

We need to talk about climate change workshop summary

Manchester Museum, Manchester, UK, 7 April 2017



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



The aim of the ‘We need to talk about climate change’ workshop was to bring together a diverse group of UK heritage practitioners to explore existing heritage sector practices and share collective wisdom relating to new approaches to climate change engagement and communication. We also designed the workshop to forge positive connections and modes of collaboration between the participants.

The premise of the workshop emerged from the findings of the ‘Troubled Waters, Stormy Futures: heritage in times of accelerated climate change’ research conducted in the UK and Kiribati during 2015-16: [www.corddirtyfroedd.org]. The research surfaced a number of key questions relating to the often-challenging role of heritage organisations in climate change debates. These were used to guide the structure of the day (see below).

This short summary of the discussions provides an overview of the issues that were raised on the day in order to capture these. Inevitably we are not able to provide a comprehensive reflection on every discussion, or provide in-depth analysis here. However, we hope to follow this summary with other more detailed outputs.

1 Workshop format

The format of the day was a fast-paced collaborative learning journey, centred on a series of exercises, discussions and frequent feedback loops. The workshop facilitation pack and accompanying resources can be downloaded from: www.enduringconnections.com/facilitator-pack/

2 Overarching questions

Q1

Should the heritage sector communicate climate change at all? What would a ‘devil’s advocate’ say for leaving it well alone?!

On the basis of what principles/aspects of mission does it get involved?

Q2

Assuming yes... can it play an important role within climate communication? Why and how?

Q3

How is the heritage sector currently communicating/engaging people with climate change?

Q4

What are the potential barriers to these strategies (internal or external to the organisation), and how might they be overcome (perhaps through collaboration; sharing ideas; a different approach to engagement and so on)?

3 The participants



15 individuals from a range of large and small heritage organisations attended the workshop. There was representation from those working in or with local authority, national and university museums, world heritage sites, heritage conservation and advisory bodies, and international heritage organisations.

Below is a summary of participants' comments on what they hoped to learn more about during the workshop. This acts as a helpful indication of what may concern other heritage professionals, and illustrates an appetite for further dialogue and shared learning in this area.

“Why do heritage practitioners care about climate change and what do they want to achieve?”

“How do heritage practitioners demonstrate this ‘care’?”

“What does successful climate change communication/engagement look like?”

“What are the changes that can be made to heritage practice?”

“What is the role heritage can play in how communities deal with climate change?”

“How are others in the sector communicating the issues of climate change?”

“What are the opportunities to collaborate?”

“What is the impact of climate change on the historic environment?”

4 Summary of discussions and key themes

Using the overarching questions above, the workshop engaged in a number of lively and fast paced deliberations and creative learning exercises. The core themes that emerged have been summarised below under the headings of ‘challenges’ and ‘opportunities’.

Challenges

‘Breaking the mould’: narratives, influence and risk

For a long time climate change was not part of the narrative of museums and heritage sites. For many this is still the case, as climate change continues to be associated more with natural history and science collections, or addressed via ‘risk assessments’ and the identification of ‘at risk’ sites in the case of policy and the historic environment.

Many of the workshop discussions centred upon how to break away from this mould and integrate climate change more visibly as a narrative or central theme.

Participants recognise that narratives are often prioritised by whoever leads or has a strong say over the organisations mission, vision and values (e.g. museum director, board of trustees, councillors or politicians). Yet being able to influence the influencers isn’t necessarily something many heritage professionals feel equipped for or wish to do.

The presence of fear and risk is felt by some in the sector around openly engaging in climate change debates owing to reputational risk with (small ‘c’) conservative audiences, both internal and external.

Becoming visibly connected to climate change discussions also presents the heritage sector with some potential challenges. For example, they risk antagonising members of the public and stakeholders on whom they rely for funding and support who do not agree that the heritage sector should be involved in climate change discussions.

There is also fear around occupying a political territory that they have little experience of, potentially risking damage to their brand and reputation.

Early discussion focused upon how to turn the apprehension that some senior colleagues, board members and visitors may feel into action in this area. It was stressed that getting ‘a seat at the table’ in policy discussions is challenging, incremental and requires sustained and collaborative effort over time.

The link between climate change and heritage is not always clear for some and it is not necessarily obvious that heritage, place and identity are impossible to disentangle. Nor is the link between accelerated climate change and physical changes to the historic environment (with a broad definition) a given.

The image of heritage as being permanent and stable plays a part here as traditionally heritage conveys a sense of longevity of existing from the past into the future, in perpetuity. Therefore, being confronted with issues that disrupt this view can be challenging.

In addition, it was noted that it can be difficult to frame climate change in museums without sounding patronising, moralistic or too didactic. An exhibition or programming that is explicitly labelled as ‘climate change’ may only appeal to a selected audience. Others, for example, may not trust heritage organisations to talk about climate change because ‘they are not science’ or feel that this topic does not correspond to a ‘good day out’ or visitor experience.

Issues of scale, proximity and inter-connectivity are also present when we consider communicating climate change in a UK context. How do we communicate the global shared experience of climate change in different contexts?

For example, how do you get people in the UK or USA to care about people in Kiribati (a Pacific island nation threatened by rising sea levels)? This disconnect is echoed in the persistent perception of cultural and natural heritage as separate considerations. Discussions on climate change in the heritage sector underlines the need to break down these increasingly unhelpful binaries.

Opportunities

‘Back to the future’ – re-telling, re-purposing and re-generating in response to climate change

As well as unearthing common challenges faced by the sector, the workshop also created a space for shared learning and inspiration around practical and intellectual tactics that can help overcome these barriers. Alongside the challenges of communicating climate change, participants note the increasingly recognised range of potential opportunities for the sector.

