

# Landmarks facing climate threats could 'transform,' expert says

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Cropped image of flooding in Venice. Credit: Chris, Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/cr01/>. Shared through Creative Commons CC BY-SA 2.0 License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>.

How much effort should be spent trying to keep Venice looking like Venice—even as it faces rising sea levels that threaten the city with more frequent extreme flooding?

As [climate change](#) threatens [cultural sites](#), preservationists and researchers are asking whether these iconic locations should be meticulously restored or should be allowed to adapt and "transform."

"The traditional preservationist paradigm is the idea of static preservation—materials stay in a constant state, and we protect the values identified at the time they were designated," said Erin Seekamp, first author of a paper that raises these questions and a professor of parks, recreation and tourism management at North Carolina State University.

"However, it's really infeasible to manage all heritage sites and property through persistent adaptation due to the extent of projected [climate impacts](#)," Seekamp said. "We are arguing for preservationists to shift toward transformation in some cases."

The paper was co-authored by Eugene Jo, World Heritage Leadership Programme Coordinator at the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM).

Seekamp and Jo presented two ideas for how transformation could take place: adaptively in response to [climate change impacts](#), or in advance of anticipated or projected impacts.

Seekamp and Jo argue that some cultural icons "severely impacted" by climate change-related events could remain damaged to serve as a "memory" of that event, and to help communities better understand and learn about the climate-related vulnerabilities of places.

In other cases, they argued that some landmarks at risk of climate change should be allowed to "transform" when the cost of preserving a landmark is too high. Decisions about how these important landmarks can and should change need to be guided by the values of descendants of

people and cultures that those sites were originally intended to highlight and preserve, they said.

"Individuals whose heritage is at stake, and who receive benefits from those places as tourist sites, should be part of the discussions about change, and about what preserving values connected with sites should look like," Seekamp said.

Their ideas about transformation were inspired by the concept of resilience in ecology, Seekamp said, in which a landscape can absorb change in response to a disturbance, and populations shift toward a "new state" or reorganize.

"What we're arguing is that the heritage field adopt an ecological framework of resilience to expand the current paradigm of preservation toward transformation to allow for autonomous and anticipatory adaptation to occur," Seekamp said.

They focused their recommendations on cultural landmarks designated as World Heritage Sites, which are landmarks or areas with important cultural, natural or scientific significance that have legal protections through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO.

They argued that preservation leaders create a new category for sites facing climate threats called "World Heritage Sites in Climatic Transformation." That list could help gather information and better document sites that face threats from climate change, as well as help channel resources toward them.

"We argue that policy reform is needed to create the flexibility that would allow for both the continuity of heritage values, and the evolution of place meaning and societal benefits in face of climate change,"

Seekamp said.

Seekamp also indicated that the new designation could aid a natural landmark like Florida's Everglades National Park. While the park isn't a [site](#) recognized for its cultural heritage, which was the focus of Seekamp's viewpoint—it was designated as a World Heritage Site because of its outstanding geologic and natural features—there are material remains of [heritage](#) present that are also at risk to rising seas and increasing temperatures.

The park is the traditional lands of the Seminole Tribe of Florida and the Miccosukee Tribe, as well as the Calusa. The designation of the park as a "World Heritage Site in Climatic Transformation" could allow managers to think about alternatives that better integrate culture and cultural values in changing environments, Seekamp said.

"We're not saying that this should open the door for development or tourism," Seekamp added. "We're saying, 'Let's create a new categorization, and enable those places to not just think about persistent adaptation, but about transformative adaptation.' It allows us to think about alternatives."

**More information:** Erin Seekamp et al, Resilience and transformation of heritage sites to accommodate for loss and learning in a changing climate, *Climatic Change* (2020). [DOI: 10.1007/s10584-020-02812-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-020-02812-4)

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