

HUMAN NATURES

The Worlds We Make. The Worlds We Break. The Way We Are.

**Touring Exhibition
Interpretation Plan**

MAGNET

Museums and Galleries Network for Exhibition Touring



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**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

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PART ONE

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

HUMAN NATURES is a touring exhibition that will explore how humans shape the natural world, for better or worse.

The exhibition will examine our complicated relationship with nature through the lenses of need, greed, desire and meaning-making.

It will invite visitors to imagine new ways of being together with nature; as a species, within our different cultures and communities, and as individuals.



THE EXHIBITION PARTNERSHIP

This exhibition has grown out of a partnership between five museums and museum services supported by Art Fund and Arts Council England as part of the Museums and Galleries Network for Exhibition Touring (MAGNET).

The partners are pooling resources, collections, and the distinct perspectives of their respective curatorial teams and local communities to tell a shared story about our species and our relationship with nature.

The exhibition will tour five venues from September 2025 to June 2028:

Derby Museum and Art Gallery
 Manchester Museum
 Great North Museum: Hancock
 Horniman Museum & Gardens
 Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery



KEY MESSAGES

The exhibition aims to communicate four key messages:

1. Humans are a force of nature

More than any other species alive today, we have transformed the planet. Some of that change is irreversible.

2. Human-altered nature is a mirror of our species

Everywhere we look on our planet we can see reflections of humanity, our needs and desires, and how we try to fulfil them.

3. There is more than one way to be human

We can choose how we want to coexist with other life on Earth, and how to fulfill our human needs and desires.

4. Some ways of being human harm nature more than others

If we want to protect nature, we need to be specific about the causes of harm, and think about who or what needs to change.



WHO IS 'WE'? – A QUESTIONING APPROACH

The exhibition will sometimes use the words 'we' and 'us' to talk about humans and how we've transformed nature.

But it will also actively question the content and meaning of those words.

After all, humans are all different. And 'we' is a slippery word.

A farmer with 50 chickens and a business that sells 1,000,000 chickens each week touch nature in different ways. Here in England, families use 9 times more electricity each day than families in Bangladesh. Companies that sell potentially harmful products like oil and petrol are driven by different needs and desires than the people who use their goods.

As visitors journey through Human Natures, displays should help them think carefully about the humans they meet along the way.

What's different, special or specific about them? Why are they the way they are? How does their way of being and thinking impact the planet?



A STORY ABOUT PEOPLE

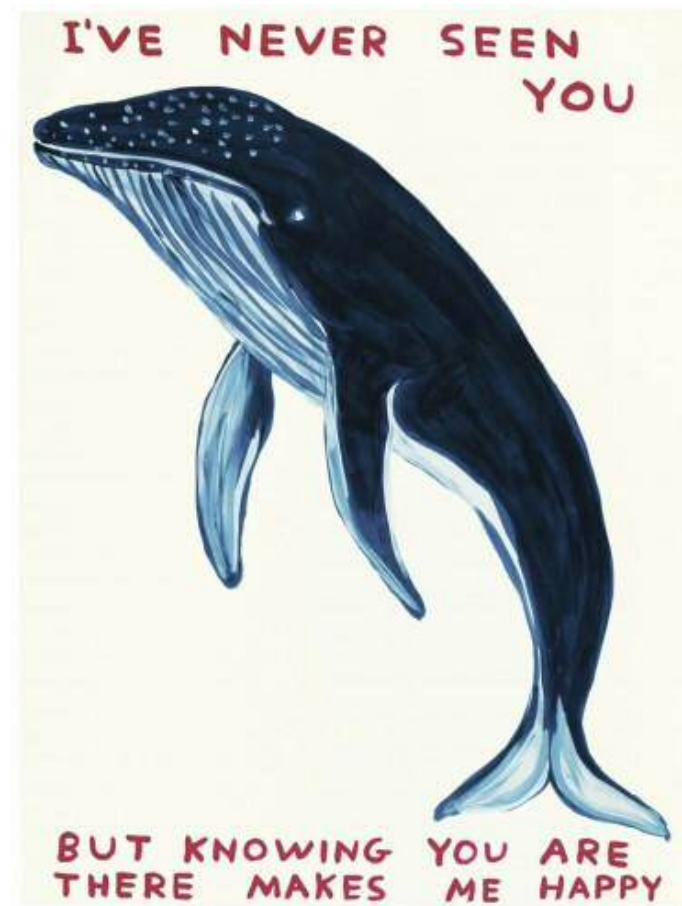
Our audiences today encounter a great many stories about environmental change, environmental crisis and the future of our planet.

Some are more technical. Many are structured around pairings of problems and solutions. Often, climate stories are marked by a strong sense of urgency, and powerful peaks and troughs of hope and despair.

We want Human Natures to be a little different. At its heart, it's a story about people; the needs, desires, norms and values they live by, and the cultures and societies they live within.

We want to see humanity in its complexity, rather than rushing to solve problems. And, where we do talk about conservation and problem solving, we want to think about why and how people care and think about nature, as much as what they choose to do about it.

Note. David Shrigley's *I've Never Seen You...* is just for inspiration. A mood image, and sadly not a part of our combined collection.



TARGET AUDIENCES

The exhibition is aimed at four target audiences:

Core

Families

Families with children aged around 10 and older

The exhibition needs to offer surprise and a bit of attitude for older kids approaching independence.

It needs tactile, easy ways in for their younger friends and siblings.

It needs fun, silly, accessible moments for their adults to enjoy.

School groups

Groups from upper KS2, but especially KS3 and above.

Scientists are a natural audience, but we also aim to forge connections with young people with passions for the arts and humanities.

The exhibition should draw on diverse subject perspectives on what it means to be human.

Independent, climate-conscious young people

Teens aged around 14+ who are making their own choices about how to spend time. They care deeply about the natural world and are familiar with the basics of climate science and ecology.

The exhibition will tell offbeat stories and centre young people's voices and perspectives to try to connect with this audience.

Stretch

Students

University and college students local to the five host venues. Manchester Museum and Great North Museum: Hancock in particular – as university museums – expect to reach larger numbers of students.

Displays may evolve subtly at these locations, e.g. to welcome this more mature demographic.

AIMS

We want visitors to...

Think

About our relationship to nature as a species, as individuals, and as members of different groups and cultures

About the value of nature, why they care about it, and what they want for the future

About what it means to be human and why we are the way we are

Feel

A sense of connection to nature

A sense of awe at the complexity of nature, especially our place in it

A bit strange – perhaps that humans seem more unusual than they did before

Free and motivated to define their own way of being with nature

Do

Have fun

Talk to each other and us

NARRATIVE: OVERVIEW

The exhibition has four main parts and a brief coda

Part One

Making Nature

Discover plants, animals and entire ecosystems designed, engineered and otherwise transformed by humans – sometimes deliberately, and sometimes entirely by accident.

Part Two

Making Ourselves Comfortable

Look at the way we clothe ourselves and ask what makes us 'comfortable' – from the feel of certain fabrics, to the values our clothes project.

Consider the ways that need, greed and desire shape our use of natural resources. Can we ever have enough?

Part Three

Making a Mess

Explore vast landscapes and ecosystems shaped by mining, forest clearance, construction, and waste disposal.

