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MUSEUMS, TRANSPARENCY, AND CLIMATE WORK: SURVIVING HOSTILITY

Museos, transparencia y acción climática: sobreviviendo a la hostilidad

Museus, transparência e trabalho climático: sobrevivendo à hostilidade

Sarah Sutton, *Environment & Culture Partners (USA)*

sarah@ecprs.org

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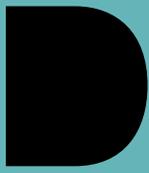
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ABSTRACT

With environmental protection and climate action work becoming increasingly dangerous in the United States due to the federal stance, how can we maintain transparency about climate-related topics in museums? Understanding the critical nature of transparency requires recognizing the dangers of remaining silent or inactive, as well as the need for many voices to achieve effective solutions. Museums' role as trusted sources is at stake, and so is museums' capacity to welcome all visitors, connect with partners, and inform the public. The responsibility of professionals to pursue and share best practices is also at stake, but we have experienced this before. This essay begins by examining transparency in climate work broadly speaking, and then explores transparency in museums, in professionals, and during these dangerous times. I conclude that we know what must be done, and that those who can must continue the work openly and visibly, so that others may see it, be encouraged, and advance climate action in fulfillment of our public mission. Wherever they are, each museum professional has the agency and the opportunity to do so.

Keywords: Ethics; professionalism; agency; climate work; transparency.



RESUMEN

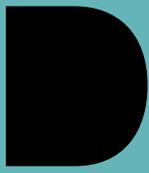
Ante el creciente peligro que representa para la protección ambiental y la acción climática en Estados Unidos debido a la postura federal, ¿cómo podemos gestionar la transparencia en los museos en relación con el cambio climático? Para comprender la importancia crítica de la transparencia, es necesario entender los peligros del silencio y la inacción, así como la necesidad de múltiples voces para lograr soluciones efectivas. El papel de los museos como fuentes confiables está en juego, al igual que su capacidad para recibir a todos los visitantes, conectar con socios e informar al público en general. La responsabilidad de los profesionales de buscar y compartir las mejores prácticas también está en riesgo, pero ya hemos vivido situaciones similares. Este ensayo comienza examinando la transparencia en la acción climática en términos generales, analizando la transparencia en los museos, la transparencia profesional y la transparencia en estos tiempos difíciles. Al final, sí se conoce qué hacer y, quienes puedan, deben continuar la labor de forma abierta y transparente para que otros puedan verla, sentirse motivados a impulsar la acción climática y cumplir con nuestra misión pública. Dondequiera que se encuentren, todos los profesionales de museos tienen la capacidad y la oportunidad de hacerlo.

Palabras clave: ética; profesionalismo; capacidad de acción; trabajo climático; transparencia.

RESUMO

Com o trabalho em proteção ambiental e ação climática se tornando perigoso nos Estados Unidos, devido à postura federal, como podemos gerenciar a transparência em relação a temas climáticos em museus? Para entender a natureza crítica da transparência, é preciso compreender os perigos do silêncio ou da inatividade e a necessidade de muitas vozes para soluções eficazes. O papel dos museus como fontes confiáveis está em jogo, assim como sua capacidade de acolher todos os visitantes, conectar-se com parceiros e informar o público em geral. A responsabilidade dos profissionais de buscar e compartilhar as melhores práticas também está em jogo, mas já vivenciamos isso antes. Este ensaio começa examinando a transparência no trabalho climático em termos gerais, abordando a transparência em museus, a transparência como profissionais e a transparência nestes tempos difíceis. Concluo que sabemos o que fazer e que aqueles que podem devem continuar o trabalho de forma aberta e transparente para que outros possam ver, se sentir encorajados e avançar no trabalho climático, cumprindo nossa missão pública. Onde quer que você esteja, cada profissional de museu tem a capacidade e a oportunidade de fazer isso.

Palavras-chave: ética; profissionalismo; autonomia; trabalho climático; transparência.



