

NEWS FEATURE:

Climate is culture

David Buckland

In 2001, British artist David Buckland founded Cape Farewell to bridge a communication gap between the science of climate change and the societal shift required. He explains why we need a cultural response to climate change.

Storytellers, C. S. Lewis said, carry meaning in a way that rational truth-tellers cannot. “For me,” the novelist wrote, “reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition.”

It is perhaps unsurprising that it has been the scientists reporting the evidence of global warming who have become the most passionate in calling for society to urgently change its course. “Talk to climate scientists and it fast becomes clear that severe climate change is coming and it won’t be pretty. The sense of restrained panic you hear in the voices of these learned men and women reveals more than a legion of scientific papers,” says Tom Rand, a green venture capitalist and author of *Kick the Fossil Fuel Habit*.

However, this urgency isn’t being communicated successfully enough to provoke the real change needed in our global societies to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and mitigate climate change. The resistance to cultural change is baffling in the face of extreme weather events and other disturbances across our planet. Anthropogenic climate change threatens us all with an uncertain physical, social and economic future, so why are we not engaged in sorting out our future? Perhaps cultural approaches can succeed where the hard facts of science have failed.

The international Cape Farewell project, now in its eleventh year, aims to do just that.



Walking Dance by choreographer Siobhan Davies. “I sense a cold, I sense a vulnerability. I feel myself as something hot and bloody, so if I find the little bit of warmth I have, I need to protect it. The idea of protection, of care, seems particularly momentous here.”

It embeds artists, writers, architects, musicians and filmmakers with climate scientists as they measure and evaluate planetary changes at the planet’s known climate change ‘hotspots’. So far, we have made seven expeditions into the Arctic aboard the 100-year-old Norwegian schooner, *Noorderlicht* (*Northern Lights*), one expedition to the Andes and the Amazon, and one to the Scottish Western Isles. Each of these journeys allows the diverse expedition team to examine how anthropogenic activity is affecting our habitat.

“The pressure of our numbers, the abundance of our inventions, the blind forces of our desires and needs are generating a heat — the hot breath of our civilisation. How can we begin

to restrain ourselves?” wrote novelist Ian McEwan, after visiting the melting Arctic ice on a Cape Farewell voyage. “We resemble a successful lichen, a ravaging bloom of algae, a mould enveloping a fruit. We are fouling our nest, and we know we must act decisively, against our immediate inclinations. But can we agree among ourselves?”

When I set up Cape Farewell, in 2001, the aim was to create a different language of climate change with which to engage the public. Over 140 arts-based practitioners have taken part in these voyages, openly engaging with more than 45 scientists, creating artworks, exhibitions, books and films that have toured worldwide. This international effort, including people from China to Mexico, has brought distinctly



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The Cape Farewell crew, February/March 2005: Max Eastley, Charlie Kronick, Nick Edwards, Alex Hartley, Antony Gormley, Peter Clegg, Siobhan Davies, Rachel Whiteread, David Buckland, Gautier Deblonde, Tom Wakeford, Heather Ackroyd, Dan Harvey and Ian McEwan.

different cultural sensibilities to the story of climate change's causes and impacts. And the wide range of material produced is testimony to the success of this enterprise, including exhibitions (such as at the Natural History Museum and Royal Academy of Art in London), films (such as the BBC's *Art from the Arctic*, and *Burning Ice* for Sundance Television, USA) and writing (including McEwan's novel *Solar*).

Voyage into the unknown

Being on the schooner allows for a very unique and powerful dialogue — the 25 artists and scientists are hundreds of kilometres away from any other living souls; they all work collectively on the boat, sailing among islands and glaciers, in storms and calms. Each expedition has a scientific and cultural objective: the boat is a research platform, a vehicle for social engagement and creative exchange.



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Private Moon, artwork by Leonid Tishkov (2011).

The concept of expedition is interesting and pertinent to climate change — there is an objective to be sought. The start point is a given, the route is a guide, and natural forces and intellectual curiosity determine the path. After each expedition everyone arrives at a place that could not have been foreseen at the start, each affected by the mission where new and creative possibilities were formed.

British poet Nick Drake explains: “During the Cape Farewell expedition to the high Arctic I began to glimpse how everything truly is connected in nature; indeed, my trips to the shops, my TV and my warm apartment are paid for up here, because in the end, we’re drawing on this vast treasury of ice. The Arctic holds a mirror up to us all, and I see now we’re living like gods on borrowed time.”

