

Conservators for a sustainable future

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Henry McGhie has a background as an ecologist, museum curator and senior manager. He set up Curating Tomorrow in 2019 to support museums and their partners to enhance their contributions to sustainable development agendas, including the SDGs, climate action, biodiversity conservation and human rights. He is a member of the ICOM Sustainability Working Group, and IUCN Commission on Education and Communication. He is the author of *Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals: a how-to guide for museums, galleries, the cultural sector and their partners*.

This article is based on my contribution to the ICON ESN Twitter conference earlier this year.

The background is that lots of museums and conservators are concerned with sustainability, but are often not that clear on what to do. Talk of ‘sustainable’ this and that, and ‘sustainability’ can be rather vague; the terms are over-used, and are misused (abused) when they are applied to really unsustainable practices. Sustainability is hard to describe because we are nowhere near achieving it: if sustainability is a state of harmony and balance between considerations of people, planet and prosperity (social, environmental and economic aspects), then we have a long way to go. Sustainable development – which I much prefer to talk about – is focused action that aims to create a better balance between people, planet and prosperity. It is the route to a sustainable future. In ‘Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals’ I set out a simple framework for museums to use to focus their contributions to sustainable development. These are based on an analysis of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 targets, and applying them to the activities that museums all do, more or less. The seven activities are:

1. Protect and safeguard cultural and natural heritage, both in museums and more generally; support and provide education
2. Support and provide learning opportunities in support of the SDGs
3. Enable cultural participation for all
4. Support sustainable tourism
5. Enable research in support of the SDGs
6. Direct internal leadership, management and operations to support the SDGs
7. Direct external leadership, collaboration and partnerships towards the SDGs

Museums and the heritage sector can contribute to sustainable development by enhancing their positive contributions, and eliminating their negative impacts. Museums often have massive carbon footprints, including the emissions from their visitors’ travel. They are often in old, inefficient buildings, using fossil fuels. Environmental standards are energy hungry, requiring high energy use for controlling temperature and humidity. Exhibitions can be

extraordinarily wasteful, both changing, special exhibitions, and the emissions from travelling and touring exhibitions. A large museum may have the carbon footprint of more than 1,000 people – the population of a not-so-small town. Museums really must address their own greenhouse gas emissions (CO₂, methane from waste, fluorine gases from equipment, and nitrous oxide). They should do so at least in line with the requirements of the Paris Agreement, especially if they are expecting other people to address their own greenhouse gas emissions. If you find that your museum is producing as many greenhouse gas emissions as it was the year before, it is not moving fast enough. If it is producing more emissions, you are going in the wrong direction!

Museums often think of educating the public about climate change and sustainable development, but professionals – including conservators – also need to have the knowledge, attitudes and skills to contribute meaningfully to creating a better future. It can be rather easy to say museums and museum professions are naturally ‘sustainable’ as they look after things for a long time, but the impacts of doing so have to be included in the mix. How much energy is being consumed? What forms of energy are used? Are standards part of the solution – or part of the problem?

Professional bodies and training organizations can help to ensure that conservators are empowered to be effective, active agents in sustainable development. They can ensure that conservators have the practical skills to use techniques, equipment and material that has a negligible environmental impact. They can incorporate sustainable development thinking and climate action into professional standards, training and certification.

The SDGs are a fantastic blueprint for museums and professionals to use, to ask how they can help set the world on the path to a better future through their own work. ICOM adopted the SDGs in 2019 as museums’ blueprint for contributing to sustainable development. Among the SDGs, SDG 11.4 aims to ‘strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard cultural and natural heritage’, but museum work and conservation have much wider impacts. Chemicals used in conservation treatments affect water quality (SDG 6) and can be polluting (SDG 12). Inefficient energy use impeded SDG 13 (climate action). Harmful chemicals and air pollution can affect health (SDGs 3 and 11). Conservation practices that deny people access to their own heritage contribute to poverty (SDG 1), as poverty relates to access to cultural heritage too, and so on. In fact, it is very easy to draw connections between conservation and most, if not all, of the SDGs.

