

TEA

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Over the edge: Heritage management and coastal erosion

Tom Dawson, School of History, University of St Andrews, Scotland (tcd@st-andrews.ac.uk)

Session organizers: Marie-Yvane Daire and Tom Dawson

Over recent years, archaeologists have become increasingly successful in integrating heritage management into the planning process. There is a growing acceptance in many countries that 'the polluter pays', and in those cases where the doctrine of 'preservation in situ' cannot or will not be applied, there is a responsibility for the developer to financially contribute towards archaeological recording work.

In general, this hard-won situation has not been applied to heritage sites that are threatened with destruction by natural processes. There are a range of natural threats to the archaeological heritage, and coastal sites are amongst the most vulnerable, facing challenges that increase in severity depending upon geographic location and local geology. Coastal erosion, tidal surges and the scouring of sediments are already damaging thousands of sites on the coast and intertidal zone. Many climate change scientists assert that there will be an increased threat in the future, with the melting of polar ice causing a rise in sea levels and changes to ocean temperatures leading to more frequent and intense storms.

Against this background, the conference session 'Over the Edge: Heritage Management and Coastal Erosion' brought together a number of leading practitioners working in the management and rescue of archaeological sites threatened by coastal processes. Coastal managers have several options when developing Shoreline Management Plans, but they usually advocate either holding the line (building coastal defences) or managed retreat (alternatively referred to as Do Nothing). Defences will be built where there is something that is perceived to be of value and therefore needs protecting, but archaeological sites do not often qualify for the construction of sea walls (which are expensive to both build and maintain).

Robert van de Noort (Exeter University, England) set the scene, demonstrating that there is a diverse wealth of archaeological heritage at the coast; including sites related to maritime industries and past coastal management. He has studied areas where defences have been constructed in the past, and he showed that coastal populations have been adapting and reacting to threats from the sea for centuries. As the scale of the threat has increased, so has the size and durability of coastal defences. Although people have a long history of

planning for adverse climates, recent mitigation strategies have involved building 'harder' defences over larger areas. The construction of seawalls and barrages and the managed realignment of existing embankments has interfered with sediment movement and has disrupted the equilibrium that had been established over centuries. Changes in the sediment budget are especially noticeable in coastal wetlands, and areas that once responded naturally to sea-level rise are now unable to do so. This is resulting in more coastal and intertidal sites becoming damaged, with problems being observed further upstream on tidal rivers.

Long-term changes to coastlines is being investigate by the Arche Manche Project, which is attempting to use the evidence locked in archaeological sites to understand how both landscapes and people have evolved in the face of changing climates. Garry Momber and Lauren Tidbury (Hampshire and Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology, England) presented details of this EU-funded initiative that is showing how maritime heritage sites and artistic representations can be used to indicate long-term patterns of coastal change and the way in which climate has impacted upon human settlement. The project is studying areas on either side of the English Channel and has posed three questions: do sites contain evidence of changes in sea level?; do sites provide evidence of environmental change?; and do sites demonstrate temporal continuity? The project team are investigating the interplay between archaeological features and data from artistic representations to establish a methodology that will show the value of archaeology, art and maritime heritage.

Although coastal archaeological sites may be rich depositories of evidence about past environments, the threat to many of them is so grave that action is needed to help preserve or extract the evidence before they are lost. There are numerous threats to coastal sites, and the management of an area's cultural heritage becomes even more acute in places where the majority of past activity was coastal. One such area is the Faroe Islands, situated between the north of Scotland and Iceland. Due to a number of factors, including topography and access to maritime resources, much of the archaeology of the Faroe Islands is coastal and a number of sites are threatened with destruction. Simun Arge (Foroya Fornminnisavn) indicated that it wasn't only erosion that was threatening cultural landscapes, but also other processes associated with climate change, including rising temperatures, greater humidity and increased precipitation, all of which may cause landslides. He presented examples of a number of threatened sites; showing how the work of Faroese archaeologists and foreign teams has been helping to record some of the sites before it is too late, but noting that there is still much to do.

Another area where past activity has been predominantly coastal is Svalbard, an archipelago in the Arctic Circle. Anne-Cathrine Flyen (NIKU, Norway) explained that although the islands have no indigenous population, people from many European countries have used the land in a variety of ways over many centuries. Most past activity was centred on hunting and extractive industries. Due to increasing threats to the cultural heritage, the Governor of Svalbard requested that a methodology be devised that would identify sites in an area which is affected by extreme weather, long, dark winters, and has few roads and other infrastructure. The researchers found that existing maps were poor and that there was little aerial photography that was of use to archaeologists. They realised that they had to undertake new field surveys in the harsh and dangerous environment (which includes the threat of polar bears). The ongoing work has resulted in the identification of more than 2000 historic sites. Surveys have also led to the identification of numerous threats to the coastal heritage, including the melting of permafrost and damage caused by pack ice. The team are recommending action at different sites, and they have noted that in the formulation of management plans, an attempt must be made to ascribe value to sites. This is essential when trying to prioritize action at threatened sites.

