

Ecological crisis & colonial histories



Exploring how Bristol's colonial collections can help empower just, fair, inclusive action against ecological (and climate) crisis today



**culture
team**

Use of powerpoint content:

The content of this powerpoint was created for a workshop delivered by Bristol Museums & Archives with the University of Bristol geology collections, 6th July 2021.

Please get in touch if you would like to use any of the images or ideas, or if you would like to share ideas for collaboration:

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- Claudia Hildebrandt, Collections Manager UoB: c.hildebrandt@bristol.ac.uk
- Mama D Ujuaje, Community Centred Knowledge: communitycentredknowledge@gmail.com

Workshop aims:

- **Sharing information:**
 - Bristol Museums & Archives - focus on ecological crisis & colonial world natural science, world cultures, British Empire & Commonwealth collections
 - University of Bristol geology collections
- **Making connections:** for the museum to progress this work requires:
 - critical friends / advisory group / wider academic & community expertise
 - access to collaborative funding streams for:
 - collections research, cataloguing, digitisation, community participation projects
- **Testing & developing ideas:** gaining your insight & expertise
- **Highlighting opportunities for collaboration:** specific upcoming opportunities - museum & / or participants

Mama D



is a Community Researcher and Facilitator whose background is in Nourishment practice and soma and art-based advocacy towards Transformative Justice. She currently curates, within Community Centred Knowledge, Learning Journeys, exploring the interfaces of community, modernity and systems of justice via art, culture and other than human 'lenses'. She uses embodied and action research methods to interrogate the interfaces of both community and academic institutional knowledge assemblage and flow. She is interested in how humans navigate justice issues over time and space and how all beings manage personal and social trauma within bodies located across the ecologies and territories of the Anthropocene.

Outline of the day

- 10.07** The consequences of connecting, disconnecting and reconnecting - Mama D
- 10.10** Contemplating Colonialisms Legacies: short video - Mama D
- 10.15** A question of relations: Paired reflective activity - Mama D
- 10.25** About Our Archives: Bristol's Collections and their relationship to narratives of ecology, colonialism and crisis - Bristol Museums & Archives & University of Bristol
- 10.45** Q&A
- 11.00** Break
- 11.05** When Elephants Fight the Grass Suffers or Building Back the Whole Body (Descartes Remade) - Mama D
- 11.10** Exploring two critical questions in breakout rooms
- 11.45** Discussion & next steps

Background: Bristol Culture & Creative Industries



- Part of Bristol City Council (BCC)
- Funded by BCC, Arts Council England, raised income ~30% each
- Multi-site service: Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, M Shed, Georgian House, Red Lodge, Blaise Museum, Bristol Archives
- 9 collection areas across art, science, history, archaeology & world cultures
- Also City Arts & Events team, Environmental Records Centre, Bristol Film Office, Bottle Yard Studios

Why look at ecological crisis in the context of colonial histories?

- **For the museum & archive service:**
 - recognising racist colonial legacies in our practice & potential for replicating colonial harms in calls to action
 - disrupting harmful structures; decentring European gaze; reparative opportunities?
 - finding new ways collections can empower visitors & users - displays, digital, events
- **For Bristol's colonial institutions & environmental practitioners:**
 - Bristol One City Ecological Emergency Strategy: 'just, fair, inclusive' framework
 - Museum collections = tangible Bristol histories; colonial basis of thinking & practice
- **For Bristol communities impacted by colonisation:**
 - to be led by communities; potential to represent & celebrate erased histories & contemporary marginalised voices in mainstream museum spaces, if welcomed
- **For international communities:** access to primary sources digitised / repatriated

Potential for informing ‘just, fair, inclusive’ action:

- **Highlighting & disrupting harmful structural legacies / ways of thinking:**
 - racist roots underlying mainstream European thinking
 - cross-subject collections - breaking across silos
- **Engaging through tangible histories (attending to specifics):**
 - real objects, images, stories
 - potential to recover hidden/erased histories; engage multiple perspectives
- **Informing tools for ‘action’ (= ways of thinking, relating):**
 - Language tools, e.g. challenging globalising ‘we’; ‘habitat loss’
 - Questions / critical thinking, e.g. whose voice is not heard? Historic timelines
- **Creating space for diversity of voice:**
 - Care: not to replicate colonial exploitation of knowledge
 - perspectives of communities affected by colonisation; celebrating diverse cultures
- **Sharing primary sources:** digital or physical repatriation; international partnerships

