

CLIMATE CHANGE, CULTURE & COP 27

The Hon Patricia Bovey

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Thank you for inviting me to speak today! You are highlighting a critical crisis for which we all must take responsibility and action.

As for COP27, the take-aways, today's topic, it was an honour to be part of Canada's Minister of the Environment's COP 27 Delegation to Sharm el-Sheik last November. My first COP, it was also my first attendance at such a large conference, 40,000 of one's closet colleagues! It was impressive, inspiring, frustrating, and concerning simultaneously.

The acknowledged role of arts and culture was far too small, though pockets of discussions moved the needle forward regarding the essential role the cultural sector can and should play in the issue. Canada's Indigenous delegations were particularly impressive and convincing, and they gave me hope.

Having worked with the Arctic and Inuit artists over many years, I draw solace from how, despite their vulnerabilities, Inuit people have managed to “journey through weather and climate [with] their resilient strategies, such as cultural adaptation, material innovation and social cooperation, to mitigate the effects of both environmental and social change.” The rest of the world has much to learn. That path was highlighted by the British Museum’s 2020 exhibition *Arctic Culture and Climate*. The Senate of Canada 2019 report *Northern Lights: A wake-Up Call for the Future of Canada*, too, brought forward recommendations including to “support community-driven environmental conservation efforts, to recognize the central role of co-management bodies in the Arctic when proposing environmental conservation initiatives; and to ensure collaborative governance in environmental decision-making.” The need to understand and collaborate with indigenous knowledge in the western science approaches was central to our work. Culture plays a particularly important, essential, role in that and our arts and cultural sectors must enhance those collaborations and bring the results forward.

Today I am delighted to share some of my COP 27 take-aways, reflections and experiences, and the very real challenges we have as a cultural community in light of contemporary climate realities. The climate challenges are REAL; they are URGENT. We in the arts, culture and heritage community have a responsibility to be involved, to lead and to provide solutions. UNESCO and national heritage sites around the world are being severely compromised, many being devastated by the effects of droughts, fire, acid rain, and resulting material degradation.

I need not underline what the climate crisis is - you know that. You know rising temperatures affect every part of the world. You know that rise is three times as high in the Arctic, causing far faster ice melts than expected even a few years ago. You know approximately 40 of Canada's Arctic communities are threatened with being submerged and becoming extinct. You know the impact of increasing carbon footprints. You know the effects of deforestation at human hands in our Canadian West Coast forests, the Amazon rain forest and more. You know about the resulting mud slides. I need not relay details of global devastation from fires, floods, and temperature extremes.

But, I, and we, do need to ask questions. I also want to throw down a gauntlet for the arts, culture, heritage and museum sectors to fulfill their role. In dealing with this crisis that role is significant, including sharing expertise and research, presenting solutions, educating audiences, and raising public awareness for the need for societal action in every part of our lives, for all of which we have the collections, research, knowledge and audiences. So I ask, where is that sector? I know in isolated cases organizations are astutely pulling their weight, but why aren't all parts of the sector? How do we motivate them?

On my arrival in Sharm el-Sheik, I knew artists had done much to raise awareness through their art and their protests over decades, alone, with Greenpeace, and as part of organized demonstrations against first growth clearcutting in BC. Having followed their work for decades and monitored the state of heritage sites' deterioration, I was armed and ready to engage in Sharm el-Sheik, or so I thought!

You can imagine my surprise in an interview with the Egyptian press on day one, when I noted the extent of climate damage on heritage sites, that they seemed surprised. Only when I mentioned the effect on the Pyramids did they take note.

I knew then my task during the two weeks would be far greater than I had thought on departing Winnipeg.

My key questions became why was there not a cultural stream within COP 27, in the blue or green zones? Why was culture not part of the holistic approach to the issue? Why had culture never been mentioned in any COP declaration statement? And, Why, once again, was culture relegated to its silo, the doors of which were to be opened only when others wanted? That, friends is not enough.

We as a creative sector MUST be there, actively engaged, showing concrete leadership. We have creative ideas. We have knowledgeable voices. We have the tools to be heard. Do we have to force our inclusion on this critical issue locally, at political levels, and internationally at the same time? YES

Did we move the cultural/ climate needle during COP27? In week one, the international heritage and cultural sectors were not allowed to meet on site, thus met off site, for a full day at the Sharm el-Sheik museum. Song, drama, film and visual art conveyed both the need for engagement and the scope of possible engagement.

The discussions and performances were inspiring and became a rallying cry for creative sectors from various parts of the world to engage actively at the centre of the debates. We were determined to have a solid session ON site in week 2; and to ensure that culture was part of the final declaration.

Week 2 brought a substantial change. Two small sessions on site, with a few attendees, looked at what has been, and is being done, in galleries and museums and with some current built heritage goals. Some Indigenous sessions also focused on cultural inputs into climate realities and change. Going forward, I believe all those initiatives need to be brought together as best practices. That colleagues, is challenge number 1.

