

Creating Interpretive Signage for Hiking Trails at Ontario Snow Resorts

Best Practices Guide & Action Plan



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Disclaimer:

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Creating Interpretive Signage For Hiking Trails at Ontario Snow Resorts

The following is a best practices guide for snow resorts seeking to improve their summer operations through the implementation of interpretive signage along their existing hiking trails. The action plan outlined below provides recommendations for all stages of the implementation process, broken down into specific steps. The action plan assumes that an appropriate and willing resort for the project has already been identified and engaged, or that it is the resort itself undertaking the project. It also assumes that if permission to install signs is required in the given area, that permission has been granted. This guide was informed by reviewing existing best practices literature and by the first-hand experience of implementing interpretive signage along selected hiking trails at Blue Mountain Resorts Limited. These recommendations are intended to help resort managers make better informed decisions within the unique conditions of their own snow resorts. It includes a number of optional steps which may or may not be desirable or appropriate for some snow resorts.

Action Plan:

Creating Interpretive Signage for Hiking Trails at Ontario Snow Resorts



1. Project Planning: This is crucial for the success of the project. The budget must be calculated to ensure that the project can be seen through to completion, a timeline must be created to keep everything on schedule, and management goals with measurable objectives must be set out very early on so that every following step is in line with the overarching project goals.

Calculate the project budget. Unless outside funding for the project has already been granted, cash available from the resort should be the only consideration when calculating the budget; outside funding and in-kind contributions may become available and help reduce project costs, but they are not guaranteed and should not be relied upon when creating the budget.

-Funding: Many projects will be eligible for some form of funding, particularly if the hiking trails are publically-accessible and the signage focuses on educating visitors. Seek out and apply to any funding programs that your project may be eligible for.

-In-kind contributions: Much of the support for the project (information collection, species identification, etc) can be acquired through the in-kind support of partner organizations and individuals (more on partnerships in *Creating Partnerships*, the next step of the action plan)

Estimate project costs. The total cost of the project will depend largely on the number of signs needed, as well as the quality of the signs. While the exact number of signs required may be unknown until further along (i.e., the *Site Research & Decision-Making* phase), the project budget can at least inform you as to how many signs you are able to put up (based the prices of sign-making and installation in your area); however, if you want a more accurate costs projection, you can move ahead through the next 2 steps in the action plan (*Creating Partnerships* and *Site Research & Decision-Making*) and come back to this step once you have a better picture of the number and type of signs needed. Many funding programs require detailed cost estimates. Keep in mind that minimal use of signs is recommended in the literature; frequent use of signs can ruin the visitor experience of discovery and exploration and take away from the natural aesthetic quality of the trail.

Some examples of considerations for project costs include: number of signs; quality/material of signs; sign installation (materials and labor); and human resources (administration, project coordinators, content reviewers, trail monitors, trail guide trainers if applicable, etc...).

Set the project schedule/timeline for completion. The duration of the project from start to finish will vary greatly amongst different resorts, depending on level of commitment to the project, time and financial resources, the season of year, and other factors. In most cases, the entire project (perhaps with the exclusion of the last step) can be done in one off-season (April-October). Make a schedule that is realistic and appropriate for the given resort and stick to it.

Set realistic and measurable goals for the project. The site manager(s) should be actively involved in the project planning and development. Their goals should have measurable objectives and should be evaluated regularly and modified as necessary (i.e., interpretive trail opening date, number of guided hikes to be made available, increase in visitor numbers, etc...).

2. Creating Partnerships: Forming partnerships with local groups and organizations, as well as complementary and competitive programs, means gaining valuable support for your project. They can offer in-kind support, help you gather information, and provide general advice and guidance.

Reach out to local groups and relevant organizations for assistance. These may include local trail groups, naturalist clubs, heritage groups, conservation authorities, and/or larger governing bodies (i.e., the Niagara Escarpment Commission). Try to acquire at least one contact that is willing and able to accompany you on the trail and help with identifying ecological features (ideally someone with an ecology and/or natural sciences background).

Seek the guidance and advice of environmental and planning specialists at the municipal level that have undertaken similar projects. They can provide valuable advice from first-hand experience and may even be able to lend materials and contact information for sign-making, photos/sketching for the signs, and more.

Visit related and nearby programs and speak to representatives there. In some cases these programs will be in competition with your project, but will more often be complementary to your project goals (perhaps building on ecologically-focused tourism in the area). You may also find that there are certain interpretive themes in the area that you can also build on.

3. On-Site Research & Decision-Making: This is a very important step because the data collected and the decisions made here form the basis of everything that follows in the project. Since you may only get one chance to identify species and features on the trail with an expert, it is important to make detailed notes and take corresponding pictures to help with identification later on.

Identify appropriate and desired trails for signage. The selected trails must have at least a few notable features of some kind (ecological, geological, cultural, heritage, wildlife) to create signage for, and must have enough space for signs to be installed. Select those trails that would be best-suited for signage, unless there are so few trails at the resort, or such a large project goal and budget, that all trails will be given signage.