For many in environmental protection and climate action, especially in the United States, transparency has become risky and fraught. Transparency—being clear about what you do, how you do it, why you do it, and how effective you are—inevitably elicits responses from others that are beyond your control. It exposes the transparent person or institution to criticism or praise, emulation or derision. It also represents confidence, commitment, and openness. For me, as a museum professional focusing on environmental protection and climate action (climate work) in the U.S. cultural sector, transparency has had to become an intentional act, rather than a default practice.

Can I—and others—continue to act intentionally until transparency in climate work becomes, once again, the default? We must.

Transparency is a critical aspect of climate work.

It is foundational for museums' work and social value.

It is the responsibility of any ethical professional, museum or not.

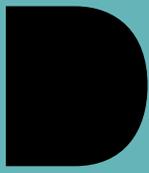
But will such transparency survive current hostility?

This essay, and its observations, is built on two decades of cultural sector climate work, and four decades as a museum professional. During that time, I have observed the growing awareness of environmental practices and the importance of reducing climate impacts (I approach these together as “climate work”) among zoos and aquariums, museums, and historic sites. The advances in climate work in the cultural sector during the last decade are significant. However, national leadership on climate work during those years has, broadly speaking, shifted repeatedly from positive to negative, and back again. In my experience, these changes have left many cultural sector climate workers confused and discouraged. Meanwhile, my work, for much of the last decade with We Are Still In/America Is Still In, the largest coalition of climate action advocates in the World, has given me hope and a national perspective on the high-level struggles. And my work with Environment & Culture Partners, a nonprofit research group, has provided encouragement and direct experience with those funding and implementing climate work in the cultural sector. The conclusions here represent those blended experiences.

I begin by examining transparency in climate work broadly-speaking, working through transparency in museums, in professionals, and during these dangerous times. My purpose here is to remind us all of the foundational value of transparency in building trust, such a vital aspect of museums' work and social standing. I acknowledge the present-day risks of transparency in certain settings, while also upholding its inestimable value. I hope this offers you renewed confidence and commitment to your role and your institution's role in climate work, with more perspective on choosing where to make your greatest impact.

Museums, Transparency, and Climate Work: Surviving Hostility

Environment & Culture Partners is a U.S.-based national nonprofit that advances environmental practice and climate action in the cultural sector, specifically within museums, zoos, gardens, and historic sites, and increasingly libraries and theaters. To move an entire sector forward requires actions and words with enough visibility to move *many* members of the sector forward rather than a single museum or site. To influence change among more than 35 000 institutions requires visibility, not stealth. Transparency, therefore, becomes a critical tool.



The importance of environmental practice and climate action grows as our climate disruptions expand. That importance also grows in the distinct practical and political conditions of 2025-2028, namely the current federal stance against climate work in the United States. If you are observing or experiencing this as well, then my message to you is:

- Don't Back Up.
- Don't Back Down.
- Tell the Others.

I encourage you to pursue what fulfills your mission in the best possible way for the greatest number of people, aiming always toward the highest purpose and the very best long game. Yes, each of us is concerned about optics, how to pay for such work, and the potential for federal roadblocks. And still—don't back up, don't back down—and tell the others.

Imagine it is now 2030, and the first deadline for the global goals of carbon reduction has arrived. How do you want to have shown up at that critical moment in global history?

Climate work is a critical responsibility for all who can take these steps right now—privately and publicly. Not everyone will be able to do what they wish, but clarity about your purpose, methods, work, and results in this work is critical for all who can deploy climate work for good. This is how to do the work *and* encourage others to do so as well.

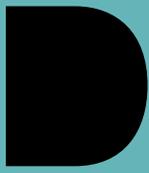
Transparency in Climate Work

Environmentalists and climate actors are frequently scrutinized for alignment of actions and words. They are often held to a higher standard than others who make no environmental statements. Critics and skeptics often single out one aspect of practice revealed through transparency, then challenge or denounce it. And yet cries of “green-washing” greet any failure to be transparent. Meanwhile oversharing details and data quickly overwhelms observers with less interest in details and specifics and, as a result, defeats our purpose of engaging and educating. How do we persevere? We do the work anyway, using transparency as a tool to pursue our goals.

