Places worth keeping? Global warming, heritage and the challenges to governance

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Abstract
This paper examines the challenges that climate change poses for conceptions and values associated with heritage conservation. Global warming physically threatens structures and artefacts that are the subject of heritage policy concern. But it also threatens the security of these objects, sites, buildings and practices indirectly if the values that govern what should be preserved are undermined. Under constrained circumstances, limited resources will increasingly be directed towards more immediate and urgent concerns – adaptation, damage remediation, shelter, food production and transport. The author argues that the ‘heritage community’ – conservation practitioners and supporters in Australia and elsewhere – now face a critical challenge, and opportunity, to identify and publicise the threats that global warming may pose to the survival of places (and things) worth keeping.

Introduction
The Statue of Liberty was listed on the World Heritage Register in 1984. Two decades later, in 2004, she appeared on a poster, buried up to her august armpits in ice and set in a frozen sea. The poster advertised the apocalyptic Hollywood sci-fi film The Day After Tomorrow, possibly the silliest film about global warming ever made. Although the film was a box office success, it was panned by the critics – including climate scientists – for its vast, melodramatic exaggeration of the pace and impact of global warming. Most cinema goers enjoyed it but agreed it was wildly excessive... until Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005.

Still, the film has a few moments that are worth dwelling on. By its end, most of the main characters are trying to survive the new Ice Age that has descended upon New York and the entire northern hemisphere in a matter of days. They and a few other remaining survivors huddle in New York Central Public Library, burning books for warmth.

Jeremy: Friedrich Nietzsche? We can’t burn Friedrich Nietzsche! He was the most important thinker of the 19th century!
Elsa: Please! Nietzsche was a chauvinist pig who was in love with his sister.
Jeremy: He was not a chauvinist pig!
Elsa: But he was in love with his sister.
Brian: Uh, yeah, guys? There’s a whole section down here on tax law that we can burn.

Then later...

Elsa: What book is that?
Jeremy: A Gutenberg Bible. It was in the rare books room.
Elsa: You think God is going to save you?
Jeremy: No, I don’t believe in God.
Elsa: You seem to be holding onto the book very tightly.
Jeremy: I’m protecting it. This Bible is the first book ever published. It represents the dawn of the Age of Reason. As far as I’m concerned, the written word is mankind’s greatest achievement. Laugh if you want. But if Western Civilization is destroyed, I’m gonna save one little piece of it.
(Emmerich 2004)

However if the film is not taken literally and one ignores its mawkish tale of love conquers climate catastrophe, it offers surreal glimpses into what can happen when a society is threatened or collapses. It reveals choices that may need to be made between survival and saving the grand artefacts of civilisation.

As the most recent data about global warming become more widely known – including information about the rapidly accelerating melting of the polar caps and glaciers (Anon. 2007) – events presented with such cinematic hyperbole assume more than metaphoric force. The latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recently estimated possible sea-level rise for this century to be between 18cm and 59cm, depending on which of several different emissions scenarios eventuate (IPCC 2007). The likelihood that it has grossly underestimated this impact is increasing, with actual sea level rise out pacing predictions (Braith 2007; Rahmsdorf et al. 2007). Breaches of the dykes surrounding the Netherlands and the inundation of low lying terrain planet-wide should now be matters of immediate policy concern. Venice, the Great Barrier Reef, and Kakadu National Park are among the World Heritage sites acknowledged to be at risk, as are numerous coastal Indigenous and islander practices, cultures and languages worldwide.

The inevitable changes that global warming will bring will lead to changing social relations and to changes in meanings related to places and sites and cultures. How we respond will depend on the pace of change and our resources. If circumstances begin to overwhelm us, what will we define as most worth saving?

This paper examines the challenges that climate change poses for conceptions and values associated with heritage conservation. Global warming’s direct impacts, including coastal inundation, storm and other forms of climate-change-related damage, threaten the physical structures and artefacts that are the subject of heritage policy concern. But it also may threaten the security of these objects, sites, buildings and practices indirectly if, under constrained circumstances, values about what can and should be preserved shift and consequently limited resources are directed towards more immediate and urgent concerns – adaptation, damage remediation, shelter, food production and transport.

