Let me through, I'm an archaeologist...

John Darlington MCIfA (506), Executive Director, World Monuments Fund

Here's the dilemma. A politician has a natural body clock. Every four years, perhaps sooner, a klaxon goes off announcing the next general election. Everything then synchs to that timeframe: decisions are reached, budgets are announced, campaigns launched, and results paraded in front of a grateful/resentful (delete according to political view) public. Their world calibrates to that cycle, and, if the politician is successful, the four-year unit becomes a building block on which longer, more thoughtful plans can be realised. If unsuccessful, they are placed outside, with the brief to undo the plans of the fresh-faced incumbent. Are these really the best people to lead in one of the most important challenges of our times: climate change?

Why politicians might not be best placed to tackle climate change

Wind Towers in the Iranian city of Yazd, a traditional technique used to catch the wind and cool the building below. Credit: Hasan Almasi on Unsplash

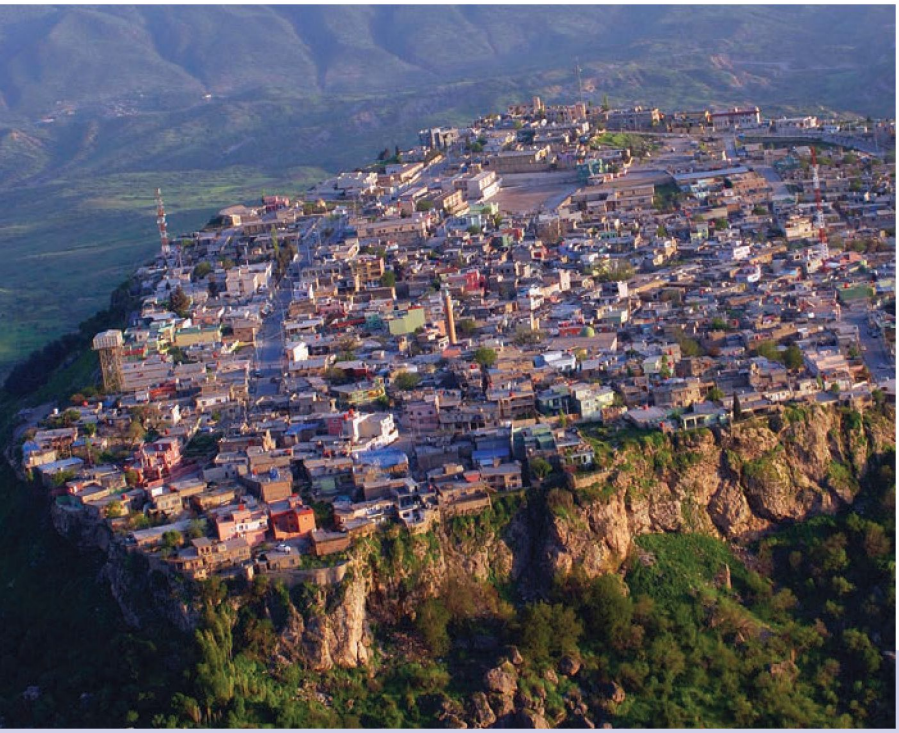
Archaeologists have a very different body clock. We work not to years or decades, but instead to centuries and millennia. Ours is a slow heartbeat, where the important issues of each era are filtered out from the day-to-day by the inevitable reckoning of time. Consequently, as an archaeologist, I have spent a lifetime dealing with transience, migration and loss. Here, from the perspective of someone who works with the long term, are my seven tips for the politicians at COP26 to deal with the climate crisis:

1 **Learn from the past**. William Faulkner wrote, 'The past is never dead. It's not even past.' History really does repeat itself. We've been residents on this planet for 300,000 years, during which the climate has constantly changed. In that time, we have been part of millions of spectacular failures and extraordinary adaptations. That's a very big library. We, the archaeological librarians, are there to help...

2 **Don't reject old technologies**, particularly from a time when we were less hermetically sealed from the natural world. Buildings made of concrete and steel require vast amounts of energy and pump more CO2 into the atmosphere. The use of traditional materials such as lime and timber can be carbon neutral and, blended with new technologies, are sustainable materials for the future. It is now possible to build skyscrapers in timber and bamboo, and we've been insulating our homes with sheep wool and straw for thousands of years.

3 ***'Reduce, reuse and recycle'* means our buildings too**. There is already an enormous amount of vested energy in old buildings: it is often cheaper to adapt them than tear down and start again. It is more beautiful and interesting too. This is not backwards-looking: the same applies to the reuse and recycling of ideas. Many architectural traditions contain tried-and-tested solutions that are designed to protect from the sun, capture the natural ventilation of the wind, rise above the water, or insulate from the cold.

4 **Accept that change is inevitable** – it always has been. Our dynamic world has had a continually changing climate from the Ice Ages that shaped our landscapes and limited where humans could live, through to warmer times, which have equally restricted our activity. For Palaeolithic humans, Libya's Fazzān region in the Sahara was a landscape of lakes. Now it is largely desert, created by an ever-drying cycle which commenced in 3,000 BCE, and which continues to this day. The difference between the long past and the last 270 years is that this time, *we* are the cause of accelerating global changes to the environment. The negative legacy of industrialisation, particularly through the burning of fossil fuels, is solely down to us. If we accept the inevitability of change due to climate and our role in it, then we must face its challenges and the solutions.



