

## REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS

# The Value of Museums in Averting Societal Collapse

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**Abstract** Current research suggests that societal collapse is in progress. The indicators of societal collapse include untenable economic inequality; the spread of authoritarian governments; the collapse of biodiversity; an economic system dependent on the fallacy of endless growth, consumption, and debt, and the failure of governments institutions to respond to these crises. This article explores the implications of societal decline for museums as civil society organizations, including an examination of the untapped potential of museums to contribute to the reimagining and transitioning to a new society in the face of collapse or possible extinction. Given the uncertainty of the world, collapse is not inevitable. Museums, as key civic and intellectual resources with ethical responsibilities, must now examine the meaning and value of their work. As institutions of the commons, belonging to and affecting the public at large, museums can commit to enhancing societal wellbeing and the durability of the more-than-human world. There is an important lesson in the history of museums, and that is their ability to learn and adapt as circumstances require. Urgent museum participation is now possible and essential.

## INTRODUCTION

The majority of the world's museums have not yet confronted the climate crisis, much less the indicators of social and ecological collapse, and thus are unwittingly complicit in these existential threats. This is understandable, recognizing that museums are mainstream institutions and thus embody the general consciousness and values of the public at large. The public, in turn, is “culture-bound”, meaning that both individual and societal perspectives are restricted in outlook by belonging to a particular culture. In this instance, the North American frame of reference is the modern technological-industrial culture, with its particular values and aspirations. In short, we are the products of the culture we are born into (Nelson, 2020). We are now in need of new cultural frameworks to identify, explore and debunk the myths, perceptions and misperceptions that are inviting collapse and extinction, such as the belief that unlimited economic growth is possible and that there can be more growth through technology (Rees & Nelson, 2020). It is here, in developing new cultural frameworks, that museums can make a vital contribution. Museums of all kinds are in a position to invent a new future for their communities by creating an image of a desirable future – the essential first step in its realization.

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This article will explore the opportunities for the museum community to confront the specter of social collapse, with the intention of initiating a frank and constructive conversation about the perils of such a future, as well as the roles and responsibilities of museums in a more hopeful social transition. My approach to this discussion is intended to be constructive, by acknowledging both challenges and opportunities. There is a critical need to rethink museum visions, missions, and values in light of collapse and possible extinction. I will examine the inherent strengths that empower museums to undertake this work, the structural problems that hinder the effectiveness of museums, and how these problems can be turned into action to address the challenges we face. Before discussing how museums can assist in avoiding disaster, however, I will examine the meaning and consequences of societal collapse.

## BEHOLD COLLAPSE

The Covid 19 pandemic offers an opportunity to embrace what we know and do not know, and to incorporate *collapsology* into contemporary museum thinking. Collapsology refers to civilizational collapse and is focused on contemporary, industrial, and globalized society (Servigne & Stevens, 2020). In the absence of any public conversation about societal collapse in the museum sector, it is imperative to catalyze both reflection and action. As historian John Michael Greer (2011, p. 239) describes the human predicament:

*Most ordinary people in the industrial world. . . are sleepwalking through one of history's great transitions. The issues that concern them are still defined entirely by the calculus of abundance. . . It has not yet entered their darkest dreams that they need to worry about access to such basic necessities as food, clothing and shelter, the fate of local economies and communities shredded by decades of malign neglect, or the rise of serious threats to the survival of constitutional government and the rule of law.*

As is the case with any attempt to address the future, the task is complex, speculative, and unpredictable, largely because the link between cause and effect in organizations, as in life, tend to be lost in the detail of what actually happens in between (Stacey, 1992, p. 11). Nonetheless, I contend that collapse and extinction can no longer be ignored by the world's museums. Unacknowledged or not, museums and galleries, are deeply entrenched in broader histories of colonialism, globalization, and capitalism as noted in *Reimagining Museums for Climate Action* (Harrison & Sterling, 2021). In summary, the authors write that museums are tightly bound by many of the forces that have led the planet to the brink of ecological collapse; the separation of human and non-human life; the marginalization and oppression of Indigenous Peoples, and the celebration of narratives dependent on unlimited economic growth. In addition to the traditional commitments to preservation, interpretation, and education, however, there are numerous opportunities and possibilities for museums to address these critical issues.

