

Press Release

New Research Framework Positions UNESCO sites as Living Laboratories for Climate Action and Sustainability

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The UK National Commission for UNESCO (UKNC) today (Monday 24th November) launches the *UNESCO Climate Action and Sustainability Framework* and its accompanying *Research Agenda*.

UKNC Climate Action and Sustainability Framework:

https://unesco.org.uk/site/assets/files/26101/uknc_climate_action_framework_v02_1.pdf

UNESCO Climate Action and Sustainability Research Agenda

https://unesco.org.uk/site/assets/files/26078/uknc_climate_action_agenda_v01.pdf

Together, they position UNESCO-designated sites in the UK and globally as living laboratories for climate resilience and sustainable futures - places where cultural and natural heritage represent not only places at risk, but powerful assets for testing solutions, strengthening communities and driving integrated responses to 21st century challenges.

Spanning more than 10 million km², UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, Global Geoparks and World Heritage Sites protect some of the world's most significant cultural and natural heritage, while offering real-world environments for understanding, testing and trialling approaches to complex and interconnected 21st-century challenges.

The new Framework and Agenda illustrate that what makes UNESCO sites truly unique is that they already bring together researchers, universities, cultural institutions, practitioners, communities and policymakers into long-standing, place-based partnerships. These existing networks, rooted in heritage, governance and local identity, create a powerful foundation for coordinated action, enabling UNESCO sites to serve as a global research–practice infrastructure where innovation, collaboration and experimentation can flourish.

Developed as part of HM Treasury’s £1.8m [Climate Change and UNESCO Heritage \(CCUH\)](#) Shared Outcomes Fund project and delivered in partnership with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the publications were co-led by the [Bureau for the Contemporary and Historic \(ButCH\)](#) and the [UK National Commission for UNESCO](#). They draw on extensive collaboration with three UK UNESCO pilot sites and a cross-sectoral Research & Innovation Group comprising leading academics, UNESCO Chairs, heritage organisations and site managers.

Professor Christopher Smith, Executive Chair, Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), said:

“UNESCO sites are extraordinary places where the worlds of research, heritage, lived experience and policy intersect. Their global reach and embedded communities make them powerful platforms for understanding and responding to sustainability challenges.

AHRC strongly welcomes this Framework and the Research Agenda, which align with our commitment to Living Labs, participatory research, and interdisciplinary collaboration across the UK and internationally and our commitment alongside UNESCO to conservation, heritage science and the role of the past in understanding the present and shaping the future. The documents show how cultural and natural heritage, including and especially in UNESCO sites, can drive innovation, resilience and societal transformation.”

Professor Mike Robinson, Non-Executive Director at the UK National Commission for UNESCO said:

“It is wonderful to see how researchers, funders and local communities are coming together to build resilience and generate sustainable responses to the realities of climate change. The UNESCO Climate Action and Sustainability Framework and the attendant Research Agenda, will provide valuable support for new ideas, new partnerships and concerted, place-based action to address the challenges of a social and economic transition to a sustainable future.”

Matt Rabagliati, Head of Research, UK National Commission for UNESCO, said:

“UNESCO sites are not only places facing the pressures and impacts of climate change and other challenges, they are also some of our greatest assets for addressing them. They bring together communities, landscapes, knowledge systems and heritage values in ways that help us understand change and co-design solutions in real time.

This Framework and Research Agenda show how these places can function as truly integrated living laboratories: spaces where science, culture, governance and community

knowledge come together to generate insights that are both innovative and grounded in place.

By embedding participatory and nexus approaches, we hope this work helps researchers, funders and practitioners unlock the full potential of UNESCO sites in driving climate resilience, sustainability transitions and long-term societal wellbeing."

Sefryn Penrose, Co-Director of ButCH and Chair of the R&I group, said:

"This innovative Framework and groundbreaking Research Agenda could not have been possible without the generosity and committed support of the R&I Group.

It has been a pleasure to work with the group in this collaborative process which re-imagines UNESCO Sites as pivotal research hubs that engage professionals, academics, and communities in making more sustainable futures. We look forward to seeing it bear fruit!"

How UNESCO Sites Enable Integrated Research and Action

The Framework sets out how UNESCO sites function as living laboratories by integrating:

- **Research and practice**, enabling academics and practitioners to co-design and test solutions directly with communities, land managers and local authorities.
- **Participatory governance and strong stakeholder networks**, supporting collaborative decision-making and long-term, community-centred approaches.
- **Rich cultural and natural heritage assets**, providing complex, real-world environments for trialling climate adaptation, conservation, resilience and sustainability strategies.
- **Nexus and systems approaches**, linking environmental processes with culture, identity, governance, livelihoods and social resilience.
- **Established data, monitoring and research infrastructures**, including new open-source tools developed through the CCUH project.
- **UNESCO's global networks**, allowing local innovations to be compared, transferred and scaled internationally.