Experience the aggregate impact of humans on the Earth.

Part Four

Making a Difference

Meet people and communities from many different walks of life, trying to make a positive difference to nature.

Consider the different values and priorities that move them, and the very different ways they've found to take action.

Part Five

Making Our Future

Reflect on our future together on the Earth.

NARRATIVE: EXPANDED SUMMARY

1. Making Nature	2. Making Ourselves Comfortable	3. Making a Mess	4. Making a Difference	5. Making Our Future
Chicken Learn how humans turned the Red Junglefowl into the modern 'broiler' chicken and built an industrial ecosystem around it	Martha Meet an early 20th Century pub landlady dressed head to toe in furs and feathers furnished by the British Empire. Explore alternative ways of clothing ourselves, and consider the values we attach to the materials.	Holes Cast an eye over all the useful things we extract from the Earth and the scars we leave behind	Kakapos Meet communities working to save a treasured cultural icon	Reflect on the future of humanity, the future of nature, and the ways in which the two are intertwined.
Cats Discover cats, the fish we farm for them, the clay we mine for them, and their knack for killing songbirds			Dung Beetles Meet farmers fighting to secure safer dung for beetles	
			Pangolins Meet activists challenging illegal trafficking	
			Toads Meet scientists breeding rare toads in their lab	
			Air Pollution Meet parents tackling air pollution on their streets	
Forests Stroll through a human-made 'natural' environment, built for biodiversity, furniture, magazines and loo roll	The Great Acceleration Enter the world of mass production and fast fashion, where clothes cost pennies and are tossed in the bin after a few uses. Discover one alternative – making do and mending, and ask how much is enough?	Heaps Explore consumerism, landfill, and the surprising ecologies of waste landscapes.	Plastic Waste Meet lawyers fighting corporate waste	
			Climate Change Meet activists campaigning to end fossil fuel use	

NARRATIVE PRINCIPLES

We aim for every story we tell to have the following qualities:

Unexpected

Stories will provide uncommon perspectives on ordinary things.

They will reveal a world of sometimes surreal complexity beneath the smooth surface of everyday life.

For example: Cat Litter – in order to let cats to do their business inside, thousands of humans are organised into a workforce that stripmines clay and sells it by the bagful. Once used, litter is binned and piled into landfill by the truckload.

Brave

Stories won't hide the uglier things humans do.

They will try to look at our species honestly without fear or favour.

For example: Chicken – we will create honest displays about the realities of the poultry industry, including potentially unsettling aspects like mass slaughter – though always with an eye to audiences' sensitivities. **(For example, this might include the use of trigger warnings.)**

Relatable

The stories we tell will be human stories. They won't judge or condemn people.

As often as possible, we will include the voices and perspectives of real people – especially young people.

For example: Fast Fashion – how do young people think about sustainability in deciding what to wear?

The human dimensions of these problems – e.g. pressures to be green, be individual, save money and look good – are particularly important.

Specific

Our stories won't make generalisations about humanity.

They will be specific about the people, communities and institutions involved in given contexts. They will acknowledge inequalities of power and impact.

For example: Landfill – we will look at throwaway culture from both sides. Consumers have some agency, but arguably far less than global corporations that build-in obsolescence to their products.

Here, a dedicated layer of script might interrogate terms like 'we' and 'us'.

Active

Our stories involve the visitor, asking them to make judgements and share their opinions and experiences.

For example: Part Four - Making a Difference: visitors will be invited to consider what strategies for environmental change they find the most persuasive.

EXPERIENCE: COLLECTIONS

The exhibition will be primarily made up of objects, drawing on the strengths of our partners' respective collections. Together, we care for collections covering vast subject areas including, but not limited to:

Natural history and conservation

Zoology and botany

Paleontology

Conservation

Ancient civilisations

Social history

Industrial history

Agriculture

Maritime history

Trade

The Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution

Histories of technology, design, and making

Anthropology

The British Empire

Rats



EXPERIENCE: COLLECTIONS

Most of the objects we will tour are relatively small, and rather antique in nature.

Many of our visitors will have walked past hundreds of museum cases over-stuffed with these kinds of objects.

So, a key challenge for design is to give these artefacts the space they need to sing.



EXPERIENCE: TOOLKIT (1 of 5)

We anticipate that collections displays will be augmented with a range of other objects and media, including:



Props

Low cost purchases to evoke the contemporary world where collections are lacking. Props can be especially valuable where they bring humour and help to reframe everyday life



Film: Personal Stories

Film will be used primarily to introduce a human dimension and expert perspective to stories. We imagine that a series of commissioned shorts will showcase the work and inner lives of, for example, conservationists, landfill workers and chicken welfare specialists.

EXPERIENCE: TOOLKIT (2 of 5)

We anticipate that collections displays will be augmented with a range of other objects and media, including:



Soundscapes and Smellscapes

Many of the stories the exhibition tells can be enriched with the addition of a soundscape layer, for example evoking the sounds of a vibrant (human-made) forest. Smellscapes could add fun to particular topics, such as landfill



Large Scale Graphics

The exhibition features several stories (e.g. 'Forests', 'Holes', 'Heaps') where collections alone will struggle to recreate or generate a sense of scale. Large scale photography or illustrations can evoke expansive human-made landscapes.

EXPERIENCE: TOOLKIT (3 of 5)

We anticipate that collections displays will be augmented with a range of other objects and media, including:



Lo-fi tactile models, interactives and handling objects

Low value objects (e.g. quarried stone, textiles, soil samples) may be presented for handling or examination under the microscope. Tactile models, puzzles and games may be particularly helpful in explaining complex landscapes and structures like landfill sites.

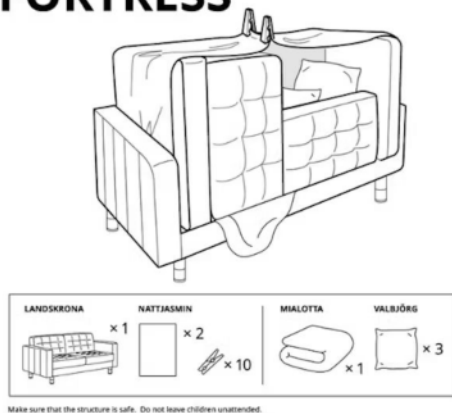
Simple, playful feedback and voting mechanisms

The exhibition should incorporate playful ways for visitors to express a view. Some should be open-ended. Others might dramatise difficult choices with simple voting, e.g. How best to spend £1 on conservation: habitat restoration, captive breeding, research etc.

