

Adapting Through Heritage: Can Ecomuseums Make Saskatchewan Communities More Sustainable?

Glenn C. Sutter

Royal Saskatchewan Museum

Adela Tesarek Kincaid*

Selkirk College

Amber J. Fletcher

University of Regina

Tobias Sperlich

University of Regina

* Direct all correspondence to akincaid@selkirk.ca, Selkirk College, 301 Frank Beinder Way, Castlegar BC., Canada, V1N 4L3

This special issue of *Prairie Forum* examines the role of heritage, systems thinking, and strategic planning in fostering sustainable community development. The articles in this issue are based on a provincial symposium called “Stuff, Stories, and Strategies for the Future” that took place in Regina, Saskatchewan on April 27–29, 2017. The symposium focused on the recent emergence of ecomuseums in Saskatchewan. Ecomuseums have been defined as locally driven, place-based “museums without walls” (Maggi, 2002) that work “to conserve the cultural and natural heritage of a region through community participation, local sustainable development, and in-situ preservation” (Murtas and Davis, 2009). Coined in 1972, the term “ecomuseum” was conceived as a way to align the heritage education and public engagement facets of a museum with concepts, models, and systems approach associated with human ecology (e.g., Dyball and Newell, 2015). The article presented toward the end of this issue identifies ecomuseums as having the potential to connect living heritage (culture) and sustainability at the local level and foster social sustainability that is also ecologically responsible (see Highlights and Future Direction for Ecomuseum Development in Saskatchewan). The authors explain that ecomuseum initiatives can enhance valuable ecological knowledge and sustainability practices at the community level. Symposium participants reflected on updates from three Saskatchewan ecomuseums, examined the relationship between heritage and sustainability with an emphasis on systems thinking, and launched a new provincial entity called the Saskatchewan Ecomuseum Network (SEN).

The purpose of this issue is twofold. First, by drawing together the stories of community members actively working on ecomuseums with current models of sustainability, we aim to examine if and how ecomuseums—as practical, community-driven initiatives—help to empirically ground and exemplify these otherwise abstract theoretical models of sustainability. Second, through this integration of scholarly and practical knowledge, we aim to present guidance for other ecomuseum initiatives in contexts both similar to Saskatchewan (e.g., communities in a relatively rural and geographically widespread area) and very different from it. The issue, therefore, draws together diverse contributions of symposium attendees from inside and outside academia. Contributors include the symposium organizers (ecomuseum researchers based in Saskatchewan), other ecomuseum and sustainability researchers from across Canada, and

community members involved with ecomuseums at various stages of development. Their articles reflect on the wide range of topics that can be addressed where heritage and sustainability come together. We also consider the value of the ecomuseum model and the importance of scrutinizing those topics from a systems perspective, since all aspects of heritage contribute to, and are affected by, a wide range of complex ecological and socio-cultural systems. To provide context, this opening chapter outlines the motivation behind the symposium, introduces key concepts that connect the articles, and examines the larger ecomuseum movement underway in the province of Saskatchewan.

Doughnuts, Sustainability, and Adaptive Renewal

New ideas can stabilize or disrupt a social group, depending on the memes and outcomes they produce and how pervasive they become. Some ideas can lead to undesirable consequences, such as environmental damage, economic hardship, or social injustice, if they have, or are expected to have negative, catalytic effects. Others can be beneficial, replacing a damaging status quo with more desirable assumptions, beliefs, and activities. According to social movement studies, whether a given idea will be disruptive or not depends on how it interacts with current thinking, reasoning, educating, and other social processes (Oliver and Johnson, 2000). Presumably, an idea is more likely to be viable and produce lasting change if it goes beyond criticism to offer solutions that are reasonable and theoretically sound.

