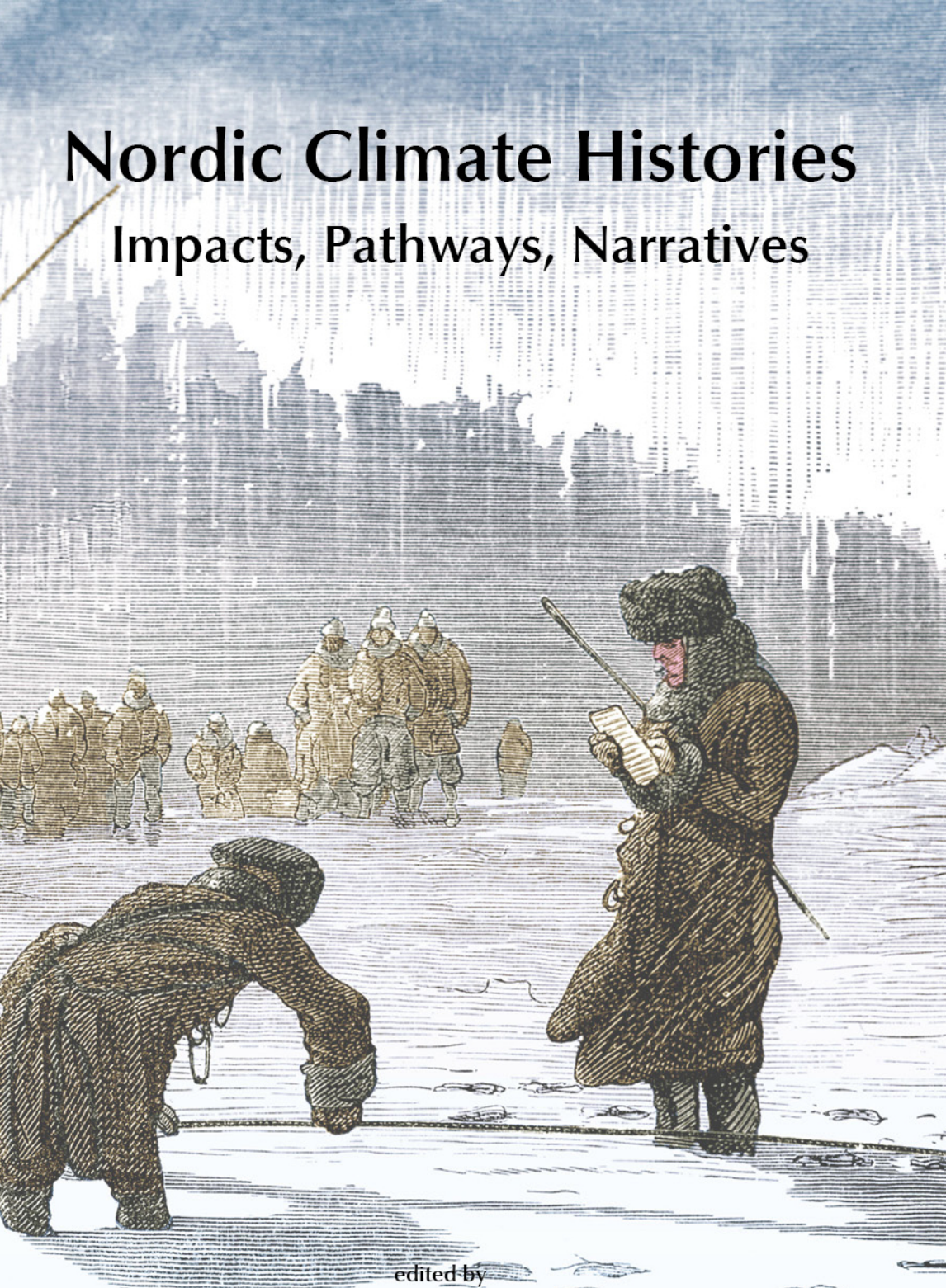
Nordic Climate Histories

Impacts, Pathways, Narratives



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A Note on the Cover Illustration

The cover of the book shows an engraving from *Vies des savants illustres* by Louis Figuier depicting 'Maupertuis Measuring Meridian Arc in the Arctic Circle'. Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis (1698–1759) was a French polymath who led an expedition to northern Finland in order to determine the shape of the earth. As noted by Lundstad et al. in this volume, the originator of the Celsius temperature scale, Anders Celsius (1701–44), also took part in this 'Lapland Expedition', as it became known.