Related previous work:

Museum shrouds endangered wildlife exhibits in mourning veil

Bristol Museum to highlight biodiversity crisis after children demand true stories of exhibits



Bristol's world natural sciences collection:

- [Legacies of Jamaica: A Not So Elegant Priest: Mama D Ujuaje, Community Centred Knowledge, 1700s Jamaican collection:](#)
- [Extinction Voices](#) gallery intervention (Aug 2019):

World Cultures Collection: [initiating repatriation](#)

Bristol Museum & Art Gallery: [Uncomfortable Truths](#)

British Empire & Commonwealth Collection:

- [Building Shared Futures](#) (digitisation, repatriation, research with Kenyan academics and heritage professionals):
- [Empire Through the Lens exhibition](#) (co-curation):
- [Lips Touched with Blood exhibition](#) (creative collaboration)

Why Bristol?

- Global contemporary centre for production of narratives about wildlife / environment, e.g. wildlife documentaries; 5th oldest zoo in the world; Cabot Institute; first UK Green Capital etc.
- History of community-led activism, justice-based approaches, e.g. Black and Green Ambassadors, Extinction Rebellion, Sustainable Development Goal alignment
- Further need to align mainstream environmental narratives with social justice focus
- Similar to Bristol's response to anti-racism - understanding Bristol's imperial / colonial history is key to this work

**Bristol's collections form a tangible material backbone to this story -
evidence to revisit, refocus, recover, reimagine for today**

Bristol's collections: 'world' natural science & cultural objects

- Established as part of the museum of the Bristol Institution, 1823
- Actively used Bristol's 'extensive foreign commerce' and 'captains and agents' to build collections, knowledge & prosperity
- A centre for knowledge development: focus on natural sciences; cultural objects often collected at same time (trophies)
- Wealth directly or indirectly through trafficking of enslaved Africans, or colonial sources



The Bristol Institution, 1823; Religious leader & founder member Rev. Beeke; international trade

World wildlife/biology collections

- Total collection (UK & world) = 700,000 extant biological specimens
- Earliest-collected specimens & archives - Jamaican natural history: 1750-90s
- 'World' material: up to 80% of nineteenth century collections?
- Sources: ship captains, colonial networks (missionaries, military, trophy hunters), scientific expeditions, animal traders, zoos, botanic gardens etc
- Significant loss in World War II; under-investigated, including rich archives



Contemporary insight: epistemic violence, structural racism:

DESIDERATA FOR THE BRISTOL INSTITUTION.

MAMMALIA.

Human Skeleton, male and female; also Skulls of all the well marked varieties, annexing the name of the tribe, and country to which they belonged.

Oran Outang, adult, Skin and Skeleton, found of the size of man in Borneo, and other Eastern Isles. Of the black species, or Chimpanse of Africa, an adult specimen is much desired.

Gibbon.—The black, and silvery ash colored Negro Monkey of Java.

Example: List distributed to Bristol's ships captains 'more especially those whose business carried them to the shores of Africa' by second curator Samuel Stutchbury (1798-1859), published 1832

- Bristol's story: knowledge development of 'world wildlife' entangled with genocide & exploitation
- Indigenous peoples classified as scientific objects for collecting
- Stutchbury 'extremely important' supplying specimens to science via Bristol's trading & imperial networks



1st gorilla material to reach Europe; evidence of erasure, othering, science = sensational, power



Structural legacies:

Example: Displays in Bristol's World Wildlife Gallery:



Maintain structural racism, e.g.:

- wildlife from outside Europe presented as known only by European man
- continued erasure of local and indigenous human communities
- no mention of violent colonial histories
- objectification of more than human beings

Potential for harm in 'calls to action':

- racist assumptions about people of colour's knowledge of wildlife; 'the indigenous problem' - placing blame for wildlife threats on local communities; enabling actions for wildlife that exploit or harm local people

Opportunities for a different approach:

- exploring multiple perspectives; critical thinking, emotional connection; a space for reflection, healing, celebrating lost voices?

Museum and University Links

E.B. Tawney (1840-1882) (curator from 1871-1878) was one of five original lecturers at the University College, Bristol holding both jobs concurrently.