Such is the case for the notion of living in a doughnut, as described in a recent book called *Doughnut Economics* by “renegade economist” Kate Raworth. Much of the book (Raworth, 2017) takes aim at dominant economic models, revealing deep flaws and unsupported assumptions in current economic theory, including the notion that people are rational consumers and that increasing gross domestic product (GDP) is a reliable measure of progress. If the book had stopped there, it would be a valuable addition to similar critiques that have been running through the economics field for several decades. But thankfully, Raworth goes on to describe new models and assumptions that are informed by pressing social needs and unchangeable planetary boundaries. The central model combines the social foundation people need with the limitations of the global ecosystem to create a conceptual doughnut-shaped space that Raworth calls a “safe and

just space for humanity.” Developed in 2011 and first published a year later (Raworth, 2012), the notion of living in the doughnut (Figure 1) has emerged as one of the more provocative and potentially disruptive ideas in the sustainability field, alongside systems thinking, ecological footprint analysis, and other innovations.

Raworth Doughnut

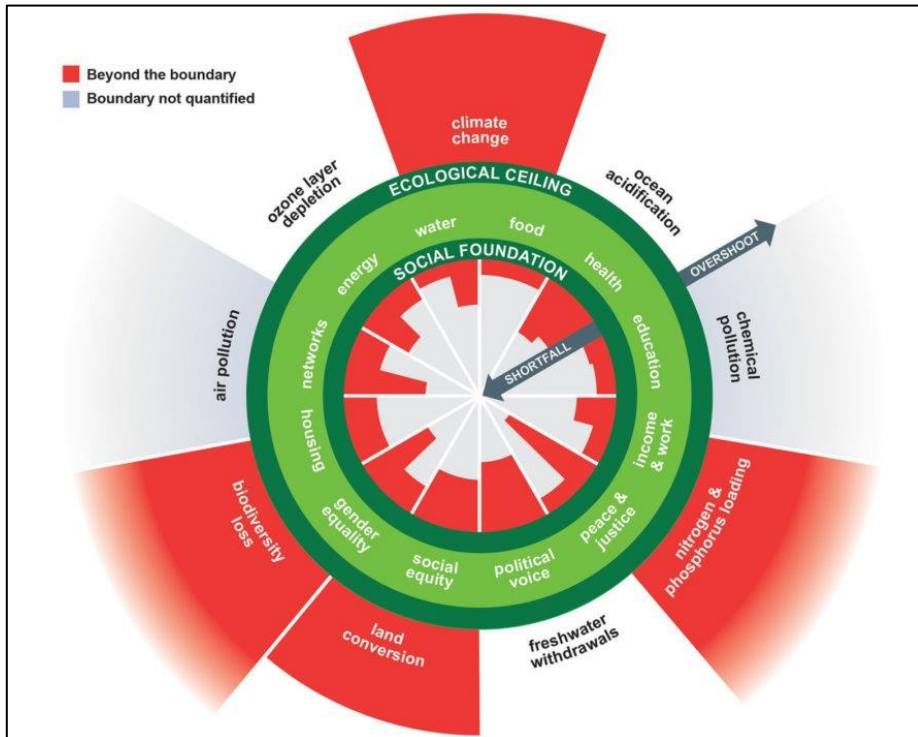


Figure 1. Depiction of the Raworth Doughnut as a desirable focus for economic activity, where an ecological ceiling and a social foundation define a “safe and just space for humanity” (light green). The red portions of the model show where the boundaries of planetary systems have been breached and social shortfalls are occurring.

The notion of sustainability itself was disruptive in the 1980s, when the United Nations report *Our Common Future* ushered it onto the global stage (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The central idea, that economic decisions should be informed by environmental concerns so that people are able to live well within the bounds of nature,

was ground-breaking and continues to underscore many international agreements. However, compared to the Doughnut, which combines economic critique with clear alternatives, sustainability and the associated process of sustainable development were presented in rather vague terms in the Brundtland report. The rationale for sustainability was clear enough, based on a litany of worrisome social, economic, and environmental trends, but few suggestions were provided about how more desirable futures were to be realized. The “how” was mostly left to states, organizations, and communities to figure out, sparking a rush of research and experimentation that has only increased over time.

Initially, the case for sustainability was communicated by using three “pillars” or overlapping circles to depict its connection to the environment, the economy, and society (e.g., United Nations, 2012). Unfortunately, this representation suggests that each of these aspects is equally valuable and equally important. Sutter and Worts (2005: 134) and others have challenged the equal prioritization of the economic and the environmental, pointing out that all human activities, whether economic or social, are nested within and “ultimately supported and constrained by larger ecosystems.” The Doughnut model picks up on this point by illustrating how sustainable economies need to be supported by a social foundation while operating within environmental boundaries.