Chapter 14

BACK TO THE FUTURE: WEAVING CLIMATE HISTORY INTO NORDIC NATIONAL MUSEUM NARRATIVES

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Abstract

Museums, perceived as trusted institutions, have significant potential for fostering public understanding of climate change. This study examines the integration of climate narratives in the permanent exhibitions of five Nordic national museums. The analyses focused on human-climate relations and the museums' role as societal reflection and change agents. Despite the growing academic emphasis on the importance of climate narratives in museum exhibitions, the analysis reveals that such narratives were scarce in the studied museums. When present, the narratives were fragmented, isolated themes rather than cohesive and integrated elements of historical storytelling. Additionally, this study explores barriers that prevent the integration of climate narratives in permanent exhibitions and proposes practical curatorial strategies for reframing existing historical narratives. The strategies aim to inspire collective action and critical engagement that position national museums as dynamic platforms for addressing climate challenges. Finally, the article highlights the necessity for curatorial practices to evolve and integrate inclusive and forward-looking narratives that empower audiences to confront the climate crisis.

Introduction

Adapting to human-induced climate change is a clear and vital societal challenge. It demands an urgent, multi-scalar response that simultaneously heeds processes that unfold at global, national and local levels. For people to feel motivated to engage and act, they need to relate to the topic personally and with affection, but also intellectually and based on knowledge. This could be achieved by linking

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the climatic past and present with the future, and by highlighting how personal and community experiences relate to global outcomes. Rees and Filho (2018) argued for a transformation in the way climate challenges are communicated, noting that, just as scientific evidence of climate change has been a key focus for policymakers, there is a need for public engagement. This requires rethinking communication channels and models that stress the complexity, extent and urgency of climate action. It requires that perspectives on the climate crisis and climate actions are made accessible and relatable to a diversity of stakeholders. While communicating the science is important, Allen and Crowley (2017) have argued that climate education needs to establish frames of relevance with the public through participation and engagement in their own communities. This requires that community-based knowledge and scientific knowledge are on equal footing (Honwad, Coppens, DeFrancis, Stafne and Bhattarai 2020). Innovative and creative, as opposed to purely intellectual and rational, approaches have regularly been contended as more effective ways to tap into the affective and personal domain of learning (Newell, Robin and Wehner 2017; McGhie, Mander and Underhill 2018).

The academic discourse increasingly emphasises the role of museums in addressing the climate crisis (Davis 2020; Þórsson 2020; Harrison and Sterling 2021). Subsequently, natural history museums have started to rethink their role in communicating climatic information; art museums have started providing spaces for creative and imaginative climate narratives; while museums devoted to climate and climate change are founded around the world (Oliveira et al. 2020; Newell 2020). Museums hold great potential to become important actors in raising awareness and encouraging climate change action but, as Robert Janes (2020) argues, they have not done enough compared to the gravity of the situation. Examples of dissatisfaction with museums' commitment to the climate crisis include criticism of oil sponsorship and, in recent years, the increasing number of climate activists' interventions inside museums (Demos 2023; Sharp 2022).

This paper addresses perceived gaps between the ideals rapidly emerging in contemporary museological literature and the presence and valence of climate change implications in permanent exhibitions of cultural history museums in the Nordics. It examines the presence of climate narratives in permanent exhibitions of Nordic national museums, i.e., the Historisk Museum in Oslo, the National Museum of Iceland, the National Museum of Finland[1], the Swedish History Museum and the National Museum of Denmark. While many specialised

1. In 2024, the National Museum of Finland was undergoing a renovation and expansion project, expected to end in 2027. The new museum will provide additional facilities for temporary exhibitions, events and other public activities (see www.kansallismuseo.fi/en/exhibitions/tulevaisuuden-kansallismuseo).

museums, such as the Klimahuset, the Finnish Museum of Natural History and the Nordiska Museet, address climate issues, national museums play a distinct role in shaping collective identity and historical narratives. By exploring how climate narratives are presented in current exhibitions, this study aims to stimulate reflections on the necessary efforts and possibilities to bring climatic narratives into focus within the permanent exhibitions of national museums.