Followed by W.J. Sollas (1849-1936) (curator 1878-1882); teaching presumed to have used museum collections

Earlier connections, e.g. Thwaites

Also Zoological Society, e.g. Henry Riley;
sourcing / donating of specimens

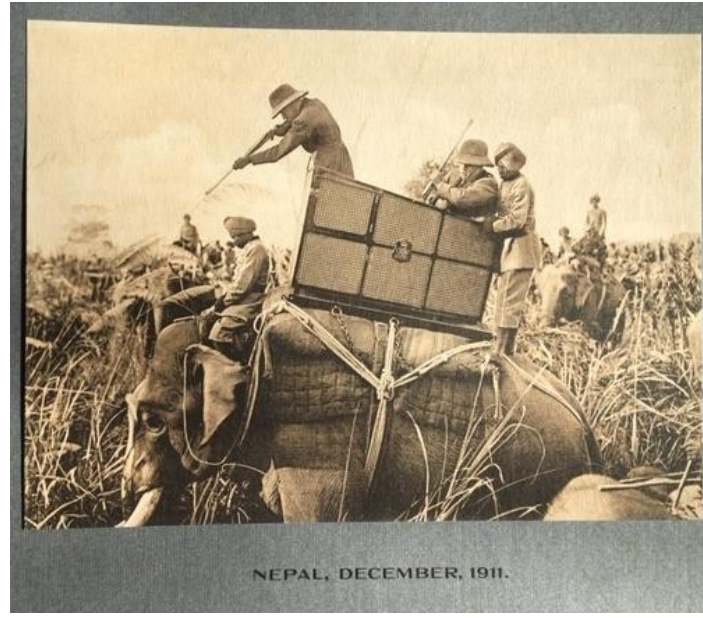


K6314 - The Flood-lit Tower of Bristol University, 1953 by Clifford Hanney (1890-1990)



Alfred the gorilla:

- Questions not asked, stories not told: focus on European encounters and his Bristol story - opportunities to change this
- *'The gorillas of Africa are known around the world, but African stories of gorillas are not. Indigenous knowledge of gorillas is almost entirely absent from the global canon'* ([Amir, 2019](#)) What's in a name?
- Threatened by 'humans', 'deforestation'. Looking across collections brings wider perspectives: e.g. Bristol's trafficking of enslaved Africans from West Africa superseded by palm oil plantations, crude oil (BECC images); indigenous marks removed from skulls (world cultures).
- A different role for this gallery today? Disrupting colonial structures, exploring indigenous & diaspora perspectives, learning from history? (Esmee Fairbairn funding application - participation & community focus)



Letters to the museum from pupils at Freshford School, Years 5 & 6, 2019:

- “As we entered the world wildlife room, we were appalled on seeing these poor animals stuffed and put behind glass, with a purpose of nothing.”
- “if we had been informed of its story, we would have seen it differently.”
- “I am sure you will agree that we must learn about this tiger’s history in order to understand the present. We must understand the present to save our future.”

Colonial networks - collections sourced via:

- **Ships' captains**, e.g. Captain Potter of the ship Tom Cod donated 'a skin of a Rhinoceros Bird, a turtle, a Mannis and two bats in Rum from Africa', 1829
- **British military**, e.g. Captain F.D. Raikes collection - British political officer in Myanmar (Burma) 341 bird skins; cultural objects including bison gunpowder horn
- **Soldier/hunter/naturalist**, e.g. Col. H.G.C. Swayne
- **Religion**, e.g. Abbot Edmund Ford in Australia, shot 'a fine collection of skins of Australian beasts and birds'
- Menageries, animal traders, botanic gardens, etc...



Unexplored Manuscripts

Rich in history and environmental history

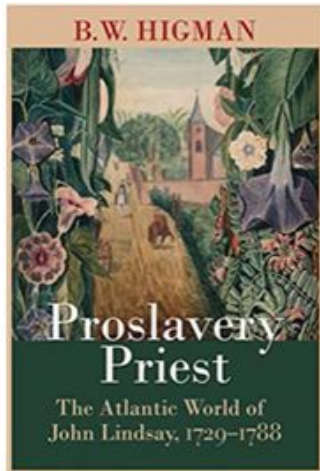
- **Robert Long Manuscript** - “A supplement attempted or appendix and addendum to Sir Hans Sloane & Dr Pat Brown in notes and observations Natural and moral on the native blacks, the quadrupeds, reptiles, insects, plants, birds, fishes, air and clime etc. of Jamaica by R Long being occasional remarks and observations from 1752-1762 inclusive.”
- **William Hilhouse** Maps of the Rivers Esequibo and Demerara with Drawing of Fish frequenting them