I suggest that the ‘heritage community’ of practitioners and supporters in Australia and elsewhere now have a critical moment of opportunity to identify and publicise the threats that global warming may pose to the survival of places (and things) worth keeping. Such a contribution from the heritage
Ecological governance and its problems

Ulrich Beck (1992) coined the term the ‘risk society’ to describe societies like ours, which acknowledge that the ‘externalities’ and risks of highly technologised modernity, including environmental pollution, have increasingly assumed centre stage and become focal points for our attention, anxiety, and attempts at management. This recognition has led to increased claims by a wide range of stakeholders (individuals, groups and organisations) for involvement in decisions over their future, claims further complicated by the growing recognition that governments often cannot provide complete or even partial solutions for the complex problems that they face and that policies, and their implementation, depend on the participation of those in the private sphere for their success. Greater inclusiveness, and demands for involvement, have been at the heart of the shift from ‘government’ to ‘governance’. Nowhere is this clearer than in the domain of environmental policy making.

The challenges of environmental governance are perhaps greater still, and include issues and problems relating to the institutional inclusion and representation of the interests of the often large number of stakeholders which environmental, development and resource related decisions seem to evoke, and also relating to the creation of processes able to incorporate the recognition of risk and the need for precaution in decision making. Perhaps as a result, the rise of environmental concerns has led to a proliferation of agencies and institutions established to deal with them, and increasingly complex interactions within and between spheres and departments of government, and government and the private sphere. The complexity of these matters is perhaps seen most clearly when one considers the global failure, over the past two decades, to really tackle the issue of sustainable development, including failures of problem recognition, of problem definition, of policy integration, and of cooperation between those implementing policy.

Climate change and its challenges

Climate change complicates matters further. In policy terms, the threat posed by climate change can be compared with the threat of terrorism, of military invasion, of epidemics, of economic downturn or depression. However what is unique about the challenge of global warming are the uncertainties about the likely nature, scope, intensity, and duration of its impacts, place by place. It produces multiple effects that extend in space and time, and also a compounding of real world policy problems. Modelling only partially helps to represent a changeable future. In one sense, therefore, climate policy decisions are based on uncertainty and swathed in complexity. This is not to argue that climate change is not occurring, or that the need for action is not desperately urgent: increasingly, scientists are warning of the threat of dangerous climate change, writing that if global atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases exceed 450 ppm, then

we run a high risk (some suggest a two in three chance) of average global temperatures exceeding 2 degrees Celsius above pre-Industrial levels and ecological processes beginning to establish autonomous feedback loops that will make even higher temperatures almost impossible to avoid (Schellnhuber et al. 2006).

What about the pressures on decision-making? Responses, including policy responses, depend on what are understood to be the known and likely impacts of climate change; the assessment of risk, vulnerability (which depends on the material capacity to respond and adapt to risks and threats), and hierarchies of need in relation to adaptation. Climate change brings with it political-economic challenges, in relation to the determination of what should be priorities for action given the costs and benefits of acting in increasingly constrained economic circumstances, in which the price of energy and issues around the availability and price of food and water, are likely to increase, trade may be destabilised, and so on.

Determining priorities under these circumstances will prove a challenge for processes of governance, as will working out how to make choices about these matters in the face of synergies in crisis and competing claims and issues, including ecological, social and economic pressures, and competing costs. Indeed, these points emphasise the need for adaptive governance… governance which is responsive institutionally and practically to the changing circumstances that global warming will create in the face of changing scientific evidence, shifting popular demand for action, altered and intensifying physical impact. Practical issues such as governments having to deal with changing investment priorities and stranded investments (in the energy sector, for example), and needs for community consultation about new and perhaps quite challenging programs for social and economic adjustment, come to mind.