Climate change communication is often just associated with museum exhibitions and programming for visitors, but we should not forget that the sector’s engagement with climate change issues extends much further than this, including policy, research, and practical mitigation.

The sector is responding in a material sense to climate change by: reducing waste within their own organisations; considering their CO₂ footprints; changes to conservation and land-management methods; and exploring the use and generation of green energy. Participants described a diverse range of examples of both adaptation and mitigation tactics that are opening up new avenues for supporting the financial sustainability for heritage organisations through their engagement with climate change. See for example the National Trust’s work on energy, which includes a hydroelectricity scheme in Snowdonia, North Wales: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/energy>.

The workshop highlighted the opportunities for the sector to be facilitating and hosting conversations rather than broadcasting a message.

This raised questions in relation to how we can develop and create shared spaces that can host a range of voices and opinions. What issues does this raise about the perceived neutrality and ‘trusted’ reputation of the museum/heritage site? Do museums have a responsibility to take a firm position on climate change and encourage action? This is an opportunity for the heritage sector to allow discussion to open up, but it is also a responsibility. Are museums and heritage professionals equipped with the skills necessary to support their visitors through potentially difficult conversations and discussions?

Participants felt that part of successfully embarking on this journey involved gaining a better understanding of the range of motivations that drive people to engage with heritage.

Heritage audiences are not homogeneous and participants mentioned the need to remember the place of ‘curiosity’ and personal development rather than assume that it is only ‘consumption’ that drives visitors.

A values based approach that understands the range and diversity of individual and collective values may help here and emerged as a key potential avenue to explore. [For more information on this aspect please see the accompanying resources ‘New Ways of Engaging’ by George Marshall, Climate Outreach].

Linked to this re-telling of histories, the unique position the sector has to reflect on the passage of time was emphasised.

Heritage explores issues of time, whether this is having encounters with deep-time or the recent past. Participants shared examples of how climate change can be usefully and effectively framed in ‘past-present-future’ narratives in relation to a range of cultural heritage and identity-based issues.

It was acknowledged that the heritage sector’s relationship with the past risks being used by some to argue that ‘climates have always changed’. Again, the interaction with political debates that climate change prompts presents distinct challenges for more risk-averse stakeholders.

Climate change can be used to tell a different side to a collection and attract new audiences and new demographics (e.g. younger audiences more engaged with climate change). The workshop participants also discussed changing the techniques of engagement, and potentially the terms used to engage internal and external audiences. For example, should we be talking more about climate change in the context of ‘innovation and creativity’? As well as re-framing the issue in this way the workshop exercises encouraged discussion around alternative communication strategies.

We need to explore the use of different communication strategies and techniques, which allow us to break away from doom and gloom narratives and communicate climate change in a responsible and imaginative way. This may include using creativity, including metaphor and humour, encouraging reflexivity, and avoiding classic tropes (e.g. the polar bear on the iceberg) which may have a strong impact, but which may also distance the audience.

“Having encounters with the past makes it possible to re-think our relationship with time.”

WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT

5 Final reflections, what did the participants feel they had got out of the workshop?

The workshop created a rare but valued opportunity for diverse parts of the heritage sector to come together to discuss a key overarching issue. For one participant this was the most valuable part of the day:

“Meeting heritage professionals in the museum sector – I don’t often get that pleasure!”

As one participant put it, the workshop offered:

“Group therapy – I am not alone!”

There was a range of opinions expressed in relation to the most valuable part of the experience for participants, which we have shared below. We felt it was important to highlight how both practical and theoretical considerations of this topic can come together through this process of shared learning, collaboration, and efforts to animate creative and supportive knowledge exchange.

“The morning’s discussion re: why and how different organisations are engaging with climate change and the pros and cons.”

“George [Marshall’s] practical ‘how to’ with communicating ideas.”

“Having a forum to think about climate change with passionate and knowledgeable professionals.”

“Looking at museum collections in a different way.”

“Hearing what the heritage sector is communicating about climate change.”

“To jump-start my thinking.”

“Genuinely much more excited about the possibility for talking about climate change and heritage.”

“People’s openness... creative exploration of situational challenges.”

Resources and acknowledgements

Online discussion and resources

- Project blog in advance of the Manchester Workshop:
www.enduringconnections.com/we-need-to-talk-about-climate-change/
- Workshop facilitation pack:
www.enduringconnections.com/facilitator-pack/
- Quotations from research participants for use as discussion prompts:
www.enduringconnections.com/nothing-comes-through-the-post-on-climate-change/
- A downloadable PowerPoint of George Marshall's (Climate Outreach) presentation 'New Ways of Engaging':
www.enduringconnections.com/how-do-we-talk-about-climate-change/
- Access to the 'Troubled Waters' film:
www.vimeo.com/130445697
- Climate Outreach's webinar on 'New Ways of Engaging':
www.vimeo.com/220337092
- Keep track of ongoing research and collaboration here:
www.enduringconnections.com

Created by

Anna Woodham, King's College London
Troubled Waters Project Team

Clara de Massol, King's College London

Johanne Orchard-Webb
Workshop facilitator and content designer

Sara Penrhyn Jones, Bath Spa University
Troubled Waters Project Team

Bryony Onciul, University of Exeter
Troubled Waters Project Team

Henry McGhie, Manchester Museum,
University of Manchester
www.museum.manchester.ac.uk

George Marshall, Climate Outreach
www.climateoutreach.org

Thanks to...

The workshop participants.

Day1 Communications for designing this report
www.day1.org.uk

The 'We need to talk about climate change' workshop was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of the Troubled Waters – Reaching Out project (AH/P00959X/1)



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

