience viewing unspoiled vistas. Diversity of previous knowledge and visit motivation among audience members is common for museums, and we find it equally true for visitors to the Island.[1]

The Island's dry, arid climate can further complicate audience connection, as the area experiences significant seasonal variability. The vibrant blooms of spring and lush landscapes of winter contrast with dry, hot summers that leave native plants shriveled, brown, and often without foliage. Though a natural part of their lifecycle, brown, brittle plant life can present a challenging aesthetic during the height of tourist season. Inspiring appreciation for the Island's plant life can require special messaging for those less familiar with the seasonality of arid climates.

The Conservancy's guided tours successfully present concepts to visitors through direct interpretation; however, a recent goal has been to develop more self-directed resources for independent recreationalists. Trask's Trail is one such resource, a new learning experience located within Whites Restoration Area in an undeveloped area of the Island that boasts high biodiversity, proximity to a road, an easy-to-enter gate, and over a quarter-mile of existing walking trails created by prior and current visitors to the space, whose self-directed movements forged pathways that are inviting and easy to understand.

Fig. 1. The Channel Islands tree poppy is common along Trask's Trail.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Whites Restoration Area was established in 2007 after a fire burned 10 percent of Catalina Island. This 10-acre exclosure protects the delicate sprouts of endangered species from grazing by the Island's invasive mule deer population. Sixteen years later, Whites Restoration Area reveals what the Island could be if mule deer were not present and models what the landscape looked like before human overuse through ranching and mining in the 19th century. Visitors to this space can see plants that have been grazed to near extinction elsewhere on the Island, including Trask's yerba santa and the Channel Islands tree poppy (fig. 1).

Until recently, the Conservancy used Whites Restoration Area informally to educate stakeholders, potential funders, and conservation partners through guided interaction. Then, in December of 2021, we received a donation to further expand the educational potential of the space to benefit a broader audience. Funding was designated for added plantings, educational signage, and trail improvements.

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The most accessible area of the exclosure became the focus of our interpretive work. We named the area Trask's Trail in honor of early botanist Blanche Trask, whose 19th-century Island explorations led to the discovery of several new plant species. The name also honors the history of the Island and signals the importance of independent exploration and self-guided curiosity for the natural world. The name reflects our approach to placemaking, which seeks to create a space where visitors feel connected and confident, and where they will thus be more likely to explore novel experiences and enjoy increased comfort overall engaging with natural spaces.

DETERMINING THE DESIGN

The authors – directors of the education and conservation departments, respectively – served as project leads and incorporated a broader team from across the organization, including our community learning manager, who provided insight into the content topics most relevant to our audience, and conservation horticulturists, plant technicians, and the trails manager, who aided in restoration planting and trail-building. Design was done in-house by our marketing manager and graphic designer. Our goal was to connect the visitor to the unique aspects of the exclosure by highlighting rare species and the Island's ecology. We valued behaviors and patterns of movement already observed in the space and aligned our interpretive strategy with visitor motivation for being in the space in the first place. We prioritized ensuring the interpretive elements did not distract from the vistas, that existing pathways were

