

Will museums provide leadership in the climate chaos?

Robert R. Janes





ABOVE
Robert R. Janes.

LEFT
Photo: Markus Spiske.

I began my career as an archaeologist in Canada's remote Northwest Territories, and I have worked in museums for 45 years – devoting my career to championing them as important social institutions that can make a difference in the lives of individuals and their communities.

As a young graduate student doing archaeological research in Northern Canada, I once spent six months living with a band of Subarctic, Dene hunters. This First Nations culture is thousands of years old and is based on intimate knowledge of one of the most unforgiving environments in the world. It is there that I learned firsthand the meaning of social ecology – that social and environmental issues are intertwined, and both must be considered simultaneously.

This inescapable truth – that our lives are inextricably linked with the natural world – inspires my belief that the global museum community must now *take a stand* on the climate crisis.

From 'global warming' to 'climate crisis'

The UN's International Panel on Climate Change/IPCC (established 1988) has assessed scientific reports and advised governments for more than three decades on risks and mitigation measures in response to recorded damage to the biosphere, lifeforms, and the threat to whole populations impacted by global warming. The urgency in the IPCC reports to its 195 member states has intensified, such that recent indicators compel us to change descriptors from 'climate change' and 'warming' to 'crisis' and 'chaos'. The IPCC's 2021 Report has been described by UN Secretary-General António Guterres as 'code red for humanity' concerning the mitigation-measures needed.¹

This is a moral imperative for museums. Climate change is no longer just about science or politics. It is also about social justice. We can no longer assume that large and complex nation states and corporations will adequately address climate change in the time we have available. The survival of the biosphere rests with each of us.

Assumptions about the museum world

My first assumption is that museums are potentially one of the freest and most creative work environments on the planet, and the scope for creativity and initiative should be just about limitless in a well-run museum. There are very few workplaces that offer more opportunities for thinking and acting in ways that can blend personal satisfaction and growth with organizational goals.

If one combines this notion of organizational freedom with the assumption that we, as human beings, are the co-creators of our lives and our organizations – the result is the powerful force called personal agency. By personal agency, I mean the capacity of individual museum workers, not just their leaders and managers, to take action in the world (Davis 2011). When museums empower the personal agency, or self-leadership, of their workers and governing authorities to live their values and act in the interests of their communities, it builds engagement and community relevance (Grattan 2017). Self-leadership should be celebrated and nurtured as a vital organizational resource and a force for good (Senge 2006).

Second, I assume that museums are unique and valuable social institutions that have no suitable replacement. Neil Postman, the cultural critic and author, wrote that the purpose of all competent museums is to provide answers to the fundamental question, 'What does it mean to be a human being?' (1990, 55–58). Governments are not equipped to do this, business is committed to profit not reflection,

1. See 'Guterres: The IPCC Report is a code red for humanity' at <www.unric.org/en/guterres-the-ipcc-report-is-a-code-red-for-humanity/>.

*Neutrality is **not** a foundational principle of museum method, theory or practice, but has emerged rather as a result of the museum's privileged position in society.*

BELOW

A part of Australia's Great Barrier reef in 2016, after a coral bleaching event. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.



and most universities are still grappling with their separation from their communities. Museums are distinct from all of these institutions and are uniquely qualified to probe our humanness. Herein lies one of their great strengths and their great worth.

My third assumption, or perhaps it is an observation, is the stubborn trait of many museums to hold themselves static – seemingly immune to the messy realities of the outside world. Many museums claim to be neutral (more on this later) or are perhaps held hostage by their collections and the fixed costs of traditional museum practices such as collections management (Wood et al. 2018). To hold a museum static, while the values of individuals and communities are changing, is to doom the museum at a time when individual and societal values are in great flux.

Last, I assume that everything that is required to fulfill the true potential of museums is here – now. There is nothing lacking. There is incessant talk of shortage in the museum world – be it money, staff, technology, or public support – a self-limiting refrain that continues unabated. When museums choose to see that they are rich in assets and public spaces, peopled with talented and creative workers, and in possession of a high degree of public trust – generally the highest among any group of public institutions (Dilenschneider 2017) – they can choose to fulfill their potential as key civic and intellectual resources.

Museums are already empowered

The world is home to more than 55,000 museums and all museums have unique qualities that enable them to address the climate crisis that is threatening life-forms at a planetary scale. No social institutions have a deeper sense of time than museums and galleries, which by their very nature are predisposed to exercise their longer view of time as stewards of the biosphere.

Museums are expressions of community and locality; they are a bridge between science and culture; they bear witness by assembling evidence based on knowledge, and they make things known; they are seed banks of sustainable living practices that have guided our species for millennia; and they are among the most free and creative work environments with which to rethink the future.

In short, museums and galleries are uniquely qualified to help mitigate the climate chaos and adapt to it, based on their singular combination of historical consciousness, sense of place, long-term stewardship, knowledge base, public accessibility, and unprecedented public trust. Museums are also civil society spaces where substantive issues can be aired, discussed, and acted upon.