The purpose of transparency is to provide clarity to the process and authenticity for the project. This is especially challenging with environmental practice and climate action:

- What level of information is enough when the actions we take, and the messages we share, involve an activity as complex as systems change?
- What level of transparency is responsible when that system's change involves an entire biosphere?
- What level of transparency is prudent in the face of legal and financial risks?

Let us begin with a macro view to establish the gravity of our situation and its relationship to transparency. Concepts of endangerment and partnerships are critical to our understanding of the scale and gravity of this important aspect of museum work.



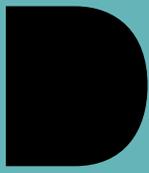
Endangerment

Climate change endangers human lives. Any action that limits and reduces climate change can limit the impacts of those changes and therefore save lives. Failure to be clear and forthcoming about the facts of climate change, and our climate actions, endangers others. Failure to be clear about the importance of this work, and our learning from that work, endangers others. Those failures leave the public without the information to protect themselves and without the encouragement to protect one other. “Endangerment” as a legal term is an intense focus right now in the United States. In 2007 a coalition of states, local governments, and environmental groups, led by the State of Massachusetts, won a United States Supreme Court ruling against the federal government’s Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The ruling stated that greenhouse gases should be considered pollutants under the Clean Air Act, that they are dangerous to public health, and that the EPA could create rulings that regulate greenhouse gas management (Lazarus, 2020) (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2025). President Bush subsequently directed the EPA to “take the first steps toward regulation that would cut gasoline consumption and greenhouse gases from motor vehicles” (Lazarus, 2020). By 2009, the EPA, under President Obama, had taken those steps and issued an Endangerment Finding, allowing regulation of greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles and other sources. But in 2025, under President Trump, the EPA formally began reconsidering this finding with the intent to reverse it (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2025). At this writing, the EPA has demonstrated its intent to undermine that work by proposing to end required emissions reporting for emitters, including coal-fired power plants, oil refineries, and other industrial facilities. This reporting informs not only community health through air quality, but also climate change forecasting and economic investment (Joselow, 2025).

The Endangerment Finding is the science-based foundation for necessary, clear rules that guide intentional reduction of greenhouse gases and toxic pollution. This finding is why we now have cleaner air transportation and cleaner energy. It is why we limit emissions that drive climate change. This finding enables United States action as part of the legally binding international treaty on climate change: The Paris Agreement. Repealing the Endangerment Finding refutes science, is the opposite of transparency, and puts everyone at risk now and for a very, very long time. The science on climate change has not changed; the political leadership has. Science has not changed; transparency in its use has. And the impacts of that shift can become dangerous unless others call for changes.

Partnerships

The complexity of a challenge lies in systems thinking. Changing something as complex as human behavior, especially where it intersects with something as huge and complex as the global climate, requires multiple approaches with sufficiently multifaceted solutions. Such solutions can only be created through multiple voices with varied experiences, and aggregated knowledge. It requires partnerships. Is this phrase familiar? “Nothing about us without us?” It is broadly associated with U.S. policymaking and representation regarding disability rights. In the museum sector it has come to represent a broader approach to inclusivity of disadvantaged and



underrepresented populations (Legislative News, 2024). It should also apply to shifts toward and decisions about climate work. It demands the inclusion of people who are not climate scientists, but who are advocates, and change-makers. Significant, lasting change will only be successful with cross-sector perspectives and partnerships.

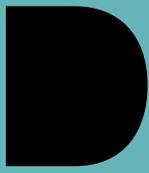
Whether the goal is a shift from gas to clean electricity as your energy source, or a cleaner exhibit protocol or a cleaner special event waste stream, success requires working in tandem with colleagues and partners. There will be new permits to secure, equipment to buy, mechanical connections to replace/improve/test; new materials to identify, test, and select; new skills to identify and practice. The list of parts, processes, and relationships for any of those changes is very long. There are also opportunities for failure at each point. Yet we regularly see committed professionals accomplish the new, time-consuming, and challenging shifts necessary for this work.