EXPERIENCE: TOOLKIT (4 of 5)

We anticipate that collections displays will be augmented with a range of other objects and media, including:

FÖRTRESS



Custom Illustrations

Illustrations may have a key role in explaining complex processes (for example, unpacking the supply chains and industrial ecosystems that make up the poultry industry)



Co-Created Commissions

For each part of the exhibition, there is scope for community artist commissions to develop works with young people exploring their relationship to nature and the themes raised by storytelling. These might take many forms. [Above: It's Called Fashion (Look it Up), Merthyr Tydfil, 2016. © Clémentine Schneidermann and Charlotte James]

EXPERIENCE: TOOLKIT (5 of 5)

We anticipate that collections displays will be augmented with a range of other objects and media, including:



Large Scale Networks

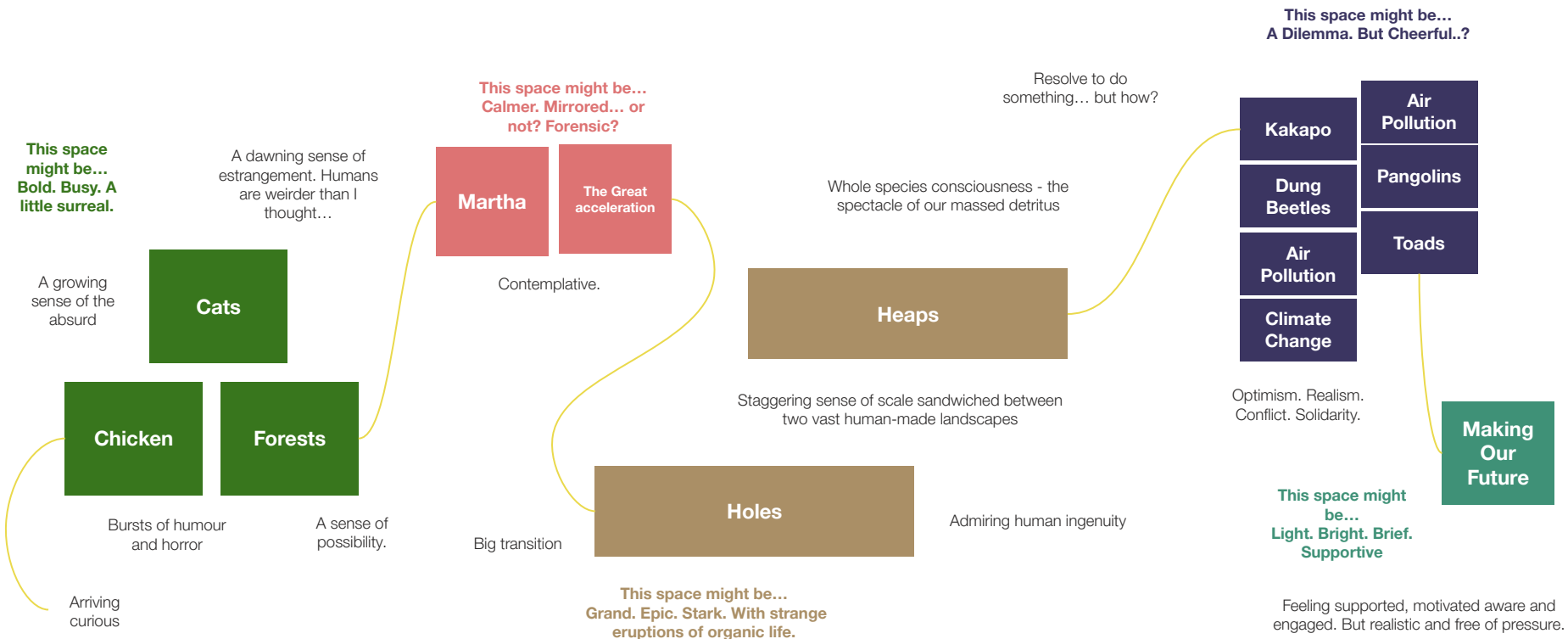
We have a wonderful opportunity to create richly narrative networks, evoking larger human-made landscapes. This could include using waste and recycled materials as structural elements, e.g. bales of waste clothing, compressed plastic bricks, etc. To reduce the overall tour load, these might be locally sourced at venue.

Art Loans

Exhibition partners have already identified several works which may be available, and would enrich displays, e.g. [*Coat of Hopes*](#), shown above. These may vary from venue to venue depending on local agreements.

EXPERIENTIAL SCORE

The exhibition should support a rich emotional and intellectual journey with highs and low, moments of joy and humour, sadness and hope, reflection and reverie. The sketch below gives a high level sense of that journey at this stage of development.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION

We aim to develop an exhibition which is:

1. **Scalable**
2. **Lightweight**
3. **Flexible**
4. **Creative with materials**
5. **Rooted**

Each of those values is explored in turn below.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION

1. SCALABLE

The exhibition will tour between five venues with widely varying spaces and capacities, from c. 150 square metres to c. 400 square meters.

Designers should consider how displays can grow and shrink accordingly.

Three clear options at this stage are:

1. Creative spacing and compression of displays
2. Scaling down individual stories (i.e. the same stories are told, but with fewer objects each, and perhaps with fewer sub-sections).
3. Adding relevant large scale installations by local artists, e.g. [LITMUS](#) (Manchester, image opposite)



CONSIDERATIONS FOR DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION

2. LIGHTWEIGHT

The exhibition will be transported by road.

For cost and environmental reasons, it is essential to maintain as light a footprint as possible.

Each host venue is able to provide a range of existing cases and other display hardware. As a general rule, these will not travel between venues.

Designs should consider how best to work with these varying furniture sets and systems as the exhibition tours.

Designers should consider the relative environmental costs and benefits of transporting exhibition materials, as opposed to building or borrowing anew in situ for each leg.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION

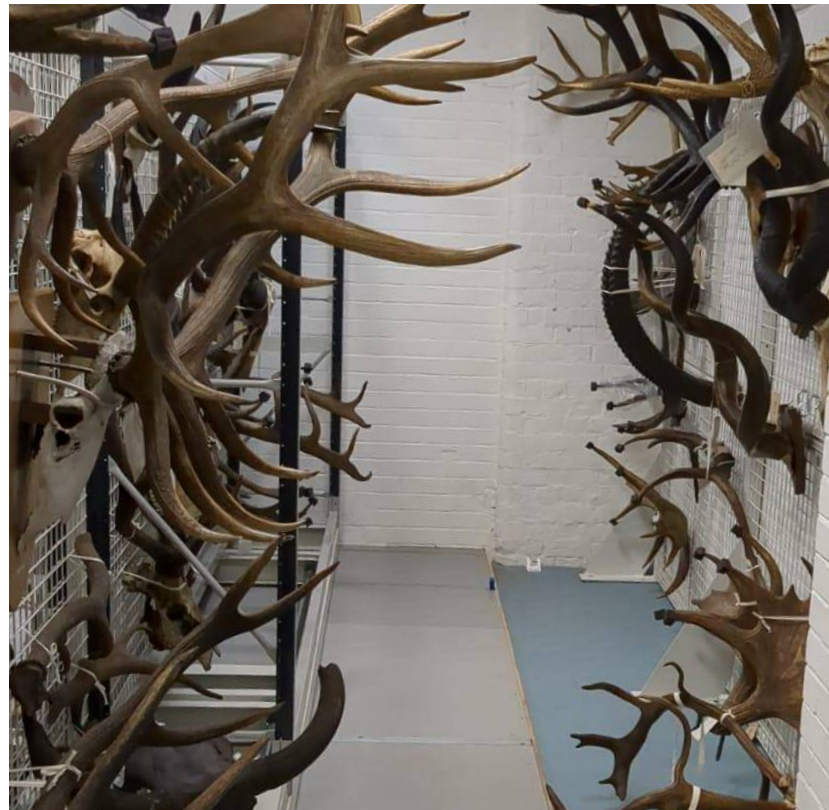
3. FLEXIBLE

We expect up to 75% of objects on display to rotate between venues. For example, where two collections have taxidermy collections, these would be swapped in for one another as the exhibition moves.

