Learning from Loss Summary Report

Introduction: objectives and context

Deterioration and loss of the historic environment due to natural processes already outpaces available resources for action, and the effects of climate change will accelerate the threat over the coming century. This brings an imperative to grasp the issue of heritage loss and prioritise action and resources. In order to prioritise, we need to have a clearer understanding of what and where is most vulnerable, what is the value of heritage to people, what ranges of options are available for taking action, and who should be involved in the decision-making process?

This is what we set out to do in the Learning from Loss programme. During a twelve-day fieldtrip and series of workshops over 100 participants comprised of researchers and practitioners from the US and Scotland, working alongside community stakeholders, used their collective expertise and experience in threatened coastal archaeological heritage and carved stone monuments to examine the issues.

The following summary distils the numerous debates and structured conversations held during the site visits and workshops[1].

Key findings for end user / policy communities

The threat

- A growing body of evidence shows that the acceleration of natural erosive processes as a result of climate change is affecting heritage now and is likely to increase in the near future resulting in greater loss of heritage. Active management as a result of informed partnership decision making is needed because a 'do nothing' approach and loss of heritage by default will not be publically acceptable.

Prioritisation, significance and roles

- Due to the large number of sites and monuments at risk, a methodology for prioritising action is needed. In a heritage at risk context, vulnerability should be a key prioritisation criterion, together with intrinsic archaeological value to create longlists of priority sites. These can be further refined into shortlists of priorities for action by considering economic potential, community value and potential for knowledge creation.

[1] All programme outputs available on https://www.scottishinsight.ac.uk/Programmes/Scotland2030/LearningfromLoss.aspx

- Longlists informed by expert knowledge, with community knowledge playing a greater role in shortlisting for action was an approach which was widely supported.
- The resilience of values in relation to change to the heritage asset could also be a fruitful approach in developing prioritisation methodology.
- A prioritisation methodology needs to have a mechanism to account for the many sites where significance is as yet unknown.

Taking action

- Letting a site go is acceptable as long as it is an informed decision. The action of monitoring heritage at risk was articulated in many discussions as inferring respectful or mindful loss of heritage, which is more acceptable than careless loss.
- In the case of carved stone heritage, retaining the stone *in situ*, even if it is more difficult to manage deterioration, was the preferred option. This reflects the importance of place and context for heritage assets which was very strongly expressed across the board.
- Construction of coastal defences to protect eroding coastal sites was at best seen as a means of buying time to develop other mitigation options. The exception to this was if human remains were being eroded.
- More funding is needed now either from the reallocation of existing budgets or through additional resources to prepare for accelerated heritage loss in the near future.

Practice and communication

- Heritage managers have a keen awareness of the issues and desire for partnership decision-making but practice often lags behind understanding and aspiration.
- Good communication bridging national perspective with local interest is essential. Communication failures resulting in poor outcomes locally have very long-lasting impacts.
- An 'Ask First' inspired culture of practice by heritage managers could improve communication and the success of partnership decision-making.
- Much of the burden and expectation to take action falls (in Scotland) upon Historic Environment Scotland and Local Authorities. The model of embedding public-focused clusters of expertise in academic institutions, (e.g. SCAPE/University of St Andrews and FPAN across all five Florida Universities), has proved successful in positively tackling the problem through awareness raising and public involvement.

An account of the insights resulting from the programme

Assessing the threats

More extreme weather as a result of climate change, along with relative sea level rise and increased wave heights accelerate the natural erosive processes that act upon all tangible elements of the historic environment. For carved stone heritage this could result in thresholds of severe or total loss of fabric being reached more quickly as a result of more active physical, chemical and biological weathering. For coastal heritage, extreme erosional events are likely to become more frequent. The sensitivity of heritage sites or assets to these risks will be very different according to their type, scale, complexity and location. Carved stone heritage and coastal heritage provided good contrasting examples to explore some of these issues.

In every site visit and workshop discussion, threats due to human factors such as neglect, poor management, vandalism and anti-social behaviour were recognised as posing an often more immediate threat to heritage than natural processes. These are the result of wider economic or societal issues and so can be particularly challenging to address locally.

The diversity of sites we encountered highlighted an issue of parity between risk assessments dealing with natural erosive processes. Risk assessment is relative and will vary according to the management context in which it is carried out. However, the same language is used to describe what could be very different levels of threat. This presents problems when comparing or amalgamating the results of different surveys, where a high risk site within one assessment may be considered low risk in another.

