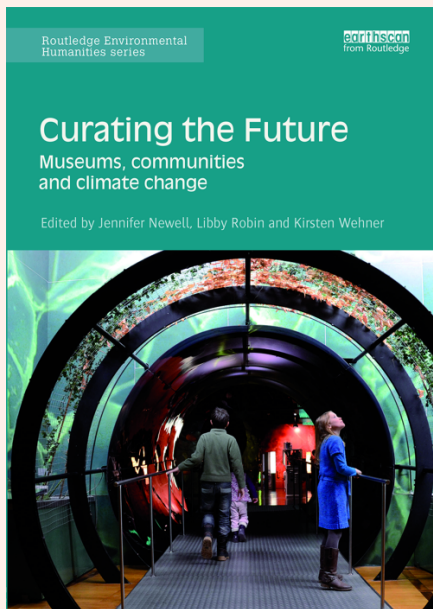


# *Curating the Future: Museums, communities and climate change*

Reviewed by Victoria Coats



## ***Curating the Future: Museums, communities and climate change***

Edited by Jennifer Newell, Libby Robin,  
and Kirsten Wehner

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As a science museum exhibit developer, when I think about climate change and museums, I think about explaining the science in interactive exhibitions. *Curating the Future* took me beyond my usual world and into a much broader and deeper story about how museums are responding to climate change. The book, which explores many different stories about climate change told in many different places – art galleries, aquariums, botanic gardens, national museums, history museums, and science museums – challenged me to think much more deeply about the greater responsibility of all museums and cultural institutions living in our current age of human-caused or “anthropogenic” climate change. Basically, no one gets to sit this one out.

*Curating the Future* makes a powerful case that compartmentalizing climate change as a science problem limits and misdirects our response to it. Climate change is a cultural problem that has relevance for all museums. In the introduction, the editors frame the purpose of the book as “how can museums collaborate in building communities able to *engage with* and *respond to* climate change?”

To expand on this question, the editors have gathered voices from Pacific islands, Australia, North America, and Europe to explore foundational and universal questions about what it means to be a museum in the age of anthropogenic environmental disruption – often referred to as the Anthropocene. The book was inspired by a workshop held at the American Museum of Natural History in 2013 and contains writings from over 30 different authors. However, *Curating the Future* is not a “how-to” book for museums – it is a book of ideas, examples, and questions.

*Curating the Future* takes the reader on a winding path through museums and exhibitions across the globe with occasional detours to consider a single object, a disrupted landscape, or a deeply personal poem. The editors have

organized the book into four parts that explore different aspects of responding to the climate crisis.

Part 1 (“Welcoming new voices: opening museums”) focuses on cultural collections from Pacific islands threatened by sea level rise. While curators may find this section especially relevant, other readers should not skip over it, especially chapter 3, “The Anthropocene and environmental justice,” one of the most powerful chapters in the whole book. In this essay, Rob Nixon, Princeton professor in humanities and the environment, exposes the feedback loop between the “two most pressing challenges of our time: the environmental crisis and the inequality crisis.” These crises feed and exacerbate each other and demand our response. This is a chapter to read and re-read.

Part I goes on to tell stories about objects from Pacific island cultures and how rising sea levels are now changing the meaning of these collections and the responsibilities of their curators. The writers explore questions around displaced communities – how to provide them greater access to their collections and to create exhibitions that are centered on their stories and told in their voices. These are among the first collections to face these questions because of anthropogenic climate change. As the climate crisis accelerates, its impact will disrupt more and more communities. It made me wonder: is there a future tipping point when all our collections and exhibitions are telling stories about climate change?

As a possible teaser for this idea, a thread called “Object in View” is interspersed throughout *Curating the Future*. Each object illustrated and described has a connection to climate change. Some represent something lost due to climate change; others illustrate

a technology that advanced anthropogenic change. My favorite object is the cucumber straightener designed in 1845 by George Stephenson (known as the “father of the British railways,” his more notable contribution to the Anthropocene). It’s my favorite object for whimsically illustrating the reoccurring theme of humans forcefully reshaping nature.