National Museums' Narratives

According to Simon Knell (2011), national museums serve as cultural pillars for a shared sense of identity. National museums are places where representations of a shared history foster a collective consciousness. Based on the idea of shared knowledge, rituals and historical symbols, national museums create a sense of unity between individuals who have never met (Knell 2011; Anderson 2006 [1983]; Macdonald 2003). Thus, national museums display the political, economic, cultural and social history of a nation, but why are they not displaying how climate has impacted societal challenges and historical development?

Often originating in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, when nationalism swept through Europe and long before climate warming became topical, the task of national museums was to construct and support national narratives. The purpose was to highlight the relationship between the nation as an ethnic unity and its territory, and to underline the temporal depth of these relations. National museums were often charged with managing the past by caring for the tangible and intangible heritage of their nations. While history plays an important role in constructing national narratives, Simon Knell (2011: 9) argued that national museums are not strictly bound to the 'requirements of rigorous historiography' but navigate somewhere between the public's understanding of nationhood and the work of experts. However, historians tend to be resistant to embracing the full participation of other stakeholders as a legitimate alternative to history (Knell 2011).

Storytelling is quite firmly anchored in the permanent exhibitions of national museums and the narrative provides a sense of permanence, manifested through the materiality of collections accumulated over a long time. Although permanent exhibitions of national museums are not completely uncontested (Kjartansdóttir and Schram 2008), they remain impervious to change. This is partially because of the established narratives in the permanent exhibitions, but also because of the heavy financial, professional and political investments put into these nation-building projects.

The position of national museums makes them ideal places to raise awareness and initiate discussions on climate action. By linking to national or regional

climate narratives, as opposed to global ones, the museums have the possibility to make otherwise abstract climatic issues relatable. However, if exhibitions continue to focus on traditional historical themes that do not expose visitors to climate narratives, they miss salient opportunities to engage with contemporary environmental realities and challenges.

Current Representation of Climate Narratives in Nordic National Museums

An analysis of the permanent exhibitions in the five studied museums reveals a noticeable absence of the physical climate and historical climate-society interactions. Only the Historical Museum of Oslo includes significant references to the physical climate and human-climate relations in both its permanent and temporary exhibitions. In the other museums, the focus is predominantly on human relationships framed by social, political, economic and religious perspectives. The importance of the past is a defining element in the studied museums and historical perspectives often take precedence over contemporary concerns in the permanent exhibitions. The museums emphasise chronological narratives and traditional themes that guide visitors through the historical development of the nation.

The almost twenty-year-old exhibition *Making of a Nation* at the National Museum of Iceland, presents its historical collection with the aim of answering the question: what makes a nation? The exhibition divides the history of Iceland into distinct periods in a chronological order from settlement during the Viking Age, to Christianity, being under Norwegian and Danish rule, to independence. Starting from the ninth and tenth centuries, the presence of environmental factors is noticeable. Pointing to archaeological findings on vegetation, the exhibition attempts to paint a picture of the landscape when the first settlers arrived. While the environment is present, the focus is mostly on nature as a resource and the bountiful landscape as an attraction for human settlement. Little is stated about climate conditions or the impact that human settlements had on the environment. As the story progresses, more emphasis is put on societal and governance structures. During the transition from paganism to Christianity, the exhibition focuses on power structures, while giving a glimpse into the peasant society and means of food production and export. From the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries, the focus is on changes in governance, and the nineteenth century is presented as the age of struggle for independence. When entering the twentieth century, technology, industrial advancements and the rise of consumer culture take central stage.

Some of the museums stimulate comparisons between the past and the present, inviting visitors to reflect on their own lives compared to the lives of

people in the past. The descriptions of prehistory exhibitions at the National Museum of Finland and the Swedish Museum of History are examples of this approach. The Swedish History Museum's exhibition *Prehistories* poses a series of questions around the daily life and social customs of prehistoric communities. Questions such as 'What were relationships like between men and women?' and 'How did Roman objects end up in Swedish graves?'[2] invite the visitors to imagine the lives of early humans through the lens of social and cultural understanding. While the questions do not address human-environment interactions or the specific nexus of human-climate relationships, they could easily do so and embrace a broader context of environmental and ecological interrelations.