How, then, can these precious qualities translate into concrete action to address climate change?

One obstacle is the widely-held belief that museums must maintain a position of dispassionate *neutrality*, lest they fall prey to bias and special interests.

Yet, museums are not neutral, and have never been so. Throughout their history, museums have presented partial narratives of the world and human development – many of these rejected and being fundamentally rewritten today (such as museums' presentations of Indigenous peoples' history and knowledge systems). The idea of museums' presumed neutrality must be challenged and rejected.

Neutrality is *not* a foundational principle of museum method, theory or practice, but has emerged rather as a result of the museum's privileged position in society. In contrast to the 'false consciousness' of detachment, embracing an active position on the questions about what it is to be human today is key to the fulfilment of the museums' mission, and underpins their long-term sustainability as institutions of public value.

To truly honour the public trust, museums must disentangle themselves from the deceptive position of neutrality and embrace an active role of civic participation: by grappling with the challenges of a complex and interconnected world. I note that this commitment is underway in many areas, as evidenced by museums working to address human rights, accessibility rights, poverty, decolonization, the refugee crisis, violence and other critical issues, as well as climate change (Janes and Sandell 2019).

We know that education is a core mission of museums. But we must ask: What sort of education is appropriate and necessary now?

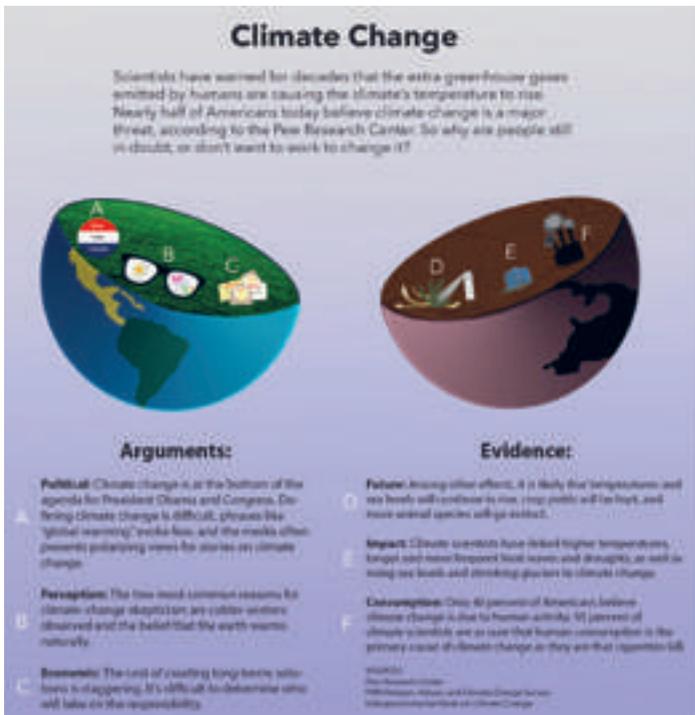
Museums are about the stories we have told, and will tell, about being human. Our world now needs a new story; museums need a new story. We urgently need museums that provide cultural frameworks to identify and challenge the myths and misperceptions that threaten all of us (especially that continuous economic growth is the key to our well-being). The climate crisis is an opportunity to change deeply entrenched behaviours based on growth and consumption, and replace them with a commitment to stewarding the planet for long-term sustainability.

We must move beyond the doomed economy of endlessly expanding industrial growth to the recognition that the connection between individuals, communities and nature is the key to our collective well-being (Korten 2014).

Taking action

There are numerous ways for museums to address the urgent action needed to confront the climate chaos. These include:

- Raising awareness in our networks of the need for immediate climate action



- Transforming your own museum/gallery by committing to become emissions-neutral by 2040
- Informing the public of the climate crisis in your role as trusted mediators of culture, science, and technology
- Supporting climate strikes and civic action campaigns – especially by youth.

In sharing these thoughts and examples, within the specific context of the climate crisis, I hope to inspire, motivate, and shed light on the good work that is underway. Museums and their workers are highly capable of making a difference, despite the gravity of climate change. We should take heart in noting that understanding does not always mean resolution and that we must embrace the tension of never being absolutely certain and never being done – grappling with uncertainty is the core of what it means to be human (Conroy 1991).

The impacts of the climate crisis, and the growing public concern, provide a rare opportunity for museums to act as key civic and intellectual resources in confronting both the scientific consequences of the climate catastrophe and the many opportunities for action to limit or reverse it. What, indeed, are we waiting for? ■

Robert R. Janes (r.pjanes@telus.net) is an independent scholar-practitioner, a Visiting Research Fellow at the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester (UK), and the Founder of the Coalition of Museums for Climate Justice. His museum publications have been translated into ten languages. His latest book, with Richard Sandell, is *Museum Activism* (2019).

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