Museums and galleries are effectively absent, however, in the wide-ranging initiatives to confront global challenges and remain unrecognized as key civic and intellectual resources. The

underlying blend of conservatism, complacency, and privilege that marks the museum sector is under increasing scrutiny internally, however. This reflection, to date, has yielded constructive rhetoric and surface-level activism, but no real fundamental change. Although fundamental change may be elusive there is, in fact, a good deal of vital museum work underway to address a variety of issues, ranging from climate trauma to organizational culture. This listing is not exhaustive and examples include the Museums and Climate Change Network, Sustainability in Conservation, Ki Culture, the American Alliance of Museums' Environment and Climate Network, the Happy Museum Project, We Are Museums, the Coalition for Museums and Climate Justice, the National Network for Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation, MuseumNext, Museums for Future, The Empathetic Museum, The Climate Museum, Climate Museum UK, Solving Task Saturation for Museum Workers, Museum Human, and the National Emerging Museum Professionals Network, and the Activist Museum Award. All of these organizations and initiatives have websites, with resources ranging from blogs to webinars, to articles and videos.

Nonetheless, there is now a confluence of urgent issues impinging upon our prospects as a species and the consequences of these issues can no longer be ignored. Three of the most critical issues are as follows (Bradshaw et al., 2021).

### **Ecological Overshoot, Population Size and Overconsumption**

Humanity's annual demand on the natural world has exceeded what the Earth can renew in a year. Since the 1970s, humanity has been in ecological overshoot, with the annual demand on resources exceeding the Earth's biocapacity. Today humanity uses the equivalent of 1.7 Earths to provide the resources we use and absorb the waste. This means it now takes the Earth one year and nine months to regenerate what we use in a year (Global Footprint Network, 2021). This massive ecological overshoot is largely enabled by the increasing use of fossil fuels (Rees, 2020). There is no way, ethically or otherwise, to avoid rising human numbers and the accompanying overconsumption (Bradshaw et al., 2021, p. 4).

### **Climate Disruption**

Scientists have found that 9 of the 15 known Earth tipping elements that regulate the state of the planet have been activated, and there is now scientific support for declaring a state of planetary emergency (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021). These tipping points can trigger abrupt carbon release back into the atmosphere, such as the release of carbon dioxide and methane caused by the irreversible thawing of the Arctic permafrost. If damaging tipping cascades can occur and a global tipping point cannot be ruled out, this is an existential threat to civilization. The scientists noted, "The evidence from tipping points alone suggests that we are in a state of planetary emergency: both the risk and urgency of the situation are acute." (Pearce, 2019).

## Political Ineptitude and Failed Environmental Goals

Negotiators at COP25 and COP 26 (The 2019 and 2022 United Nations Conferences on Climate Change) failed again to agree to a deal that would limit global warming to 1.5°C. Scores of civil society groups condemned the European Union, Australia, Canada and the U.S. for their myopia and cowardice (Goodman, 2019). After the 33 climate conferences in the past 50 years, we have yet to witness actions that could reduce the rising CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations in the atmosphere (Klein, 2020). Instead, the world's governments plan to produce 120% more coal, gas, and oil by 2030 than is allowable in order to meet the Paris climate target of 1.5 degrees of warming (McKibben, 2019). In short:

*...most of the world's economies are predicated on the political idea that meaningful counteraction now is too costly to be politically palatable. Combined with financed disinformation campaigns in a bid to protect short-term profits, it is doubtful that any needed shift in economic investments of sufficient scale will be made in time.*  
(Bradshaw et al., 2021, pp. 5–6)

I fully understand that many museums and museum associations are beholden to their government funders, and that they are knowingly or unknowingly complicit in this political failure. Museum practice is as vulnerable to societal failings as any other public organization, but this does not mean that museums and their staffs are precluded from taking constructive action. I will examine the opportunities for doing so later in this article, as museums need not remain complicit.

## COLLAPSE: GLOBAL SCENARIOS

The possibility of collapse and extinction are not new topics in the museum field (Janes, 2009, 2016; Janes & Sandell, 2019; Koster, 2011, 2020a, 2020b). My earlier observations are useful for highlighting the acceleration of the lethal trends that now confront us. I speculated then on the idea of collapse, but restricted my comments to museums only, based on their growing dependence on marketplace values and revenues (Janes, 2009, pp. 176–177). The idea of both museum and societal collapse a dozen years ago required a leap of imagination. Among the litany of other stressors beyond museums, I focused on the destruction of our closest living relative, the primates – humans, apes, and monkeys. At that time, 114 of the 394 primate species were classified and threatened with extinction. I then turned my attention to the ongoing destruction of biodiversity (Janes, 2009, pp. 42–44). We must confront this truly staggering loss of biodiversity, as only 5% of all animals in the world are wild and free-living. Farmed animals and human beings now constitute 95% of all land vertebrates (Safina, 2021).