Establishing and sustaining those relationships demands transparency. Accurate communication, careful language, and thoughtful framing will help build the understanding and engagement that moves people and communities to action, and to safety and wellbeing. And it can help reduce politicization and fracturing that lead to inertia, maladaptation, and conflict. Systems function best when balanced, and that extends to the language we use in our transparency efforts. Transparent does not mean loud and blunt. Strident calls will drown out other voices and alienate necessary partners. You may be familiar with activist demonstrations where individuals appeared to vandalize artwork in museums to garner attention to the need for climate action (Mattei, 2022). We *are* desperate and yet such strict demands are mistaken tactics and never long-term solutions. Such hardened approaches drive others away, leaving you alone and unhelpful in this work. Fortunately, museum professionals are skilled at communicating in ways that meet learners—whether as visitors or climate work partners—where they are, using language suited to the moment. When we identify and explain the work, and openly explore solutions, then we can ask others to consider this information and align with us to build solutions.

Transparency and the Museum Public

In the US, museum professionals are most proud of the research demonstrating that museums are a highly trusted resource. Research by the American Alliance of Museums' (AAM) has demonstrated that, as sources, museums are “second only to friends and family, and significantly more trustworthy than researchers and scientist, NGOs generally, various news organizations, the government...” AAM’s research demonstrates that “The top three reasons cited as contributing to this trust are that museums are fact-based, present real/authentic/original objects, and are research-oriented” (American Alliance of Museums, 2021). During recent calls by federal leadership to excise portions of exhibits at the Smithsonian Museums, AAM reiterated that “People trust museums because they rely on independent scholarship and research, uphold high professional standards, and embrace open inquiry” (American Alliance of Museums, 2025).

AAM’s research also found that there were no relationships between political ideology and the trust for museums nation-wide. There were no statistically significant differences among liberals, moderates, and conservatives on museums and their credibility and trust, or expectations of museum neutrality (American Alliance of Museums, 2021). Maintaining this level of trust is critical for our credibility, and our social and financial well-being. Transparency underpins this work, whether through the objects we select, the research we do and

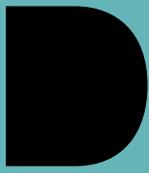


share, or the actions we take. It extends beyond exhibits to operations and community engagement. It extends to climate action. The work we do to share our world with others is central to museums' purposes. Failure here is failure of our missions.

Trust and Reliability: Welcoming and Safe Places for Learning

How many of us have changed our language based on the audience? We have all had to become skilled at translation, modulation, and engagement as appropriate to any situation. As museum professionals, we know how to engage the learners by starting where they are—in their knowledge, experience, values, attitudes, and feelings. We use this practice in our basic pedagogical approaches, in our fundraising, and in our environment and climate work. Choosing to use language that welcomes rather than threatens the listener does not affect transparency. It is critical for sustaining engagement in ways that can lead to changes and behavior that support climate action. The words “health,” “stability,” “security,” “resilience,” and “stewardship” can open a climate conversation no matter what feelings or attitudes the visitor arrives with. Are we failing to be transparent by not talking about the death, losses, and suffering we know we can anticipate if there are no changes made? We know visitors turn away from this depressing, discouraging, even frightening information. Transparency, misapplied, can be overwhelming.