Climate change’s challenge for heritage conservation

The conservation of natural and cultural heritage has always dealt with issues of threatening processes, risk, and competing social pressures and priorities. The pressures of development, and the effects of time and neglect, threaten sites, places, artefacts with damage or irreversible loss. In one sense, climate change is just another one of these risks, pressures, threats…although its constant ‘futurity’ and ‘uncertainty’ makes it even more difficult to accommodate. The emerging physical pressures of climate change on clearly identified cultural and natural heritage are also more or less well understood, as indicated by recent UNESCO reports on climate impacts on World Heritage sites (Colette 2007).

Similarly, heritage conservation has always dealt with contests over values. The value-laden choices by which sites are chosen and listed involve assessing the value of these sites/places/objects against other value sets, and convincing the public, corporations, and the state, to respect that evaluation as a representation of ‘special value’. As a consequence, formal listing and acts of conservation have sometimes led to contests between the allocation of private and public funds to different purposes. Even in affluent times and with relatively ‘stable’ social conditions, heritage conservation has struggled against the image of something which is the luxury of a wealthy society, an upper class fetish, to be politically down-graded alongside other more immediate and important calls for attention and resources. Nevertheless,
there is now an elaborate institutional machinery to enshrine and protect heritage-related values, embodied in international, national and local organisations, processes, regulations, laws and heritage lists.

As the impacts of climate change intensify, this machinery will be pitted against other and increasing claims for support for adaptation, from productive sectors of the economy, from vulnerable communities, and so on – both domestically and across the international stage. In other words, what is changing includes both the scale of the physical threat and also the nature of the contest over heritage conservation values. In times of resource constraint and intensified pressure to direct limited resources to more ‘basic’ social and economic needs, the struggle over determining which are the places, or structures, or objects, worth keeping may again be opened wide. As Adger, Barnett and Ellermann (2008) write:

Climate change is presently causing disruption to social and ecological systems. Major disruptions in the future seem likely given even the most optimistic of emission reduction scenarios. Climate change puts a wide range of phenomena that people value at risk, ranging from ecosystem services, species, and economic sectors, through to landscapes, homes and human health, to name but a few. Indeed few things of value are free from the risks of climate change. All of the phenomena at risk have some value to at least some people. Were they not valued, the risk would not be identified. Yet all are not valued equally, not all are valued universally, and not all values can be measured using the same metrics. Changing climate impacts will lead, in certain situations, to an intensification of competition not only for constrained resources but over and between foundational values, leading to changes in the priorities by which things are valued. In some cases, mitigation and adaptation strategies will conflict directly with heritage conservation. For instance, we have already seen conflicts over the siting of solar panels on heritage-listed buildings and windfarm proposals clashing with the desire to preserve specific landscape values or endangered species (see Bonyhady and Christoff 2007). It is likely that infrastructural works to defend certain coastal areas from storm surges and sea level rise will lead to the modification or loss of valued coastal landscapes. More generally, as the pressure for mitigation and adaptation increases, it is feasible that intensifying competition for constrained resources will make it harder to fund future heritage conservation.

The combined effects of unavoidable impacts, constrained resources and perhaps shifting values, are reflected in the Australian Greenhouse Office’s report on Climate Change, Risk and Vulnerability (2005). Its authors write, in relation to ecosystems and biodiversity, that ‘within this group, priority should be given to World Heritage systems. Such systems and areas have properties of uniqueness and ecological importance that have been confirmed against an international yardstick...’ They continue, ‘The findings of this report should give additional impetus to the National Action Plan for Biodiversity and Climate Change. However it is likely that policy makers will need to adopt a triage approach – aimed at investing effort where the benefits of biodiversity and important ecosystems are likely to be greatest’ (p.x). What institutions and processes will guide the triage decisions? How will these claims fare, given that even a one degree increase in ocean temperatures will jeopardise the survival of the Great Barrier Reef, requiring a much more conservative global response to permissible temperature rise?

