

The Remains of Extinction

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Transcript (times given when new slides appear)

0:00

Good morning, good afternoon or good evening wherever you are in the world. My name is Dolly Jørgensen and I am a Professor of History at the University of Stavanger in Norway. And today, I'll be talking to you about the remains of extinction.

We are currently living through a global extinction event, with vast numbers of species across the planet, becoming extinct because of human action, from climate change to habitat destruction to pollution. The high number of species either recently extinct are facing imminent extinction. And the great speed at which that extermination is happening exceeds even the most well studied extinction event, the end of the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous. At least 322 vertebrates are known to become extinct since the year 1500. And there are many more invertebrates and plants that have been lost. In May 2019 intergovernmental science policy platform on biodiversity and ecosystem services published its Global Assessment Report, which described the dire state of wild biological life worldwide. They took stock of wild animal populations and concluded that approximately 1 million species of animals and plants are threatened with extinction under the human status quo.

Within the field of environmental humanities, in which I work, there's been a calls for cultivation of a new ethos of human relationship with the more than human world, one that recognizes and makes place for all. The field of Extinction Studies has recently been established, including a co edited volume by Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren and Matthew Chrulew in 2017. It was described as an interdisciplinary inquiry into how extinction interrupts the processes of time, death and generations. Extinction stories, therefore, have the potential to raise awareness of the connections between humans and nonhumans over time, and how they affect our culture.

Because museums and galleries are one of the primary sites of public engagement in many types of environmental issues, including extinction, we need critical reflection on how they can be used to cultivate heritage thinking about non-human species. Unlike the prior extinction events, extinction is now being recorded, as it happens. It's being remembered in human narratives, and thus, it is part of our culture. The challenge for cultural heritage institutions is how to grapple with these human nature entanglements that carry dereyes the stories of contemporary extinction.

3:09

So today, I want to ask what remains after a species has become extinct? And how can heritage professionals engage with those remains. And I'm going to do that through two areas, bodies and stories.

3:27

So, we begin with bodies.

3:30

I want to start here in the Hall of Threatened and Extinct Species at the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, France. This particular hall is filled with species of the type that are either extinct or are threatened to become extinct. The hall itself as you can see it rather long and dark with species highlighted through lighting and plain black backgrounds.

4:12

And one of the species that is on display there is very special. The Bluebuck, also called the blue antelope or blaubok in the original Dutch [Africans], scientifically known as *Hippotragus leucophaeus*. This particular animal caught my attention at the Natural History Museum. And the reason is because there are only four extant specimens of it that are taxidermied like an animal.

This animal was described by Western science in 1766. And already by around 1800 it was extinct because of hunting. Now, it may have had very small population prior to that. And that's why it went extinct so quickly. But nevertheless, it appears to have been because of Western colonialism. And it was one of the first African victims of the colonization of Southern Africa by Europeans.

So the museum in Paris has one of these four, which makes it a very special specimen.

5:45

The Naturhistoriska Riksmuseet (Natural History Museum) in Stockholm has another of these specimens. What's interesting about them is that we actually have very little information about collecting for any of them because of the time period in which they were collected and the records. We know that it had to have been collected before they apparently became extinct, but that's it. Whereas the context of the parish museum was in this very large room full of extinct and threatened species, the context here of the bluebuck is within just two cases that have to do with extinction. It's displayed with examples of extinct specimens, like the Thylacine from Tasmania, Australia, the great Auk, the passenger pigeon, which we'll hear more about later.

6:51

The third of the specimens is in Naturalis, in Leiden in the Netherlands. This specimen however, is not on display in the museum, but rather on display electronically in the BioPortal. Here we can see detailed pictures in extremely high resolution taken of this specimen so that you can see all of it and its defects. Particularly noteworthy in all of these is the condition in which these specimens are, being 200 years old. Taxidermy practices at the time make it quite difficult to maintain these specimens in any kind of good condition. So the stitching is quite obvious in all of them.

7:51

The fourth specimen at the Naturhistorisches Museum Wien, Austria. This is a picture of when it was on display, in an extinction display. It is not now. It has been moved to the scientific collection like the one in Leiden.