A major theme of Part II (“Reinventing nature and culture”) is the necessity of connecting nature and culture instead of continuing to divide them into separate compartments, collections, exhibitions, galleries, and museums. The writers explore ways of reinterpreting collections and objects and of framing exhibitions around topics that bridge nature and culture, such as food, water, or weather.

Part III (“Focusing on the future”) challenges museums to plan seriously for the future. We struggle with this for the same reasons our visitors do; as ecological artists Susannah Saylor and Edward Morris explain, “Climate change is difficult to grasp because whatever we know about it, we cannot fully believe it.” This planning includes documenting and collecting in light of future losses and telling stories that build resilience for this future. The section provides diverse examples from many places that are doing so – a national museum, botanic gardens, art galleries, and a digital database of disappearing Great Barrier Reef corals. Chapter 21 revisits food as a particularly effective topic for making climate change real and tangible because of its universality. Here, George Main, curator at the National Museum of Australia, challenges us directly: “Can museums redirect their core functions in ways that help people grapple with the monumental emotional, cultural and physical challenges posed by climate change and faltering food systems?”

Part IV (“Representing change and uncertainty”) is, not surprisingly, my favorite part, because we’ve circled back to science museums and exhibitions. One chapter traces the evolution of environmental exhibitions at the Swedish Museum of Natural History over time. Initially framed as science problems with science solutions, over the course of 40 years (from 1965 to 2005) they grew in scope from addressing local concerns to national issues to complex global change. Another chapter critiques a climate-change exhibition at San Diego’s Birch Aquarium for staying too focused on the science. The authors, postdoctoral scholars Susanna Lidström and Anna Åberg, assert that “the exclusion of stories that reflect a long-term historical relationship between humans, climate and oceans narrows the perspective presented to the audience and presents climate change as a problem for natural scientists, rather than a cultural challenge in a much wider and deeper sense.”

The last chapter in the book looks at the most recent climate exhibition at the world’s largest science and technology museum, the Deutsches Museum, in Munich, Germany. Unlike the museum’s previous exhibition on climate change, which was jam packed with scientific information, *Welcome to the Anthropocene* shifts from imposing order to exposing chaos. This is exactly the opposite of our usual purpose for science exhibitions (we prefer bringing order to chaos). The curators and scholars who wrote this chapter describe it like this: “In the end, the curators elected to live with the complex messiness and concentrate rather on the networks, systems of interconnections and

chaos. Since the world of the Anthropocene is no longer ordered, the exhibition explored the navigation of chaos.”

The last place we visit on this grand tour is the remote island of Svalbard, located in the Arctic Circle. Of all the places described in *Curating the Future*, this is the one I most want to visit in person. On Svalbard is the ultimate eco-historical monument to climate change: Pyramiden, an abandoned Norwegian-Russian coal mining settlement that has become a cultural heritage site. I hope to draw inspiration from Pyramiden for telling the messy, natural, cultural, historical, social, political, and personal saga of the Anthropocene in my museum – as well as the science.

In conclusion, this is a book that every museum professional should read (or at the very least read chapter 3). The climate crisis is redefining reality and it’s never going away. We all need to stop pretending it has nothing to do with us or that we’ve done our bit by explaining the science. The enormity of climate injustice demands our collective, creative response as individuals, institutions, and communities. Every museum should consider how it can make the climate crisis visible, build community resilience, offer space to process our collective grief, and break apart our orderly and imaginary compartments that divide nature and culture. Museums have powerful assets for making the climate crisis real and tangible and powerful opportunities for creative collaboration with communities, with other institutions, and with the future. Rob Nixon sums up our challenge like this:



“So, how can we most effectively animate this charismatic, planetary, but divisive story – in our writing, our image making and our curation – in ways that speak not just to the global environmental crisis, but also the global inequality crisis?”

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**Victoria Coats** is Research, Development & Advancement Manager at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry in Portland, Oregon.  
[vcoats@omsi.edu](mailto:vcoats@omsi.edu)

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