Tom Dawson (University of St Andrews, Scotland) noted that of the many threats facing coastal sites facing the Atlantic, erosion was one of the gravest. Coastlines can change very rapidly, especially when high tides combine with low pressure and high winds. He gave examples of how single climatic events can destroy entire archaeological sites; in the Western Isles, a storm in 2005 caused up to fifty metres of the coast edge to recede in a single night. Surveys have been completed of 40% of the Scottish coast, revealing over

12,000 sites, many of which were previously unrecorded. Information was also collected about the local geology, geomorphology and whether the stretch of coast was eroding, accreting or stable on the day of the survey. Due to the details of the surveys, the research noted that erosion was often localised and more of the Scottish coast was threatened than previous studies had suggested. Dawson advocated that local communities had a crucial role in monitoring and recording vulnerable sites, and gave examples where archaeologists and local groups had worked together to take action in a variety of ways. This included survey and excavation projects; recording threatened remains through art projects and video; and even moving an entire site from the coast edge to the local heritage centre.

Marie-Yvane Daire (Université Rennes, France) noted that irreversible damage can be caused to archaeological sites on the coast by both long-term processes (such as sea level rise) and sudden extreme events (such as storms). These events can cause widespread and irreversible damage to heritage sites situated on the coast. Bringing together colleagues involved in Integrated Coastal Zone Management with archaeologists and geologists, she has formed a team that has developed a collaborative project which combines geology, geomorphology and archaeology. Much of the work of the AleRT project has focussed on Brittany, an area whose long and vulnerable coastline and numerous islands contain a wealth of archaeological sites. The AleRT project has developed the Vulnerability Evaluation Form (VEF), an objective method of recording threats to sites that is also simple to use. The project has enlisted the help of the Conservatoire du Littoral, an organisation that employs officers who act as custodians for much of the French coastline. Although more used to working with the natural heritage, the project has trained officers to use the VEF to monitor sites and to raise awareness with the visiting public.

In addition to using professional rangers, the use of the general public to help record threatened sites was also seen as an important way of helping to manage the problem of erosion. Joanna Hambly (The SCAPE Trust, Scotland) explained that thousands of Scottish sites carried recommendations for further work in advance of destruction, far outstripping available resources. This meant that priorities had to be set, and a project by SCAPE developed a GIS-based system for assessing the value of sites, together with the level of threat. The project resulted in a 'top 1,000' priority sites being drawn up in collaboration with regional and national heritage managers. The project noted that the dynamic nature of the coast meant that all priority sites needed to be revisited. This was to verify which sites had been destroyed, which had stabilised, and which were in a more critical condition than when first surveyed. In order to help raise awareness of the problem and to bring communities into the heart of decision making, SCAPE has launched a new project, Scotland's Coastal Heritage at Risk, that encourages the public to participate in the management of sites. The project has developed an interactive website and mobile phone app to allow a crowdsourcing approach to be adopted. An army of 'citizen archaeologists' is being recruited all around the country to monitor and record threatened sites. A form allows the submission of results directly from site via a mobile phone or back at home through the website. Once verified, text and images are added to the project database, which is also accessible online. The public are also being asked to make recommendations for follow up work at sites that they feel are important locally. These recommendations will result in community projects involving local people and professionals at a number of sites which are both a priority for archaeologists and are valued by the general public.

The Thames Discovery Project is another long-running and successful example of how to involve the public in recording sites threatened by erosion. Eliot Wragg (Museum of London) explained how the tidal River Thames is the longest archaeological site in London, a place containing evidence of centuries of intensive occupation along its banks. A large number of sites are revealed at low tide, when structures and artefacts can be found along the Thames foreshore. Many of the sites are under severe threat from erosion caused by changing scour patterns and tidal flows resulting from newly constructed structures in the river. The project works with teams of volunteers to record sites and groups have been set up order to monitor site stability. The Thames Discovery Project team provide training and collect records from volunteers, which are placed on their website, together with videos of activities. The team have found that the best way to monitor sites is through photography, as this is a rapid and

accessible way of recording which allows observation of changes to sites over time (which can be both exposed and covered by sediment). The project provides people with a sense of “ownership” for sites whilst helping to ensure that archaeology remains a relevant subject for the public.

Following the presentations, a lively discussion showed that although there is a growing awareness of the threat that natural processes pose to coastal sites, much still needs to be done. The lack of baseline knowledge concerning coastal sites and the severity of the threat that many face was noted. In addition, threats are largely unpredictable as erosion is not a steady process, but is dependent upon a number of variables that can combine to cause widespread damage and destruction. In order to manage coastal heritage, there is a need to locate and record vulnerable heritage assets as well as the severity of the threat and the value of the site. Recording value can be especially difficult, as many systems exist, but the application of public value as a means of prioritising action at heritage sites was noted as being important.

There are many thousands of archaeological sites threatened with damage and destruction. In order to plan for the future, there is a need to engage heritage managers, archaeologists and the public in the problem. Greater cooperation is needed, with people sharing experiences and ideas on how best to manage the threatened resource before it is destroyed. Organizations such as the EAA could play a pivotal role in coordinating the sharing of experience and collaborative action.

Rather than necessarily seeing the threat posed by coastal processes in a negative way, the potential destruction of a site could act as a catalyst that stimulates action. For example, research projects that at present target unthreatened sites could be focussed on coastal sites, allowing important questions to be answered while saving valuable information that would otherwise be lost.