Prioritisation and significance

The large number of places demanding attention outstrips currently available resources, meaning that a system for prioritising action is needed. How to prioritise brings to the fore questions around site significance and decision making.

In the context of heritage at risk, vulnerability came out strongly as an essential first stage of any system of prioritisation. Here, issues of parity between different vulnerability or risk assessments were highlighted in discussions.

The other variable in the equation is an assessment of significance. Traditionally, significance has been understood as the intrinsic value of a site for scientific or historical interests. This includes criteria such as rarity, condition and research potential. The process of legal designation (e.g. scheduling and listing) rests heavily upon determining intrinsic value, but simply using existing lists of designated heritage does not present a short-cut to identifying all sites that are significant, because not all significant sites are designated. Additionally, some places are strongly suspected to be of national significance but a lack of work to characterise such sites means their significance is unquantified.

To overcome these problems, it was felt that sites that exhibit potential, but where there is not enough information to make an informed judgement, should be included in some way when creating prioritised list, indicating that at a minimum, further assessment is needed.

One way to produce, in a relatively rapid manner, a 'longlist' list of priority sites, is to assign numerical scores to a site's intrinsic value (or potential value) and to its vulnerability to natural processes. Multiplying these produces a score that allows relative priority to be assigned.

In a further stage, where action is being recommended, additional values, informed by local communities could be considered to refine the list. In our discussions community stakeholders highlighted social values in terms of potential for economic benefit, activities that contributed to improved social capital, learning and knowledge creation, and community esteem. However, it was recognised that not all 'significant' places have a community. This doesn't necessarily make a site less significant and underlines the importance of careful weighting of criteria in prioritisation.

An alternative approach assesses the resilience of values associated with the heritage asset. When assessing resilience, the value is considered in the context of change; meaning that places where the value remains at the same level despite change have a higher resilience, while those where the value falls have a lower resilience, and are thus a higher priority.

All three values can rise or fall; and an increase in one value, (for example, a better understanding of intrinsic value) can prompt a virtuous circle where the other values grow. This means that any outcomes of a prioritisation exercise needs to be kept under review.

Options for taking action

As no human agency is directly responsible for damage caused by natural processes, there is no clear responsibility to act in the majority of cases. However, amongst the communities consulted, there is a public expectation and desire for heritage loss to be actively mitigated in some way. The main options for heritage at risk are protection *in situ*; physical relocation; undertaking work aimed at preservation by record; and allowing the heritage asset to be let go. These options are not mutually exclusive, for example recording work can be done in advance of abandonment; and alternative courses of action can be undertaken for different areas of the same site.

With regard to carved stone heritage, most programme participants felt that, wherever possible, preservation *in situ* was the preferred option. The importance of retaining place and context was strongly expressed across the board. Many monuments are of a size that some form of protection can be given to mitigate the effects of natural processes, for

example, the erection of permanent or seasonal shelters[2]. We looked at examples of stones moved inside for conservation reasons, but it was clear that this course of action had to be weighed up against providing access to the monument, which is especially important for local communities[3]; and ensuring that changes in environmental conditions do not have unintended adverse consequences[4].

Archaeological sites threatened by coastal erosion can be more complex and larger scale. Although it is possible to provide physical protection by building a sea wall, coastal defences are expensive to both construct and maintain, and can exacerbate erosion elsewhere. Initially, the perception amongst some heritage managers in the team was of public demand for coastal defences to preserve eroding sites *in situ*. However, our discussions showed that there is widespread public understanding of why preservation *in situ* is rarely advocated for sites threatened by coastal processes because of expense and sustainability. The exception to this was in sites where human remains were being eroded and exposed[5].

A conscious decision to let go of a site was thought to be acceptable as long as this resulted from a process of informed decision making. Community participants were open to digital documentation approaches, and interventions resulting in knowledge creation and community benefit, even if the site was ultimately lost. Monitoring was also valued as a response as showing attention and respect for the heritage. This concept of showing respect to the heritage by paying attention to it also extended to showing respect to the people that created the sites and to the present communities in which they are located.

Many discussions agreed there is an urgent need to work on threatened sites now. While prioritisation work is ongoing, practical action at some sites will raise awareness and help avert community frustration and disappointment.

