Environmental issues like climate change, conservation, and sea-level rise are important issues that have grabbed the public attention, but the difficulty in mustering the political will to implement necessary changes continues to hamper environmental efforts. Moreover, the concepts and details behind issues like climate change can make it hard for people to understand or activate.

For decades, artists have been at the forefront, using their work to inspire and educate the public to change their behaviors to be more sustainable, whether through writing, photography, community engagement, performance, or innovative partnerships with scientists and environmental advocates.

The arts have been shown to amplify the uptake of pro-environmental messaging and to improve the clarity and impact of the message. Visually representing complex concepts can help people better understand and how they can help. The arts also positively connect and empower people, inspiring advocates and documenting change.

Anecdotal research shows that the use of the arts to illustrate complicated issues related to the environment can inspire thousands of people to take action who would not have otherwise.\(^1\)

Researchers have found that artist-created visualizations of complex scientific concepts not only help the general public better understand, they also help scientists understand the meaning of the data and devise next steps.\(^2\)

The way complex concepts like climate change and sustainability of the environment are presented is crucial in convincing people of the urgency. Using the arts can drastically increase comprehension, as visuals can be processed in as little at 13 milliseconds.\(^3\)

Participants who view an underwater photograph with related text about plastic pollution in the ocean are more likely to change their behavior than participants who only viewed the corresponding text.\(^4\)

Complex issues like climate change run the risk of disheartening people into inaction with their messaging instead of inspiring them to be part of the movement. Research shows that integrating imagery of energy alternatives and personal actions to mitigate climate damage inspire feelings of success and empowerment in viewers.\(^5\)
Examples of Practice

KlimaForum: The People’s Climate Summit, Copenhagen, Denmark

This shadow event to the 2009 UN COP 15 Climate Change Summit gathered more than 50,000 people and featured 202 debates, 70 exhibitions, 43 films, 16 concerts, and 11 plays from all over the world—all of which served to encourage policymakers to uphold the Kyoto agreement.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klimaforum09

image: Signage at the KilmaForum in 2009: The People’s Summit

Water Bar, Minneapolis, MN

Using the serving of water from different parts of the state as a base from which to create connection, conversation, and partnership, Water Bar aims to transform culture by re-centering water and ecology in public life and create social spaces through art that reveal the interdependence of ecology, place, community, and culture.

https://www.water-bar.org
hello@water-bar.org

image: People at Water Bar in Minneapolis. credit: water-bar.org

Land Art Generator Initiative, Seattle, WA

The goal of the Land Art Generator is to accelerate the transition to post-carbon economies by providing arts-based models of renewable energy infrastructure that also add value, inspire, and educate. It conducts events, education, outreach, and research into emerging clean technologies and hosts a design competition.

http://www.landartgenerator.org
lagi@landartgenerator.org


HighWaterLine, New York, NY

HighWaterLine is a community initiative that works in diverse disciplines to devise climate change resiliency at a local level. It conducts public art interventions to bring awareness to the effects of climate change and facilitates skill-sharing and community collaboration.

http://www.highwaterline.org
eve@evemosher.com

image: HighWaterLine I Bristol. Photograph courtesy of Eve Mosher

Re-Locate Kivalina, Kivalina, AL

Re-Locate Kivalina is a collective of ethnographic artists and Inupiaq Alaska Natives working to help the Inupiaq people, some of the world’s first climate refugees, prepare for a community-led and culturally specific relocation. It is building artistic and web-based platforms to raise issues, support community discussion, encourage partnerships, and create spaces where the people in Kivalina can share original media about their lives.

http://www.relocate-ak.org
relocateak@gmail.com

image: Aerial view of Kivalina which is threatened by rising sea levels in the Arctic

References


**READING LIST**

**Arts. Environment. Sustainability. How Can Culture Make a Difference?**

This research paper and report on a 2010 summit convened by the Asia-Europe Foundation provides a variety of examples of current and future practice at the arts/environment/sustainability intersection.

http://www.asef.org/images/docs/Culture%20make%20a%20difference.pdf

**The Arts and Environmental Sustainability: An International Overview**

This report presents research across a wide range of national arts councils and ministries of culture, with the goal of broadening the understanding of environmental sustainability in connection to the arts, outlining current and future work, and encouraging collaboration and partnership to develop policies and programs related to culture and environmental sustainability.

http://media.ifacca.org/files/DArt34b.pdf

**Farther, Faster, Together: How Arts and Culture Can Accelerate Environmental Progress**

This paper, the fourth in the Creative Placemaking Field Scan series from ArtPlace America, provides a literature review and project analysis of work currently happening at the intersection of the arts and environmental advocacy.

https://www.americansforthearts.org/node/100696

**Funding at the Intersection of Art and Environment**

Grantmakers in the Arts commissioned this survey of arts funders who are supporting environment-related work. Some of the funders are actively pursuing this cross-sector work, while others are just beginning to consider whether and how to do this.

giarts.org/article/funding-intersection-art-and-environment-field-scan26-3_Frasz.pdf

**Arts, the Environment, & Sustainability**

This essay looks at changes in the environment and issues of sustainability and the role the arts may play in positively impacting those changes over the next 10 to 15 years. This article is an excerpt from the book *Arts & America: Arts, Culture, and the Future of American Communities.*

https://www.americansforthearts.org/node/90685

**Additional Images:**

Top image: HighWaterLine | Bristol. Photograph courtesy of Eve Mosher
The Center for Sustainable Practice in the Arts (CSPA)
CSPA is a think tank that advocates for environmentally sustainable practices in the arts and culture. It engages in research initiatives, educates arts leaders on sustainability, and convenes industry leaders around the issues of sustainable arts practices. sustainablepractice.org/about-us/the-cspa

Center for Energy and Environmental Research in the Human Sciences (CENHS)
CENHS, a research center associated with Rice University, is designed to foster and incubate research on the energy/environment nexus across the arts, humanities, and sciences. http://www.culturesofenergy.com

ArtPlace America
Among ArtPlace’s numerous focuses is the intersection of arts and environmental sustainability, with a particular focus on equity and displacement. http://www.artplaceamerica.org

Center for Art + Environment
The CA+E is an internationally recognized research center housed by the Nevada Museum of Art dedicated to supporting the practice, study, and awareness of creative interactions between people and their environments. It also hosts an annual Art + Environment conference. https://www.nevadaart.org/ae/

The Asia-Europe Foundation
This wide-reaching, international foundation began commissioning research and case studies about arts and the environment in 2010. Now it has a robust set of publications, many exploring environmentally-related initiatives by cultural sectors in Asia, but which are applicable to similar issues anywhere. http://www.asef.org/projects/themes/culture/2381-linking-the-arts-to-environment-and-sustainable-development-issues

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top image: Water Bar in Minneapolis. credit: water-bar.org.

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