Substituting items across the tour legs will help reduce the transport burden and hence the exhibition's carbon footprint.

It is also foreseeable in smaller venues that certain stories will be dramatically scaled back.

As a consequence of these factors, exhibition designs must accommodate perhaps hundreds of small changes in terms of the dimensions of cases and objects, as well as changing labels. As we change objects, we will also need to modify tombstone text as a minimum – so it is essential to have a labelling system that allow for simple editing and reprinting.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION

4. CREATIVE WITH MATERIALS

The exhibition team wishes to explore opportunities to include waste and recycled materials in the exhibition design, and to make these an active part in telling stories and communicating key messages.

In particular, we would be keen to build partnerships with waste collection facilities and similar in and around our respective regions.

How can the exhibition restore value and meaning to materials and items that have been discarded elsewhere?



CONSIDERATIONS FOR DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION

5. ROOTED

We aim to create a strong sense of connection to place with each passing leg of the tour.

The exhibition design should be sufficiently open that it can accommodate new products of audience co-creation, local commissions and object loans as it tours.

Where possible, it should be possible to localise content and displays.

For example, mass object displays - a likely component of the Heaps and Holes stories - might be updated as they tour to reflect local histories of production and consumption.



PART TWO

STORIES

PART ONE

MAKING NATURE

CHICKEN



CHICKEN

Overview

The chicken (*Gallus gallus domesticus*) is a powerful symbol of humanity's transformation of nature and our complex relationship with the world around us.

Over millennia, humans have reshaped this small Asian jungle bird, which once thrived in forests and reproduced modestly into an industrial organism engineered to meet our demands. Today's chicken grows unnaturally fast, lays hundreds of eggs annually, and exists in vast, controlled systems that make its natural life unimaginable.

This transformation represents humanity's ingenuity and ability to manipulate nature for efficiency, creating an affordable protein source that feeds billions. At the same time, these systems generate pollution, contribute to habitat destruction, and foster conditions for disease outbreaks. Ethical dilemmas abound, from poor animal welfare to environmental damage.

The chicken forces us to confront how far we'll go to prioritise human needs over nature's balance.



CHICKEN

Key Objects

- Various stuffed chickens
- Mounted taxidermy of Red Junglefowl (*Gallus gallus Linnaeus* – the wild ancestor of the modern chicken).
- Various Items related to chickens in agriculture, including egg boxes, faux eggs, feeding items, and poultry breeding magazines.
- A pair of spurs worn by fighting cocks, featuring leather leg covers with metal spikes.

Other Opportunities

- Interview with Dr Fritha Langford, Animal Welfare researcher, Newcastle University Department of Agriculture.
- Archival film
 - UK chicken farming;
 - The red Junglefowl in its natural habitat
- Examples of contemporary advertising for chicken / chicken products
- Examples of chicken in popular culture, e.g. Chicken Run, The Pengest Munch



CHICKEN

Learning Objectives

1. Understand how humanity has transformed the chicken from a forest-dwelling bird into an industrial organism to meet global food demands.
2. Reflect on humanity's ability to manipulate nature to increase efficiency and meet global food needs,
3. Be able to weigh the ethical issues surrounding modern chicken farming, including animal welfare, environmental impacts, basic human need for food, and more complex cultural needs.



CHICKEN

Other Objects

- (DBY) (1986-1677/6.1): Ceramic Egg—a 65 mm ceramic egg used to encourage hens to lay eggs.
- (DBY) (1996-270/50): Lantern Slide—depicts the Uttoxeter Egg Depot circa 1913, showing a group of ladies, men, and one child.
- (DBY) (2004-1053/15): Leaflet—details regulations concerning poultry, specifically Statutory Instruments 1952 No. 437: The Poultry Pens, Fittings and Receptacles (Disinfection) Order 1952. (153 x 243 mm)
- (NFK) (KILLM: 2014.41.1): Drawing (c. 1920)—a preparatory sketch for a cockerel galloper fairground ride, created by the King's Lynn company, Savages. A finished cockerel galloper is on permanent display at Lynn Museum.
- (NFK) (NWHCM: 1908.22.133.13): Medieval Pilgrim Badge—a 19 x 20 mm lead badge in the shape of a small cockerel, likely associated with St. Peter, found at King's Lynn.
- (NFK): Chicken Bones and Pot Chicken Feeders—archaeological fragments from various historical periods, reflecting chickens' role in past societies.
- (NFK) (NWHCM: 1894.76.713): Roman Figurine—a copper alloy figurine of a cockerel, found at Caistor St. Edmund, highlighting chickens' presence in Roman-era Britain. [View object.](#)
- (MCR) (BB.8985.6): Spirit Body Part (Head)—preserved head of a domestic fowl (*Gallus gallus*), part of the Phasianidae family.
- (MCR) (BB.8819.333): Egg of Red Junglefowl (*Gallus gallus* Linnaeus, 1758)—from Asia, specifically India, representing the wild ancestor of the domestic chicken.

CATS



CATS

Overview

Unlike dogs, which were actively bred, cats likely domesticated themselves, drawn to early settlements by the abundance of prey. Over time, humans and cats formed a mutually beneficial partnership: humans provide shelter and cats control pests.

As humans have spread globally, so have cats. While they are beloved for their comfort and charm, they are also condemned as invasive predators responsible for devastating wildlife - in particular bird populations, and they come with a huge material footprint.

Efforts to move cats indoors have led to the mass production of cat litter, often produced by strip mining which destroys ecosystems. As obligate carnivores, cats could not survive in their current numbers without industrial systems dedicated to providing them with cheap meat.

Humanity's relationship with cats highlights our tendency to value species that serve our needs while disregarding the consequences of their introduction.

My cat watching me clean out
it's litter box



CATS

Key Objects

- Taxidermy mount of a domestic cat (*Felis catus*), dated 1758.
- Egyptian mummified cat, possibly from the Late Period. It features white bandages, some with green stripes, and 'eyes' and 'nose' sewn onto the face. It is housed in the bottom half of a wooden coffin (410 x 105 mm). Such mummies were often offerings to Bastet, the cat goddess.
- Egyptian amulets, depicting the cat goddess Bastet or cats.
- Egyptian mummified cat in painted cartonnage with a string of beads. The cartonnage is a composite of fragments from at least two mummified human remains.



Other Opportunities

- Props: cat litter and raw material samples;
- Examples of popular cat foods and branding
- Cat memes / online cat culture



CATS

Learning Objectives

1. Understand how the global spread of humans and cats has influenced ecosystems.
2. Understand that cats – as they live now, and at their present population levels – are dependent on human industrial systems for survival.
3. Reflect on humanity's shifting perception of cats, from reverence to ambivalence, and appreciate their dual nature as companions and often invasive predators.
4. Consider how human values shape our treatment of cats and their role in conservation debates, considering their impact on wildlife.