The process of creation and evaluation for both scientists and artists often takes time. Water samples and marine life are dissected and analysed in laboratories, and data is added to climatic modelling, while the artists struggle to evolve a salient story within their media — a book, a film or an artwork. How have we, as humans, caused something so massive that it can change the course of natural systems? What are the consequences of this for us all and, importantly, what are the solutions?

Artists, in their working practice, gravitate towards and are inspired by relevant cultural shifts; the values, passions and concerns that drive cultural changes become the food for their creative and artistic endeavour. Working with the Cape Farewell project, the artists are invited to focus their enquiring lens to engage with, and create artworks, that address the important issue of climate disruption. To inform this process it is essential for them to work directly with the climate scientists, to understand the complex physical science that underpins our understanding of the workings of our changing planet.

Interpreting the oracle

Each of us has been moved by a work of art, poem, song, book or painting. We draw it into our psyche, and it informs and adds to our emotional knowledge. These future narratives, well told, have the power of engagement and transformation.

Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan best explained the importance of art in raising awareness of an issue when he wrote: “I think of art, at its most significant, as a DEW line, a Distant Early Warning system that can always be relied on to tell the old culture what is beginning to happen to it.”

Until now, we humans have only had to address humanitarian and political

The ice core sample says

This is the library of ice,
A high security
Auditorium of silence
Far below zero;
An archive of cold
That keeps me as I am,
And reminds me of home
Now that it is gone
Forever.

I am a long story,
Ten thousand feet long,
A hundred thousand years old,
A chronicle of lost time
Back to the first dark,
Too dark for telling;
I am every winter's fall;
I am the keeper of the air
Of all the vanished summers;
I honour the shadows of sorrows
That come to lie
Between my pages;
I distill lost atmospheres
Pressed into ghosts
Kept close to my cold heart.

And as for you –
What story would you like to hear?
On your two feet,
Tracking the snow
Two by two, two by two, two by two;
Here is the dust and music
Of your brief cities;
Here is the ash and smoke;

Here are your traffic jams
And vapour trails;
Here are your holidays in the sun
And your masterpieces
And your pop songs.
Here are your first cries
And last whispers;
Here are your long sighs
Of disappointment.
Here is where it went right,
And where it went wrong.
Easy come. Easy go.

So I know why you slice
Moon after moon from me,
Holding each fragile face
Up to your searchlights;
Why you measure and record
The tiny cracks and snaps
Of my mysteries;
Because you know
You are the people
Who have changed nature –
And now you are on your own.

I have no more to tell.
No questions please
About the future
For now the great narrator
Silence
Takes over;
Listen carefully to her story
For you are in it.

Nick Drake

This poem is part of a collection,
The Farewell Glacier
(Bloodaxe Books, 2012),
to be published in April.
www.nickfdrake.com

challenges in the present tense, stories of human conflict, territorial claim, intellectual property, economic and social paradigms — challenges that need to be resolved. Climate change proffers a unique cultural problem: it is a future truth. For both the artists and the climate scientists they have essentially a human story to tell — how feverish and profligate human existence is spoiling our own habitat. Climate change demands that we act now to prevent a catastrophic environment for our children to inhabit.

Now, the radar of enquiry for the Cape Farewell project has shifted from awareness to solutions. The name Cape Farewell is taken from the southernmost point of Greenland, but its significance to our project is the duality of the word 'farewell' or 'fare well': if you are a sailor, you don't hang around off a cape; it is the point of decision-making, which, I think, describes exactly where the global society is on the global warming issue. The challenge is to act and move out of the

doom-ridden scenarios of the emotional 'farewell' into the optimistic possibilities of 'fare well'.

Last year's expedition to the island communities of western Scotland focused on examples of sustainable cultural change that are both achievable and desirable. Our band of scientists, artists and writers visited the community-owned isle of Eigg, where ten years ago the islanders decided to install a mains electricity grid that would be entirely powered by renewables. Each house now has a quota of 5 kWh per day — produced by micro-hydro, solar and wind power — in a demonstratively successful example of power generation and sustainable living. During the voyage we saw different island communities at various stages of engagement with sustainability — the larger ones struggling more with complex infrastructure and conflicting needs — but to the scientists and creative community aboard our sailing ship, we were witnessing a clear path of cultural change.