Identify points of interest. An expert in local ecology (and perhaps local history/culture) can help identify species of plants and trees, as well as other ecological features that may be noteworthy. Be sure to take pictures and make notes of the locations of these features for future reference. Keep in mind that it is better to get too much information (too many features/species) than too little. Research has shown that signs are most effective when located at points immediately following a discontinuity in the natural environment (i.e., a clearing after a wooded area), since this is where aesthetic pleasure is usually triggered.

Confirm a list of chosen features and their exact locations along the trail. Use the signage budget (and/or other factors relevant to the number of signs being created) to dictate the number of signs needed for each trail. From the list of possible features created in the previous step), select the desired features to highlight with signs; you may choose to minimize overlap and have only one sign dedicated to a wildlife feature, one to a tree, one to a plant, and one to a heritage site/view; or you may choose to make your selections based on a theme of some sort, highlighting nothing but different types of tree species, for example.

4. Developing Sign Content: Now that a list of features for the signs has been confirmed, research can begin on the chosen features and the written content of the signs can be developed.

Conduct research on the features selected for signage. Local libraries and (reputable) websites will likely be your primary sources. A lot of valuable information can come directly from local groups and organizations specializing in different areas (i.e., previously established contacts and partners), both online and in the form of printed documents that might not otherwise be accessible.

Write the content for the signs. The first step will be to summarize the collected research so that the messages on the signs are clear and concise. There are many things to consider when writing sign content:

- Most people will only read a sign for 25 seconds; the content should consist of key messages expressed in an abbreviated manner, with no more than 100 words on each sign (70 is ideal).
- There should only be one main topic per sign, and no more than 2 messages; more than this causes information overload in the reader.
- Avoid technical language that presupposes any detailed knowledge of scientific disciplines; the assumed readers should be literate adults (i.e., 8th grade reading level).
- Signs should not simply be identification labels; they should teach the reader something specific about whatever is being highlighted, and should be made to be as interesting as possible to the reader.
- Consider the graphics that may accompany the written content on the sign; if a photograph of an animal is going to be on the sign, there is no need for a written description of the animal's appearance (this just takes up valuable word-count budget)

Optional Steps:

- **Add a theme** - Make all of the signage along the trail(s) integrated as parts of a mini-narrative (example: the forest through the eyes of a deer, where each sign highlights a different natural feature as it would be seen/used by a deer or any other animal)
- **Create guidebooks** - If it is a possibility that guided hikes will be offered, either by resort staff or by teachers taking their students on field trips, it is a good idea to prepare a guidebook. A guidebook can be used as a reference, providing expanded information to that on the signs.

5. Creating Signs: With the content for the signs completed, the design, construction and installation of the signs can take place.

Finalize the design of the signs. The format and layout of the signs, as well as the presentation of the content must be clear, organized, and easy to read. Some tips for this include:

- Add graphics to aid in identification (photographs or drawings of animals, leaves, plants, etc).
- Ensure that the layout is consistent across all signs; this makes it easier for hikers to read them once they have internalized the basic design.
- Do not mix fonts; rather, *italicize* and **bold** words.
- Do not use caps-lock, or if you do, limit it to headlines only
- Leave room between texts on the sign (do not make the writing too crowded looking)
- Text sizing; you will usually want to use 60-72 for titles, 40-48 for subtitles, a minimum of 24 for the body, and a minimum of 18 for captions.
- Fonts; Helvetica and Times New Roman are recommended.

Get the signs printed. If you do not already have a sign-making company in mind, you may want to consult local contacts that have made signs in the past (i.e., municipal environmental/planning specialists). The sign quality and material will depend on your preferences and budget, as well as weather and other considerations.

Install the signs at the preselected points along trail. This will usually require a post and something to mount the sign onto the post with. Ensure that the laborers installing the signs are careful not to disturb any nearby vegetation or wildlife.

6. Post-Implementation: There is still work to be done following the installation of the signs, including research on the different impacts the signage has had, developing communications about the project, as well as a few additional optional steps.

Assess the impact of the new signage. Following all of the work done on the project, it is important to find out what sort of an effect it has had on visitor experience (education, enjoyment) and any other variables you may be interested in (such as trail traffic, trail condition, or resort revenue for example).

Different variables will involve different research methods. We recommend verbally surveying a sample of trail users to collect information regarding experience (how much information they retained from the signs, whether they read the signs at all, what they thought of the signs, and other variables). Variables such as traffic can be measured at the same time or by counting vehicles in parking lots.

Document the research collected and create communications about the project. This can be in the form of case studies, articles, newsletters, or promotions (via e-mail, newsletters, or brochures to school boards, partners, members, and other means), or all of the above. Sharing news about the project and your experience can be very helpful to others hoping to take on similar projects, and can help promote your project to potential trail users.

Optional Steps:

- **Train Trail Guides** – If you have chosen to offer guided hikes along the interpretive trails, you will need trained trail guides. The guidebook you will have developed earlier should provide most or all of the information needed for the guides, but a training session (covering how to deal with groups or children, rules, further ecological details, and more) can also be helpful.
- **Deliver guided hikes!**
- **Create print-offs of the sign content translated into different languages** – These translations can correspond to pictures or numbers on the trail signs. Waste may become an issue if these are left at the trailhead for anyone to take, but if they are made available at a front desk this should not be an issue.

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