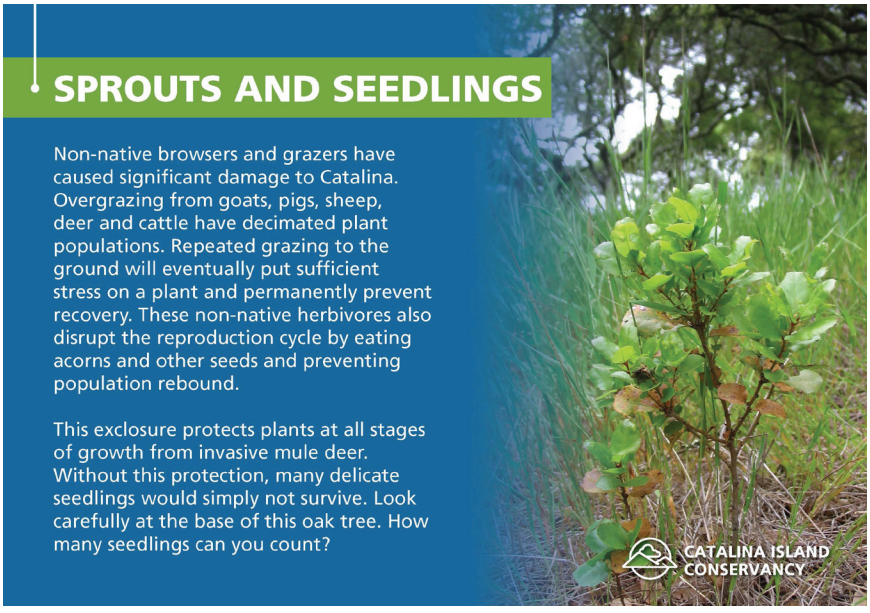

Fig. 2. A large thematic sign explains the importance of protecting native plants from invasive species.

honored, and that the emotions and interests naturally prompted by a visit to the space would guide content decisions.

We decided that the theme of landscape health and preservation would drive content creation. We then selected approximately a dozen content areas to advance this central theme, including fog capture, diversity of flora, examples of restoration challenges, islands as a refugium, fire dependency, importance of study, herbivore predation, diverse fauna, faunal food and shelter, pollinators, and bird song diversity. The team benchmarked these against evaluation data from a similar project completed in 2021 in the Conservancy's Wrigley Memorial & Botanic Garden. This project consisted of a two-year comment-collection phase during which the Garden caretakers compiled a document of visitor questions and testimonials regarding the various features of the Garden. These were then synthesized into 13 content areas that represented the most commonly asked questions, highlighted unique species in the Garden, and promoted awareness of the Conservancy's restoration efforts. Signs corresponding to these topics were then added to the space. Prior to this project, the only interpretation in the space had been small, 3-by-5-inch species identification signs placed in proximity to plantings.

The results of paper-and-ink questionnaires administered by summer interns indicated that 100 percent of visitors felt the additional signage improved the value of their visit. Respondents indicated one of the most interesting signs was the one that addressed how we protect plants from invasive deer. Referring back to the Garden evaluation project not only highlighted the importance of similar concepts in Island ecology but also reaffirmed our commitment to placemaking through the incorporation of topics of common interest to our community. The input of our community learning manager was essential in helping us to recognize audience learning-style preferences and in synthesizing the topics our audience felt added the most value.[2]

From this, we created a three-level interpretive plan that included three different proposed sizes of signs and different depths of content complexity in alignment with sign size (fig. 2). The team then walked the space with this plan in hand. During these walks, our emphasis was on identifying authentic connections between the content and the land itself. We eliminated topics if there was no clear tie to what the visitor would see and added new topics to align with what would assuredly capture attention and prompt questioning.

Fig. 3. For many conservation staff members, this was their first experience with the creation and installation of interpretive signage.

We followed general best practices in designing our labels, with particular emphasis on text length, contrast, and font size and style.[3] A final total of approximately 150 small species identification signs, 21 medium species spotlight signs, and 13 larger thematic concept signs were designed in-house and fabricated off site. Sign installation occurred in phases beginning with the identification signs and concluding with thematic concept signs (fig. 3). Physical improvements to the space occurred simultaneously and included members of the interpretive team from the conservation department as well as the authors.

Fig. 4. Sign placement keeps visitors on the trail and away from delicate seedlings and hazards.

Placemaking guided the plan for physical movement through the space, helping us to prioritize the needs of visitors through reference to past land use. The informal footpaths that hikers and visitors had created over the last decade became the main trails. We installed interpretive signage near natural resting spaces after difficult terrain and away from dense underbrush that could harbor hazards like sleepy rattlesnakes or poison oak. We avoided placement near uneven terrain or in areas where it would bottleneck movement along narrow paths. We avoided sign placement in any location uncomfortable to access, rest, gather, or read (fig. 4).

EXPERIENCE IMPACT

After completing the project in early 2023, we initiated efforts to gauge its impact. As one of the first examples of interpretation within our conservation exclosures, Trask's Trail allows us to explore the impact of this work on both visitors and organizational staff. For some team members, this was their first experience in merging interpretation with conservation work. One emerging professional who had been a part of site design and sign installation happened upon a pair of early visitors to the site. She sent a team email that served as our earliest data point:

> I wanted to let you know that we ran into some hikers in there today and they were locals who have hiked around the exclosure before in previous years. They said they saw an article about the new trail, so they took the shuttle out to see it. They commended our work and said it looks way more welcoming and that it is easier to navigate now. They really loved the stairs and educational signs. It was great to hear after all the hard work we put into the exclosure this year.