CATS

Other Objects

Pets

- (NCL) (NEWHM: 2023.H21) taxidermy mount of a domestic dog with a brown and white piebald coat, likely a spaniel. The mount depicts the dog in a resting position as though asleep.
- (DBY) (1979-307), cat skull measuring 45 x 56 x 84 mm
- (DBY) (2019-16/1) desiccated cat found in the wall of a barn at the donor's property. The house dates from circa 1825, with the barn built slightly later. The cat was discovered by builders in a rubble pile.
- (MCR) (A.2416.10) taxidermy mount of a Common Wild Cat (*Felis silvestris*), dated 1775.
- (MCR) (A.2365.1) taxidermy mount of a Common Wild Cat (*Felis silvestris*), dated 1775

Pests

- (NCL) (S0247) collection of cat skulls from multiple sources, including stray cats. Some skulls show evidence of gunshot pellet wounds, suggesting they were shot as pests
- (NCL) (S1418) Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*), found shot and hanging from a gatepost by rope in Northumberland, 1989. This crow was killed as a pest.
- (NCL) (2006.H1474) mount of a House Sparrow, a species sometimes considered an invasive pest but also threatened and preyed on by cats.

Cat Culture

- (DBY) (2022-15/3) corn dolly in the shape of a cat, measuring 145 x 110 mm.
- (NFK) (NWHCM: 1942.53.1.60) ceramic knitting sheath from the 1830s–40s, depicting a girl holding a cat. This item is associated with childhood, home, and comfort (66 x 65 mm).
- (NFK) (NWHCM: 1973.48.1) child's circular handbag from 1928. Made of tan imitation leather, it features a moulded cat face with yellow glass eyes and an ochre silk lining (110 x 70 x 15 mm).

FOREST

A photograph of a paved road winding through a dense forest. The road is wet and reflects the bright light from the sun, which is positioned high in the sky, creating a strong lens flare. Tall, thin trees line both sides of the road, their silhouettes dark against the bright sky. The ground is covered in grass and low-lying vegetation. The overall atmosphere is serene and misty.

FOREST

Overview

Britain's forests and rural landscapes reflect the deep tensions within human nature, our evolving needs, and shifting desires.

Historically, forests were seen as spaces to be tamed, drained, or cleared. The transformation of landscapes into farmland and settlements symbolised human progress. Later, aristocrats reimagined the countryside, crafting pseudo-natural landscapes, demonstrating wealth and control while reflecting romantic ideals of harmony with nature.

Today, forests are valued as wildlife havens and natural spaces in an increasingly urban world. The rise of rewilding demonstrates a longing to reconnect with wilder environments. Yet, the same landscapes are shaped by industrial forestry. Intensive farming creates vast monocultures that serve economic needs but degrade biodiversity.

Britain's forests show that human desires for control, beauty, and sustenance are intertwined, often in conflict, with our yearning to live in harmony with nature.



FOREST

Key Objects

- Bronze Age and Neolithic axe heads, associated with early deforestation in the UK and the beginnings of farming
- Timber sections from Eucalyptus trees suggest plantation forests cultivated for paper pulp
- Costumes related to the Women's Land Army Timber Corps, who worked at Thetford Forest. The forest was planted post-WWI due to timber demands during WWII
- Red Squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*) skin, collected from Kielder Forest in Northumberland, highlights a rare native species that thrives in commercial forests

Other Opportunities

- Props: glossy magazines, toilet roll, etc representing paper industry
- Possible approach to Wildlife Trusts/Environmental Records Centre/Forestry Commission



FOREST

Learning Objectives

1. Understand that humanity's relationship to forests has changed many times over the course of history
2. Understand the range of ways in which humans have perceived forests: in cultural, economic, aesthetic, ethical and environmental terms.
3. Be aware of large human impacts on forests, such as logging, agriculture and urbanisation, and the environmental impact of these including habitat loss, flooding, invasive species and pollution.
4. Understand that forests have essential material values - ecosystem services, such as providing materials, regulating water cycles, and maintaining biodiversity and mitigating climate change



FOREST

Other Objects

- Taxidermy woodland birds.
- Specimens of animals and plants associated with different types of woodland
- C&T collection contains various clothing items related to hunting and gamekeeping
GRSRM: 2011.12.6 - informal sketch from 1943 by Doris Tomasin, depicting members of the Women's Timber Corps sleeping. They worked at Thetford Forest and other locations
- Tools related to hedgelaying, including saws, gloves, and other implements.
- Black-and-white photo negative shows a man standing with an ancient oak tree, illustrating the care of ancient woodlands.
- Black-and-white photo negative from Manchester shows young trees planted in rows, representing man-made woodlands and farming trees as crops (MCR).
- DBY: Ornate oak chair, with plaque attached: All the oak in this chair was derived from the demolition of the Wilmot timber-framed almshouses in Bridge Gate, Derby in 1934. These houses were built in 1638 by Sir Robert Wilmot of Chaddesden on whose estate the oak probably grew. In the great beam appeared seven hundred annular rings so this oak is probably over one thousand years old. The original houses were brick faced in 1814
- NWHCM: 1935.34.FAP9 features a print from 1841 by Henry Ninham, titled The Thorn - Hethel. It depicts an ancient tree thought to be 900 years old, which is now the UK's smallest nature reserve, cared for by the Norfolk Wildlife Trust.
- MCR: Taxidermied hares, representative of Thetford Forest hare populations

PART TWO

MAKING OURSELVES COMFORTABLE

MARTHA



MARTHA

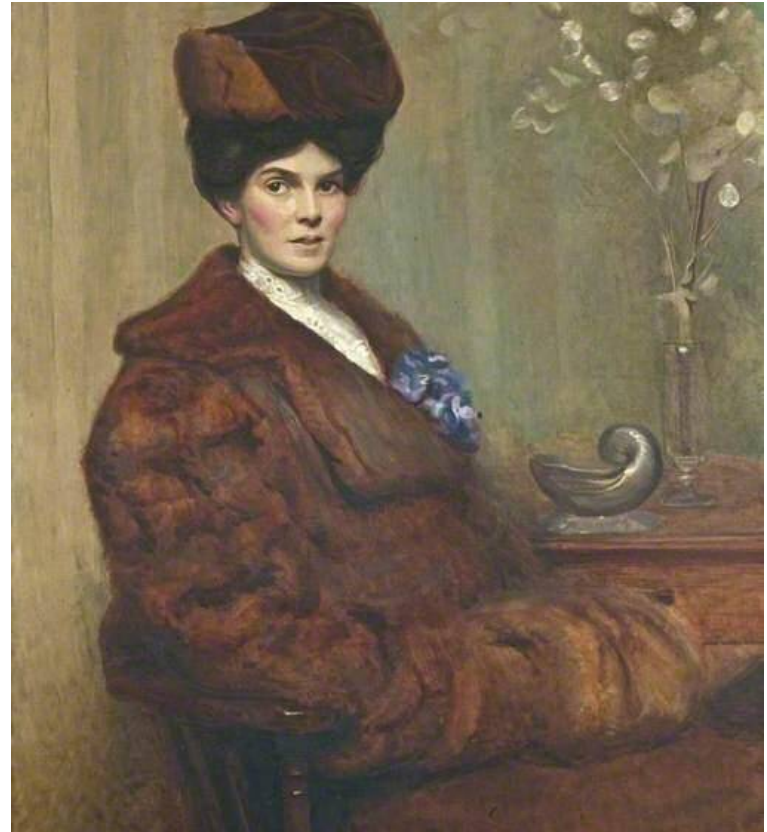
Overview

Surveying Derby's collections, this portrait of pub landlady Mrs Martha Ellen McColgan sang out. Once perhaps a proud display of ambition and social mobility, to today's viewer, it can perhaps feel unsettling: a vision of excess, animal cruelty and exploitation.