In addition, the analysis revealed a (subtle) engagement with forward-looking considerations and concerns about the future. These narratives, although limited, offer glimpses of a future-oriented perspective and make connections to contemporary issues through the lens of cultural heritage, sometimes inviting reflection on future challenges and values.

The temporary exhibition *Future Fragments* at the National Museum of Iceland stands out as a case where art, historical artefacts from the museum's collection and environmental themes come together to explore the human-environment relations. Featuring artworks by Þorgerður Ólafsdóttir, the exhibition results from her research on conceptions of cultural and natural heritage, using art to explore what the museum describes as 'planting the seeds of a future collection'. By displaying artefacts and ecofacts together, the exhibition aims to challenge conventional boundaries between culture and nature.[3] This approach encourages reflection on how heritage might be perceived in the future, emphasising an integrated view of natural and cultural elements that could foster bridges between past heritage and future ecological concerns.

Similarly, at the end of its permanent exhibition *History of Sweden*, the Swedish Museum of History incorporates elements that gesture towards the future implications of change by introducing a cabinet of curiosities from the 1740s. The text introducing this part of the exhibition on the museum's website is entitled 'A new interest in science'. It refers to the rise of industrialism and subsequent social changes, including socio-economic gaps and early feminist movements. These references may indicate an awareness of social change from historical antecedents and suggest visitor's reflections on the future by examining past changes. The description refers to 'reflections on the contemporary scene', connecting the past and present. However, despite the title, the text does not deal explicitly with science or nature-related topics, as might be expected in

2. https://historiska.se/utstallningar/prehistories/

3. https://www.thjodminjasafn.is/en/syningar/brot-ur-framtid

a cabinet of curiosities, nor does it refer to the contemporary environmental context or the climate crisis.[4]

The National Museum of Finland's current permanent exhibition highlights the political, economic and social history of Finland and the birth of the welfare state. While the museum is closed for renovation until 2027, its vision is to integrate future-oriented reflections more directly into its exhibitions. It seeks 'to strengthen cultural sustainability, to respond to the ever-growing demand for culture and to make the common cultural heritage even more accessible and usable'.[5] The museum also documents contemporary phenomena and issues relevant to environmental and societal shifts, such as 'environmental impact of plastic, civic activism related to climate change, the costume culture of Romani in Finland, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on society'.[6] While these efforts recognise that cultural institutions must capture the evolving social and environmental realities, references to ecological and future-oriented issues, such as the impact of climate warming, are missing from the descriptions of the museum's permanent exhibitions. Likewise, it is unclear whether and to what extent the results of this documentation have been, or will be, integrated into the museum's permanent exhibitions.

The Historical Museum in Oslo provides some of the most explicit examples of permanent exhibitions that link the past with the present and incorporate future-oriented narratives. The exhibition *Heritage – Our Place in History* examines human relationships with heritage and displays historical and contemporary heirlooms to highlight the commonalities in human relationships with the past. The narrative encourages reflections on how choosing to elevate or forget heritage affects contemporary communities and the ways in which this determines how society addresses the future.[7]

The past is also linked to the future in the exhibitions *Control – Attempting to Tame the World* and *Collapse – Human Beings in an Unpredictable World*. These exhibitions explore the relationship between humans and the environment. They highlight questions that reflect upon the consequences of humanity's quest to control nature and provide examples of human adaptability in the face of environmental challenges. By focusing on human-animal relationships, *Control* explores the environmental and social implications of the attempt to control nature. Using the relationship between humans and cows as an example, the exhibition explores domestication, forms of interaction, religious beliefs, power

4. https://historiska.se/utstallningar/history-of-sweden/

5. https://www.uusikansallinen.fi/

6. https://www.kansallismuseo.fi/en/collections/kansallismuseo-dokumentoi-nykypaeivaeae