In a subsequent book (Janes, 2013, pp. 371–374), I ventured beyond the more-than-human world and examined four possible scenarios for the future of our civilization based on the work of Bridget McKenzie, a UK curator, consultant, and activist. I am indebted to McKenzie for identifying and describing these four scenarios which are summarized below:

1. *The Red Global Scenario – Status Quo.* In this scenario, there were serious efforts to address the environmental and resource crisis globally, but this work was dominated by technology and the marketplace, without sufficient attention paid to regulating the ensuing damage to the biosphere, and coupled with insufficient efforts to restore ecosystems. Inequality and conflict over resources persisted.
2. *The Silver Global Scenario – Techno-utopia.* In the second decade of the 21st century, there was a redoubled effort, supported by corporations and governments, to replace fossil fuels with alternative energy sources and to engineer new sources of food and water. The effects of climate change increased, however, and the oceans continued to acidify, and deserts spread. The reduction in greenhouse gas emissions enabled some cities to persevere and bring back climate stability over the next 1000 years.” There were some remarkable technological advances, but they were insufficient.
3. *The Green Global Scenario – Ecotopia.* In the second decade of the 21st century, the inherent value of the biosphere was finally recognized and efforts to restore and “rewild” the forests and oceans intensified. Urban gardens became commonplace. All of these efforts failed to prevent the tipping points of climate change feedback, however. It was hoped that wilderness could be restored in some regions to allow for biodiversity to recover. Humans and nature are thriving in some areas, but not globally.
4. *The Black Global Scenario – Accept Decline.* Efforts to address the environmental and resource crises were ineffective and too late, lacking both purpose and enthusiasm. The consequences were varied, with some communities accepting the decline, some choosing crime and conflict, and still other communities becoming nomadic. McKenzie noted that “Others might form protective spiritual clans that ‘live for now’ while aspiring to morality” (McKenzie, 2012).

Because all of these scenarios are plausible, aligning with one or another is a matter of personal values and beliefs that reflect one’s life experiences and anxieties. Grandparents will undoubtedly feel greater distress, for example, when considering the implications of the Red and Black Global Scenarios for their grandchildren. The Red Global Scenario, or *status quo* is an apt description of what is unfolding now, but which does not have to fail if we attend to what we have learned. It is only the temporary abundance of fossil fuels and myopic politicians that provide a sense of normalcy. The Red Global Scenario is also not new, and we have the catastrophic events of the distant past to ponder, such as the disappearance of the Mayan civilization and the demise of ancient Egypt. The stories of these collapsed societies are popular analogues for the present, and their meaning and implications for contemporary challenges have been examined by various writers (Homer-Dixon, 2006; Wright, 2004).

Wright and Homer-Dixon both provide the backdrop for what will be seen as perhaps the greatest fallacy of our time – the idea that we can get along without natural resources, an idea that is now apparently widespread in wealthy countries (Homer-Dixon, 2001, pp. 31, 241). We have the benefit of archaeology and ecology, which neither the ancient Maya nor the Egyptians had, to teach us how and why those ancient societies failed and how ecological diversity is essential to the health of the biosphere and averting extinction (Heinberg, 2011, p. 53). Museums, with their heightened historical

consciousness, could assist society in taking advantage of this knowledge and do much to avoid the mistakes that led to the catastrophic collapses of the past.

The second scenario, *Techno-utopia*, is what corporatists and governments would like us to believe, and many intelligent and responsible people have adopted this belief. It is difficult to be a contrarian in light of all the technological benefits that underpin contemporary life, even while global governments continue to sabotage the future with the simpleminded belief that technology will fix everything. At the very least, societal leaders in all sectors should be exercising the precautionary principle – if an action or policy may potentially cause harm to the public or to the environment (in the absence of scientific consensus that the action or policy is harmful), the burden of proof that it is *not* harmful falls on those taking the action (Pinto-Bazurco, 2020).

