What is Interpretation?

“A nature guide (interpreter) is a naturalist who can guide others to the secrets of nature. It is not necessary for them to be a walking encyclopedia. They arouse interest by dealing in big principles, not with detached and colorless information.”
--Enos Mills, Adventures of a Nature Guide, 1920

“Interpretation is an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects by first hand experience and illustrated media rather than simply to communicate factual information.”
--Freeman Tilden, Interpreting Our Heritage, 1957

“Environmental Interpretation involves translating the technical language of a natural science or related field into terms and ideas that people who aren’t scientists can understand.”
--Sam Ham, Environmental Interpretation, 1992

“Interpretation facilitates a connection between the interests of the visitors and the meanings of the resource.”
--National Park Service, 1996

“Interpretation is a communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of an audience and the inherent meanings in the resource.”
--National Association for Interpretation, 2000

Interpretation is conversation, guided interaction, or any communication that enriches the visitor experience by making meaningful connections between the messages and collections of our institution and the intellectual and emotional world of the visitor.
--Mary Kay Cunningham, The Interpreters Training Manual for Museums, 2004
What Can Interpretation Achieve?

Good interpretation can:

- **Attract Visitors**
  Interpretation is a product that invites and holds visitor interest.

- **Increase Visibility**
  Interpretation sends the message that there is something worth seeing here.

- **Enhance a Recreational Experience**
  Interpretation engages visitors personally while giving them an opportunity to learn something about what they are seeing.

- **Create a Positive Image**
  By offering engaging experiences and desired information, the Arboretum sends the message, “We care about our visitors and their needs and interests.”

- **Increase Public Understanding and Awareness**
  Interpretation should reinforce the value of the Arboretum's mission and messages while promoting understanding of the decisions of Arboretum management.

- **Preserve/Protect the Collections**
  By educating visitors about what is valuable and how their behavior can affect the collection, interpretation can build stewards.

- **Encourage Social Interaction and Increased Learning**
  An interpreter who seeks ways to initiate conversations both during and after the visit promotes lasting connections to the Arboretum and ongoing learning.

--From *The Interpreters Training Manual for Museums*