8:12

But this is it. This is all that remains of this animal. There are a few other bones and a pair of horns in Edinburgh. But if we want to understand what was a bluebuck like, this is what we have.

And what's interesting is that the earliest drawing of the Bluebuck, one that would have been made when there were still bluebooks, is a 1778 drawing of the animal by J. Allemand. It's actually based on the specimen in Leiden, not on a living bluebuck. So our idea of what they look like is dependent upon the ways in which they were taxidermied, which in and of itself is an art as much as a science.

The bodies like these can be extremely precious. But that can also lead to choices like in Leiden and Austria where they're actually not on display at all to the public visiting the museum. So their stories through their bodies are then hidden from those people who are visiting. Mind you for very good reason. And as we can see, an image of the one from Leiden, the specimen itself needs a lot of care in order to not disintegrate, and when there's only four of them, what a pressure to be under. There are no other skins! This is it. And it can't be replaced.

10:19

Now I want to turn to stories. So from the physical remains of extinction, to the stories about those that are extinct. And one of the really important elements that I've found in stories of extinction has to do with names. How do we name something and make it known?

10:59

So one of the impulses within that is to list extinct species. So here we have a listing in the hall of biodiversity from the American Museum of Natural History in New York. And it points out, then, in the big text about extinction, the extinction crisis and the world we've created. And then in very small text, a listing of all the species that are known to have gone extinct in the modern era. What this does is to give a sense of the names and the expansiveness of what's been lost.

11:36

We see that picked up as a way of engaging with extinction here in the Old New Land gallery (it's now closed, it's being replaced with a new gallery, but when it was there) at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. A particular exhibit within that gallery called Endling had this case. And if you look carefully, what you'll see is that printed on the outside of it on the metal, were printed the names of species that have gone extinct in Australia. Australia has been hardest hit of any geographical place by extinction. And so the different species known to have gone extinct are engraved in it. And they're given the scientific name, as well as a common name when known. What I found interesting about the exhibit, though, is that those common names are the names given to those animals by the white settlers. There aren't Indigenous names that were given to them. Yet we can think that many of these species, often small marsupials similar to rats and mice had names that people gave to them, but have those names been lost because of the human who came and dispossessed the Aboriginals of their country? So it's an interesting thing to think through: about which names we give.

13:38

At the Survival Gallery at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, they have an entire wall of these names. Here they use the common name again of the colonizers, because often these species are species that became extinct after colonization in Africa, South America, in islands. So they've given the name as a common name when available. And then what they have done, which I found a good way to try and make this list more meaningful (because if you have an entire wall of these names, what does it mean to you?) are two things. One, they have behind it very famous picture of skulls of American bison that were taken on the Great Plains. So that's one way of marking the seriousness of the names -- through the imagery that's along with it. But the second is that they've actually in made into bold face, those species that the museum actually holds. And so, just next to this is the beginning of the cases which contain the extinct/endangered/threatened Species held by the National Museum of Scotland. So, you can connect as a visitor, then those things in bold: "Okay, I see that in the case nearby." This is kind of at a species level, right? Not unlike saying "humans"; if you say the "New Caledonian rail," it's the equivalent.

15:55

So another thing that's happened in some extinction exhibits is to try and put a personal name to the story. Here's part of an exhibit called "Once There Were Billions" that was held at the Smithsonian in Washington DC in conjunction with the 100 year anniversary of the extinction of the passenger pigeon. The passenger pigeon became extinct when the female bird in this picture died. That female was held at the Cincinnati Zoo and was known to her keepers as Martha. There are many, many passenger pigeons worldwide that are held by museums. There are about 1500 extant taxidermied passenger pigeons. So, unlike the bluebuck, where the bodies are extremely scarce, passenger pigeons are very common; and most natural history museums have a passenger pigeon in their collections. What makes this one special is that she was the last -- the last of the passenger pigeons. So that when she died in 1914, there were no more passenger pigeons. That's part of the story, part of the story that makes it personal. That it was Martha who was the last one, the ending of the passenger pigeon. But it's also a story that is told about a period of great abundance. And we see that storytelling in the name of this exhibit: Once there were billions. It is a common refrain when exhibiting passenger pigeons to talk about how many they were, because it is a perfect example of how a very numerous commonplace species -- there were probably around 5 billion passenger pigeons -- could go from that to none in a 100 years. So we see this narrative of abundance and dirty repeated when passenger pigeons are exhibited.