The hubris and ignorance underlying the “technological fix” are the result of both willful ignorance and the plutocracy’s self-interest. This belief in technology is also driven by neo-classical economics and the fixation on economic growth as the dominant benchmark of societal well-being. *Techno-utopia* is too little and too late, a common theme throughout history where privatized interests are in control – why change if you are reaping the benefits? Although the *Techno-utopia* is theoretically probable, it will fail because it is predicated on the denial of the unfolding damage to the biosphere’s systems (Koster, 2020a). Museums have a vital role to play in examining the meaning and value of technological solutions to the current crisis, although there is no doubt that technology remains a naïve and partial solution.

This leaves *Ecotopia* as a third possibility and it will not unfold as described without the unequivocal collaboration of public and private institutions, including museums. An unprecedented sensitivity to the integrity of the biosphere will be required, as well as a commitment to individual and community self-reliance and sacrifice not seen since the Second World War. All of this is possible and is, in fact, underway in a variety of local, regional, and national initiatives that remain largely unacknowledged by governments, be they Transition Towns, or urban gardens, or land-based cooperatives. The combination of ecological overshoot, climate disruption and political ineptitude, however, will likely make *Ecotopia* impossible.

The remainder of this article will examine collapse in more detail, along with mitigative opportunities and responsibilities to avoid or overcome the worst of its consequences. It behooves us to understand what is possible. For museums, there is much they can do.

## THE FIVE STAGES OF SOCIETAL COLLAPSE

Although the same pattern of complexity, speculation, and unpredictability is true of societal collapse (as it is for ecological collapse), the work of Dimitry Orlov (2013) provides a more detailed examination of how collapse might unfold for human society. For individuals, families, and communities, collapse refers to” the ending of our current means of sustenance, shelter, security, pleasure,

identity and meaning” (Bendell & Carr, 2019). Few would dispute that “collapse is a socially awkward subject” (Orlov, 2013, pp. 1–2) – the difficulty being that pondering collapse is seen to be “overly negative, disturbing, distressing, depressing, defeatist.” Orlov addresses these concerns with insight and dark humor by examining several pre- and post-collapse societies. The result is the following taxonomy of collapse that synthesizes a great deal of complexity (Orlov, 2013, pp. 14–16).

### **Stage 1: Financial Collapse**

Trust in “business as usual” and the past is no longer the guide to the future. Financial institutions become insolvent; savings are erased, and access to capital is lost. Orlov (2013, p. 62) notes that “. . . life without global, or even national, finance is possible. In many ways it is even desirable.” He foresees a successful human culture universal:

*A family is three generations at a minimum, living together, pooling resources and allocating them in the best interests of the whole. A community is a band of such families capable of self-governance. The traditional form of self-governance . . . is a council of elders.*

### **Stage 2: Commercial Collapse**

Despite society’s utter dependence on commerce, the faith in the market is gone. Money is devalued, commodities are hoarded, imports collapse, retail chains break down, and widespread shortages of survival necessities become the norm. Orlov (2013, p. 101) notes that there is a fallback: “The normal human relationship pyramid, based on personal, tribal and familial relationships and dominated by gifts, barter and tribute, can provide a solid base for a local economy.”

### **Stage 3: Political Collapse**

There is no longer any faith in government, including its ability to care for society and to mitigate the widespread loss of goods and services necessary for survival. The political establishment at all levels loses legitimacy and relevance. The vanishing of the industrial age, however, and with it the nation states that maintain it, will make room for smaller and more local political entities – a rebirth of states small enough to renew themselves democratically (Orlov, 2013, p. 157).

### **Stage 4: Social Collapse**

Social institutions, be they charities and other non-profits run out of resources or fail internally, and with this goes the belief that the “your people will take care of you” (Orlov, 2013, p. 15). To remain healthy as social animals, however, “we need to be part of a small, close-knit group”

(p. 202). In short, “society exists, until it does not.” Self-organization will be key (a couple, family, or families), and it will be vital for people to find a safe *way* to be with others, rather than a safe *place* to be (p. 197).

### Stage 5: Cultural Collapse

This is the grimmest of the scenarios, summed up in the dictum, “May you die today, so that I can die tomorrow” (Orlov, 2013, p. 15). Faith in the goodness of humanity is lost, and along it with peoples’ capacity for kindness, generosity, honesty, compassion and charity. Families disband and compete as individuals for meager resources. Orlov (2013, p. 244) concludes “that family is society, while larger groups are illusory. . . there is no individual and there is no state; there is only the family. . . or there is nothing at all.”