Martha's elaborate outfit reflects a time when wealth and status were shown through materials now often viewed as unethical. It speaks to a particular moment in imperial history, when Britain held an extraordinary – and destructive – grip over natural resources in almost every corner of the planet.

Industrialisation brought with it new materials, such as wool, cotton and silk. But while these fabrics entail less animal death, they are nonetheless often mass-produced at great human and environmental cost. Later, synthetics like polyester promised to replace nature's exploitation, but introduced plastics to our wardrobes.

As we study the evolution of materials we use to clothe ourselves, we see that our attempts to fix the problems of the past often create new dilemmas for the present.



MARTHA

Key Objects

- (DBY) Portrait of Martha Ellen McColgan
- Assemblage of furs, feathers and associated taxidermy specimens (see Supporting Objects list below)
- Assemblage of other materials: wool, cotton, silks, plastics

Other Opportunities

- Props: Magazines, posters, marketing materials and digital media evoking the fashion industry, and changing Ideals of glamour, beauty and sustainability.
- Anti-fur campaign materials
- A possible commissioned portrait series, or display of crowdsourced clothing: young people reflecting on the clothes they wear, and grappling with the idea of sustainability as applied to clothing and fashion.
- Opportunity to approach Fashion cohort at Derby University
- Coat of Hopes,



MARTHA

Learning Objectives

1. Reflect on the lifecycle of materials, identifying environmental and ethical problems linked to fashion, and considering sustainable alternatives.
2. Reflect on how and why attitudes to fur and other materials have evolved, and what this says about humans now and in the past.
3. Examine how our fashion choices reflect personal and societal values, balancing self-expression with environmental responsibility.
4. Understand how the fur and feather trade linked different parts of the world through supply chains, including the exploitation of natural resources and indigenous populations.



MARTHA

Other Objects

Trophies

- Kudu horn trophy on upholstered shield—a decorative hunting souvenir of a Kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*). Hunting trophies can signify status, wealth, or serve as souvenirs.
- Ocelot skin rug, 983 x 620 mm.
- Woman's handbag made from an entire crocodile—gruesome by modern standards, but historically a status symbol.
- Decorative ashtray made from juvenile crocodile heads.

Feathers

- Decorative brooch or hair ornament made from a Bird-of-Paradise—linked to the plume trade and the desire for elaborate hats.
- Taxidermy mount of an egret showing breeding plumage—also connected to the plume trade for millinery.
- Feather-covered hat from the 1960s—similar examples are available.
- Taxidermy of Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*), historically used for millinery. [View object.](#)
- Taxidermy of Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*), also linked to millinery.
- Taxidermy of Indian Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*), linked to the plume trade for hats.
- Taxidermy of Raggiana Bird-of-Paradise (*Paradisaea raggiana*), another millinery example.
- (Taxidermy of Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*), feathers once sought for hats.

MARTHA

Other Objects

Furs

- Fur and felt pillbox-shaped hat, 1940s (180 x 150 mm).
- Full-length muskrat fur coat, 1950s, custom-made for Hilda Coxhead, an RSC actress, for theatre appearances in the USA and Canada.
- Mink, stoat, and other skins/stoles.
- (Various taxidermy objects.
- Taxidermy mount of a beaver (*Castor fiber*).
- Beaver tooth in bronze binding.
- Carved and painted sea lion/beaver face mask, c. 1860s, from Northwest Coast, British Columbia. Collected by missionaries from Great Yarmouth. Many of these items were confiscated or stolen from First Nations peoples and are linked to the fur trade and colonialism.
- Child's smoked skin moccasins, embroidered with floral designs and bound with green horsehair, c. 1860s, from Northwest Coast, British Columbia. Likely Athapaskan in origin.
- Various items using fur and feathers—detailed in separate PDFs.
- Various furs

THE GREAT ACCELERATION



THE GREAT ACCELERATION

Overview

No less important than our choice of materials is our choice of how to use them and care for them. The industrial revolution transformed our attitudes to clothes and fabric.

From the beginnings of mass textile production in Manchester and Derby, humans now operate a global factory system that produces unimaginable volumes of fabric everyday. Clothes are cheap and abundant. Increasingly, low quality clothes are made to last just a few months before we throw them away. Fashion labels encourage us to update our looks several times each year. Everything has accelerated: the speed we produce things, the speed we consume them, and the speed with which they end up in the bin.

But we haven't always been in such a hurry. And we haven't always tolerated such a throwaway culture. Together, our collections hold evidence of people truly taking care of materials, making do and mending, and squeezing every drop of life possible from the natural resources we need to clothe ourselves.



THE GREAT ACCELERATION

Key Objects

- Assemblage of materials representing raw materials for textiles and textile manufacturing
- Examples of mended and cared-for clothing

Other Opportunities

- Damaged or 'distressed' clothes as fashion
- Bale(s) of second hand clothes (potential Key Object)
- A fashion item with a long supply chain such as a pair of jeans, with indication of the many steps materials take.
- Carbon labels from clothing
- Granny Plastic commission / loan:
<https://norfolkmakersfestival.co.uk/events/totally-rubbish-art>
- See **Martha**, potential co-creation commission on youth attitudes to fashion



THE GREAT ACCELERATION

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the concept of fast fashion, and appreciate its ecological consequences
2. Investigate how attitudes toward frugality, resourcefulness, and "making do" have shifted over time and how they influence modern ideas of beauty and value.
3. Understand some of the ways social class and economic circumstances influence everyday life and material culture.



THE GREAT ACCELERATION

Other Objects

- Labourer's jacket from the early 1800s—heavily patched, showing long-term use and repair.
- 'How to' leaflets on clothing care and mending
- Example of artificial silk from British Celanese—details unspecified.
- Motorbike crash helmet, 1930s—yellow and black 'Triumph' helmet made from Thetford pulpware, an early material transitioning towards plastics. Pulpware, a hardened papier-mâché, was used for manufacturing helmets and homeware until the 1950s when production shifted to plastics and fibreglass. The factory began in 1879 and later produced items like the Centurion helmet.
- Pulpware bowl, 1940s—white interior with marbled red, green, and blue exterior and a narrow gold band around the rim (118 mm diameter). Pulpware was an important transitional material before plastics dominated manufacturing by the 1950s. View object.
- Recycled picnic set, 1999—a creative work by basketmaker Lois Walpole. Both the outer basket (which unfolds into a picnic rug) and the cylindrical inner basket are made from recycled materials, including fruit-juice cartons, plastic bottles, and Yakult containers. The set includes picnic plates, cutlery, and tumblers, exploring themes of single-use plastics and reuse.
- Disposable paper dress

PART THREE

MAKING A MESS

HOLES



HOLES

Overview

Humanity's legacy will be as earth-shapers. Through relentless digging, extraction and remodeling, we now move more earth than natural processes like rivers, glaciers, and wind combined – a testament to both our ingenuity and capacity for destruction.

