

Think in pictures

How can we communicate effectively with our deaf visitors and help them feel welcome at our sites?

When working as a ranger, I became frustrated that I could not interpret my site to deaf visitors. That moved me learn deaf sign language, exploring a world that was both familiar and different to the one I knew. I found deaf sign had accent and dialect, but that some deaf people lip-read instead of sign. I learnt polite ways of attracting attention: to gently touch a shoulder; to wave a hand in front of a face; or to tap a shared table. I discovered the incredible subtlety of deaf sign poetry, whose nuance of multiple blended signs and body language wove deep and clear messages.

My memories and comprehension are linked as much to sound as sight. To help me understand deafness, one of my sign tutors shared with me ways in which he experienced the world. He often noticed far more detail of the image than I did. The picture took the place of sounds in his memories. For me recollection of a forest wind might mean the sound of tree leaves rustling. My tutor might remember the sight of branches moving, or the sunlight making patterns on the ground.

Over time my deaf visitors came for guided walks, school trips and stories, and I learned much from this experience. In the first instance, relate to what they know, using references to what can be seen. You can't simply say how one bird sounds similar to another. If you have to interpret sound, find tangible ways to relate it to them. Standing on a wooden floor, you might demonstrate the way a rainstorm rises and quiets with finger snapping building to a crescendo of thunder stamping feet.

When interpreting for deaf visitors, the best advice is simple: to think in pictures - not sound.

To sign everyday chat is something that anyone can learn, although to sign well is a complex skill. Consider partnering with professional deaf sign interpreters for a more technical guided walk or presentation. Contact your local deaf association to find out how you help each other. The Royal National Institute for the Deaf is a useful source for information, guidance and local contacts www.rnid.org.uk Tel 0808 808 0123.

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**"Not the senses I have but what I do with them is my kingdom."
Helen Keller (1880-1968) pioneering deafblind activist and writer**