18:28

Like here at the Field Museum in Chicago. The label with their passenger pigeons: "billions of birds vanished in a blink". So the narrative we constructed and tell those who visit these museums. That there were many of them -- there were billions -- and then there were none. This has called cultural implications of course, because the reason there were billions and then none had to do with the hunting of passenger pigeons for the most part. That hunting was a huge cultural phenomenon.

19:13

So at the National Mississippi River Museum in Iowa, we see that story about being hunted by both natives and then later settlers, when the birds migrated in the valleys. They were sold on local meat markets and sold on long distance transport markets so that they were taken to cities on the East Coast of the US, as food for the urban population, particularly by the urban poor. So, there is in fact a story there is a history of humans as much as a history of birds. They are tied together: passenger pigeons abundance and extinction. There's also a story about passenger pigeon extinction in place -- that it belongs somewhere. So it's very common in museums, that on their label with their passenger pigeons, they will say where it became extinct: the Cincinnati Zoological Gardens in Cincinnati, Ohio.

20:24

And there at that place is a building. The building (shown here) is the only original pavilion from the zoo, built in 1875. It is a National Historical Landmark. But in addition to being an old part of zoo and historic for that reason, it is the building in which Martha died. And in fact it is also the building in which another species, the Carolina parakeet, found an end -- the last individual of that species died three years after Martha.

This building has been transformed by the zoo into the Passenger Pigeon Monument. We see the inside of the exhibit here which opened in 2014, in conjunction with the hundred year anniversary of Martha's death and the extinction of the passenger pigeon. It is called Martha's legacy. Again gives the story of "from billions to none". But in this case it pairs that story with a conservation story about the zoo and what they're currently doing with contemporary conservation activities to fight extinction. So here, the story is both about the bird and about people. About the present with conservation, and also about the past in a heritage building, a historical landmark part of the zoo that has historical value. So you put those together and what you get is a story that makes it about place. And it makes it a story about abundance. And it makes it a story about endings. More than anything it makes it a cultural story. It has to do with choices. It has to do with people, not just about the bird.

That's what I think extinction stories call us to do. They call us to look beyond the extinction of the animal itself, to the cultural stories, the entanglements between humans and those species. As an environmental historian, I'm actually not interested in the bird, the passenger pigeon, for itself and its own story. I'm interested in how it relates to us. How do we talk about it? How is it part of our human history? And that helps us understand better the passenger pigeon's story. The passenger pigeon's story tells how they become part of our history and how we became part of theirs.

Now these stories then are an integral part, just as the physical bodies were. Luckily with the passenger pigeon we have stories of the passenger pigeon hunting. We have cultural artefacts. With the blueback that I discussed in the Bodies section, unfortunately we don't. There are no cultural tales of the blueback that I know of. It disappeared with barely having been recorded. It left behind only its bodies. So those are the only remains.

24:30

So what kind of opportunities might we have with extinction? It may sound strange to talk about it as opportunities, but I want to do that.

24:43

Because I think we have an opportunity to make new constellations of bodies and stories, by thinking a couple questions. One is, how can we tell this story otherwise? And the other is, how do we invite others to contribute their stories? So I want to give a few examples of where I think extinction can push us in these directions by telling new stories with bodies in a new way.