Amedi, in Iraqi Kurdistan – an ancient hilltop citadel rich in historic buildings... and pomegranate trees. Credit: World Monuments Fund

Traditional water meadows at Harnham, Salisbury. Credit: Andy Newton on Unsplash

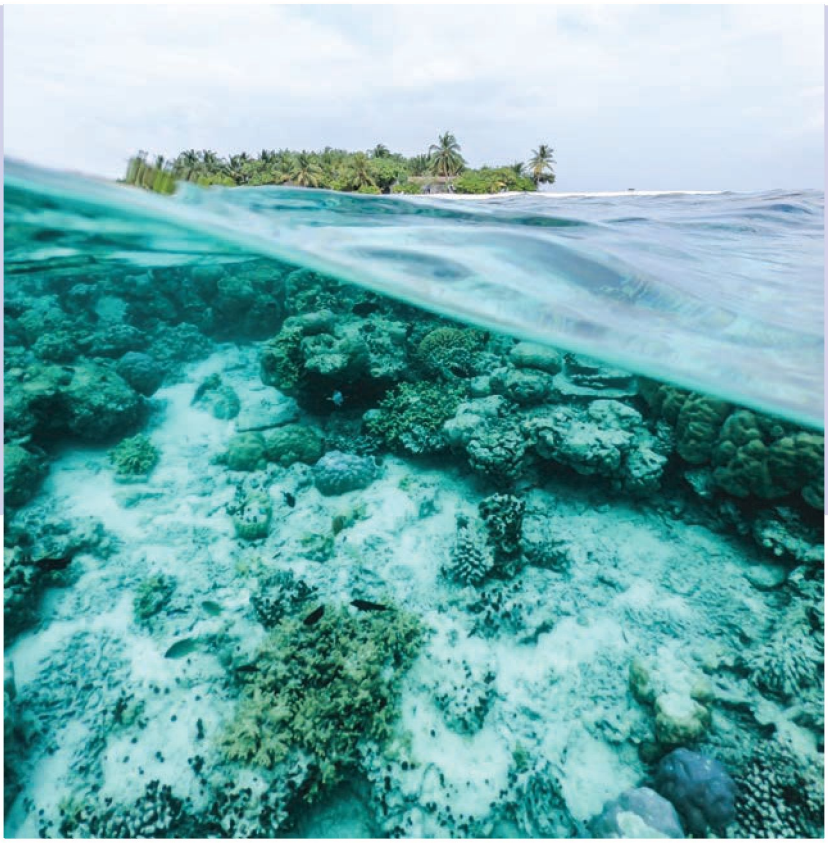
5 **If change is inevitable, then so is loss**. The highest point in Maldives is 2.4m, just above the height of a door (and that's a sand dune!). People born on the islands today will be witnesses to their country's disappearance because of sea level rise and increased storms. The same threat applies to many populations globally, particularly those currently living on the limits of land, water, ice, high mountain or dry desert. People will move, bringing a little of their old culture to their new homes. We have a lot to learn from migrants (and let's not forget, historically, we are all the offspring of migrants).

6 **Go with the flow of nature**. Canute, the eleventh century king of England, Denmark and Norway, famously failed to turn back the sea's tide. Back then the apocryphal story was a demonstration to the king's fawning courtiers of his mortality in the face of God's omnipotence. Today the same is true of the natural world, with history littered with examples of humankind battling against the forces of nature and losing. Historically, where humans have been most successful in the face of dramatic environmental change is when we work with the warp and weft of nature, not against it. Making space by allowing farmland land to flood, as our predecessors did through the use of water meadows, is just one small example; replanting mangroves on the Tanzanian coast to protect against coastal erosion is another.

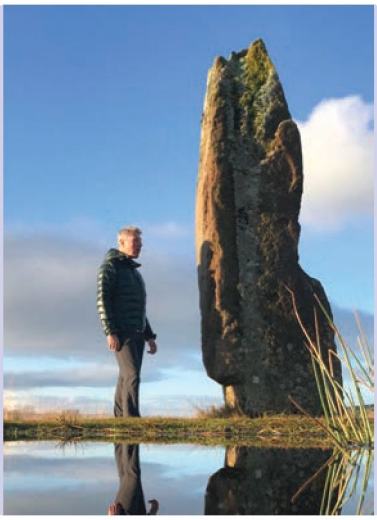
7 **Finally, think long term**. As custodians of the past there is often a misconception that archaeologists wish to preserve the world in aspic, to freeze it in a moment in time – nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, conservation is our truth – and conservation is all about the careful management of change. We seek to retain 'spirit of place', a distillation of the elements of the past that people treasure today and may value in the future, knowing that change is inevitable. To do that in the face of the climate crisis, you need to ask those who live, work or play in those places, and listen to the experts for an outside view. The answers often surprise: when I posed that question of the locals in Amedi, a hilltop town in Iraqi Kurdistan, they appreciated the spectacular setting and ancient buildings, but they also cherished the social space provided by the shade of disappearing pomegranate trees that once grew in every garden. Engaging people in the direct impact of climate change *on their doorsteps* must be part of the solution. You would have thought that politicians would be rather good at the doorstep piece...

There is one final reason that archaeologists might make good leaders in the world of climate change – we wouldn't want the role.

– from a piece in *The Evening Standard,* 17 Nov 2021



One of hundreds of islands that make up the Maldives, threatened by rising seas and warming temperatures. Credit: Ishan @seefromthesky on Unsplash



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John joined World Monuments Fund Britain in June 2015 from the National Trust where he was Regional Director, North West of England. An archaeologist by training, John is an author and conservation professional with over 30 years of practical experience in protecting heritage for the benefit of all.