7. https://www.historiskmuseum.no/english/exhibitions/heritage/index.html

and futures. The themes invite visitors to ask, 'What are the consequences of seeing the world as under human control?' and whether this perspective has contributed to contemporary environmental crises such as deforestation and endangered species, but also to what extent industrial agriculture has impacted the climate crisis.[8]

Collapse juxtaposes historical and contemporary examples of human responses to environmental crises. It invites visitors to 'meet people who, in various ways and at different times, face forces of nature that threaten to collapse their world.' With stories ranging from the Stone Age pioneers of the Oslo Fjord to historical and contemporary human-environment relationships in Polynesia, the exhibition offers a broader historical perspective on human adaptability and vulnerability in the face of natural forces.[9] Using Polynesia as an example, the last part of the exhibition is meant to provide an alternative to cartesian dualisms between humans and nature, and highlight adaptation and integration both in the past and present. However, using an example from a distant region with an unfamiliar climate can create distance between visitors and the narrative.

Of the analysed exhibitions, *Collapse* and *Control* provided the most explicit references to climate change and human-climate relations. However, these references are situated within a broader narrative of human-environment interactions that often perpetuate a sense of antagonism, instead of connectedness, between humans and nature. While some museums express an intention to establish connections between past, present and future, this connection is limited and the focus of permanent exhibitions remains on the past. The limited engagement with climate narratives and sustainability highlights the untapped potential of museums as platforms for addressing pressing issues such as the climate crisis.

Barriers to Integrating Climate Narratives in Permanent Exhibitions

It is challenging to integrate climate histories and human-environment relations into permanent exhibitions. Limited resources (human and monetary), spatial constraints and a lack of specialisation make it difficult to implement substantial changes to longstanding displays. In contrast, temporary exhibitions often make such engagements readily feasible due to their lower costs and structural complexities. By their nature, however, temporary exhibitions are smaller and short-lived, meaning they have a limited outreach, especially when considering shared frames of reference across multiple visitor generations. Temporary exhibitions provide opportunities for innovative approaches and experimental

8. https://www.historiskmuseum.no/english/exhibitions/control/index.html

9. https://www.historiskmuseum.no/english/exhibitions/collapse/index.html

storytelling, but their transient nature prevents them from leaving a lasting imprint on the narrative framework of museums. As a result, temporary exhibitions fail to contribute to the long-term preservation of narratives and debates of societal concerns. This ephemerality jars with the urgency of the climate crisis. The long-term changes and consequences of climate warming require sustained and inter-generational efforts to raise awareness and inspire action over time.

It is worth considering whether the lack of climatic perspectives stems from the perception that climatic themes fall outside historical museums' field of expertise. Relegating the topic to natural history or science museums leads to the absence of climatic narratives and human-environment interactions in the museums' permanent displays. Overcoming this perception requires a shift in how historical museums perceive their role in fostering societal engagement with global challenges. It demands that museums recognise climate change as deeply intertwined with the history and future of human societies. Over the last decades, the rise and rapid growth of fields such as climate history, environmental history and environmental archaeology (Olsen, Farstadvoll and Godin 2024; White, Pfister and Mauelshagen 2018) highlight the relevance of climate in history and prehistory, which provides the means to bridge entrenched disciplinary boundaries. Growing awareness of the complex interplay between human societies, climate and the environment adds pressure on cultural history museums to integrate this knowledge into their constructed narratives.

National museums arguably carry the historical burden of the strict conceptual and institutional division between *nature* and *culture* that permeates Western academic thought and organisations. Even when permanent exhibitions explicitly address human-climate relations, the narrative tends to frame human-environment interactions in terms of the dichotomy between control and resistance. It presents nature as either an adversary to be dominated or an uncontrollable force that threatens the human ways of life. The presence of human-environment relations is more apparent in early historical periods, reflecting similar biases in school curricula (Riede 2022). This framing perpetuates an antagonistic Cartesian view that overlooks both the evident structuring role that climate plays in unfolding human social history as well as more nuanced and cooperative past human-environment relationships (Hussain 2024; Hussain and Baumann 2024; Hussain and Riede 2020). Given the significant challenges – both practical and conceptual – of transforming permanent exhibitions, it is necessary to consider whether historical museums can explore alternative narratives.

