

# How much longer? Planetary emergency: look away or take action?

Our planet is threatened in many ways and is on the brink of an ecological collapse. Those who deny it are not only blind, but also ignorant.

Yet very few people are concerned with averting this state of affairs and reversing the conditions. Some people don't act because they see no reason to do so, mostly due to profit maximisation as they are only focused on the present and disregard future-oriented developments. Others – by far the larger part of humanity – don't act because they have no chance to deal with it at all: their living conditions are so poor or threatened that they cannot develop any perspectives for improvement, as war, terror, famine or destitution dominate their everyday lives. For their part, the respective acting governments often see no reason to correct seemingly profitable paths that have been taken. These diverging life realities seem to make a common direction almost impossible with regard to a longer-term survival strategy for people, nature itself and thus for our planet. Nevertheless, we can observe year after year that the climate is changing

significantly. More and more storms and environmental disasters are threatening not only parts of humanity, but also natural reserves, cultural assets, and museums. It is high time to be more active in safeguarding cultural institutions and to achieve a rethink towards more sustainability.

Instead, we are moving along old, well-trodden paths. We seldom dare to think in new ways and to abandon what we are used to, all the good old habits of ours. Actually, we continue unabated with the overexploitation of natural resources and there is probably no area that has remained untouched: the soil is depleted and heavily polluted by pesticides; the oceans are littered and full of plastic particles; the animal populations that were still healthy in the last century are being massively decimated or have already been wiped out by permanent overfishing or overproduction. Agrarianism and massive deforestation have led to depleted, parched soils and contributed to climate change on many continents. The entire ecological system of the planet has been wilfully thrown into imbalance. The permanent exploitation and decimation of valuable raw materials and elements is intended to help satisfy the countless needs for a “better life” and to guarantee the energy supply for an increasingly demanding world population. The exploitation of nature and people that began with the Industrial Revolution has become a global problem.

Climate change is the keyword under which almost all these problems and phenomena are subsumed. Increasingly, climate change also means that disasters have amplified significantly in the last two decades: “The balance of natural disasters since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: more than eight million deaths and over seven trillion US dollars in economic damage. Behind these bare figures is a Sisyphean task. James Daniell: “The data comes from everywhere. We have evaluated more than 30,000 sources in more than 90 different languages. We searched microfilm archives and those of newspapers. Only verified information went into the database and factors such as consumer price indices or population trends went

into the analysis. We dug through a tremendous mountain of data from all over the world’.” (Dagmar Röhrlich<sup>1</sup>)

Isn't it amazing, no, isn't it frightening and infuriating that as early as the 1980s, Greenpeace's climate report predicted what climate catastrophes could be expected if no countermeasures were taken? At that time, this was largely dismissed as crankery, or at least irrational alarmism. There was almost no serious perception of the crises, no working through of the problems and no orientation towards sustainability in the solutions. The first awareness of the finite nature of resources was triggered by the two so-called oil crises that threatened the world economy in 1973 and 1979. They led to the first measures to achieve economic independence, the development of other resources, but also to the construction of nuclear power plants<sup>2</sup>. The question of how to deal with energy resources and energy needs for humanity has rightly been heating up people's minds for decades and has become more than urgent since the reactor accidents at Chernobyl (1985) and Fukushima (2011). In addition to the reactor accident, Japan had to face earthquakes and a tsunami that devastated large parts of the country. This is only one of the many natural disasters that humanity has to deal with more and more frequently: heat waves, blizzards, tsunamis, hurricanes, spring floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, widespread fires (like the one in California and the particularly frightening one in Australia<sup>3</sup> in the summer of 2020,

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<sup>1</sup> Röhrlich, Dagmar: Naturkatastrophen – Erschreckende Statistik mit positivem Hintergrund. Deutschlandfunk, post 19.04.2016. Online available at: <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/naturkatastrophen-erschreckende-statistik-mit-positivem-100.html>

<sup>2</sup> Fraune, Burkhard: 1973 – Ölkrise bremst Deutschland ab. DW, post 17.10.2013. Online available at: <https://www.dw.com/de/1973-%C3%B6lkrise-bremst-deutschland-aus/a-17164884>

<sup>3</sup> More than 20% of the country's forests burnt down. According to the WWF, an estimate of 3 billion animals were killed in the fires or cast out of their familiar habitat between August 2019 and March 2020. Reptilians were the most impacted species. See Read, Paul; Richard Denniss: With costs approaching

which destroyed large areas of the country) or the devastating flood wave in the Ahr valley<sup>4</sup> (Germany) in 2021.

The excessive overexploitation, climate change as well as armed conflicts and acts of terrorism threaten both cultural and natural landscapes, but ultimately also world-class cultural-historical sites as well as museums and collections. For the cultural landscape and especially for museums, the provoked crises as well as climate change can only mean to face the constantly increasing demands and to better position themselves so that exhibits and collections can be sustainably and permanently protected, preserved and researched. The extent to which the consequences of climate change, in particular, directly threaten cultural assets and museums can now be experienced almost daily<sup>5</sup>. The lack of appropriate research into its effects on cultural assets, and thus also on museums, must give food for thought. There is an urgent need for action and for the research gaps to be closed

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\$100 billion, the fires are Australia's costliest natural disaster. The Conversation, post 17.01.2020. Online available at: <https://theconversation.com/with-costs-approaching-100-billion-the-fires-are-australias-costliest-natural-disaster-129433>

<sup>4</sup> Umweltbundesamt: Weltweite Temperaturen und Extremwetterereignisse seit 2010. URL:

