



Lunch With
WJL

Roundup Editor, Jane Lemke, recently sat down with Dr. Robert Janes to discuss his groundbreaking work encouraging museums around the world to reflect on how they handle environmental responsibility and climate change.

Janes is an independent scholar-practitioner and the Editor-in-Chief Emeritus of the journal *Museum Management and Curatorship*, a Visiting Research Fellow at the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester (UK), and a Fellow of the Canadian Museums Association. He is also the past Chair of the Board of Directors of the Biosphere Institute of the Bow Valley - an NGO committed to the ecological integrity of the mountain region where he lives. He earned a Ph.D. in Archaeology from the University of Calgary and began his career as an archaeologist in Canada's remote Northwest Territories.

In what ways are museums not living up to their potential?

Museums have amazing potential as places that are grounded in their communities and are expressions of

locality; are bridges between science and the humanities; bear witness by assembling evidence and knowledge, in addition to being one of the freest and most creative work environments in the world. Museums are closely connected and representative of their communities and they have substantial potential to address climate change from a local perspective.

Museums are also deeply trusted, knowledge-based, social institutions. They are spaces for civil society where substantive issues can be aired, discussed and acted upon.

It is not that museums should be expected to fix climate change or any other issue. Rather, they can provide the knowledge, experience and civility that build the understanding and public dialogue which are essential to progressive civic action.

Right now, museums are missing out because they are preoccupied with issues of funding and donors. Many museums are also failing to question their own relevance. Museums must ask why they are doing what they do. This will naturally lead to a concern for the community's interests and aspirations. In short, what is the museum's role and place in the local community and in the global community?

Why should museum workers part company with the time-honoured protection of institutional neutrality? What can be achieved?

First, we cannot continue to protect our institutional neutrality because climate change is upon us. Each of us has a personal responsibility to confront the reality of climate change and protect the planet upon which we depend.

Second, we know as museum workers that education is a core mission of museums, but we must ask what sort of education is appropriate and necessary now? What we need are museums to help identify and challenge the myths and misperceptions that threaten us all.

And third, we're all part of a family and if we care about the next generation and the children born to the next generation, we have to shift our thinking. We have to create a new story of "our time" that does not turn a blind eye to issues of climate change.

Why isn't providing the public with information enough anymore?

Just providing information was never enough. Information that consists solely of facts is not sufficient. Information is now the curse of the digital age and we are drowning in it. Much of it means nothing, devoid as it is of context and values. What society needs is knowledge, wisdom and advocacy.

It is time for museums to move beyond their internal preoccupations and create visions and missions that address the big problems and the big questions, such as *why does your museum exist, what changes are you trying to effect, what solutions will you generate, and what are your non-negotiable values? Can we put an end to our oversimplification?*

Furthermore, museums have conservation policies, collections policies, membership policies, etc, but they should also have advocacy policies. Wouldn't it be nice if museums had an advocacy policy that articulated the civic and moral issues that are of importance to the museum and the community? In doing so, museums will become more relevant to their communities. The Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History is one of a few institutions that has an advocacy policy and it is available online. I hope it inspires similar initiatives in other institutions.

How can museum workers make a difference in the climate change debate?

Museum workers can make a difference by assuming personal agency or the capacity of individual museum workers, not just their leaders and managers, to take action in the world. They can be personal advocates

with their substantial training and education and they shouldn't only rely on their institutions to lead them through an issue. Yet, museum workers often shy away from expressing their values – possibly for fear of losing their job or their professional colleagues. However, personal agency should be celebrated and nurtured as a vital organizational resource and a force for good.

Museum workers are insightful and motivated by concerns beyond the workplace and can be intellectual advocates for a variety of issues. By intellectual advocate, I mean someone who does not necessarily create new knowledge but makes existing knowledge more accessible, understandable and useful to others.

We all need to become more reality-based. Being reality-based means becoming more visionary, becoming more involved in the broader world and confronting the socio-environmental issues that museums are equipped to address, recognizing their individual strengths and limitations. Can museums finally subordinate themselves to concerns that are larger than their own?

We need to create a sense of urgency around the issue of climate change. We also need to be asking the larger question of: who's telling our narrative? Who's telling the story of life in the twenty-first century? Right now, our story is being constructed by multinational corporations and governments, who tell us that consumption equals happiness and that economic growth is essential for our future. This shouldn't be our narrative and these institutions should not be responsible for telling it. Museums should be creating a new story for humanity in conjunction with their communities, including creating a sense of urgency around the issue of climate change.