Cultural-historical museums often emphasise the preservation and interpretation of material culture and heritage as a means of representing human experiences through the preservation of the tangible traces of the past. Simon

Knell (2011) stated that museums compress time and often present human subjects indirectly through the artefacts with which they have interacted. Knell used the open camera lens as a metaphor to exemplify how museums view the world. While the lens remains open, the contours of human presence become blurry and fade out leaving behind the material vestiges that remain the focus of museological representation. Focusing on the preservation of material culture can lead to a reluctance to address living, evolving issues such as climate change, which require a dynamic forward-looking and human-centred approach (Knell 2011).

Knell (2011) also noted that history, or more broadly the engagement with the past, remains central to the construction of national identity in national museums. However, the traditional and established idea that museums are custodians of the past limits their ability to engage with contemporary and dynamic subjects. As an urgent and unfolding issue, the climate crisis challenges the conventional museological emphasis on timeless preservation and demands a reimagining of historical narratives to include connections to the present and future.

Historical museums are well-positioned to present complex, multidimensional narratives. By integrating multiple perspectives and promoting critical reflection, based on past human-climate relations, historical museums could present a broader understanding of the complex impacts of contemporary climate change and inspire complementary approaches to the climate crisis. To achieve this, it is crucial to interrogate how perceptions of the role of museums as guardians of the past, as well as the antagonistic framing of culture and nature, shape decisions about what stories are told. Understanding these dynamics helps to identify opportunities to integrate climate narratives in ways that resonate with the missions of national historical museums. Such narratives could highlight moments of cooperation, conflict and decision-making in response to climate anomalies and extreme weather events, providing historical context to inform current and future responses. By taking a more integrated approach to human-environment relations, these museums could contribute to meaningful discussions about climate change, inspiring collective action and reflection grounded in historical perspectives.

Integrating Climate History: Six Curatorial Strategies

Incorporating climate themes does not require a complete transformation of permanent exhibitions. Instead, cultural history museums can adopt innovative strategies to revise historical narratives and embed climatic perspectives into their storytelling, while still preserving their core mission. Nonetheless, this process

requires a conceptual shift in how exhibitions are framed and how climate narratives are integrated into historical and cultural contexts. We propose six climatic strategies as approaches to climate change to help museums in their attempts to incorporate climatic narratives into their permanent exhibitions. The strategies provide a conceptual and practical framework that aims to incorporate climatic perspectives into the museums' storytelling practices.

1. Mindful of Space and Time

National museums have the prerogative of covering the history of a specific geographical region over a long period of time. In showcasing the impact of climate warming and the role of historical climate variability and extreme weather, the examples should be from their respective countries. A Finnish museum should use examples from Finland, as this is the climate type that Finnish visitors are familiar with, can relate to and can understand. It might be tempting to use more dramatic examples from other parts of the world, but little is gained if the examples derive from places, cultures and climates of which the visitors have little prior knowledge. Thus, Nordic museums should use national, regional or local narratives. Prehistoric examples can be used, but examples from more recent history are recommended as it may be easier for visitors to identify with or understand changes in recent history than those from the distant past. It is important and advisable to create a climatic bond between then and now. This can only be done if the museum visitors can identify or at least recognise the examples in both space and time.

2. Highlighting Climate

Climate is often considered highly abstract and therefore visitors often connect more easily with the tangible and immediate concept of weather and its impact. As humans also have become more urban and alienated themselves from climate, a historical perspective should illuminate societal change and climatic impact over time. The Nordic countries, albeit not all, are unique from a European climatic perspective in that they all have a shared history of being impacted by ice and snow and they have four clearly distinguishable seasons. A climatic perspective could highlight seasonal change and how the short growing season during summer has affected agriculture or how snow and ice during winters, or naturally occurring spring floods, have impacted societies economically, culturally and socially, but also how societies slowly adapted to these limiting factors or tried to mitigate their impact. Comparative perspectives, then and now, especially if considering national museums, would let visitors learn how climate impact has affected nation-building parallel to technological and societal development. For

example, icebreakers provided the means for Finland to engage in trading all year round, but this process of adapting to the ice waters of the Baltic Sea took over 100 years. Perspectives like these might demand a new type of research, or revisiting old research with a fresh perspective, and joint collaboration between the humanities and natural sciences.