The holes we dig are a paradox. On one hand, they showcase ambition and creativity. We extract resources to create new technology, build cities, and (we hope) live better. Concrete may be our fossilized legacy, a permanent, rock hard testament to our energy and capacity for construction.

But the scars our labours leave behind reflect short-term thinking: polluted water, wrecked ecosystems, displaced people, and collapsing biodiversity.

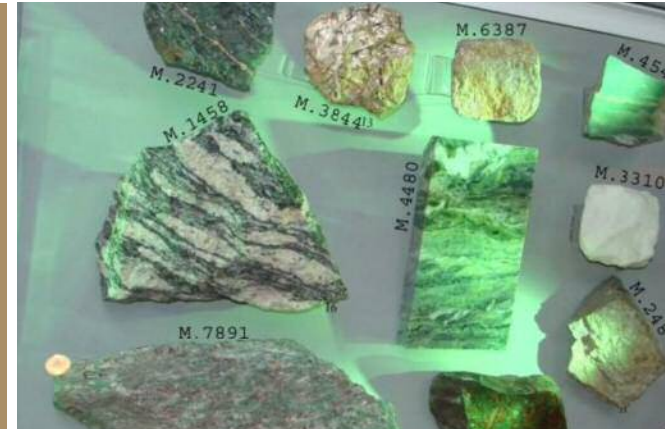
Perhaps digging reflects something deeper about being human: our willingness to disrupt, our struggle to balance creation and destruction. The mess we make isn't just a story of greed—it's also one of learning. Can we shape the earth without breaking it?



HOLES

Key Objects

- **Networks and/or graphic treatment critical to evoke scale. Might incorporate scenes of mining, quarrying, drilling and forest clearance.**
- (MCR): Italian Marbles—An assortment of geological specimens of ornamental marbles, showcasing valuable materials extracted from quarries.
- (DBY) (2008-298): Porcelain figure parts—a collection of approximately 7,000 pieces, including Chelsea and Derby period figure parts, models, and moulds for Derby Porcelain dating from the 1750s to the 1840s. Some pieces are already mounted.
- (MCR) Building stone samples



Other Opportunities

- TBD



HOLES

Learning Objectives

1. Explore how human activity, particularly extraction and construction, has reshaped the Earth's surface and surpassed natural processes in scale
2. Examine how the extraction of natural resources fuels technological and urban development
3. Discuss the ethical implications of resource extraction, including questions of equity, displacement, and the impact on biodiversity.
4. Reflect on humanity's capacity to create and destroy



HOLES

Other Objects

Confirmed in collections

- House bricks—a collection of over 250 house bricks, most locally made in Derby.
- Medal—made from ore mined at Millclose Mine, Darley Dale. It commemorates the 700th Anniversary of the Inquisition held at Ashbourne in 1288, which led to the establishment of lead mining laws.
- Lantern slide—depicts coal mining in Derbyshire with the description "Descending the mine." (82 × 82 mm)
- Metal petrol can, 1914—features a looped handle, brass cap on chain stamped "Pratts," and markings reading "Petroleum Spirit Highly Inflammable" and "FPD". Used by the donor's father, who worked for the Ministry of Agriculture during WWI to demonstrate tractors to farmers.
- Lithium and a Phone: Pairs of items that are seen as valuable, highlighting the materials we use to create products that are quickly discarded. Similar themes have been explored in Manchester's learning programs.

Potential objects

- Geological specimens - limestones, aggregates, minerals
- Rare Earths
- Copper ore and copper mining ephemera
- Portland cement
- Concrete

HEAPS



HEAPS

Overview

The holes we dig to extract resources often become the holes we fill with rubbish.

Materials that once had value, shaped to meet our needs, are discarded and buried—out of sight, out of mind. These landfill sites are symbols of an unsustainable, disposable culture, where consumer capitalism transforms raw materials into junk.

Yet, strangely, they've also become part of nature. Birds adapt their migration patterns and breeding habits to live near them, drawn by the food waste and shelter they provide. Over time, remediated and covered landfills can turn into parks or reserves, home to species that thrive in the contaminated soil. For example contaminated soil at the former Nob End bleachworks near Manchester supports an array of rare orchids seldom found in Britain.

These rubbish dumps reflect our capacity to create waste and destruction, but also nature's ability to adapt, transform, and make life in even the most unlikely places.



HEAPS

Key Objects

- **Networks and/or graphics/illustrations critical to evoke scale: scenes of landfill, air pollution and large scale coastal and ocean pollution**
- Herbarium Sheet of Plants from Spoil Heaps—features plants tolerant of mining waste, such as those adapted to heavy metal-rich soils.
- Taxidermy mount of Rat (*Rattus sp.*)—Muridae, Rodentia, Mammalia.
- Early example of disposable razor



Other Opportunities

- To explore: opportunities to feature landfill workers, or landfill architect
- (MCR): "Environmental Legacies of Cotton" (LITMUS)—an art project focused on soil health.
- Everyday waste implying large-scale use, e.g. disposable straws, cutlery, napkins, coffee cups, razors
- Household items that are not generally recycled - toothbrushes, washing up sponges, charging cables, bubblewrap and flexible plastics.
- Waste typologies. E.g. 10 different kinds of washing up sponge or mascara wand
- Iconic waste objects that reflect consumerism. E.g. Coca Cola bottle
- 'Dated' objects that will last a lifetime as waste - plastic phone cards, 70s and 80s plastic toys and branded packaging.



HEAPS

Learning Objectives

1. Explore how materials are used, discarded, and buried in landfills, examining the environmental and societal impact of a disposable culture
2. Understand how landfill sites affect ecosystems, biodiversity, and soil, and explore the role of waste in shaping human and natural environment through both destruction and adaptation
3. Reflect on what landfills reveal about human values, consumption, and responsibility. Consider how consumer habits shape the world and whether change is possible.
4. Investigate sustainable alternatives to landfills, such as recycling, upcycling, and circular economies, and examine the potential to turn waste into resources.



HEAPS

Other Objects

Landfill ecosystems

- Eurasian Stork—details unspecified.
- Taxidermy mount of Rat (*Rattus* sp.)—Muridae, Rodentia, Mammalia.
- Taxidermy mount of Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus* Pontoppidan, 1763). View object.
- Taxidermy mount of Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone corone* Linnaeus, 1758)—Corvidae, Passeriformes.
- Section of cave floor with ancient waste: bones, flints etc.

Restoration ecology - species from recreated habitats

- Entomology Box—contains insects collected from bioblitzes in parks that were once industrial sites but are now important urban wildlife refuges.
- Entomology Box of Peppered Moths—demonstrates industrial melanism, where species adapt to environmental changes driven by human industry.
- Pressed Orchids—details unspecified.
- Herbarium Sheet of Plants from Spoil Heaps—features plants tolerant of mining waste, such as those adapted to heavy metal-rich soils.

Nob End Bleachworks case study

- Textile/Bleach Origins—details unspecified.
- Boxes of Dye—linked to orchids and bleach works.

