



Climate Crisis and Environmental Impact Working Group Report Summary

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Of the Held in Trust (HIT) initiative's nine pillars of study, the findings and goals of the Climate Crisis and Environmental Impact Working Group demand the most urgent attention and action.

On August 9, 2021, the United Nations/World Meteorological Organization's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a highly disturbing report on the accelerating rate of catastrophic effects of climate change. The damage already done to our climate is creating unprecedented perils to the long-term preservation of heritage resources around the world: museums, libraries, archives, historic structures, monuments, sites, and historic landscapes.

On March 20, 2023, the IPCC issued a Synthesis Report for the Sixth Assessment ([AR6](#)) calling for countries to eliminate their greenhouse gas emissions by 2040, not by 2050. To do so it stated that "Government actions at sub-national, national, and international levels, with civil society and the private sector, play a crucial role in enabling and accelerating shifts in development pathways towards sustainability and climate resilient development (very high confidence). Climate resilient development is enabled when governments, civil society and the private sector make inclusive development choices that prioritize risk reduction, equity, and justice, and when decision-making processes, finance, and actions are integrated across governance levels, sectors, and timeframes (very high confidence)."

The cultural heritage sector is an integral part of civil society. Difficulty in reducing the impacts that contribute to climate change cannot limit the profession's commitment to stewardship. When climate events are so substantial as to cause communities to lose parts of their heritage, the vibrancy of the values inherent in and connected to that heritage is diminished. The present and future living communities lose the social significance, symbolism, historical or aesthetic values, and the science embedded in cultural heritage. Stewards of cultural heritage have a responsibility to address and overcome these challenges.

Considering the urgency of the climate crisis, the Working Group's report embraces a practical approach focused on project-based actions that address the needs of the conservation field immediately and support individuals and cultural institutions tackling the effects of climate change. The Working Group identified the following three key considerations for continued research and framing of their recommendations.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Awareness and understanding of the impacts of climate change on cultural heritage

Technologies exist to develop a digital climate impact mapping resource for cultural heritage professionals, yet the field has not prioritized its creation. Such a resource would identify climate change impacts across various regions, providing critical information for professionals and institutions developing action plans and partnerships for resilience.

Education for action

In addition to needing clear and usable information about their level of risk, cultural heritage entities need to better understand how to plan for the preservation of their resources. The field can help cultural heritage institutions and preservation professionals develop climate actions plans, which outline science-based strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and address ways the climate is already changing. Plans should include activities for mitigating contributions to climate change and its effects on cultural heritage; adapting to climate change in responsible ways; and becoming resilient, physically, socially, and financially, in the face of a changing climate.

Policy development

A critical area of focus for the field is an exploration of the policies and considerations that would encourage the cultural heritage profession to take more steps for adaptation and climate action in their work. These policies can address risk management and planning policies for impending climate change events. They will set goals for the field and advance the development of supportive procedures for reducing risk exposure and impacts that drive climate change, collecting and collection management, and care and display. The field needs to prioritize equity expertise in developing these policies.

STRATEGIC GOALS

The HIT Working Group on Climate Crisis and Environmental Impact has identified the following four strategic goals for the field to help cultural heritage professionals and institutions anticipate climate impacts and develop climate action plans, identify sector-wide policies that encourage resilience and adaptability, and raise awareness of and commitment to climate change response across the cultural heritage sector in the U.S. To incentivize organizations and individuals to prioritize this work, the Working Group recommends tying American Alliance of Museum (AAM) accreditation to the existence of climate action plans and continuing education credits to trainings related to climate crisis issues.

Further detail on these goals and an outline of benchmarks over the short, medium, and long term can be found in the Working Group's [full report](#).

GOAL #1: Aid cultural heritage professionals and institutions in visualizing and anticipating climate impacts.

Climate risk maps are effective tools for visualizing and anticipating climate impacts to cultural heritage and can be designed in a manner that drives immediate action. To begin, professionals should investigate the feasibility of overlaying climate vulnerability data on existing models for mapping cultural heritage in the United States. A centralized climate risk map should be publicly and freely accessible, easily updated, and digital.

GOAL #2: Support cultural heritage institutions and sites in developing a framework for their climate action plans.

The HIT Working Group for Climate Crisis and Environmental Impact will prepare a framework with support tools that any institution or community can use to build its climate action plan for their cultural heritage. It is imperative to integrate equity concepts and expertise into these frameworks. Ultimately, having a current climate action plan will be considered best practice within the field.

GOAL #3: Identify field-wide policies and considerations that encourage resilience and adaptation.

Establishing a list of policies and considerations around climate action would help cultural heritage institutions and preservation professionals in developing steps for adaptation that could complement or be incorporated into a climate action plan. Climate crisis is a fluid situation that will require continued diligence, flexibility, and resilience and having a reference list of policies and considerations will be integral to quick, data-backed, and thoughtful decision-making.

GOAL #4: Raise awareness of and commitment to climate change response across the cultural heritage sector in America.

In order to accomplish the first three goals, the field must significantly raise awareness of and commitment to climate change response across the cultural heritage sector in America on par with the level of awareness of international organizations such as the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC); International Council of Museums (ICOM); International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM); and International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), particularly along the lines of the recent [IIC, ICOM, ICCROM declaration](#). The cultural heritage sector's professional associations have an opportunity to lead such recognition and actively support and prioritize climate change-related research in conservation practice and training for conservation and preservation professionals.

IN SUMMARY

The climate crisis is one of the most urgent issues impacting the world today. It is driving decision-making across business, government, and society. It is past time for the cultural heritage preservation sector to establish the frameworks, tools, and policies that will guide actions for mitigation, adaptation, and resilience. Such work presents opportunities for new collaborative partnerships with allied disciplines, community engagement, and sustained investment.

While climate crisis poses an existential threat to cultural heritage worldwide, positive change is achievable if we are willing to act boldly and lead for the sake of a better future. Accordingly, as the Working Group developed these recommendations, the members recognized that the climate risk mapping and resilience planning could not wait until the Held in Trust project was complete. The team designed a project to support Goal #1: Aid cultural heritage professionals and institutions in visualizing and anticipating climate impacts. With support from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), FAIC/AIC has begun work on the Climate Change Resilience Resources for Cultural Heritage project that includes development of an interactive climate risk map and resilience planning learning modules, and it is piloting the resilience planning process for cultural heritage in two communities of practice with partners in New Mexico and Puerto Rico.

To learn further details around the findings and recommendations of the HIT Working Group on Climate Crisis and Environmental Impact, please access their [full report](#).

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