### WHY MUSEUMS?

Enter museums as social organizations in civil society. Whether it be the four global scenarios, or the five stages of societal collapse, the question is what role do museums have in negotiating and tempering the consequences of collapse? Assuming that museums have no role or responsibilities in the realm of finance, commerce, and politics (which are already showing various signs of collapse), I will limit my speculation to their role in the last two stages of collapse – the social and the cultural. My assumption is that museums can play a significant role, as they have numerous attributes that directly resist, if not defy, various elements that constitute societal collapse.

In brief, museums are well-positioned to mitigate the disruptions to daily life as societal collapse and unfolds (Janes, 2009, pp. 178–182). They are grounded in their communities and are expressions of locality; they bear witness by assembling evidence and knowledge and making things known; they are seed banks of sustainable living practices that have guided our species for millennia, and they are skilled at making learning accessible and engaging. Most importantly, a competent museum is a bridge between nature and culture, as well as the sciences and humanities. These qualities are not fully operational at this time, however, hampered as they are by various internal challenges peculiar to museums.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGE

As mentioned earlier, museums are understandably complicit with the many mainstream forces that have created the catastrophe before us. In addition to being culture-bound as discussed earlier, museums also suffer from management myopia – a lack of foresight and discernment with respect to broader socio-cultural issues. There are four beliefs which give rise to this myopia in the world of organizations, and all of them persist in the museum world (Stacey, 1992, pp. 1–2; Janes, 2009, pp.



66–68). The first is that the museum should have a visionary director who determines the future destination of the museum and guides it to that point. This assumes that the lone director, along with the less celebrated management team, are in control of their museum and its future. The second belief is that the museum must have a common and unified culture, sharing a single vision and committed to the same rules. The third belief, now the preoccupation of countless museums, is the focus on the financial bottom line. This is the direct outcome of the belief in the lethal narrative of continuous growth – including the proliferation of vanity architecture, to the preoccupation with wealthy elites as donors, to the primacy of economic interests in institutional decision-making. The fourth root cause of management myopia is the belief that the museum should determine what it is good at, give people what they want, and adapt to the market environment.

These management deficiencies reflect a range of deep-seated structural problems that are also preventing museums from rethinking their role and responsibilities in a troubled world.

These challenges are not inevitable or enduring, however, and I have studied these structural difficulties to determine what can be done about them (Janes, 2007, 2009, 2013, 2016; Janes & Sandell, 2019). Addressing these obstacles and opportunities will require:

1. Rethinking vision, mission, and values – Museums are preoccupied with the “what” and the “how”. Few, if any, ever ask “Why are we doing what we are doing?” Asking “why” leads to questions about purpose, meaning, and values. In addition to asking why, museums must consider:
  - What changes they are trying to effect?
  - What solutions they will generate?
  - What are their non-negotiable values?
2. Reforming governance to reflect the community – One’s cultural background and life experience, are just as important as one’s title or formal position. Museums need “deep civic roots to thrive, and local relationships are the soil in which these roots grow” (Vandeventer, 2011).
3. Experimenting with new leadership models - Museums and galleries are dominated by an outdated corporate model – the lone CEO. Other models must be considered, such as the Roman model – *primus inter pares* or first among equals – which is based on collective leadership (Janes, 2009, pp. 64–66).
4. Creating new organizational designs - Although rarely discussed, *how* you work directly affects *what* you do. There is an urgent need to abandon hierarchy and replace it with new organizational designs, including self-organization.
5. Nurturing and support personal agency - This is the capacity of staff to take action in the world, irrespective of their positions. The relationship between workplace and personhood remains largely unrecognized and unexplored.
6. Installing an advocacy policy – This policy will strengthen a socially responsible vision, by delineating what issues are important and how the museum or gallery will respond when confronted with moral and civic challenges, such as the climate crisis, the decline in biodiversity, social injustice, and collapse.

7. Acknowledging that museums and galleries have ethical obligations - including (1) being open to influence and impact from outside interests; and (2) being responsive to citizens' interests and concerns (Janes, 2013, pp. 371–398).
8. Discarding the myth that museums and galleries are neutral voices of authority. They are not neutral and never have been (Janes, 2009, 59; Autry & Murawski, 2019; Prescha, 2021).