Though anecdotal, this feedback is incredibly positive on many levels. First, as we will discuss in the challenges section, accessing the space takes planning, and taking the shuttle indicated that these visitors had invested both time and money in their visit. Secondly, Island residents are traditionally extremely averse to anything that changes the landscape and rarely compliment modifications. Lastly, these were individuals who had spent time in the space before, contributed to the informal foot paths we incorporated, and taken in the vistas we worked hard not to obscure. For project leads, hearing the pride from a team member to have been part of this transformation circles back to the importance of taking on designer roles in creative placemaking and inspiring the next generation of professionals.

A second source of early feedback came from a small group of adult visitors from the mainland, half of whom had never visited the interior of the Island. The Conservancy arranged their transportation to the space, but they received no other guidance or interpretation, simply the opportunity to explore (fig. 5). Ten of these visitors responded to a post-visit evaluation: 60

percent found the level of signage the right amount, while 30 percent were interested in having more signs. Comments further confirmed the design provided the opportunity for them to feel fully immersed: "[there were] no big signs in my face telling me where to go so it felt like I was exploring on my own instead of following a guide... which for me is a good thing!"

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We also saw evidence that these visitors had retained new information, such as comments that referenced "the importance of preserving native species," that "fog plays a huge role in the ecosystem," and that "there are many native and endemic species that live here so protection is important so they don't disappear forever."

We are only at the start of our evaluation process and look forward to furthering data collection and analysis throughout 2023. Our EcoTour drivers were brought in for a tour and demonstration in April 2023 and, at the time of publication, were finalizing plans to incorporate Trask's Trail into excursions for Island visitors. The location will continue to be a site for K–12 immersive ecology-based field trips as well as a location to host volunteers.

BEYOND CATALINA

Creating an exhibition true to the concept of placemaking in an already natural and immersive environment may be the very opposite situation many readers find themselves in. However, we feel that many of the lessons learned and challenges faced have universal relevancy. As with other organizations, we struggled to find the balance between the information that we, as science professionals, felt was critical to impart and what information would be most relevant to the visitation goals of our audience. Our solution was to live the theory of placemaking by incorporating multiple walk-throughs of the location into our planning process. These included honest conversations about what topics of interest naturally arose when we were in the space as

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Fig. 5. Visitors to the space enjoy both natural vistas and access to opt-in ecological information.