The contention that sustainability is ultimately about fostering a “safe and just space for humanity” has two important implications for ecomuseums and other agents of community development. First, it offers a critical frame of reference for individuals, communities, and organizations that are trying to envision what a sustainable future might look like. If that future is overly focused on or restricted to either environmental, social, or economic concerns, the Doughnut model makes it clear that a broader perspective is more realistic and more likely to shed light on important relationships and opportunities. Second, once a shared vision is in place, the Doughnut image can help to identify which aspects of a society, an economy, or the environment need attention, and whether a given set of goals and activities are producing desirable outcomes. The concluding article in this issue provides an applied example of this visioning and priority-setting process by participants in an ecomuseums workshop. Given that both aspects of strategic planning—creating a shared vision and setting or assessing goals—are critical for ecomuseums, Raworth’s novel perspective

on sustainability provides a valuable basis for encouraging and studying their development.

Systems thinking is another lens that informed early discussions about sustainability. Stemming primarily from the disciplines of organizational management and health systems, systems thinking rejects reductionism, emphasizing instead a holistic understanding of systems and ongoing critical reflection on current practices (Bierema, 2003). In the field of sustainability, Donella Meadows and the other founding members of the Club of Rome (Meadows et al., 1972) used systems modeling to gain insights about the behaviour of complex global systems. In turn, sustainability research has led to many important innovations in systems thinking, including a widely accepted model of systems behaviour known as the adaptive cycle. Initially proposed by Holling (1973) based on studies of forest ecosystems, the adaptive cycle describes how transitions in the storage and connectedness of all types of capital produce a relentless loop with four distinct phases (Figure 2). The quickest part is the Release (Ω) phase, where stored capital becomes available to the system as a whole. This is followed by Reorganization (α), where some capital becomes locked up again, but key relationships are relatively loose. Next comes Exploitation (r), where complex relationships develop and more capital is stored away, and finally Conservation (K), where high levels of stored capital and interconnectedness are maintained until the next Release phase begins.

The Adaptive Cycle

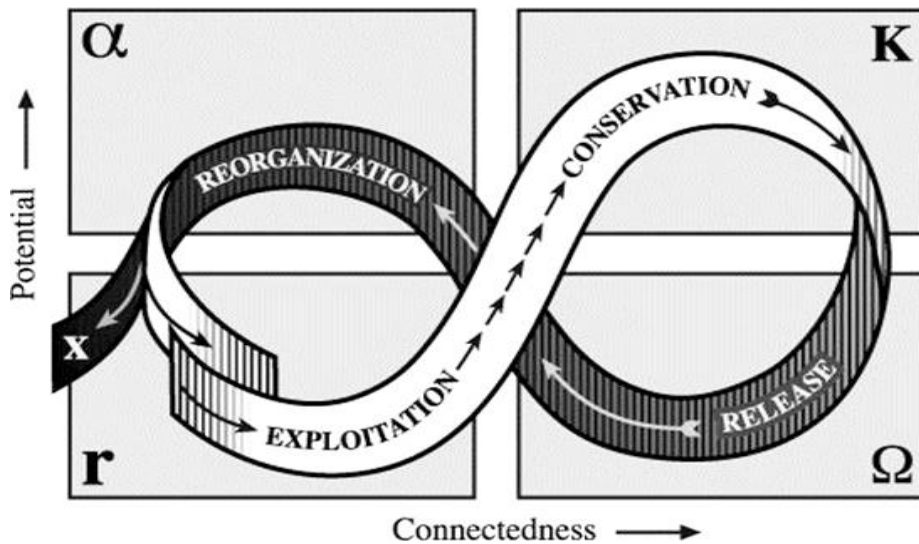


Figure 2. The adaptive cycle (from Gunderson and Holling, 2002), depicting the distribution and flow of capital through four phases as a function of ecosystem connectedness and the potential for change.