PART FOUR

MAKING A DIFFERENCE



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Overview

With growing recognition that our planet faces multiple ecological crises, many of us want to make a difference to the planet. But it's not always easy to know where to begin.

First, it can be hard to know what problems or values to prioritise. Some conservationists, perhaps driven by cultural factors, or notions of natural rights, are drawn to try to save charismatic individual species. Others might prioritise whole ecosystem health. Sometimes, cold economics comes to the fore. And for many of us, it may feel easier to grasp relatively smaller problems like localised habitat loss than to look climate change – an incomparable existential threat – in the eye.

Added to all this, we all hold different degrees and types of power and agency to make change. Some scientists are able to take direct action through their work. Some of us have the opportunity to educate others. Some people put their faith in consumer pressure to drive global change. Many of us may feel powerless. For all of us, change (or the lack of it) is personal. It reflects a particular relationship with nature and with other people. The differences we each try to make say a lot about who we are and how we relate to nature.



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Short Stories, Real People, In Dialogue

In this part of the exhibition, a range of shorter stories will be presented in dialogue with one another.

Each story will have at its core people who are taking action to protect the planet in one way, shape or form.

Collectively, the range of stories presented will point towards different ways of valuing nature: culturally, aesthetically, instrumentally, in terms of natural rights or ecological science, and so on.

And, the stories will highlight the differences and inequalities of power, agency, and access that underpin and constrain our ability to act as individuals and communities.

The final selection of stories for this section will be contingent on building relationships with the people best able to represent them.



WORKING STORY SELECTION: KAKAPO

The Kakapo is a critically endangered flightless parrot from New Zealand. Unique to that island, it's also of deep cultural significance to the Maori people. It was nearly wiped out by habitat destruction and introduced predators following European settlement. Today, Kakapo conservation costing millions of dollars relies on intensive human intervention, from genetic management to hand-rearing chicks in order to prevent their extinction.

Paradoxically, *Stringopotaenia psittacea* – a parasitic worm only known to occur inside the Kakapo's gut – has quite possibly been made extinct by work to save the endangered bird.

Potential Storytellers /Partners

- Department of Conservation *Te Papa Atawhai*

Objects:

- (MCR) (BB.4717): Study skin of Kakapo (*Strigops habroptilus* G. R. Gray, 1845)
- (MCR) (BB.1326): Egg of Kakapo (*Strigops habroptilus* G. R. Gray, 1845)
- (MCR) (B.2237): Skeleton of Kakapo (*Strigops habroptilus* G. R. Gray, 1845)
- (MCR) (edu.0105): Taxidermy mount of Kakapo



WORKING STORY SELECTION: DUNG BEETLES

Beetles play a crucial role in ecosystems, from breaking down organic matter to pollinating plants. Despite this, they get far less attention than more attractive species like the Kakapo. In the UK, dung beetles are declining due to changes in livestock medication practices, which prevent them from breaking down manure effectively.

A world without dung beetles would be a world with *a lot more dung in it* for humans to deal with.

Potential Storytellers /Partners

- Dung Beetles for Farmers (<https://www.dungbeetlesforfarmers.co.uk/>)

Objects:

- Beetle assemblage



WORKING STORY SELECTION: PANGOLIN

Pangolins are at the centre of global wildlife trafficking, hunted for their scales and meat. Their survival is tied not just to conservation but also to broader systemic issues of economic disparity, cultural traditions, and law enforcement. While protecting pangolins in their native habitats is critical, much of the demand for them comes from thousands of miles away.

Where should intervention happen? Should we focus on protecting pangolins in the wild, or tackling demand in consumer nations? How far does our responsibility extend? Can wealthier nations enforce conservation policies on others while ignoring their own environmental issues?

Potential Storytellers /Partners

- Dr Hong Tham, Save Vietnam's Wildlife / National Museum of Vietnam.

Objects:

- (NCL) Pangolin skin (*manis crassicaudata*)
- (NCL) Pangolin skeletal material
- (MCR) (A.2339.8): Taxidermy mount of Pangolin (*Manis* sp.)



WORKING STORY SELECTION: TOAD

The Variable Harlequin Toad has been successfully bred in captivity at Manchester Museum's Vivarium. The toad is critically endangered because of a range of human-influenced factors. Much of its habitat has been lost due to agriculture, and it is vulnerable to the chytrid fungus: an invasive species, which was accidentally introduced by humans and is spreading fast due to global warming.

Currently, we can breed the species in captivity, but we can't make its ecosystem safe. If we can only preserve nature in captivity, what kind of nature is that?

Potential Storytellers /Partners

- Matthew O'Donnell, Curator of Herpetology Manchester Museum

Objects:

- TBD



WORKING STORY SELECTION: AIR POLLUTION

Air pollution has a negative impact on biodiversity and connects to a range of wider ecological problems, but it is also an issue which touches humans very directly and dramatically – impacting our health and contributing to an estimated seven million premature deaths globally each year.

This is a story in which environmental action and social action become indistinguishable. It demonstrates the way in which environmental pollution touches us at every scale: we can see it is as a global problem, but also a global problem that haunts the very streets we live on.

Potential Storytellers /Partners

- Ella Roberta Foundation, Clean Air For All. (Ella Roberta Adoo Kissi Debrah is the first person in the world to have air pollution listed as a cause of death on her death certificate.)
- Local action groups on a venue by venue basis

Objects:

- TBD



WORKING STORY SELECTION: PLASTIC WASTE

Depending on your point of view, plastic waste might be a product of personal irresponsibility or a symptom of corporate greed and neglect. Are we too lazy to recycle, or are manufacturers wrong to be selling us plastic packaged goods in the first place? Today, it's very easy to buy 10 different plastic items in a matter of minutes in a single supermarket. But recycling those same 10 items might take hours of travel between multiple sites operated by different organisations.

This story will look at legal activists trying to use the law to hold states and large businesses to account. It shows a very different side of the conservation movement – one that is perhaps cynical about humanity's ability to change purely out of love for nature.

Potential Storytellers /Partners

- ClientEarth

Objects:

- TBD



WORKING STORY SELECTION: CLIMATE CHANGE

Global warming poses existential threats to millions of species and to lives, livelihoods and cultures of millions of people across the planet. Compared to the other stories here, it is unfolding at a unique scale, orders of magnitude bigger. Added to this, the people who are impacted the most by climate change tend to be the same people who contribute least to causing it.

The scale of the problem, and the scale of the human activity that causes it, almost defy imagination. They make it very difficult for individuals and small communities to conceive of a way of contributing to change.

Potential Storytellers /Partners

- Just Stop Oil
- Pacific Island Students Fighting Climate Change (<https://www.pisfcc.org/>)

Objects:

- TBD



PART FIVE

MAKING OUR FUTURE

MAKING OUR FUTURE

Overview

At the end of the exhibition we'll ask our visitors to look to the future and reflect on their relationship with nature.

This area will be a brief coda to the exhibition.

Visitors could be invited to share something that gives them hope, or perhaps to take away a problem with them when they leave the exhibition, to inspire future action.

The nature of this space will depend considerably on the overall feel of the exhibition as this emerges through design, as well as on the forms and languages the design establishes for visitor interaction.



END