

Museums and environmental history

Environmental historians conventionally write books and articles for their audiences, but increasingly we are seeking to employ a wider range of media in our historical storytelling, from film to podcasts to exhibitions. For this edition of the Notepad, we asked a curator, a curator-historian and a cultural heritage consultant how museums can best engage with environmental history. Here are their responses.

Anthropocenes and museums¹

In the last decade the concept of the Anthropocene (I will hereby use the word as an umbrella-term useful to describe the rapid eco-socio-cultural transformation we are living in) has emerged as a key discussion platform for museums to discuss environmental issues. When dealing with the concept, museums have generally tackled the difficulties posed by the complexity and heterogeneity of the Anthropocene concept by opting for personal perspectives on the theme, yielding explicitly partial interpretations that have built museum-specific narratives. From this point of view, it is possible to imagine, in the flourishing of new museum projects on the theme, the progressive composition of a mosaic of diverse Anthropocene narratives, of ‘Anthropocenes’. This is an intriguing output and a further critique of the dramatic inappropriateness of the word, not only in its unfortunate prefix (the undifferentiated *anthropos*) but also in the unsatisfying singular form.

If building new narratives for the Anthropocene is a key task for our institutions, museums are also best placed to deploy skills and experiences honed through years of advocacy, lobbying and activism. There is a new role here for museums with respect to the social relevance of environmental issues. The debate on the Anthropocene remains too often entangled in the academic theory and museums, with their ability to effect concrete change, can use all their strategic skills to ‘ground’ the concept, and bring it to concrete fruition.

Museums have gained a positive status and reputation in most societies around the world: they are considered reliable, authoritative. Museums are therefore best placed to actively contribute to bridging the gap between theory and practice, illuminating the path to change as they operate in the ecotonal space between production of knowledge, participation and politics. They can, I believe, act as powerful levers to help chart a course towards the ecological paradigm shift we need. This is probably the most relevant mission for our museums that should be recognised as imperative, first by our local

1. This perspective is based on M. Bernardi, ‘COVID 19 pandemic and the inescapable challenge of the Anthropocene for museums’, *Museum International* 73 (2022): 146–55.

authorities of reference and by governments, which in the coming years will be forced to issue increasingly stringent measures related to the key issues of the Anthropocene debate. These measures will only be accepted by a society that is aware of and participates in those same debates. To be effective, however, museums, leaders and their staff will have to become increasingly aware of their social role. The Anthropocene forces museums to remove the gloves and get into the dirty field of politics.

MASSIMO BERNARDI,
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Maybe your next project is an exhibition?

By some estimates, more than a billion people worldwide visit a museum each year.² Museums have become sites of conversations, interactivity and confrontational storytelling. Environmental issues are among the most pressing of our times and major institutions – including national museums, natural history museums, science and technology museums and national galleries – have transitioned their thematic storylines to include environmental degradation, habitat and species loss, exploitation and environmental justice. But it is not just the major well-funded institutions that are engaging audiences with environmental issues – small museums, regional galleries, art collectives, pop-up museums, historical societies and heritage sites have all taken a new look at their collections and programmes and are engaging audiences by the tens of thousands.

With substantial collections of heritage artworks, historic objects and natural history specimens, environmental history is an important discipline to cast new light on long-held collections. As museums over the last half century have grappled with their own disciplinary foundations, environmental history has played a critical role in the emerging ‘ecological museology’. And as experts in environmental history, our skills and approach to history and heritage have never been more important for museums.

Taking a brief survey around the world we can begin to see how widespread environmental history has become in the galleries, libraries and museums (GLAM) sector. The National Museum of Australia in Canberra has just completed its multi-million-dollar *Great South Land* permanent exhibition – the largest exhibition redevelopment since the museum opened its doors in 2001. The Smithsonian Institute in the United States has employed a curator of environmental history and actively collects and engages in our field. Just outside Tokyo, the Museum of Natural and Environmental History, Shizouka, opened in 2016.

2. John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience Revisited* (Left Coast Press: Walnut Creek CA, 2013), p. 23.



Figures 1 and 2. The recently opened 'On the Land: Our Story Retold' permanent exhibition at the National Wool Museum in Geelong, Australia, retold the Australian wool story using environmental history as its core interpretive lens. Although the exhibition was completed on a micro-budget it still received national recognition for its new forms of storytelling. Images courtesy of National Wool Museum.

Environmental issues have become so pressing that they have also broken down traditional institutional boundaries. For example, a recent exhibition at

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Frankfurt's Kunstverein gallery combined the work of contemporary artists with collections from Frankfurt's highly regarded Seckenberg Natural History Museum.³ Themes that have formed the foundations of environmental history – long-term environmental change, species loss, Anthropocene thinking and more-than-human histories – can regularly be found in museums and galleries around the world.

Nearly two decades ago, Jeffrey Stine noted that the collective involvement of environmental historians in creating exhibitions to reach audiences 'could be – and should be – substantially expanded'.⁴ A select few have taken on this mantle but there are still many possibilities for environmental historians to contribute to exhibitions. Commentary on museums and environmental history has tended to comprise reviews or reflections on particular museums or exhibitions without dealing with the practice-based challenges of exhibition making or even outlining the valuable relationship of environmental historians to museums. Environmental history also provides the opportunity to enliven often disparate collections with new stories. Science and technology collections might be combined with natural history collections; social history collections can be reinterpreted in light of environmental degradation; artists might respond to historical objects or natural history specimens. Exhibitions have now become the sites where all of these varying products coalesce. Maybe your next environmental history project is not a monograph or journal article but an exhibition?

LUKE KEOGH,

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Starting an environmental humanities collaboration

Museums that deal with archaeology, ethnology, history and art have the humanistic view encapsulated in their DNA, and there has been a tendency to seek like-minded collaborators when it comes to formulating research projects and seeking funding. Questions and research methods vary on a limited scale and it's easy to leave the contemporary world out of sight. When Jönköping county museum started the process toward a new Research Strategy we were searching for a new and more contemporary perspective that could enlarge our view, and we found it in environmental humanities.

3. For example: *The Intelligence of Plants*, 16 Oct. 2021 to 20 Feb. 2022, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt; and the earlier *Tree of Life – Stories of a Damaged Planet*, 10 Oct. 2019 to 16 Feb. 2020, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt. Also of interest here is another German show, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, 26 July to 1 Dec. 2019, Gropius Bau, Berlin. These are just three of the many gallery exhibitions that are engaging with historical and contemporary environmental themes.
4. Jeffrey K. Stine, 'Placing environmental history on display', *Environmental History* 7 (4) (2002): 566.

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The questions we face today cannot be solved with yesterday's methods and answers – instead we need a new set of theories and methods and, above all, new views from outside the usual framework. Our next step was therefore finding research partners with whom we could build a platform and formulate common questions for scientific research. Jönköping city hosts four colleges and universities: School of Health and Welfare, School of Education and Communication, Jönköping School of Engineering and finally Jönköping International Business School.

Earlier this year we invited the Universities to an online meeting where we talked about common platforms for research and collaboration. We found that environmental humanities were already a strategy adopted in some research projects from the School of Health and Welfare and the School of Education and Communication and that the other faculties were curious about it and its applicability when it comes to formulating research strategies.

At present the County Museum and the universities are planning for a workshop that will take place shortly, where we will continue the discussion about common research projects under the environmental humanities umbrella. Just recently the county museum has been granted money for research on allotment gardens in and near the city of Jönköping, a project that in my opinion will be perfect as a start-up research project together with two or more of the colleges and universities mentioned above.

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