

EDITORIAL

Cultural Heritage in a Changing Climate: From Emergency Response to Care

Marguerite Johnson^{1,*}

¹Classics and Ancient History, School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, University of Queensland, St Lucia, Australia

Correspondence: marguerite.johnson@uq.edu.au

Images of damaged monuments give climate risk public visibility. They also encourage a narrow understanding in which heritage enters policy only after a dramatic event. Much climate-related change is slower: repeated heat stress, altered rainfall, biological growth, shoreline retreat, dust, declining water availability, or the gradual loss of plant and animal relationships important to cultural landscapes. These changes are difficult to communicate because no single moment marks the loss.

The humanities are well placed to interpret such temporal complexity. Nixon's concept of slow violence describes harms dispersed across time and space that are difficult to represent through conventional narratives of crisis. Heritage policy needs a comparable sensitivity. Monitoring should attend not only to objects but also to practices, livelihoods, access routes, seasonal rhythms, and the capacity of people to continue care.

Heritage is often classified as a sector needing protection from climate change. It can also contribute to adaptation. Historic settlement patterns, water systems, building techniques, food practices, and collective memory may contain knowledge about living with environmental variability. This knowledge should not be romanticized or copied without evaluation. Some practices no longer fit contemporary population, equity, or safety requirements. Nevertheless, dismissing inherited knowledge as obsolete removes potentially valuable evidence.

Adaptation teams should include historians, conservators, architects, ecologists, craftspeople, Indigenous and local knowledge holders, and residents. Their task is not simply to assemble perspectives but to negotiate different definitions of value.

A conservation scientist may prioritize material integrity; residents may prioritize continued ceremonial access; planners may prioritize safety and infrastructure. Transparent adaptation identifies these conflicts rather than hiding them behind a technical score.

Climate adaptation unsettles the conventional promise of preservation. In some places, materials will need to be replaced more frequently; uses will move seasonally; collections may be relocated; landscapes will change composition; and certain structures may not be defensible indefinitely. Refusing to discuss these possibilities can produce emergency decisions made without consent.

Institutions should establish decision pathways before thresholds are reached. Who has authority to decide relocation? What documentation is needed? How will communities maintain access? Which values would be lost through physical movement, and which might be sustained? Can partial transformation be preferable to complete reconstruction after failure? These are cultural and ethical questions as much as engineering ones.

The ICOMOS report *The Future of Our Pasts* argues that cultural heritage should be integrated into climate action rather than treated as an isolated concern. Integration must include funding. Small institutions and communities responsible for heritage often lack stable maintenance budgets, environmental monitoring, insurance, or digital backups. Adaptation grants that fund assessments but not repairs or staff time create knowledge without capacity.

Conservation depends on labor. Rising heat, hazardous conditions, disrupted seasons, and emergency demands affect the people who inspect roofs, maintain sites,

stabilize collections, guide visitors, and transmit craft knowledge. A plan that protects an object while exposing workers to unreasonable risk is not a successful adaptation plan. Scheduling, training, protective procedures, fair contracts, and continuity of employment belong within heritage resilience.

Community participation also needs material support. People cannot attend planning processes if relocation, damaged infrastructure, or livelihood pressures consume their time. Engagement should be compensated and conducted through accessible formats. Local knowledge is not free data to be extracted for an institutional plan.

A care-centered approach would join four forms of continuity: **material continuity** through monitoring, maintenance, and appropriate intervention; **social continuity** through access, livelihood, participation, and transmission; **documentary continuity** through records of condition, decisions, and change; and **institutional continuity** through funded staff, governance, and partnerships.

No single measure can maximize all four. The purpose of the framework is to make trade-offs visible and revisable.

Climate change will not affect cultural heritage only through discrete emergencies. It is already altering the conditions under which care is possible. Heritage institutions should move from reactive rescue toward long-term adaptation that recognizes gradual change, community authority, labor, and unavoidable choices. Preservation remains a vital aim, but it should be understood as the continuation of meaningful cultural relationships, not the impossible promise that nothing will change.