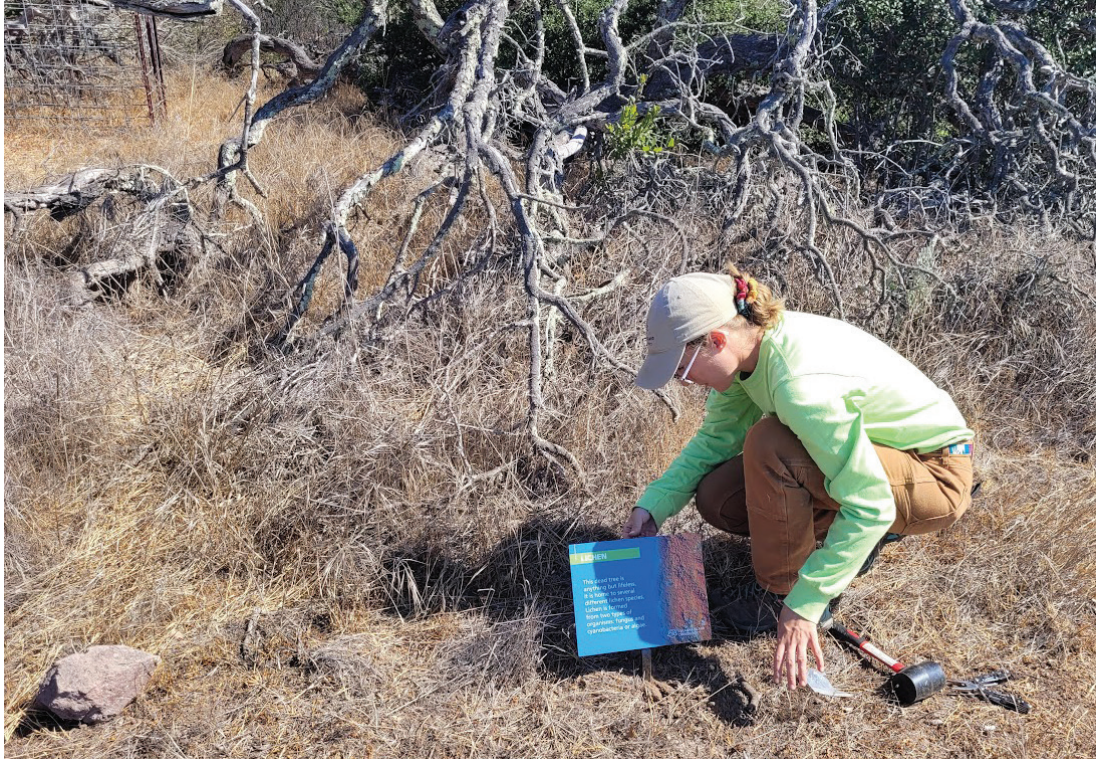

Fig. 6.

An interpretive sign describing lichen was added to the trail after the team recognized its prevalence along the path.

opposed to typing away in the office. For example, signage identifying lichen as a living organism seemed unimportant in the office, but its prevalence along the trail made it impossible to ignore (fig. 6).

For our organization, as might be the case for others, interpretative collaboration across the departments of education, conservation, and recreation is still in its nascent stages. At multiple points in the process, we had to verbally restate our goals of placemaking in order to guide our decision-making and rely on open and thoughtful communication. This began by initiating the project with clear goals on the depth of content that would be presented and the realities of word count and then aligning responsibilities with expertise. Conservation determined core messaging, while education took the lead in crafting the language and presentation that would be most engaging for a general public. Using signs that we could afford to replace reduced stress because it allowed us to add topics in the future or swap out a sign that, once placed, didn't work as planned.

Physical time together was a big help with team building. When on a walk-through one of the authors had to stop to catch her breath before continuing along the trail, she set aside her embarrassment in calling her more nimble conservation colleagues back. As they waited together, they collectively realized that this challenging section of the trail was likely to be a pinch point for most visitors and thus the ideal place for signage to capitalize on what was a natural stopping point. These types of spaces allow visitors to rest without the risk of feeling stigmatized by announcing their need for a break as the author needed to. This strategy later proved effective when one of the visitors we spoke with offered the feedback, "I have bad hips so hills can be difficult, but it was nice to have signs to read, to stop and rest for a minute."

Another aspect of our approach that we feel has broad relevancy was the way we embraced both the assets and challenges of our location through an iterative approach to placemaking. During design and development site visits, we actively reviewed our content choices and eliminated topics that (while interesting to us) did not naturally fit the location. We understood that without a direct connection to what the visitor was seeing and experiencing, even topics we found fascinating were likely to fall flat. In addition, we chose to incorporate natural pathways rather than force alternative movement patterns. The space is not a simple loop but rather a Y-shaped path that requires backtracking. Although it may not seem

like the most ideal pathway, by enhancing what came before we are honoring previous visitors' use of the space. Most importantly, we opted for less expensive, semipermanent signage specifically so modifications would be easier and less costly to implement after formative evaluation. Though the resulting signage has a less-polished aesthetic, we value the additional flexibility. Lastly, our budget was very modest. We feel the scale of our project aligns well with many organizations working without substantial funds or a designated exhibition team.

CHALLENGES

Immersion within natural environments can create unique challenges. For Trask's Trail, balancing authenticity and accessibility is an ongoing consideration. The space includes uneven terrain and sharp inclines. However, landscape grading to improve walkability would damage the very flora the space protects. To address this, we ensured that the most accessible, flat, open space at the beginning of the experience featured a range of signs covering multiple topics. In the event this is as far as someone can go, we want them to feel that they have had a meaningful experience. We also incorporated stairs into existing pathways to address loose and slippery terrain (fig. 7).

When choosing materials and fabricating our interpretive signs, we accounted for durability against rain and intense sunlight. Our good choices were evident after severe storms in February left content signs undamaged and just in need of a little more stabilization. Gale-force winds, however,

Fig. 7.

In addition to signage and improved trail markings, the team constructed stairs in steep and slippery areas.

