

Press Release

New Research & Innovation Group established to shape the future of UNESCO Sites and Sustainability

3rd February 2025 – London, UK



(Image caption: Members of the Research and Innovation Group at Scotland House, London. Left to right: Rob Woodside, Dina Dayala, Sefryn Penrose, Sarah May, Lara Band, Joanne Tippet, Dave Chapman, Francesca Giliberto, Fernando Avakian, Aisling Parrish, Claire Thirlwall. Photo credit: Matt Rabagliati)

The UK National Commission for UNESCO (UKNC) has established a Research & Innovation Group to help shape the future of how UNESCO sites both in the UK and overseas can help address global challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

The Group is composed of leading academics and practitioners who have been invited from eight UK universities and UNESCO Chairs; practitioners from English Heritage,

Historic England, National Trust and the private sector; and specialists from UNESCO Sites and UNESCO itself.

The inaugural meeting of the Group took place in London on 21 January, to set the direction for the group's ambitious research agenda. Members shared insights into their respective fields and identified the opportunity to map research strategies to maximize the potential of UNESCO sites as testing grounds for sustainable development initiatives, that could then be replicated globally to drive innovation and change.

The Group will deliver actionable outputs that enhance the role of UNESCO sites in fostering collaborative, place-based solutions, to global challenges, including:

- A comprehensive study contextualising learning from the Climate Change and UNESCO Heritage project and wider place-based approaches in UNESCO sites and beyond.
- A strategic research framework for the next 5 to 10 years, supporting collaboration and driving research and investment across the global UNESCO network.
- Evidence-based solutions to address interconnected challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

This ground-breaking assembly is a core component of the **Climate Change and UNESCO Heritage project**, a flagship £1.8 million initiative funded by HM Treasury to position UNESCO sites as hubs for innovative, place-based approaches to global sustainable development challenges. The project is a partnership between the UK National Commission for UNESCO and the Department for Culture Media and Sport.

The Research & Innovation Group builds on the UKNC's 2022 *UNESCO Sites for Sustainable Development* report and positions UNESCO sites as "living laboratories" for sustainable development innovation.

The Group is being convened and facilitated on behalf of the UK National Commission for UNESCO, by the **Bureau for the Contemporary and Historic (ButCH)**, a specialist consultancy that counts the Environment Agency and Historic England among its previous clients.

Matthew Rabagliati, Head of Policy, Research and Communications at the UK National Commission for UNESCO said:

‘UNESCO sites represent broad, place-based partnerships that bring together communities, organisations, and stakeholders in participatory ways, breaking down silos to address 21st-century challenges. We hope that the research study and five-year strategy will pave the way for fully realising the potential of the UK and international UNESCO network, driving investment and research to trial and test innovative approaches.

‘The Research & Innovation Group brings together an outstanding team of experts who will play a pivotal role in advancing this vision and demonstrating the transformative power of UNESCO sites.’

Sefryn Penrose, Chair of the Research & Innovation Group at ButCH said:

“The dedication and expertise of everyone involved makes it a privilege to be part of this process. The UK National Commission for UNESCO’s initiative to craft a thoughtful and forward-looking research agenda underscores its deep commitment to addressing critical global challenges in a meaningful and sensible way. We are excited to bring our own expertise on heritage and climate change to support this new vision. It’s a testament to the power of collective intelligence and purposeful action.”

ENDS.

The UKNC Research & Innovation Group members are (in alphabetical order):

Fernando Avakian (Project Officer, UNESCO World Heritage Centre)

Lara Band (Research Analyst, ButCH)

Nadia Bartolini (Research Director, ButCH)

Rosalind Bryce (Director, Centre for Mountain Studies, University of the Highlands and Islands)

Dave Chapman (Project lead - Climate Change & UNESCO Heritage, UK National Commission for UNESCO)

Dina D’Ayala (UNESCO Chair on Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience Engineering, University College London)

David Drewry (Vice Chair, Non-Executive Director for Natural Sciences, UK National Commission for UNESCO)

Francesca Giliberto (Senior Research Fellow, University of Leeds)

Kate Guest (Senior Policy Adviser (Climate Change), Historic England)

David Hannah (UNESCO Chair in Water Science, University of Birmingham)

Keith Jones (National Specialist Climate Change, National Trust)

Stefan Krause (UNITWIN Network on Ecohydrological Interfaces Under Change, University of Birmingham)

Qihua Liang (UNESCO Chair on Informatics and Multi-hazard Risk Reduction, Loughborough University)

Sarah May (Co-Director, ButCH)

Marc J Metzger (Professor of Environment and Society, University of Edinburgh, Chair of the UK National Committee for UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme)

Aisling Parrish (Project Administrator - Climate Change and UNESCO Heritage, UK National Commission for UNESCO)

Sefryn Penrose (Co-Director, ButCH) (Chair)

Matt Rabagliati (Head of Policy, Research and Communications, UK National Commission for UNESCO)

Claire Thirlwall (Director, Thirlwall Associates)

Ian Thomas (Head of Evidence, Arts, British Council)

Juliet Thondhlana (UNESCO Chair in International Education and Development, University of Nottingham)

Joanne Tippett (Senior Lecturer in Spatial Planning, School of Environment, Education and Development, University of Manchester)

Imogen Wood (Senior National Consultant for Heritage & Climate, National Trust)

Rob Woodside (Conservation & Estates Director, English Heritage)

Note to Editors

About the UK National Commission for UNESCO (UKNC)

The UKNC serves as the UK's focal point for all UNESCO-related matters, supporting government objectives and maximizing the impact of UNESCO's mission across the UK. The UK's UNESCO sites are integral to the UKNC's vision for education, science, culture, and communication as tools for sustainable development.

For more information on the Research and Innovation Group and its work, visit www.unesco.org.uk.

About Butch

ButCH (Bureau for the Contemporary & Historic) is an independent collective consultancy formed in 2019. With backgrounds in archaeology, heritage, geography and arts, and specialist experience in climate strategy, risk and loss in relation to cultural and natural heritage, in review and research, and in engagement, ButCH specialises in collaborative, solutions-oriented approaches that work across the sector, developing collective approaches to current issues.

For more on ButCH and its work, visit www.37LooeStreet.org/ButCH.