**Proposal for an Organized Session**

**Session Title: Interpretation as a tool for connecting visitors to and managing visitors in protected areas**

**Proposers:**

**Professor Betty Weiler**, PhD, Research Professor in Tourism, School of Business & Tourism, Southern Cross University (Gold Coast, Australia) betty.weiler@scu.edu.au

**Associate Professor Elizabeth Halpenny**, PhD, Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation, University of Alberta (Edmonton, Canada) elizabeth.halpenny@ualberta.ca

**Session Purpose and Content:**

Interpretation and Environmental Education have only occasionally featured as session themes for MMV in the past, notably MMV 8 and MMV 6, and yet there is much discussion in the literature about the centrality of communication as an on-site as well as pre and post-visit tool for managing visitor behaviour and impacts. While “hard” or “directed” management practices such as site-hardening, enforcement of regulations, and zoning are widely employed in protected areas, researchers have demonstrated that strategic communication, interpretation and environmental education – sometimes labelled as “soft” or “indirect” management approaches – can produce equally effective, and often longer term results, particularly for future visits to parks (Manning, 2012). These indirect approaches have been deemed to be “proactive”, “and “sophisticated” because they move beyond the notion that visitation automatically produces negative impacts, and treats visitation instead as an opportunity to enhance human connection to protected areas and nature (Hall & McArthur, 1998). With the pervasiveness of internet and digital communication in 21st century society, the opportunities to attract, connect with and impact visitors, potential visitors and past visitors are arguably greater. At the same time, communication is more challenging, as managers have far less control and more competition for their on-site interpretation, including wireless internet, smartphone apps and other communication distractions that may or may not support the goals and aspirations of the park management agency and the visitors themselves. Increasing diversity in visitors’ language and cultural background adds to the challenges. In this noisy and messy communication environment, this session seeks to present lessons learned from research and communication practice in and outside the field of interpretation to ensure park managers are optimising the range of opportunities to engage with and impact their visitors.

A preliminary list of topics that we would particularly encourage include:

* Interpretation effectiveness
* Interpretation costs and benefits
* Managing visitor safety through interpretive signs, websites and other media
* Using interpretation to reduce or eliminate destructive behaviour
* Promoting pro-environmental behaviour through interpretation
* Communicating with first-time visitors to national parks
* Lessons learned from interpretation research in new cultural contexts or emerging markets
* Using interpretation to get visitors to fall in love with and become champions of parks
* Interpretation in marine protected areas
* How much is too much – research that evaluates length or complexity or number of media
* Options and approaches for post-visit communication
* Communicating with Gen Y / Millennials in and about protected areas
* Using volunteers and friends-of-parks as communication tools