Unless explicitly addressed these entrenched practices will hinder or prevent museums from preparing for a future devoid of the “calculus of abundance”, to recall the earlier words of John Greer. In addition to these structural problems, it is instructive to read the summary report “From Climate Knowledge to Climate Action: Exhibitions and Education for Sustainable Development” (International Symposium, 2020, p. 20). While acknowledging that museums can offer a great deal to climate education and action, the report concluded that:

*...they must be empowered to play these roles in society. Museums need support and guidance from policy makers, local and national governments, through effective climate change education policies, plans, financial and other resources. We would welcome mechanisms that can help us share and tell our collective story.*

Regrettably, no governments anywhere have provided sufficient leadership to any sector in addressing the climate crisis. In light of what has been accomplished in the maturation of museums (more responsive, more fiscally responsible, and more accountable to the visitor), it is now appropriate for museums to exercise their right as social institutions and insist on the accountability of government (at any level) and the private sector. It is clear that both government and the private sector require a much greater degree of accountability, as both persist with decisions, actions, and inactions that threaten the well-being of individuals, communities, and the biosphere. Some courageous risk taking will be in order, recognizing that government and business are key funders of museums. Without testing these murky waters, however, the museum's potential to foster heightened awareness of climate trauma will remain untested.

## A FUTURE FOR MUSEUMS

The global museum community is the largest, self-organized franchise in the world, and museums constitute an informal network of public storefronts, unlike any other organizations. Museums are also civil society spaces where societal collapse can be aired, discussed, and acted upon, and they are uniquely qualified to do so because of their singular combination of historical consciousness, sense of place, long-term stewardship, knowledge base, public accessibility, and unprecedented public trust. No social institutions have a deeper sense of time than museums, and by their very nature they are predisposed to exercise their larger view of time as stewards of the biosphere.

Although still plagued by elitist behavior, museums are public places where people can meet, work, and learn from each other. Museums can move the conversation about collapse and extinction beyond the academy and into society at large. Assuming that it is possible for a sizeable number of

museums to overcome the structural and managerial obstacles noted earlier, I will now consider an emerging movement that provides both opportunities and responsibilities for museums to fulfill their potential.

Bendell (2019), a Professor of Sustainability Leadership at the University of Cumbria (UK), writes that societal collapse due to climate change is already here. Bendell launched the Deep Adaptation Forum for people who want to explore what they can do professionally, personally, and collectively to promote collapse-readiness as society breaks down. He proposes (Bendell, 2019, p. 8) an agenda for deep adaptation to the inevitability of collapse, consisting of resilience, relinquishment, restoration, and reconciliation. This agenda is embodied in four questions that serve as a framework for community dialogue:

### **Resilience: “How Do We Keep What We Really Want to Keep?”**

This question alone is sufficient cause to acknowledge the meaning and value of museums, most notably in their role as creators of social capital (Janes, 2009, p. 102). There is a widespread misconception in Western society that markets create communities. In fact, the opposite is true, as the marketplace and its activities actually deplete trust (Rifkin, 1997). It is the organizations of the non-profit sector, neither government nor business, which build and enrich the trust, caring, and genuine relationships – the social capital – upon which the marketplace is based. These organizations range from museums to Girl Guides, and there would be no markets without this web of human relationships. Social capital is born of long-term associations that are not explicitly self-interested or coerced, and typically diminishes if it is not regularly renewed or replaced (Bullock & Trombley, 1999, p. 798). Stewarding social capital is an antidote to societal collapse, and museums are a primary source of that capital. This alone is a sufficient reason to acknowledge the civic value of museums and ensure their longevity as pressures intensify.

### **Relinquishment: “What Do We Need to Let Go of in Order to not Make Matters Worse?”**

Despite their inherent conservatism, museums have existed for thousands of years, unlike the vast majority of commercial and corporate enterprises. Museums have always had a form of adaptive intuition – to reinvent and transform, however slowly and unconsciously (Søndergaard & Janes, 2012). They have evolved through time, from the elite collections of imperial dominance, to educational institutions for the public, and now to the museum as “mall” and appendage of consumer society (Gopnik, 2007, p. 89). There is an important lesson in this historical trajectory, and this is the ability of museums to learn and adapt as circumstances require.

The museum’s next iteration awaits articulation and will hinge upon enlarging the context of museum work to provide sustained public benefit in the face of possible societal collapse and

extinction. The challenge for every museum is to redefine the purpose of museum work, and to replace the domination of the marketplace, leisure consumption (exhibitions, shops, restaurants, etc.), and the yearning for popularity, with a commitment to the durability and well-being of individuals, communities, and the natural world (Berry, 2000, p. 134). This is the opportunity, and all museums are empowered to do so. In short, museums must now grow accustomed to asking “why” they do what they do, as noted earlier.