Banks of historic data (what, where, when):



Bristol's Jamaican Natural History Collections where investigation has begun (Rhian Rowson, Curator)

John Lindsay
Manuscripts of
Natural History of
Jamaica 1750's



Dr Arthur
Broughton
herbarium 1790's



World cultures collections (Lisa Graves, Curator):

- c.10,000 items, dating from the 18th to the early 21st centuries
- Regionally significant collection, with some material of international importance.
- Major areas represented are West Africa, Central Africa, North America, Central America and the Pacific.
- Smaller collections exist for: North, East and Southern Africa, South America, Asia and Europe.
- Also includes c.10,000 items from ancient Egypt.
- Symbiotic history with natural sciences: natural & human trophies



Blackfoot deerhide shirt, Dr Richard Smith, 1828



Whales' teeth necklace, Fiji, Mrs AG Maden/Tourquay, 1949



Sealskin 'breeches', Arctic, early 20thc



Yoruba divination bowl, Cpt Walters, late 19thc



Cartonnage mask, British School of Archaeology in Egypt, 1911

W.W. Rowland - Hecla - given 1826

- 1) Antler of an Elk
- 2) Bone of a Wallros
- 3) Sealskin as prepared by the Esquimaux
- 4) a Pair of Sealskin boots
- 5) Do shoes
- 6) Do gloves
- 7) Head of an Esquimaux Dog
- 8) Bone knife of an Esquimaux found in a grave at Pendulum Island
- 9) Esquimaux Iron knife
- 10) small square vessel made of Bone obtained from a tribe of Esquimaux
- 11) Head of an Esquimaux spear
- 12) Walrus wiskers
- 13) Esquimaux Drill
- 14) Specimen of Esquimaux [drilling]
- 15) Do found in a grave
- 16) Bone Harpoon used by the Esquimaux
- 17 Bone ornaments representing a Seal & white Bear wor[ked] by Esquimaux females
- 18 Chalcedony from Greenland
- 19 Walros Head
- 20 Furcoat of a Greenlander
- 21 Scul of an Esquimaux



Why this matters today:

- Important to recognise that indigenous groups are best to answer the question what do they want to know about an object. Particular objects may appear interesting but a 'simple' basket can hold techniques, knowledge of eco-resources etc. that aren't obvious to outsiders.
- Reconnecting groups with relationships with nature e.g. harvesting and use of plants for ceremonial objects/healing products (Cree caribou hide coat, Kiribati coconut hair armour) - *'The decline in the production of armour went hand in hand with visitors to the islands who collected armour as curios; first whalers and traders, blackbirders, missionaries and the Colonial Office.'*
- exploring changes in habitat that affect cultural practices (Kiribati and Tuvalu material in WC and BEC object collection)
- through scientific analysis of materials used in objects, ability to locate them geographically and support repatriation claims
- (re)establishing indigenous/treaty rights to land use eg. fishing in Mikmaq territory in Canada



- Symbiotic history with natural science collections - at beginnings of removal / introduction of species and land use change
- Rectifying colonial terminology and classifications based on racist interpretation of cultural practices ('medicine man' gourds, Tanzania and 'fetish'/'charms, Congo')
- Reparative opportunities? If welcomed - learning from more diverse ways of knowing, indigenous perspectives, cultural storytelling and practices; repatriation.



Rai'vavai 'bird figure' -
Stutchbury?