Decision making and practice

The importance of partnership decision-making between heritage managers and local stakeholders was universally expressed. This acknowledges the role of expert knowledge in assessing significance and evaluating threat and the role of community knowledge in assessing local significance, which encompasses economic potential and a range of social values.

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[2] e.g. as a conservation practice by HES for the Aberlemno Pictish stones

[3] e.g. at St Vigeans. The stones are in a much better environment for their long-term conservation, but this has caused local tension because of limited accessibility.

[4] 4 e.g. St Andrews cathedral, where the damp conditions and lack of air circulation in the cathedral museum has accelerated deterioration of some of the re-located stones.

[5] e.g. Chapel and eroding medieval burial ground at Newark Bay, Deerness. Here the local community have installed sandbags to cover up exposed human bone and (temporarily) prevent it being washed onto the shore.

The enormous benefit of relationships of trust between experts and local stakeholders built up over time was recognised, but also the reality of change in the composition of communities and organisations. People move in and out of areas, groups and alliances alter, members of staff get new responsibilities, and organisational priorities shift. An awareness of volunteer fatigue and over-reliance on the goodwill of community groups is also very important. Communities need to be supported though training and funding if they are expected to take an active role in local stewardship of heritage at risk.[6] Embedding public-focused clusters of research and practice expertise within academic institutions for mutual benefit (as seen in the Florida Public Archaeology Network across Florida Universities and SCAPE in St Andrews University) was thought to be a successful model and provides examples of effectively involving the public in heritage research and action.

Colleagues in Local Authorities and Historic Environment Scotland, (HES) have a keen awareness of the issues outlined above, but if partnership decision-making is a serious aim, some shifts in organisational practice may be needed. There are many good models to draw inspiration from, e.g. the principles of Ask First.[7]

Funding also needs to be addressed. There is no 'developer' to pay for actions at sites being lost through natural processes and practically most demands fall on relatively small budgets within HES. There is a pressing need for additional dedicated resources to get a handle on how to deal with the loss of heritage now in the context of the situation worsening because of impacts of climate change. One way of achieving this would be through a review and re-allocation of existing budgets.

Main outcomes and (expected) impact

The immediate outcomes of the programme are a series of multi-media resources created by programme participants. These include a film, blogs, online publications and a story map, and are being used by the team to share and communicate insights from the programme amongst our own networks, and are a resource for a wider audience to learn about and apply the findings in their own work. These are all available via the SUII website (https://www.scottishinsight.ac.uk/Programmes/Scotland2030/LearningfromLoss.aspx)

Detailed notes of workshop discussions have been shared amongst workshop participants and written insights from core programme participants made available amongst the team.

Outcomes from the Learning from Loss programme are already shaping the HES Archaeology Strategy and featured in the first HES magazine-style report *'Celebrating Archaeology in Scotland 2018'*.

[6] as demonstrated in the work of the Edinburgh World Heritage Graveyards Project
[7] http://www.nrm.wa.gov.au/media/86488/ask-first.pdf

In a session on climate change, at the European Association of Archaeology conference, held in Barcelona in September 2018, the Learning from Loss film was used as a springboard to start a discussion amongst the international participants on heritage threatened by climate change.

Team members were invited to contribute to a workshop for the Scottish heritage sector in November 2018 coordinated by Built Environment Forum, Scotland to discuss methods of prioritisation and directing resources to threatened heritage sites.

Planned follow up activities

Learning from Loss has stimulated a great deal of interest in many countries, resulting in invitations to a number of conferences and workshops to share insights about the programme. In 2019, US Florida-based members of the core team are speaking about Learning from Loss at the Society for Historical Archaeology conference in Missouri and at the Society for American Archaeology conference in New Mexico. Learning from Loss will be the subject of Tom Dawson's keynote at Keeping History Above Water conference in Florida and at the Canadian Archaeological Association conference in Quebec, where he is also a discussant on a panel looking at climate change impacts to the historic environment. Ellie Graham will attend the Tidally United conference of the Florida Public Archaeology Network in August. The team will present results at the European Association of Archaeologists conference in Bern and the World Monuments Conference SEA CHANGE: Managing the challenge of protecting coastal heritage in the face of climate change in Blackpool.

These all provide opportunities for connections made during the programme to continue to grow and develop and to reach out to wider networks.