### Restoration: “What can We Bring Back to Help Us with the Coming Difficulties and Tragedies?”

An unrivaled role for museums is as knowledge seed banks. Museum collections are a time capsule of material diversity (albeit biased and selective) and distinguish museums as the only social institutions with a three-dimensional, cultural memory bank (Janes, 2009, p. 179). In this respect, museums are as valuable as seed banks. If seed banks are gene banks, then museums are tool, technology, history, and art banks – curating the most distinctive trait of our species – the ability to make tools and things of beauty.

Modernity has led to the loss of knowledge of sustainable living practices that have guided our species for millennia, making the record of material diversity contained in museums as valuable as biodiversity – as adaptive solutions are sought in an increasingly fragile world (Janes, 2009, pp. 178–179). Moreover, museums contain our civilization’s most comprehensive catalogue of both cultural and natural diversity. Should the worst come to pass and the world plunges into some an apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic scenario, and if some museums survive, they will play a stewardship role that vindicates the keeping of collections. As author James Kunstler asks:

*If the social and economic platform fails, how long before the knowledge base dissolves? Two hundred years from now, will anyone know how to build or even repair a 1962 Chrysler slant-six engine? Not to mention a Nordex 1500 kW wind turbine (Kunstler, 2005, p. 130).*

One immediate challenge is to assess museum collections to determine what is essential to save in advance of the inevitable, low energy future and the cessation of unlimited economic growth. There is now a Global History Databank that gathers data into a single, large database that can be used to test scientific hypotheses (Seshat, 2021). Why not a similar initiative for museum collections – to test adaptive thinking and technology from the past to assist society in moving beyond the crumbling industrial society? The concept of museums as seed banks also transcends the objects themselves, to include the local, traditional, and Indigenous knowledge that resides not only in the objects, but also in the written and oral testimony that accompanies them. Both these forms of knowledge are currently under siege, for “as knowledge expands globally, it is being lost locally,” writes Wendell Berry (2000, p. 90–91).

## **Reconciliation: “With What and Whom can We Make Peace with as we Face Our Mutual Mortality?”**

The world is populated with Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Inuit, and Metis Peoples in Canada) – if only we had the wisdom to truly appreciate their sense of the world, rather than continuing to marginalize and destroy them (Janes, 2016, pp. 205–206). It is not necessary to argue that Indigenous Peoples are innate conservationists and stewards in order to appreciate the extent to which these cultures have achieved a profound degree of interconnectedness with the biosphere. I am also conscious of the fact that there is no singular Indigenous perspective, as the diversity of their cultures can be seen simply in the number of languages they speak.

There are some general attributes of Indigenous cosmology which help to enhance our understanding of what stewardship means as we contemplate collapse (Janes & Conaty, 2005, pp. 13–14). One of the most quoted phrases from the American Indian wars was Crazy Horse’s comment at a battle in which the Lakota were outnumbered. He said, “Today is a good day to die” (Lopez, 1978, p. 5). Regrettably, no one pays attention to the second part of his remark which was “for all the things of my life are here.” This story expresses a remarkable sense of interconnectedness, as life for these First Nations peoples is not a sequence of goals to be accomplished, but is complete when one enters adulthood. One can only continue to grow in that state, fully enmeshed in family, relatives, friends, and the natural world. “With that continuous sense of a full life, no one was tyrannized by the prospect of death” (Lopez, 1978, p. 5).

This refusal to fragment experience into mutually exclusive dichotomies is not only the basis of interrelatedness, but is also integral to the First Nations’ concept of time as “living in the moment of the present” (Brown, 1989, p. 117), rather than in the categories of the past, present, and future. Living in the present allows a continual and immediate interrelationship with the environment in which one lives, and this is the same state of awareness that is now so essential as we confront collapse. Out of this sense of interconnectedness and non-linear time comes the deep respect, and ultimate sacredness, with which First Nations peoples view the forms, beings, forces, and changes of the natural world (Brown, 1989, p. 119).

We must make peace with Indigenous Peoples as we face the specter of collapse, and those museums holding Indigenous collections are honor bound to do so as custodians of Indigenous cultures, both tangible and intangible. The time has come for museums to acknowledge decolonization and repatriation – not only as the foundation for forging truth and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples – but also as essential conditions for museum integrity and accountability (Janes, 2021). In summary, these responses to Bendell’s questions are a glimpse of what could be expected from the museum community if it were to truly reflect on its potential role in an uncertain future. Bendell’s penetrating questions provide an essential framework for deep listening, reflection, and action.