British Empire & Commonwealth Collection (BECC) (Nicky Sugar, Archivist)



- Collected mainly from British travellers to the empire from c. 1860 – 1970s
- Collection strengths include large quantities of photo, film and oral history material
- Contains a wealth of material on wildlife, hunting, conservation, agriculture and extractive industry
- Our mission is to make these sources available so that people and communities worldwide can explore difficult, forgotten or hidden histories from their own perspectives

Potential of BECC material

1. Documents and illustrates the colonial backbone to the current ecological crisis:



Hunting and safari images and journals: detailed insights into attitudes and practices



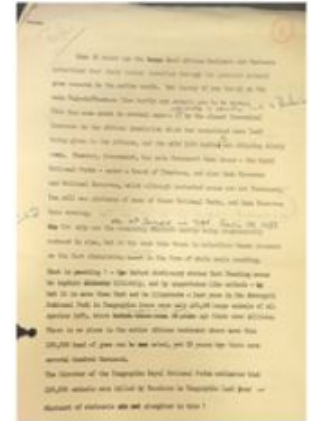
Extractive industry: evidence of palm oil extraction, deforestation and mining, through films and photos



Civilising mission of Western zoos and museums: complex portrayal of humans and animals for education and entertainment



Emerging Western conservation narratives : wildlife photography and documents from the early conservation movement. Racism often inherent.



2. Can be used alongside other material to spark questions and interventions:



Are we horrified by fur but OK with fast fashion?
Potential to display objects within existing galleries.



Is unfair trade a legacy of empire?
What are the links between current and historic injustices?

“Mr Kemp provides his view of the enlightened views of the British Colonial Forestry Policy, based firmly upon the social needs of the local population, and the need to involve local people in management and conservation.”

Were mid 20th century practices really so enlightened?

What can oral history teach us about changing attitudes to conservation?



How do pictures like this make us feel?
How much has changed in 60 years?
How can people earn a living through tourism without the exploitation of humans and the environment alike?

3. Contains unpublished data and images which can be shared with source countries:



Norman Myers collection, focussed on biodiversity hotspots.
What can we learn from his predictions about species extinction?

A photograph of a handwritten document, possibly a log or record, with text and numbers. The document is written on aged, yellowed paper and contains several columns of text, likely detailing dates, locations, and other information related to the collection. The handwriting is in dark ink and appears to be from the early 20th century.

Clough kill logs from early C20th India.
What can we learn from cross-referencing these
with data held elsewhere?



Images of wildlife dating from c. 1910 in various
collections including Huxley, Tanner, and Trotter.
What do these tell us about how animals lived and were treated,
and how did this change over time?

4. Offers diverse source material for engagement activities:



Wildlife films from the 1930s onwards can be used to inspire creative projects such as filmmaking, to raise awareness of habitats and histories throughout the Commonwealth with younger generations

Images from numerous Commonwealth countries, such as these from a fishing community in Somalia, can form points of connection with diaspora communities in Bristol, building on successful previous projects such as Migration Stories

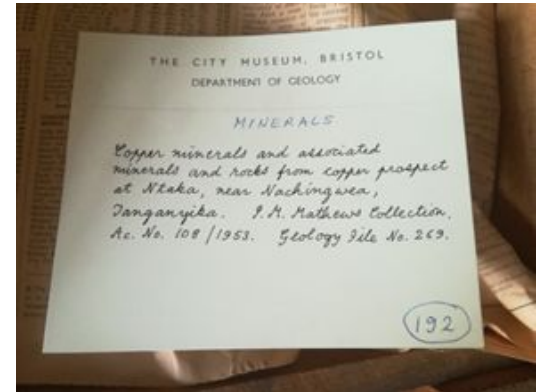


Tartarugh marine su una spiaggia del Benadir.

World geology collections (Deborah Hutchinson, Curator):

Mineral and rock collection: history of resource extraction: The collection holds many examples of minerals and ore specimens sourced from colonised countries (Approximately 17% of the mineral collection), from countries such as Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Tanzania (Tanganyika), Myanmar (Burma) and Ghana (Gold Coast). How were these specimens collected? Mined exploitatively?

Palaeontology: Specimens contributed to palaeontological knowledge development, reflect colonial networks and attitudes.



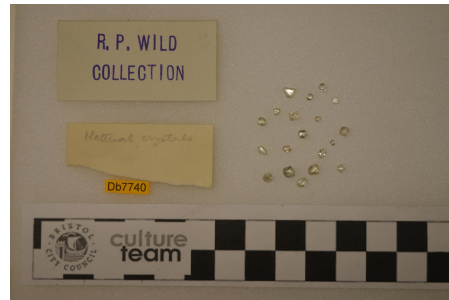
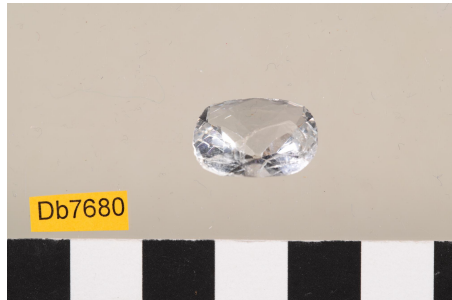
Colonial Administrators – Mapping and surveying used to exploit resources

Captain Robert Powley Wild (1882-1946)

Colonial administrator and collector

Appointed Inspector of Mines in the Mines Department, Obuasi, Ghana from 1920-1937 and worked in the Asante region. Gold, diamonds, haematite....