3. Highlighting Weather

Extreme weather events could be effective tools for illustrating the impacts of climate warming (Cameron, Hodge and Salazar 2014), especially if seen from a long-term perspective and by including changes in frequency and intensity. By emphasising historical human responses to extreme weather events, museums can ground their exhibitions in relatable, real-world contexts. By focusing on past societies and adaptation strategies, mitigation attempts, resilience and policymaking, museums can highlight how societies in the past have been impacted by and dealt with extreme events and how future climate warming will change societies' vulnerability. In this volume, see for example Norrgård's article on ice jam events in Turku 1739–2024. An exhibition could discuss the occurrence of ice jams, depict them as extreme events and discuss their economic impact. Moreover, there is a cultural aspect as ice breakups and ice jams have been deeply rooted in past societies' climatic memory. The sounds, the excitement, the poems on ice breakups are why the citizens gathered in the thousands waiting to be entertained and experience the true force of nature. By linking historical responses to contemporary climate challenges or weather extremes, museums can inspire visitors to perceive climate issues as immediate and relatable, fostering a shared sense of responsibility and action towards climate justice. Each country, however, should try to focus on climatic variables or extreme events that are representable for that country, as the challenges vary from country to country.

4. Promoting Conversation, Not (Just) Information

Rather than focusing solely on providing information about climate change, museums should prioritise fostering a culture of communication by positioning themselves as spaces for community storytelling and active listening (Rees and Leal Filho 2018). By highlighting shared narratives, from stories of overcoming contemporary climate challenges to those of past cooperation in the face of extreme weather, museums can promote collective understanding among audiences. This approach reframes climate narratives as opportunities to engage communities in discussions about citizenship and collective responsibility. By emphasising conversation, museums can inspire action rooted in shared values and preferences.

5. Integrating Local and Personal Stories

Climate warming is a societal challenge and research fields within the humanities need to engage more rigorously in crafting stories that foster engagement and understanding. By incorporating localised narratives – stories rooted in specific places and personal experiences – the humanities would help audiences to perceive climate challenges as immediate and familiar concerns rooted in everyday human experience instead of making them appear as distant abstractions (Daniels and Endfield 2009).

Memories and experiences of past extreme weather events and their impacts have shaped how communities understand and respond to climate uncertainty. This has resulted in diverse coping strategies that foster both conflict and cooperation in adapting to environmental challenges (Daniels and Endfield 2009). Including memories and experiences also exemplifies how extreme weather events may provoke long-lasting cultural trauma (Scarlett, Rothenberg, Riede and Holmberg 2023; Sztompka 2000). By linking historical experiences to contemporary climate issues, museums can offer valuable insights into human-environment interactions. Exhibitions that emphasise historical adaptability, resilience and vulnerability enable audiences to reflect on lessons from the past, and provide a foundation for reflections on future challenges and strategies.

Transitioning from rigid, professionalised historical narratives to more personal and communal storytelling fosters perceptions of relevance, emotional connection and deeper engagement with climate issues. Museums can incorporate these localised narratives and personal anecdotes, whether drawn from the past or the present, into their exhibitions. Such relatable, human-scale stories can resonate more deeply with audiences than broad crisis narratives, fostering connections between climate change and their own lives and local contexts.

6. Incorporating Future-Oriented Perspectives

Although seemingly paradoxical, the field of heritage studies – under which museum studies fall – is future-oriented (Holtorf and Högberg 2020). To promote climate resilience, museums can integrate narratives that connect history and experiences of the past with forward-looking perspectives. Daniels and Endfield (2009) argue for climate change narratives framed in historical-geographical contexts, using imaginative scenarios based on past stories and future possibilities. Museums can reframe permanent exhibitions by creating imaginative displays connecting history, memory and future-oriented narratives related to climate resilience. This invites visitors to reflect on the applicability of knowing about the past in imagining the future and taking collective action. The 'Great Acceleration' towards the Anthropocene can be tracked by the dramatic

increase of certain materials and material flows in much the same manner as the previous transitions from stone to bronze and to iron are used to mark the onset of new ages. Extrapolations of these material flows and their climatic correlations make it clear that the world will look different in the decades to come. The materiality of these changes makes them patently exhibitable and the provocative addition of galleries dedicated to the Plastic Age also allows national museums to proactively include dimensions otherwise covered by the emerging climate museums (Newell 2020).