For museum professionals, engaging with someone who is unfamiliar with, or even skeptical about, climate change plays to our existing skills. The work requires first finding something you both understand or agree on—it can be very basic such as the community you share and hobbies you love, or more serious, such as what they have heard about climate change and are concerned about. Perhaps they experienced power outages for the first or the fiftieth time; had their own home—or a friend's—flooded by an unexpected river rise; or found their summer harvest or favorite activities severely affected by high heat and lack of rain. With almost every aspect of our lives affected by climate, alignments and shared experiences are a bridge to a discussion of the changing climate and the positive solutions we can all pursue (Hayhoe, Accessed 2025). This creates a shared understanding that allows for next-level climate discussions. With your audience's interests at heart, there is no need to obscure intent or impact. We are successful when we help them become ready for these discussions. We must inspire them. Two museums are valuable examples of robust climate engagement in unexpected settings. The staff at Mount Desert Island Historical Society (MDIHS) in Downeast, Maine, have been conducting a multi-year project with multiple scientific, historical, and social welfare partners to understand climate change on this small island. The process of comparing scientific, journal-based, historical data about the island, its vegetation and wildlife, with modern data and visible conditions is a valuable opportunity for public engagement. The residents and wealthy summer visitors are acting as civilian scientists, exploring the island and collecting modern data to show the changes over time. The Executive Director, Raney Bench, says “People who may or may not engage in climate change personally or politically can see that it is happening right here in a place they love” (Sutton, 2023). The MDIHS program, called Landscape of Change, addresses “the reality of climate change at the local level, advocating for understanding of the complexity of the larger problem, causes and solutions.” The project's partners see that “by focusing on local examples, the larger, more complex story of climate change can be better appreciated” (Mount Desert Island Historical Society, 2025).



The Museum of Discovery and Science (MODS) is in Miami, Florida, a state often politically resistant to climate action. MODS is transparent about its important resilience work and environmental education. The work prioritizes “pathways to lifelong learning to cultivate climate citizenship, creating a sense of place in the climate crisis, providing opportunities to showcase current solutions, inspiring visitors to contribute to future solutions” (Museum of Discovery and Science, 2025). MODS’ educational hub includes exhibits on resilience and programs on global marine health. The workforce development pathway “EcoExplorers” supports high school students exploring sustainability and resiliency careers. It is regularly oversubscribed. With this suite of programming, MODS has become a leader in environmental sustainability. It excels through its “focus on cultivating climate citizenship.” “With the opportunity to reach hundreds of thousands annually, MODS serves as the hub to raise awareness around the importance of science, inspiring deeper engagement in sustainability, climate change, and resilience” (Museum of Discovery and Science, 2025).

Neither institution hides the work nor softens their language. Both use language that appeals to as many members of the public as possible. That is their job.

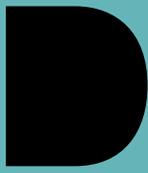
Transparency and Professionals

Professionals *do not* change their minds based on politics. Professionals *do* respond to changes in ethics, responsibility, and research.

Some feel that too much emphasis on sustainability or climate action can make visitors uncomfortable. That’s possible—just as subjects like slavery, genocide, or abuses of power can. And so, the museum professional makes decisions about how it presents information and invites public engagement. However, when you are unable to directly or immediately name climate change and climate threats, for any reason, you may feel it is a failure of transparency. You may feel like you are not telling the full story. That feeling comes from your full awareness—or at least more complete knowledge—of the causes, and the current and expected impacts of climate change. Those feelings are not facts. They are a sign that you know what is at stake and that you wish you were having the entire discussion.

Making decisions about how best to present information so that individuals or groups can learn, grow, and change is our job. That is different from hiding or ignoring the facts—or softening the truth. This is different from censorship. We must not let it become anticipatory compliance.

Recent steps by the United States Government are widely regarded by the museum community as censorship. In early 2025, an Executive Order directed the Vice President, and White House staff to pursue policies at the Smithsonian Institution that include “seeking to remove improper ideology...” (The White House, 2025). In August 2025, the White House followed up with a “Letter to the Smithsonian: Internal Review of Smithsonian Exhibitions and Materials.” It announced a plan for a review of The Smithsonian’s public-facing content, curatorial process, exhibition planning, collection use, and narrative standards (The White House, 2025). The American Alliance of Museums (AAM), our national nonprofit professional museum association, responded to these actions just days later “We stand with the hundreds of thousands of museum professionals in the United States who protect our heritage, conserve species, create unforgettable experiences, and serve their communities with integrity. We call on all who value our shared heritage to support the museum field in resisting censorship, so museums can continue to educate, connect, and inspire” (American Alliance of Museums, 2025). National Public Radio, a private non-profit news