You can use the seven activities outlined above, and the SDGs to identify where you want to make a difference: what are your main positive contributions, and your main negative impacts. Use the SDGs and their targets to set some goals, make a plan, and do it. Supporting sustainable development is much easier than people often think, but it does need people to do it. It is not about making statements or declarations, or telling the world what you’re going to do. It is about making a clear commitment, and doing it, simple. Working to support sustainable development can be really satisfying, motivating, challenging, and keeps you fresh. If you find yourself using techniques you’ve been using for years, then there is almost certainly a way to achieve the same outcome another way, that

causes less social or environmental harm, or that costs less (or is the treatment even needed at all?).

Sustainability is often thought of as 'doing no harm', which fits well with conservators' thinking, but – for sustainable development – that is not enough. Sustainable development is about leaving the world in a better place than we found it.

Sustainability action in museums often inches forward from the present, but that approach is simply not fast enough to keep up with the transformation that is required. Instead, you could ask, what professional and environmental standards are needed to meet the Paris Agreement and the SDGs, which are due to run until 2030. That leaves less than nine years to make really very radical changes to how museums do things. Are they up to the challenge? Maybe you could ask a different question, or look at it a different way. There will be no place in a sustainable future for unsustainable institutions, professions or practices. Conservation will have to adapt to keep up.

This year, the UK will host COP26, the United Nations climate change summit. Now is a good time to commit to being part of the change that is needed. Challenge out of date environmental standards. Find other conservators interested in embracing sustainable practices (there are plenty of them, by the way). Look outside the sector for how people are shifting energy use, using less or new materials and techniques. If you see a good approach in another sector, use it. If you want more support on adopting sustainable practices or approaches, tell the training and accrediting bodies: make them work for you, and for the future.

Further reading

Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals: a how-to guide for museums, galleries, the cultural sector and their partners (Curating Tomorrow, 2019), <https://bit.ly/2Orh5WU>

The Sustainable Development Goals: Helping Transform our World Through Museums, ICOM Voices, January, 2020,

<https://icom.museum/en/news/the-sustainable-development-goals-helping-transform-our-world-through-museums/>

ICOM Kyoto triennial conference, 2019, plenary session, Curating Sustainable Futures (video),

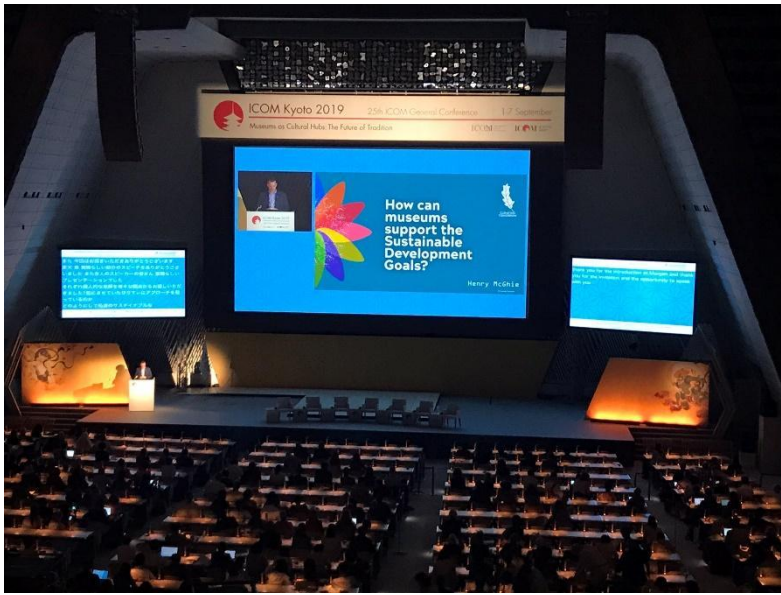
<https://icom.museum/en/ressource/plenary-session-curating-sustainable-futures-through-museums/>



SDGs guide cover

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS





Henry at ICOM Kyoto conference, September 2019