<https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/themen/klima-energie/klimawandel/weltweite-temperaturen-extremwetterereignisse-seit#das-jahr-2019>;

Statista: Statistiken zu Naturkatastrophen. URL:

<https://de.statista.com/themen/551/naturkatastrophen/#dossierKeyfigures>;

<sup>5</sup> A special recommendation goes to the video published on Arte: Lépine, Fanny; Véronique Barondeau: Kultur durch Klimawandel bedroht. Arte, post 07.12.2018. Online available at: <https://www.arte.tv/de/videos/086718-000-A/kultur-durch-klimawandel-bedroht/>;

See also Landsberg, Torsten: Klimakrise bedroht berühmte Kulturgüter. DW, post 24.11.2020. Online available at: <https://www.dw.com/de/klimawandel-bedroht-kulturg%C3%BCter-weltkulturerbe-baudenkm%C3%A4ler/g-55662901>;

Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt: Wegen Klimakrise lauert auch Gefahr für das Kulturerbe. IDW, post 11.05.2021. Online available at:

<https://idw-online.de/de/news768578>;

Völzke, Daniel: Klimawandel. "Wir werden nicht das gesamte Kulturerbe erhalten können". Monopol, post 29.07. 2021. Online available at:

<https://www.monopol-magazin.de/kulturerbe-klimawandel/>;

here. Research is a prerequisite to better protecting museums, but also to manage energy resources more sustainably. For here, too, the top priority should be to re-equip museums and cultural venues in such a way that energy consumption is reduced, and, above all, insulation is geared towards sustainability. Too many museums still consume too much energy every day due to air conditioning or inadequate building insulation. Last but not least, the sometimes excessive transports to new venues for exhibitions and art fairs will certainly have to be questioned in the coming years. Here, too, it will be necessary to choose other transportation means technically adapted for a better climate balance. Sustainability must also be taken seriously in this sector.

Within the museum world, and with ICOM International at its forefront, many relevant organisations are in favour of a strategy on how to deal with these problems in a measured and sustainable way. Nevertheless, there is a lack of coordination of those many different actors. All active interest groups urgently need to come together and join forces more effectively than they have done until now. ICOM International created a Working Group on Sustainability (WGS) to deal with urgent issues here. Its president Alberto Garlandini has emphatically called for this necessity in his speech<sup>6</sup> given at the G20 Summit in 2021. Other worldwide associations like ICOMOS and the Climate Change and Heritage Working Group (CCHWG) are also looking for solutions and answers to the problems in the museum sector<sup>7</sup>.

ICOM Germany intensively fosters the exchange in the international museum world. The most recent example thereof is the conference

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<sup>6</sup> ICOM, post 02.08.2021. Online available at:

<https://icom.museum/en/news/the-g20-recognises-the-role-of-museums-and-icom-in-addressing-the-climate-crisis/>

<sup>7</sup> ICOMOS: New ICOMOS Focal Point for Climate Change and Cultural Heritage.

Online available at:

<https://www.icomos.org/en/focus/climate-change/94222-new-icomos-focal-point-for-climate-change-and-cultural-heritage>

*Museums Facing a Planetary Emergency*, which was held digitally together with ICOM Greece and ICOM Cyprus in autumn 2020. Important contacts in this context are also the German section of Blue Shield and the Club of Rome<sup>8</sup>. However, it is not enough for individual associations or organisations to develop programmes and perspectives on their own, it also needs the involvement of each and every decision-maker. Cultural organisations have the duty to direct the attention of politicians on the consequences of inaction or only half-hearted implementation of urgent tasks. There must be no more “business as usual”.

The decisive goal is to counteract global warming according to all the laws of physics and biochemistry. The permanent extension of time limits set for achieving environmental goals, as provided for in the Paris Climate Agreement, is unacceptable. Taking time to wait until 2045, or beyond, means irreversibly destroying the planet by then. A global action plan to reach the goals set must be drawn up and implemented. Every individual can participate in this and every cultural institution, every museum, is called upon to be a pioneer here. Every museum can actively take part in this master plan and contribute to raising awareness – and join in action.

This includes, as basic measures, carrying out initial self-evaluations and integrating resilience and sustainability into one’s own corporate philosophy:

1) Evaluate problem areas within the institutions in order to protect them against climate disasters such as floods, heat, snow and

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<sup>8</sup> “Initiated by The Club of Rome and Potsdam Institute for Climate-Impact Research, with initial partners WWF and Nature4Climate, the Planetary Emergency Partnership now consists of over 350 scientists, policymakers, business leaders, youth representatives and NGOs. The Partnership supports the Leaders Pledge for Nature, the Global Goal for Nature, UNFCCC Race to Zero and Race to Resilience campaigns and the 50×30 Coalition.” The Club of Rome. URL <https://www.clubofrome.org/impact-hubs/climate-emergency/planetary-emergency-partnership/>

ice, or fire; have evacuation and emergency plans ready and simulate emergency situations with staff and civil protection.

2) Retrofit museums to make them more climate-neutral, which requires appropriate dialogue with politicians (thermal insulation, minimise energy consumption).

3) Museums must actively promote the reduction of energy consumption, make climate damage clearly visible in their exhibition programmes, deal with the crises of the globe, which are consistently provoked by humans, and make them a topic (an exhibition topic) in the museum.

4) Make climate neutrality visible to everyone in everyday working life.

Joint rethinking and joint action must be closely interwoven at local, national and ultimately international level. Only in this way can we counter the global threat of climate damage and the loss of natural resources. Only then will we succeed in protecting and preserving cultural assets and keeping museums open as living places for humanity.