## CONCLUSION

We continue to sleepwalk into the future, seemingly oblivious of the need to think beyond ourselves and accept responsibility to change and act. There is an urgent need for the human species to begin anew, bereft of the arrogance and hubris that define its collective unconsciousness. Regrettably, this reawakening may come at the cost of great suffering – suffering that is at once abstract for the privileged minority, yet now a tangible reckoning for those who are disempowered and live far away, to say nothing of the more-than-human world. The late Barry Lopez (1986, p. 405) shares his profound insight into the false duality we have created in this excerpt from his book, *Arctic Dreams*:

*One of the oldest dreams of mankind is to find a dignity that might include all living things. . . the dignity we seek is one beyond that articulated by Enlightenment Philosophers. A more radical Enlightenment is necessary, in which dignity is understood as an innate quality, not as something tendered by someone outside. And that common dignity must include the land and its plants and its creatures. Otherwise it is only an invention, and not, as it should be, a perception about the nature of living matter.*

I have sought to demonstrate that museums are equipped and able to assist in the search for the “dignity that includes all living things.” It is fitting that these institutions, with their deep sense of time, should contribute to realizing this “oldest of dreams” and, in so doing, confront the meaning of collapse and what we require to endure.

## CODA

I now find myself enmeshed in the quandary of humanism and these thoughts are necessarily auto-ethnographical as a result (Adams et al., 2015). This is a quandary because I share David Ehrenfeld’s (1978, p. 6) view that humanism abounds with arrogant assumptions that are largely responsible for the catastrophe we now have created. In his words, “We have defiled everything, much of it forever.” He notes, “among the correlates of humanism is the belief that humankind should live for itself, because we have the power to do so.”

The mountain valley where I live is currently under siege by a group of land speculators who wish to double the population of the town and convert the remaining wilderness into a suburb of second homes for the global elite. The heart of the matter is a continentally-significant wildlife corridor (between Canada and the US) that is home to three, key indicators of wildness (wolves, wolverines, and grizzly bears), with whom we have co-existed in this valley for a century and a half. For the First Nations who live here, this relationship is one of time immemorial. The proposed development would restrict animal movement, provoke people/wildlife encounters, and create an island of isolated creatures. The scientific consensus should this happen is the ultimate extinction of the grizzly bears, wolves, and wolverines. Can this be – humanism equals extinction? We have witnessed this degradation countless times worldwide, wrapped in the humanistic guise of progress but driven by greed and neoliberal economics.

There is no possible justification for this development – it is morally unconscionable. Here is yet another example of human exceptionalism, in which nature exists only “to serve the interests of human beings, and that we as humans, have dominion over the plants and animals” (Janes, 2009, p. 53). Will the municipal government have the foresight, courage, and wisdom to act accordingly and reject this assault on the natural world once and for all? If they do not, extinction advances one more step in its relentless unfolding. The most disturbing outcome, if approved, is that we will have done this knowingly.

In contrast, I am also a co-owner of a farm/orchard/nursery devoted to growing and selling food trees and empowering others to do the same. The philosophy and management of the farm are based on arrangements observed in natural ecosystems, commonly called regenerative agriculture or permaculture. The project consists of a large annual garden, several acres of orchard trees, and a pasture that is inter-planted with nut trees. The farm’s vision and mission have evolved to embrace the wonder of food trees, address the importance of food security, and honor the grandeur of the surrounding forest. As the world confronts the climate trauma and the loss of biodiversity, we are working hard to steward a multi-generational, collaborative enterprise - committed to sustaining harmonious relationships between people, land, trees, and animals. A unit of survival attempting to craft decent lives for descendants, alongside the dominant system.

These two accounts embody the warp and weft that will define the future of our species – antithetical, yet interwoven. These threads provide both the narrative and the counter narrative that will either destroy the future or sow the seeds for its recovery. One thread being the specter of exterminating three key indicators of wildness in a mountain valley for the purpose of “progress” and making private money at the expense of the more-than-human world. The other thread being a small group culture devoted to regenerative agriculture based on the fact that nature does not belong to them. These choices confront us every day, whether it be what we eat, what we wear, where we go, and what constitutes meaning in our lives. In short, what we value. END

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