provider, reported that “The White House did not respond to a request for comment about whether governmental review of museums could have a chilling effect on the institutions by threatening their free speech rights and limiting their ability to openly and honestly engage with the public” (Ulaby, 2025). AAM stated that “Societies benefit from museums and the professionals who steward them. They educate, connect, and help us understand one another—something we can’t afford to lose.” “What’s at stake is the erosion of what every human benefits from: health and safety, and independence, of course, and also identity and culture, which is where cultural institutions and their professionals have special value and opportunity” (American Alliance of Museums, 2025). The United States Government’s attempt to threaten the ideological independence of the largest museum in the country, located in the national capitol, and a point of pride for the nation and the museum field, is earth-shaking. This is a threat to legal standing that can impact the entire sector.

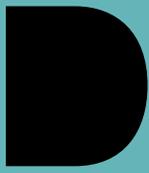
According to the laws that established the Smithsonian, the Vice President does not have the authority to direct its ideological stance. It is instead “exclusively subject to the decisions of the entire Board of Regents” (Petersen, 2025). But the words have been spoken, and the chill has begun. With the threat of censorship from the federal government, some will be tempted to adjust a tone, shift a stance, and make superficial changes to avoid attack. This anticipatory compliance, taking actions to change our work so that we can stay out of harm’s way, threatens museums’ ability to attract trust. Too much is at stake to lay low in hopes the crisis will pass. Every day our situation either remains dangerous or worsens. At ECP, we hear some museum professionals—as well as funders and other allies—calling for going quiet, to leave us to fight another day, instead of “inviting” attacks that might halt our work completely. Do we save pieces of work or try to save the whole? Do we hide rather than be transparent? Do we do this every time there is change?

Responding to Change, Again

Yes, what we are seeing here in the United States *is* scary; it means our work matters more. Museums can and must resist urges toward political appeasement and anticipatory compliance. Those tactics are not the answer, or even *an* answer. Despite the local mood, national crises, or institutional struggles, our work matters. Where would the museum field be if we had taken all the easier paths before?

When I came into this work in the mid-1980s, I thought the profession had sorted itself into what a profession “should” be: knowledgeable and practiced. That was a naïve expectation of course. The profession was undergoing changes due to new U.S. laws on physical accessibility to sites and on unrelated business income taxes applied to gift shop sales of materials or services not directly tied to the mission. These were legitimate requests. The response, though slow, also demonstrated capacity for change, whether shifting museum shop inventory, or addressing handicapped access ramps, door widths, and label readability. As we matured in our response, our effectiveness improved despite the challenges.

In 1990, NAGPRA, the Native Americans Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, called for the protection and return of human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony. The law began addressing the widespread historic removal of these items from native lands, and their keeping in museums (National Park Service, n.d.). While changes have been slow, the work, and the last decade of intentional decolonization approaches, have created significant field-wide changes in practice and ethics. Maeve R. Donnelly wrote recently



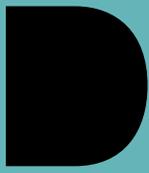
about Indigenous art and how historically the museum field has grossly overlooked the important cultural value of crafts now identified as “made during the tourist period, reflecting traditional knowledge an economic adaptation,” often referring to them previously as “tourist” crafts and discrediting the traditional artistic practice and skill elements. Donnelly explains that the shift to embracing this new valuing of craft is aligned with “The future of ethical museum practice” and “does not lie in reinforcing legal definitions or institutional binaries” (Donnelly, 2025). As museum professionals we have responded to and demanded some significant changes to our sector. We will do the same on environmental protection and climate action. We will do the same with censorship. We *are* doing it.

Transparency In These Times

When the United States Government filed for withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2017, a new coalition took shape—comprising businesses, cities, states, and investors—and alongside them came the cultural sector, higher education, and health care. It was called “We Are Still In.” That cross-sector engagement brought a new level of collaboration, sophistication, and visibility to this work. Its momentum accelerated climate action in the United States and the cultural sector significantly. It provided momentum simply by creating a shared language, sharing information, and raised the profile of climate work. It also provided cover or protection within a larger group, and encouragement by example. It provided a socially recognizable, widely endorsed path for climate work. This protection made the cautious more confident and brought the hopeful more support. Partnerships and collaboration continue to have that effect even today.