Institutions and structures, issues and solutions

Will existing categories of risk serve to help hierarchise heritage in relation to climate risks and assist in identifying priorities for adaptation? Because the physical threats generated by climate change are similar to each of the parameters discussed below, the existing machinery for noting threatening processes and potential impacts is no different than for other threats. This explains the approach used by UNESCO in its recent report on World Heritage sites under threat from climate change, which focuses on known and likely physical impacts. It concentrates on material assessments of risk (involving location, type and intensity of threat, and so on), using familiar methodologies for heritage planning in relation to, for instance, the threats of storm damage to coastal sites, etc., to create hierarchies of concern. But what is absent from this methodology is consideration of the shifting context of heritage policy implementation – the potential changes in non-material values and concerns, and institutional adjustments to accommodate these changes. These issues of adaptive planning must accommodate a range of scenarios about potential physical impacts and also consider changes in demands and needs in the broader context.

The Australian national report on Climate Change, Risk and Vulnerability talks of the need to have an approach to adaptation that results ‘in climate risk being considered as a normal part of decision-making, allowing governments, businesses and individuals to reflect their risk preferences just as they would for other risk assessments’ (AGO 2005: viii). In this view, climate risk is ‘normalised’ and anaesthetised. It is a view in which heritage continues to struggle to compete against other priorities much as it has to date. For heritage concerns, this approach, like that of the UNESCO report cited earlier, will deliver the ‘same old results’ for a limited period of time and then, more likely than not, be overrun by the avalanche of other urgent resource-demanding concerns.

Inaction around the looming impacts of climate change is based in systemic inertia and a profound failure of imagination. The belief that current policies and institutions are sufficient to deal with the challenges of mitigation and adaptation is bolstered by an understandable unwillingness to visualise and conceive of the enormity of the potential changes we face even at low levels of global temperature increase – the threatened extinction of between 20-30 percent of species, the loss of vast tracts of coastland, loss of global water and food production capacity and the displacement and, potentially, death of millions of people. These are indeed apocalyptic imaginings, against which many of us are immunised by the comforts of everyday life in wealthy, industrialised societies.

This points to the urgent need for a public debate about heritage values under threat which, like the best attempts to consider climate change itself, is pre-emptive and precautionary and looks for new sites of mobilisation to focus public attention on the threat of global warming to cultural and natural heritage. Such a debate would serve as a means for combating global warming and preparing for its impacts by indicating the mounting resource requirements for protecting even those places and items we currently see as having ‘heritage value’. This also involves extending the discussion...
about threats to heritage to the threats climate change poses to whole cultures and ways of life. Projections of sea level rise have been converted into images of cities drowned: a picture of Melbourne’s CBD under 10 metres of water is used as part of the Australian version of Al Gore’s slide show An Inconvenient Truth. Like the poster of the frozen Statue of Liberty, such an image at once seems extreme but also suggests the new risks to patterns of behaviour, sites, structures and artefacts that comprise the fabric of everyday life upon which we depend and which, in such extremes, threatens to become ‘lost heritage’. It is this melding of traditional heritage concerns with a broader language of potential loss that the heritage community is best placed to deliver to both the public and to policymakers, urging that urgent pre-emptive action against global warming must be understood, not inappropriately, as ‘saving civilisations’.

Specifically, Australian conservation and heritage specialists and groups should now consider a campaign to provoke public concern around these issues. They could commission a well-illustrated report to identify and report on climate-related threats to those Australian places, communities and cultures of identified heritage significance. Many of these sites are icons of the Australian landscape and mobilising symbols of Australian cultural life. This report could also outline terms of reference for a future official review of these matters.

Such a study would provide the basis of a public statement by the National Trusts and high profile signatories (ecologists, planners and architects) focussing public attention and imagination on this issue. The statement could – based on the terms of reference articulated in the report – also call for a formal review of climate threats to listed Australian heritage sites and values, leading to the identification and costing of programs of action to ensure their protection against a range of climate scenarios, and a timetable for its implementation. Moreover, it could call for the extension of the notion of heritage to places that are presently not regarded as being of ‘heritage value’ – such as rural communities – but which may become so under the pressures of global warming. Tactically, such action – particularly in alliance with the work of groups (like the Australian Conservation Foundation) that have campaigned for the preservation of such places and values, and which are concerned about the social, health and environmental impacts of global warming – could help to galvanise public action and encourage appropriate policy responses before it is too late.

References