

Activating the past to address a climate crisis?

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Our profession isn't exactly the first place you'd turn to for 'people who are going to save the planet'. In fact, it has occasionally been pitched as standing in the way of progress or even being a barrier to sustainability. In the middle of a climate crisis why should people care about heritage?

However, quietly, a perspective has been growing that maintains it is possible to have your heritage *and* reduce your carbon emissions, and that cultural heritage is part of the solution to the climate crisis. 2021 was its year.

In July 2021 culture ministers from the world's largest economies came together for the first ever G20 Cultural Ministerial event. This meeting led to the *Rome Declaration of the G20 Culture Ministers*:

'The G20 Ministers of Culture ... acknowledged that culture – including intangible and tangible cultural heritage, creativity, indigenous peoples' languages and knowledge systems – offer great potential to drive forward climate action. They welcomed the ongoing efforts of all relevant intergovernmental organizations – including UNESCO – in anchoring culture more firmly within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.'

<https://en.unesco.org/news/g20-agrees-first-declaration-culture>



Welcome to COP26 sign surrounded by plants. Credit: Hannah Fluck

Summer 2021 also saw the Climate Heritage Network <https://climateheritage.org/> formally included as partners in the *UN Race to Resilience*; the first time that cultural heritage has been recognised in such a high profile campaign. In order to be accepted as partners, the Climate Heritage Network (which includes ClfA and many UK heritage organisations) convinced the COP Presidency High Level Champions that culture-based solutions will help make millions of people around the world more resilient to the effects of climate change, 'Catalysing a step-change in global ambition to build the resilience of 4 billion people by 2030'.

In November 2021 at the COP26 in Glasgow, cultural heritage was represented in dozens of side events in both the Blue Zone (the official UN and COP presidency event space) and the Green Zone (the public event space). This unprecedented representation included an event in the UK pavilion where both the UK Secretary of State and the Italian Minister of Culture reconfirmed commitment to the Rome declaration and to the importance of

cultural heritage in tackling climate change.

As a finale, 2021 concluded with the *ICOMOS/IPCC/UNESCO International Co-Sponsored Meeting on Culture, Heritage and Climate Change* in December. The event was opened by the Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Hoesung Lee, who said:

'Culture and heritage are vitally important aspects of our lives and resources influencing how our communities and societies adapt to climate change.'

It is extraordinary that the positive role that cultural heritage can play in tackling climate change has been stated and reinforced by government ministers and global climate leaders; just a few years ago that would have seemed impossible. But what next?

The challenge now is how we will use our skills as experts on the past to help the future – something we all need to take responsibility to do.

Main entrance to the COP26 conference venue in Glasgow.
Credit: Hannah Fluck



Race to resilience logo.
Credit: Hannah Fluck



COP26 globe displayed at the conference venue.
Credit: Hannah Fluck



Here are a few ways in which we can make a start:

- **Draw on archaeology and local heritage to tell the climate stories of places** Marcy Rockman, US archaeologist and pioneer of heritage climate action, tells us that every place has a climate story. The scale of the climate change challenge can be overwhelming for people; through the telling of human histories and local climate stories, can we help people make the connection between what is happening on a global scale and their local place?
- **Offer archaeological data to help solve environmental challenges** Archaeological data are not just about identifying sensitivity – places to avoid or mitigate. Can we also use them to inform climate-resilient places by understanding how places were managed or used in the past, how successful that was and how that might affect their future?
- **Demonstrate the human origins of our ‘natural’ environment over millennia** How can we use archaeological understanding of places to support biodiversity?
- **Use our skills in remembering, and in recording and understanding change, to help people address loss and change** Climate change will result in loss – of places, of the familiar, of ways of life. Can we help?
- **Share knowledge of the past so we can learn from it** What can we learn or rediscover that might help us find culture-based solutions to climate challenges?
- **Promote a long view for sustainability** Can taking a long perspective (centuries/millennia) help in thinking more sustainably?

‘Our culture and heritage are windows into millennia of human experience from which we can draw and use them to shape our strategies to adapt and to make our communities more resilient to climate change risks and challenges. Are we capable of projecting from our collective past into our shared future? I believe yes, we are. I believe this is not only possible, but it is imperative that we do so.’

Hoesung Lee, IPCC Chair, 6 December 2021



Hannah Fluck

Hannah is Head of Environmental Strategy at Historic England where she oversees strategic work on climate change and the historic environment. Hannah is a contributing author to the second UK Climate Change Risk Assessment, and is a founding Steering committee member of the Climate Heritage Network. Hannah has presented on climate change and heritage in international fora including at COP25 and COP26, the G20 cultural round table in 2021 and was an invited participant in the ICOMOS/IPCC/UNESCO International Co-Sponsored Meeting on Culture, Heritage and Climate Change in December 2021.