Climate Change and Cultural Heritage: Understanding the Basics

Climate change has become one of the most significant and fastest growing threats to people and their cultural heritage worldwide.[[1]](#endnote-1) Scientific evidence shows unequivocally that increasing concentrations of Greenhouse Gases (GHGs), driven by human activities such as burning of fossil fuels and deforestation, are accelerating climate change and its impacts, including sea level rise and coastal flooding, drought and extreme heat, and increased frequency and intensity of severe weather events.

Past human activities have already warmed the planet about 1°C (1.8°F) since the pre-industrial era. The resulting impacts are currently displacing populations and damaging infrastructure, ecosystems, and social systems – including cultural heritage – that provide essential benefits and quality of life to communities, necessitating urgent efforts to reduce disaster risk, strengthen resilience and enhance adaptive capacity.

The changing climate is creating new risks even while it multiplies traditional threats like rapid urbanization, wealth inequality, and globalization. In tandem, the ecosystems that underpin human well-being are declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history. One million species are now threatened with extinction with grave impacts on people around the world, warned a landmark 2019 report from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

Meanwhile, humans continue to emit more net GHGs which threaten to further warm the planet. The recent IPCC *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C* establishes that every additional increment of warming is of consequence. While 1.5°C of global warming will severely damage our natural and cultural heritage, the impacts of 2°C warming will be significantly worse. In order to limit global warming to 1.5°C, global net human-caused emissions of carbon dioxide (CO2) would need to fall by about 45 percent from 2010 levels by 2030, reaching ‘net zero’ around 2050. This would require ‘rapid and far-reaching’ transitions in land use, energy, industry, buildings, transport, and cities, the IPCC authors found.

The 2015 Paris Agreement represents a global consensus on how to combat climate change and

accelerate climate response. Arts, culture and heritage offer an immense and virtually untapped

potential to drive climate action and support a just and equitable transition by communities towards

low carbon, climate resilient development pathways. There are significant cultural dimensions to

every aspect of climate action covered by the Paris Agreement, including heightening ambition to

address climate change, mitigating climate change by reducing GHG emissions, enhancing adaptive

capacity to moderate the harm of climate impacts and, where losses and damages are inevitable,

helping communities plan for them.

This Paris Agreement’s decarbonization imperative exists alongside the global aspiration for

sustainable development embodied in the 17 U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The

SDGs embrace the reality that we live in a world of complex, interdependent systems and acknowledges the role of cultural heritage in the resiliency of these systems (e.g. SDG 8.9 and 11.4).

The recognition given at the highest levels of policy making to the role of heritage, together with the urgency of the challenges of climate change, creates both a profound opportunity and a challenging responsibility for all those connected to heritage.

Realizing this potential in the era of climate change requires further elaborating the role of arts, culture and heritage in delivering not just sustainable development as that term has traditionally been understood but climate-resilient development pathways that also strengthen efforts to eradicate poverty and reduce inequalities. Examples include circular economy approaches (i.e. approaches aimed at minimising waste and making the most of resources) that create jobs, economic opportunities and community benefits. “Win-win” strategies strengthen climate action while safeguarding and promoting the culture and heritage of communities

Key to this is an appreciation of the breadth of the concept of cultural heritage. Over time, the meaning of cultural heritage in professional practice has expanded from single monuments and sites identified as objects of art to cultural landscapes, historic cities, and serial properties. Contemporary practice further extends the concept of heritage beyond ‘tangible heritage’, to the intangible dimensions of heritage as well. This means the entirety of knowledge derived from the development and experience of human practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills; and associated objects and spaces that communities recognise as part of their cultural heritage

Cultural heritage is a composite of human experience. It is a source of creativity and inspiration for

action. It connects people to place, anchors identity and community and embodies our understanding of change through time in ways that make it uniquely suited to communicate climate impacts and stress urgency. Evidence of past adaptation to climate and landscape change, from agriculture and land-use to the use of material culture, together with the diversity of living cultures today, form an essential basis for understanding how the environment has been shaped by people. Identifying the consequences of this for past and present communities is important not only for explaining and communicating the changes and challenges we face but also in adapting to them.

The cultural values carried by the planet’s land and seascapes are closely interlinked with its natural

values (and affiliated bio-cultural practices). Integrated nature-culture approaches can advance

sustainability objectives including responses to climate change and biodiversity loss by improving

conservation outcomes, fostering bio- and cultural diversity, and supporting the well-being of

contemporary societies and future generations.

Given the nature and scale of climate impacts, new, multi-disciplinary approaches will be required in areas such as heritage documentation, disaster risk reduction, vulnerability assessment, conservation, education and training as well as in the ways heritage sites are presented to visitors.

“The climate is changing and so must heritage. It would be foolish to imagine the practice of heritage remaining static while the world goes through the rapid and far-reaching transitions discussed in the IPCC’s recent Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C,” has said Professor Toshiyuku Kono, President of ICOMOS.

1. <https://blog.ucsusa.org/adam-markham/climate-change-is-the-fastest-growing-threat-to-world-heritage>

<https://www.iucn.org/news/secretariat/201711/number-natural-world-heritage-sites-affected-climate-change-nearly-doubles-three-years-%E2%80%93-iucn> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)