What makes this model especially useful for ecomuseum development and other types of sustainability work is that it appears to apply across a wide range of spatio-temporal scales, affecting all sorts of complex systems and all types of capital (Gunderson and Holling, 2002). Some aspects of the cycle are obvious, from destructive events like a fire, to repeating periods of wealth concentration and redistribution (Goldstein, 1988; Minsky, 1977), to the stages of learning that people go through as they acquire knowledge (Hein, 1998). In each case, the slow phases of growth and organization help to produce resistance, while the rapid “back-loop” of destruction and reorganization confers resilience (Gunderson and Holling, 2002). In some situations, transitions between these phases may be too rapid and small or too large and slow for people to appreciate, but the underlying model provides a valuable frame for identifying and understanding relationships that affect local communities and tipping points that transform undesirable “vicious” cycles into constructive “virtuous” ones (Marten, 2001). It also provides context for communities that are trying to enhance local quality of life and address other aspects of sustainable development (see UN Sustainable Development Goals, 2018) through the ecomuseum model.

Ecomuseum Development in Saskatchewan

Interest in ecomuseum development has been growing in this province since 2011, when the Royal Saskatchewan Museum (RSM) initiated discussion about the potential for these sorts of organizations to take root here. The notion of a locally led organization that would help people engage with issues that matter to them and make positive changes in their communities had been discussed in the 1970s, when the model was first being applied in other parts of the world, but there were no ecomuseums in Saskatchewan until the RSM rekindled interest in the concept.

As symposium keynote speaker René Rivard noted, the ecomuseum movement started in France as a new way of preserving local heritage with the help of communities who saw themselves as curators of the collective memories and symbolic activities found on their territories. The first wave of ecomuseums was aimed at heritage preservation and cultural representations; the second involved concepts and practices that led societies into the 21st century and a shift from focusing on objects to investigating and discussing subjects. Ecomuseum development is now in a third wave that started a little more than a decade ago. This time the challenge is to deal with new ideas, and to tackle economic, socio-cultural, and environmental issues confronting not only communities but also nations and all of humanity.

Here in Saskatchewan, key provincial organizations and over a dozen communities responded favourably when the RSM sent out its call for interest in 2011. As a result, the RSM, the Museums Association of Saskatchewan (MAS), Heritage Saskatchewan, and SaskCulture decided to form a joint steering committee that would oversee an exploratory project called the Saskatchewan Ecomuseums Initiative (SEI). Over the next five years, this committee expanded to include Raven Consortium (a group of Indigenous consultants), Nature Saskatchewan, the Saskatchewan Parks and Recreation Association, and the Saskatchewan History and Folklore Society, with links to the National Trust for Canada and the Saskatchewan Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development. Key outputs in that time included a detailed concept paper, an independent feasibility study, a development framework for newly forming ecomuseums, a website, a Facebook group, and an interdisciplinary studies course offered through Luther College at the University of Regina called “Ecomuseums: Exploring Place.” The SEI also defined an ecomuseum as:

[A] community museum that provides a unique mechanism for community engagement, in which community members work to preserve and learn from tangible and intangible heritage in its living form. Through community consultations, stakeholders agree on natural and cultural assets that they value and create plans to ensure they are preserved and used to foster a culture of sustainability. Unlike a traditional museum, ecomuseums do not necessarily gather objects in a museum facility. Instead, they enable communities to preserve valued objects, sites, and cultural practices where they exist, enhancing their visibility and the contributions they make to community development activities.” (Heritage Saskatchewan and the MAS, 2015)

At the same time, by responding to expressions of interest and working directly with local residents, the SEI has helped ecomuseums take root at five locations across the province, namely the towns of Val Marie and Nipawin, in the White Butte and Calling Lakes areas, and through the Regina Civic Museum. Several other communities have also expressed interest in or worked with the concept, including Lumsden, Saltcoats, Wolseley, Moose Jaw, Middle Lake, and North Central Regina. All of these locations are current or potential members of the SEN that was launched by MAS during the April events. The principles that have been developed to guide the activities of this emerging SEN are listed elsewhere in this issue (see Table 1 in the article by Wendy Fitch).