Through this integrated approach, UNESCO sites offer unparalleled opportunities for testing high-impact solutions, generating policy-relevant evidence, and strengthening resilience pathways that are both locally grounded and globally transferable.

A Framework for Global Research and Action

The publications align closely with the ARCHE Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda, the emerging Horizon Europe Resilient Cultural Heritage Partnership, and UNESCO's global

priorities on climate, culture and sustainable development. They offer a ready-made platform for UK and international partners to collaborate on transdisciplinary research, Living Labs, open data infrastructures and evidence-led policy.

Together, the Framework and Research Agenda establish UNESCO sites not only as custodians of heritage, but as frontline laboratories for integrated climate action, sustainability innovation and community resilience, connecting local action with global learning at a moment when coordinated international responses have never been more urgently needed.

Case Studies:

CULTIVATE Project

<https://www.cultivate-project.net/university-of-the-highlands-and-islands-uhi>



The **AHRC–JPI Cultural Heritage** funded **CULTIVATE project** explores how cultural heritage shapes sustainable landscapes and resilient communities in the context of major 21st-century challenges, including the Covid-19 pandemic, the climate emergency and the transformations needed to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Working with **UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in Scotland, Norway, Estonia and the Czech Republic**, the project treated these sites as demonstration regions for understanding

how *cultural narratives*, stories of place, identity, land, memory and belonging, are co-created, contested and negotiated across community, regional and national scales

Coastal TALEs (UNESCO–MOST BRIDGES)

<https://www.heritageresearch-hub.eu/project/coastal-tales/>



A view from Killiney Hill over Dublin Bay, Ireland (Credit: Artur)

[Coastal TALEs](#), delivered through the [UNESCO–MOST BRIDGES](#) coalition, connects coastal communities in Alaska, Ireland (Dublin Bay UNESCO Biosphere Reserve) and Wales to document heritage stories of changing shorelines, maritime traditions and lived experience of environmental change. By embedding these narratives into UNESCO’s social science framework, the project strengthens climate education, empowers youth engagement and informs local adaptation planning—demonstrating how storytelling within UNESCO programmes can drive resilience, dialogue and evidence-based policy development.

Estrela UNESCO Global Geopark (Portugal)



(Medieval Castle of Celorico da Beira. Credit: Downunderphoto)

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386072964_Assessment_of_forest_fires_impacts_on_geoheritage_A_study_in_the_Estrela_UNESCO_Global_Geopark_Portugal

Researchers in Estrela assessed the impact of forest fires on geoheritage and biodiversity, generating new conservation strategies and risk-management approaches for vulnerable landscapes.

Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras (World Heritage)



(Batad Rice Terraces in Northern Luzon, Philippines) (Credit: By [R.M. Nunes](#))

<https://publ.icomos.org/publicomos/jlbSai?html=Pag&page=Pml/Not&base=technica&ref=BA2E8BF467466DB0E37EF0600D249D69>

Scientists and Indigenous communities co-developed climate vulnerability assessments blending traditional knowledge with scientific monitoring to protect one of the world's most iconic cultural landscapes.

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Members of the Research and Innovation Group



Name	Organisation
Fernando Avakian	Project Officer, UNESCO World Heritage Centre
Lara Band	Research Analyst, ButCH
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Claire Thirwall	Director, Thirlwall Associates
Ian Thomas	Head of Evidence, Arts, British Council
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Joanne Tippet	Senior Lecturer in Spatial Planning, University of Manchester
Imogen Wood	Senior National Consultant for Heritage & Climate, National Trust
Rob Woodside	Conservation & Estates Director, English Heritage

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About the UK National Commission for UNESCO

About the UK National Commission for UNESCO The UK National Commission for UNESCO (UKNC) is a constitutional part of the UK's membership of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

An independent body, UKNC is core-funded by the UK Government primarily to bring the benefits of UNESCO programmes and international agreements to the UK government, academic community and broader civil society. It also ensures that these elements fully contribute to and shape UNESCO's global aims and activities.

UNESCO harnesses the power of education, science, culture, and communication & information to advance global peace, sustainable development, intercultural dialogue, and poverty eradication.

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves are 'learning places for sustainable development'. They are sites for testing interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and managing changes and interactions between social and ecological systems. Each site promotes solutions reconciling the conservation of biodiversity with its sustainable use.

<https://en.unesco.org/biosphere/about>

UNESCO Global Geoparks

UNESCO Global Geoparks are single, unified geographical areas where sites and landscapes of international geological significance are managed with a holistic concept of protection, education, and sustainable development. <https://en.unesco.org/global-geoparks>.

UNESCO World Heritage Sites

UNESCO World Heritage Sites are designated by UNESCO for having cultural, historical, scientific, or other form of significance. The sites are judged to contain cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity.

<https://whc.unesco.org>