While transforming entire permanent exhibitions is challenging, small but impactful changes and innovative approaches can be implemented to intro-

Figure 1. National museums can take a practical and incremental approach to integrating climate narratives into permanent exhibitions, making small changes without the need for major renovations.

Figure 2. By reframing narratives, implementing small changes and linking history to a look towards the future, national museums can foster critical reflection, community engagement and informed action for climate justice.

duce climate narratives. Museums can focus on practical, low-cost, incremental interventions that integrate climatic narratives into the existing themes and exhibitions without requiring large-scale remodelling. It can be as simple as redesigning labels and refreshing the vocabulary to adding local context and linking historical themes to the present, or using digital media and experimenting with narratives and micro-stories.

Museums can combine small-scale approaches with a broader sense of reframing the narratives, using multiple strategies at once. By reframing how objects and stories are presented, national museums can bridge historical human-environment interactions with contemporary climate challenges, foster-

ing a connection between past, present and future. By embracing narratives that inspire resilience, adaptability and climate awareness, they can act as catalysts for critical thinking and action. These incremental adjustments pave the way for national museums to serve as dynamic spaces for critical reflection and community engagement, highlighting the urgency and relevance of climate discourse.

Looking towards the future, national museums should be adaptable and inclusive, connecting local and national narratives to global warming while amplifying diverse voices. Museums should challenge conventional practices, provoke reflection on their own role and encourage audiences to engage with contemporary complexities through a lens informed by history and oriented towards the future.

Final Considerations

National museums have an important position as custodians of cultural heritage and agents of societal transformation. However, an analysis of Nordic cultural history and national museums reveals a significant gap between the narratives addressed in their permanent exhibitions and contemporary climatic, environmental and societal challenges. Human-climate references are largely absent and, even when present, the climatic narratives are fragmented, isolated stories or pieces of information rather than comprehensive themes that weave through the exhibitions. The current content of permanent exhibitions in the studied museums lags behind both academic discussions and societal needs. As institutions, museums need to evolve and take a more active role in addressing climate change. The museums need to rethink the narratives of their permanent exhibitions. They need state-of-the-art research and attempts to create dialogues that engage audiences. However, changing entire permanent exhibitions requires time and resources that museums often lack. With their limited capacities, should museums focus on changing permanent exhibitions to include climate narratives, or would alternative approaches (such as educational programmes, public events and temporary exhibitions) be more effective when engaging with complex and pressing societal issues? While practical constraints may limit the complete transformation of permanent exhibitions, the potential for national museums to serve as dynamic spaces for promoting climate awareness and action remains vast. Different approaches must be combined, and museums can take a positive direction in incorporating climate stories into permanent exhibitions by reframing already existing narratives, implementing small changes and looking towards the future.

Reimagining the role of national museums in the action for climate justice requires a shift from a singular, celebratory narrative of national history

to one that embraces interdisciplinary collaborations, a tapestry of collective memory, inclusive storytelling and participatory dialogue. By combining the preservation of cultural heritage with contemporary narratives, museums are better equipped to promote understanding of pressing societal challenges. Including societal challenges transforms museums into dynamic spaces for public reflection and action. By weaving climate narratives into their core exhibitions, national museums can move beyond preservation and become active platforms for exploring how the past informs future action. This approach can position museums as critical spaces for reflecting on how historical and cultural legacies can inspire action and shape a more sustainable and resilient future.

Further research into curatorial practices and the inclusion of forward-looking narratives is crucial to support this transformation. While history is at the heart of national museums, their approach to history needs to evolve to meet current and future challenges. By embracing inclusive and forward-looking narratives, national museums can fulfil their potential as agents of societal change, empowering communities to confront climate issues with a sense of shared purpose and adaptability.

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