25:26

The first of those is the Extinction Voices exhibit at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. Curator, Isla Gladstone, put this together. And what she did was to try and bring extinction and the threat of extinction into the fore of the discussion about their natural history collection, but without requiring there to be an entire special exhibit set up. I think that this was an extremely smart intervention, because what it did was take something familiar to visitors and make it not familiar. She took the galleries that already existed, as you can see here in this image, and she added to them and relabelled them. So each of the animals that had been designed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as extinct, endangered, critically endangered, vulnerable, those received re-labels and a shroud was placed over them. Now this material was an intentional choice to evoke the mourning shroud. What it did was allow the visitor to see the animal -- you could see that it was under there and what it was if you looked closely -- and yet it was obscured. The intent was to prompt the visitors to recognize that these species might soon disappear if something's not done. So like the Thylacine in this case labeled extinct, the animals that are endangered, critically endangered, and vulnerable may soon join them. It asked visitors to imagine a world where these animals were no longer there. In addition to the shrouding and relabelling, the existing information boards were supplemented (things were put on top of them) and replaced about extinction, about why extinction is happening, where the problems are that are facing global biodiversity, and prompted people to think about how they need to change what they are doing in their daily lives to make a difference. So there were feedback stations for them to make commitments about what they were going to do. The end result is that you prompt people to create new stories--stories of entanglement between humans and nonhumans in the issue of extinction.

Now this example was in a natural history setting. It's very easy to think "OK, extinction that she is talking about belongs in natural history because, after all, they are animals", but it's not just the natural history setting.

29:05

So I want to turn to another example: The Fashioned from Nature exhibit that was at the Victoria & Albert in London, because here you have cultural artifacts that speak also directly to the issue of extinction. Things like whalebone, used in hats or corsets or umbrellas, or whole birds used as decoration on hats, in addition to all the materials like feathers and furs. These artifacts have their own cultural histories, but in fact those histories are tied up with histories of extinction.

Whaling is a great example of that. Because if we look back to the 1800s and up to the mid-1900s, numerous whale species were extremely close to extinction because of human practices. Luckily, there've been changes, some numbers have started to climb back, but

even then, they are very low numbers. And if passenger pigeons can go from 5 billion to none, then certainly whale populations can go from 2000 to none. So I think that using cultural artefacts to talk about extinction is an opportunity. I think the Fashioned from Nature curators did a good job of talking about the materials of construction in our cultural artifacts and where those come from -- that they have physical remnants of things in them, built in. It's an opportunity to think through what kind of collections currently have, what materials they are made out of, and where they come -- this is a potential of bringing together stories of the extinction of bodies and the cultural histories involved with those. Thinking through the collections we have and where they come from, what their constituents are in terms of animals and plants is one potential for bringing together the story of extinction bodies and their histories.

31:50

And I think here about the 'ahu 'ula as an example. The 'ahu 'ula is a Hawaiian royal cape. I have a PhD student, Gitte Westergaard, who's working with these objects as one of her case studies to think through how cultural histories of extinction could be told because the feathers that were used in the ahu 'ula (the yellow ones) come from the 'ō'ō. That bird of the Hawaiian islands is extinct. So if you want to make one of these capes now, as a cultural heritage activity, you would have to find a replacement because the 'ō'ō is not there. There are some interesting stories that could be told, and I've not seen anyone tell them, about the junction of the extinction of the 'ō'ō and the Hawaiian people.

So thinking about where extinction fits in the material culture and material remains that we have in our heritage items is worth considering. It's worth thinking about, because the extinction matters. It matters culturally, not just to the animal itself.

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So I want to argue that extinction is cultural heritage. It's a problematic legacy. Just like so many other problematic legacies that we are trying within the heritage sector to grapple with. Things like slavery and colonialism. Because (modern) extinction has almost always been traced to colonial activities, it is the Western powers which have led these changes in biology around the planet. So it is important that we grapple with it as a problematic legacy. And that we make it visible. Making it visible isn't just something that happens with a body in a natural history museum because it's scientific, but it also happens with the stories of artefacts, of people, of relations with those species.

And if you'd like to know more about what I've been working on with museums and extinction, you are welcome to go to my website about my Remembering Extinction projects: new.natures.org/extinction. You are also welcome to follow me on Twitter @DollyJorgensen

I hope that this will prompt you to think about how humans and the nonhuman world are tied together, how we can grapple with a problematic legacy of extinction as cultural heritage.

Thank you.