The expedition produced a raft of stories and cultural engagements inspired by these spectacular islands. It also highlighted micro-scenarios that reflect the wider social landscape. On the isle of Lewis, its main town Stornaway is dominated by an oil-fired power station. Plans for a large wind farm were rejected recently by the local community, which seems perverse given the abundance of Atlantic gales, until you look in detail at the plan that was presented by the major energy company. Acres of concrete footings were planned next to highland villages, installations were sited in sensitive wildlife environments and, in the words of the Lewis resident, poet and playwright Ian Hamilton Finley, "what was proposed for Lewis was an energy factory".

The islanders do want to switch to sustainable energy, but on their own terms. Turbines are now being installed in the Outer Hebrides with the involvement and support of the communities. Telling this type of story can be instructive and

inspiring, the artist being “relied on to tell the old culture what is beginning to happen to it”.

Carbon analysis

One of the best by-products of the climate challenge has been the de-ghettoizing of the science and arts communities — a return to eighteenth-century debate and expedition. Pockets of new solutions are evolving in societies, and interrogating them through the creative cultural lens will lead to stories, films, new architecture and evolved social thinking. The objective of the Cape Farewell project is to amplify this message and use the inherent skills of our creative folk to look forward. Being media savvy is part of their job description and essential if we are to resonate these messages of transformation.

Over the next two years, for example, there are three *Carbon* exhibitions planned, referencing the carbon isotopes 12, 13 and 14. Carbon is a building block of life, the root cause of the increase in greenhouse gases and the original drawing material of artists. *Carbon 12*, opening in Paris in May 2012, is an exhibition of five artists who have worked directly with climate scientists. It encompasses biodiversity, atmospheric and oceanography — earth, wind and sea. *Carbon 13* opens in Marfa, Texas, in October 2012, exhibiting six artists who challenge the status quo of society, our oil addiction, and our denial and arrogance in the face of climate

disruption. The essence of the *Carbon 14* exhibition is, like the isotope, something edgy, unstable, exciting and subversive. It opens in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto in September 2013.

The beginning of the twenty-first century has witnessed a fundamental shift as we grapple with the realities of human activity, expanding populations and their effects on our environment. The past decade has compelled climate scientists to become public figures, making them position their work politically on the very public ‘centre stage’. Artists already inhabit this centre stage — artwork demands a public audience. Now artists are helping scientists to permeate the cultural space so that their research findings can be debated by the public at large.

In November 2011, Cape Farewell attempted an ‘urban expedition’ — a two-day gathering of ‘informers’: climate scientists, economists, sociologists, eco-theologians, venture capitalists and green technologists worked with a group of 20 artists, architects, film-makers and writers from Mexico, the United States and Canada. This energetic workshop aimed to emulate the closed social and enquiring environment of an Arctic expedition, only this time the scientific engagement was expanded to include other professions that make up society’s structure. The expedition-like quest forced open debate, creative edginess and subversive conversation. All participants are now tasked with delivering

work for the *Carbon 14* exhibition in 2013. Social psychologist Kurt Lewin famously said, “if you want truly to understand something, try to change it,” applying systems-thinking principles to developing a new approach to research, which he called ‘action research’. These aggressive artworks will perhaps reflect the winds of change needed in our societies.

In these artistic journeys we have evolved a culturally equivalent tool to the mathematical modellers: a way of interrogating the future through a process of ‘action research’. What if we can transform how we perceive our future by transforming it into an expedition, an adventure — not ideological but pragmatic, in much the way the islanders of Eigg saw the solution as the best way forward from a non-negotiable place they found themselves?

“Many of the best resilience stories are about the times when people were loving what they [were] doing together,” says Nick Wilding in *Exploring Community Resilience*. “Although there is a fine tradition of solo explorers bagging Munros, conquering the poles or sailing single-handed around the planet — most of us prefer to party with friends along the way. Just as Douglas Adams put the words ‘DON’T PANIC’ on the cover of his *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, it seems that it would be a good idea to put a sticker that says ‘HAVE FUN’ on the back of the compass.”

The Cape Farewell expeditions built on the notion of action-based enquiry have produced extraordinary art, writings and films. The overriding memory of each of the voyagers engaged in these adventures is more akin to having fun than experiencing suffering. Climate change is truly a cultural challenge, it affects all of us and we all need to become part of the solution, but perhaps we should approach it more in the spirit of an expedition that encompasses the optimism of moving forward. As McLuhan put it, “Spaceship Earth doesn’t carry passengers, only crew.”

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Pregnant Walk, artwork by David Buckland (2009). This woman, projected onto the high-Arctic sea ice, carries in her stomach all our futures — a child who will inherit an Arctic without summer sea ice.

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