I suggest starting locally, ideas and actions can quickly expand globally and I think there are several specific initiatives, their results and public accountability which could be expanded. Boise Idaho, for instance has a Deconstruction and Demolition Material and Waste Management Plan which calls for the recycling of all materials from demolition sites and has set up sites for the recycling of such materials. The Smithsonian Science museum has inaugurated a number of truly interesting practices within their “Life of a Sustainable Climate Change Initiative”.

They are collecting new data about the changing planet, implementing holistic conservation, mounting strong education programs about why and how sustainable solutions to climate change can benefit us as individuals and nature as a whole.

Canadian museums should take note and follow suit actively and I would hope the Canadian Museums Association would lead the way. The Smithsonian, like our Senate Arctic study, are also working with Indigenous people, including those in Alaska. Their research is significant and partners globally -- Canadian museums need to engage.

Where are Canadian museums on that trajectory? Nowhere at the moment, I fear. The Canadian Museums Association must promote the urgency of this and push for action now, and funders should insist on such initiatives. They can be implemented alongside current initiatives for Reconciliation, and they do indeed intersect.

The culmination of week 2 was the successful request by our 'group' for a session ON site. The COP Egyptian Presidency said if 75 delegates signed on, they would allow it to take place in the Blue zone.

That happened on the last day. Princess Dana of Jordan moderated. Ministers from Egypt, Jordan, Tonga and climate heritage specialists participated. I believe this will be the first of many exchanges. Further, culture was recognized in COP's final document, and loss and damage funds were agreed to.

So my five high level take-aways?

1. Creative minds must be engaged in developing solutions to stall or reverse climate change and its effects on humanity, even if we have to force the inclusion of our sector as leaders. If we don't insist it's obvious no one else will. Canada's creators have the insights, knowledge and ability to make positive change if they are included.
2. Creators **MUST** present their work on climate change -- films, plays, concerts, visual art, performance pieces and more, and they need financial support and institutional partnerships to enable spread of this world's crisis. Enter Canada's museums and arts organizations.
3. Arts and culture and their import in determining who we are, our places and livelihoods must be taught in schools, and with honesty.

The arts and creativity have been cut too long, thus their impact and effect has been minimized or erased. Relevant discussions in the curriculum will necessarily include societal issues, like Climate change, and the essential role culture plays.

4. Museums **MUST** step up to the mark. They have been followers for too long and now must lead. Museums **must** change in order to fulfill their societal roles and to have sustainable, meaningful futures. Building on their core mandates to embrace new paradigms, museums must understand and use their collections, exhibitions, public programming, and outreach in new ways. As society's trusted leaders, while stewarding the material, natural, scientific and creative past and present, museums have the opportunity **AND** responsibility to change public awareness in today's rapid, and drastic, paradigm shifts, including Climate change. They must lead by example too and cut their carbon footprints. The 2021 UK Gallery Climate Coalitions conference "Decarbonizing the Art World" agreed to adopt a "step-by-step action plan using the carbon calculator designed in the UK for the art industry". We should use it too.

Galleries and museums DO have the research, the collections held in public trust, the knowledge, audiences and the ability to tell the stories and make a difference. Remember, families go to museums together; they don't go to school together.

We must use these strengths to present not only the histories and current realities, but society's threats and solutions. I asked Environment Minister Guilbeault, how, and if, he intended to work with artists and the cultural sector in meeting his climate change goals. His response was an unwavering yes. Former Minister of Canadian Heritage, now Environment Minister, he knows the important role we play and is engaging with us.

So, what can museums do? Expand climate change science awareness. The impacts on lives and communities are significant. We must also set an example. How do we work? What materials do we use in our exhibitions? Do we break down display cases, or reuse and share them? How do we organize and ship touring exhibitions? Are we attentive to routes and modes of transport, minimizing carbon footprints? Do we use digital media to its fullest effect? What do we serve in our cafes?

5. Canadian funders should employ the accountability tool kits developed by the UK's Julie's Bicycle, used there by arts and culture funders to positive effect. Organizations must respond to questions regarding their climate accountability. Julie's Bicycle's initiative might force our organizations to wake up! Funders like the Canada Council for the Arts and provincial funders should access these tools. I gather they have seen them and are supportive. Now is the time to act.

A recent Senate exhibition project, *Visual Voices*, which presented photographs by Edward Burtynsky and Roberta Bondar, focused on climate change. Though a small exhibition, it highlighted the issue for my Senate colleagues and the visiting public.

I want my professions to combine their initiatives to make sure reversing climate change is at the forefront and fully understood by all of society. Only then will we fulfill our civic societal responsibilities now, and for future generations, and for the natural world around us.

Thank you!