In 2021, President Biden returned the United States to the Paris Agreement, and We Are Still In became “America is All In.” As part of America is All In, when the group made recommendations to the White House for reducing net greenhouse gas emissions below 2005 levels by 2030—as the United States Nationally Determined Contribution to the goals of the Paris Agreement—ECP specifically proposed a reduction range of 50–52 percent, which was ultimately adopted. The aspect of a range was critical for meeting standards while calling for more (The National Climate Advisor and the White House Office of Domestic Climate Policy, 2021). To reach that goal, and the goal of net zero emissions, economy-wide, by no later than 2050, everyone must do everything they can, even cultural institutions. ECP’s own research has demonstrated that more than 35,000 museums and historic sites in the United States emit an estimated 4 Million Metric Tons of CO₂eq annually, solely from operational energy use. This does not include staff or visitor transport, or goods; it is simply the carbon costs of operating buildings for the public and the collections (New Buildings Institute, Environment & Culture Partners,). Knowing our impact on the climate and reducing it is our responsibility. We hope, that as more organizations take action and report results, we can set sector-wide goals for reducing those emissions, whether or not the United States is party to the Paris Agreement. Failure to reach net zero is dangerous for us all. There are substantial benefits in costs, carbon, and environmental well-being when we get carbon emissions down to zero. The only way to zero is together.

Yes, federal government grants have been taken away from many, but have been returned to some. Meanwhile some state and private funders are stepping in to fill funding gaps. As an example, New York State Governor Kathy Hochul has announced \$80 Million new USD to support capital grants for arts and culture in the state (New York State, 2025). The museums, libraries, and cultural organizations—and funders—who care about the work are still forging ahead courageously. We see no loss of momentum. Yes, ECP has lost some grants because of its focus on



climate and cultural heritage. One grant was rescinded, and three others were disregarded, even though they had been submitted before the election. We know, though, that we will do that work eventually, or in another form, or someone else will do it. We are stymied but not permanently.

Yes, we could frame our work in different language, but for a climate-focused agency, concealing our intent would be absurd. Is it a transparency failure to highlight only energy and cost savings, and not carbon when this is so central to our work? The work *is* important to us. It is also valuable to avoid using words that a bot would immediately detect in a federal grant application. We are comfortable with the decision *not* to use language to trigger non-human, uninformed, responses, but when working with humans, we *do* use language that keeps us in conversation and moving forward. Both cultural sector climate action, ECP, and America Is All In are still strong in 2025. Yes, we have had our own scares about funding, and some partners have been wary of certain language, but we know that the development of partnerships and opportunities that make us strong would not have been impossible if we had hidden our work.

Strength, Safety (and Impact) through Numbers

Partnerships are critical for climate work. “Partners” is in our nonprofit’s name because partnerships are how a small team of museum professionals can learn and do enough, fast enough, to accelerate climate action in museums. Being a part of these cross-sector teams is a joy. It gives us the capacity, expertise, reach, and encouragement to tackle bigger issues than we could alone. Our multi-partner work on funding, decarbonization research, and public engagement demonstrates how cross-sector teams provide the capacity, expertise, and ability to tackle bigger issues than ECP could alone. The shared commitment and progress make all the difference.

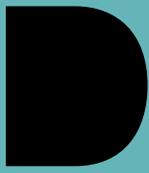
But we are not the only ones taking this path. The earlier examples of MODS and MDIHS showcase the value of the partnership pathways. MODS’ *Making Florida Resilient* exhibit is the result of a partnership with Florida Atlantic University. And their *Hub for Resilience Education* is a partnership with a community foundation (Museum of Discovery and Science, 2025). *Landscape of Change* is a partnership between MDIHS, Schoodic Institute, Acadia National Park, University of Maine Biological Institute, A Climate to Thrive and subsequent work with The University of Maine (Sutton, 2023). MDIHS uses the journals in its collection to create public engagement and conduct research that far exceeds what they could accomplish on their own. MODS gains research and production expertise to create more than it could alone. For both institutions, every member of these teams shares the credibility, legitimacy, and protection of operating within a publicly valued and valuable team. These partnerships provide the resources and the solidarity to do important work even during challenging times.