Over 1500 mineral specimens, many from colonial sources.



Dr Norman Ross Junner (1891 -1973)

Sierra Leone – Colonial Geological Surveys

Was seconded from the Gold Coast to survey Sierra Leone for mineral deposits in 1926.

In 1928, a Geological and Mines Department was established and Dr. Junner was appointed its first Director.

1930, Dr. Junner returned to the Gold Coast on promotion to the post of Director of that Survey. (Earthwise BGS)

Palaeontologists/Geologists



Figure 2. De la Beche's illustration, in his *Notes on the present condition of the negroes of 1825*, showing slaves on the family plantations in Jamaica. The Bristol Institution's members drew their wealth from exploiting a deeply unequal society, and this was reflected in its conservative, anti-Lamarckian scientific ideology. Photograph courtesy of the National Museum of Wales.

Taylor, M.A., 1994. The plesiosaur's birthplace: the Bristol Institution and its contribution to vertebrate palaeontology. *Zoological Journal of the Linnean Society* 112, 179–196

H.T. De la Beche (1796-1855)

Founding member of the Bristol Institution. Significant early geologist, founder of the BGS and slave owner.

'Sir Henry Thomas De La Beche, his father left his estate, subject to annuities and legacies, including his Jamaica estates [and enslaved people] for life'.

Donated material and objects to the BI. 'A group of Institution members, including Mary Anning's childhood friend Henry Thomas De la Beche (1796-1855), bought the museum's first fossil from her and donated it to the museum in 1823'.

also read papers:

On the Diluvium of Jamaica , by H.T. De la Beche, Esq., F . R.S., F.G.S., etc . Read May 12, 1825.

UoB Earth Sciences Collection

<https://www.bristol.ac.uk/earthsciences/about/facilities/earth-science-collection/>

Early days of Bristol Collection University College 1876 (part of Department of Zoology and Geology). Based in Wills Memorial Building.

First donations 1877 but specimens dating back to 1830-50s.

Shared organisational history (collectors, staff, donors) with City Museum and Art Gallery



Collection content:

Minerals, gemstones, rocks, fossils, modern skulls and skeletal material, maps, archives, field notebooks, expedition diaries, slides, photographs

Geographical origin: global

A record of changing landscapes, ecologies, communities and science - not just geological past but also more recent times (skeletal, corals, microfossils)

UoB Earth Sciences Collection

Collection narratives to explore:

Unravel indigenous narratives outside existing organisational and academic/educational/scientific structures.

Discuss impact of colonial collecting and depletion of natural resources (flora, fauna, minerals) to inform fair and just transition to a green and sustainable future



Potential

Inform a fair and just green energy transition

Platform indigenous voices to built collection narratives

Acknowledge and challenge white western perspectives in (earth) sciences education and research

Civic impact of 150 years of colonial history and collecting



Collection of African mammal skulls

Partly endangered or red-list species



White, A.E. 1948 donation

Natural crystals presented by Diamond Development Cooperation, Africa, Zaire



Sir Lewis Leigh Fermor, OBE, FRS (18 September 1880 – 24 May 1954), was a British chemist and director of the Geological Survey of India (1930-1935) and president of the Bristol Naturalists' Society in 1945.

Collaboration - upcoming opportunities:

- Research funding - [AHRC/NERC Hidden Histories of Environmental Science](#)
- Examining presentations in the World Wildlife Gallery, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery with communities, creative and environmental practitioners (workshops, interventions) - [Esmee Fairbairn Collections Fund](#)
- City narratives - COP 26 and 15?
- City narratives - 'Think Global: Act Bristol' exhibition, M Shed, Summer 2022 cross-collections
- Museum activities - events, digital stories, social media etc.
- Wildfilm project - Wellcome/ UoB

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