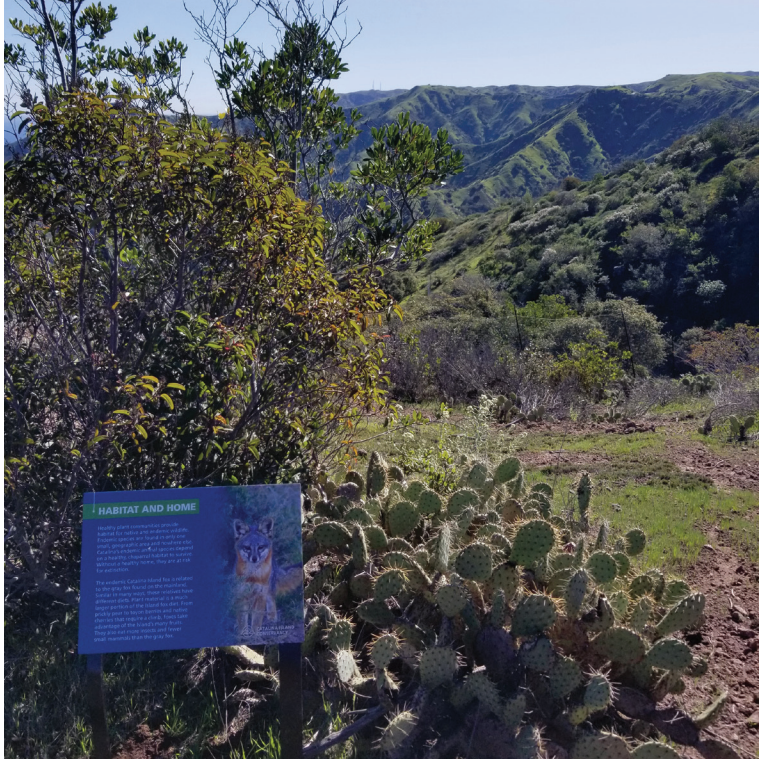

Fig. 8. The combination of natural vistas and curated content makes Trask's Trail an ideal space to promote the Conservancy's mission.

separated the entrance door completely from its frame. Our hypothesis is that the lightweight welcome sign we had attached to the door may have functioned as a sail, causing the damage. Accordingly, the door is under repair and our welcome sign will be reinstalled as an in-ground design.

An ongoing challenge for this and most of the Conservancy's natural spaces is access to the site itself, which is not close to the tourism center of Avalon. Located approximately nine miles from town along a steeply climbing road, Trask's Trail is beyond the scope of a casual stroll around town. Accordingly, our tours and interpretive programs have begun to incorporate a visit to Trask's Trail into our facilitated offerings. It can also be reached by the approximately 15,000 hikers and bikers that travel the nearby trails annually. Lastly, we have a shuttle that runs to the area with modest frequency. We will continue to explore ways to increase access as part of the initiative's evolution.

Creating spaces that protect fragile biodiversity and/or collections while simultaneously encouraging active engagement is an endeavor not unique to our organization. In our case, an unlocked gate cedes entry control to the visitor, yet one forgotten latch (or wind-damaged door) can lead to decimating predation by invasive deer. It is our belief that this risk will be rewarded through a more informed and inspired public eager to help us conserve this unique ecosystem; however, only time will tell if our assumption proves correct.

LOOKING FORWARD

The Conservancy is eager to explore a multitude of ways this space can serve as a natural-yet-curated space for programming and to advance understanding of its mission (fig. 8). Upcoming activities include regular volunteer workdays in the space, inclusion in a new botany-focused EcoTour, and incorporation into K–12 programming with local students. A very wet winter promises a strong bloom and growth year ahead, leaving us especially excited to have this new interpretive space in which to engage learners of all ages and backgrounds. The initiative transformed an uninviting, fenced area protecting a landscape of imperiled plants into a welcoming place, inviting visitors into the landscape's pristine past to inspire conservation of its future. We hope it is just the first of many such placemaking experiments on the Island and elsewhere. ▮

1 John Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

2 Cara Courage, "Introduction: What Really Matters: Moving Placemaking into a New Epoch," in *The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking*, ed. Cara Courage, Tom Borrup, et. al. (New York: Routledge, 2021).

3 Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).