And if Climate Action Becomes Illegal?

What if climate action becomes “illegal” in the United States the way Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is becoming?

If environmental and climate action becomes “illegal,” then how do we feel about transparency?

Recently, a climate activist explained to me that, in today’s context, they face personal risks if they are transparent about their climate values. We agreed that now is not the time for them to speak up. They have in the past. They will again. The rest of us can speak up and must. The rest of us must be transparent and with courage.



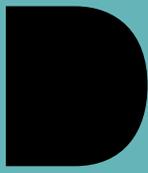
It has to do with “agency.” Anyone can identify areas of personal and professional ability to take action, and at many scales. Our standing as trusted, well-loved, community and national resources, empowers us all to reach out to everyone—children and governors, businesses and presidents, visitors, and residents—in ways that blend both urgency and agency. Where each of us has unique abilities, leverage, and capacity, we also have agency. By focusing on that area of agency rather than on all possible paths, one’s impact is greatest.

If or when climate work becomes illegal in the United States, the agency many now hold may change, but it will not disappear—neither within the sector nor across the nation. Where we at ECP feel we have agency, we will focus and deploy our efforts. You can too. None of us must be loud and abrasive to achieve our goals. We cannot be invisible to achieve them, either. What is most important is that we are effective. This requires more than just living to fight another day; it requires ensuring the others know we are here, we are doing the work.

I opened this essay with an appeal to all: “Don’t Back Up, Don’t Back Down; Tell the Others.” Gina McCarthy rallies those of us in every sector pursuing environmental and climate work by saying “We don’t give up, we stand up” (Meager, 2025). Ms. McCarthy is a former Administrator of the United States Environmental Protection Agency, a former Climate Advisor to former U.S. President Biden, and the current Co-Chair of America Is All In. I agree with her: those of us doing the work, who are able, must stand up; and those who can must stand where we can be seen, so others witness the work and recognize the signal to advance.

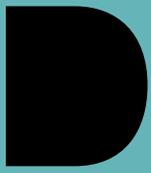
We all have choices. We all have options. Whatever your role in the institution, you can advance climate action under any conditions. As an educator you can craft messages, programs, and exhibits that demonstrate local and global impacts of a changing climate, and human choices that have led to those impacts. You can use language that engages and informs instead of alienating or overwhelming your audiences. You can show how your institution practices materials reduction, waste management, and energy efficiency, and then encourage visitors and community members to save their own resources and reduce their impacts in similar ways at home, at school, in places of worship, and at work. As conservators, curators, exhibit designers, or event planners you can choose to continuously expand your repertoire of low-impact materials and practices. You can share resources with each other and ask for grace to try new approaches. Then you can share what you learn to help your peers do the same. As a facilities manager you can observe peers’ and other sectors’ successes, then translate them into your operations and capital plans. You can partner with them to test and show new approaches for the industry, and then embed that in your public education programs. As the department or institutional leader, you can encourage policies that advance practice and then highlight those benefits for others to model or support. And you can set the tone that truth and community well-being are your highest priorities. Then you can share that with professional associations to demonstrate demand for and commitment to this work. In the process you will build mutual strength and protection for peers seeking to engage.

At ECP we will intentionally pursue transparency until it again becomes our default. We know it is a critical aspect of environmental protection and climate action; it is critical to museum work, and it is the responsibility of any ethical professional, museum or not. We believe such transparency will survive current hostility. If the museum profession fails at this, then the signal we have been sending will fade and be lost. We need that signal to keep telling the others to keep at this work, to keep up their commitment to action. We must stand up together.



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