The SEI has also entered a new phase, transitioning from an informal group of organizations interested in an idea, to more rigorous multi-agency collaboration that reflects a shared commitment to ecomuseum development. This involved rebranding the group as the Saskatchewan Ecomuseum Partnership (SEP) and crafting an agreement that defines how each organization will contribute to that commitment. The SEP currently includes eight organizations plus the SEN (Figure 3). At the same time, active ecomuseums in the province and interested individuals are being encouraged to join the SEN, a member group associated with MAS. As part of this process, the SEP is emphasizing that ecomuseums need to include and pay particular attention to the presence and current living cultures of Indigenous peoples, so it is clear that local histories go far beyond the time of white settlers.

The Saskatchewan Ecomuseum Partnership

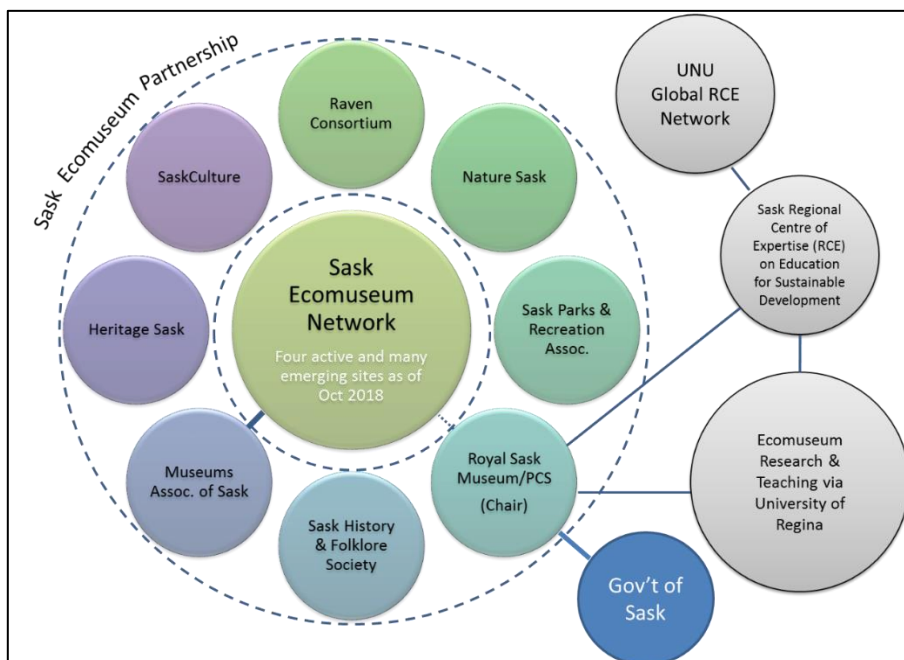


Figure 3. The Saskatchewan Ecomuseum Partnership (SEP) currently consists of eight provincial heritage organizations, plus a representative of the Saskatchewan Ecomuseum Network (SEN). The SEP is chaired by the RSM, providing links to other organizations involved in ecomuseum research and teaching. The SEN is overseen by MAS, with input from the RSM.

The Symposium

Despite the fact that sustainability continues to be more of a fuzzy ideal than a lived reality, many cities, towns, and other communities have identified it as a desirable path. To that end, the April symposium was conceived as a way to bring the relationship between heritage and sustainability into sharp focus, including the need for planning activities and collaborative actions that foster cultural changes at local, regional, and ultimately global scales (Worts, 2010). In particular, the event was designed to:

- Give Saskatchewan ecomuseums and other community-engaged organizations a chance to talk about what they have been doing, what they aim to do, and what they need for further development.

- Encourage growth of the SEN by highlighting how the ecomuseum model has been applied around the world and how it can be used to foster sustainability, and
- Identify opportunities for action research.

As reflected in this issue, the outcomes from this event are important for two reasons. First, heritage exists in many forms, from the tangible manifestations of nature and human activities, to the suites of values, attitudes, actions and customs associated with living cultures. Many people and organizations are working to safeguard and raise the profile of these different aspects of heritage, recognizing them both for their potential or current economic value and as an irreplaceable source of skills, knowledge, and inspiration. These individuals and groups often work in isolation, despite social, economic, and environmental realities that link different types of heritage together, so the April events gave them a valuable opportunity to discuss shared concerns and opportunities.

Second, all types of heritage have a role to play as people grapple with sustainability issues that range from global climate change and the loss of biodiversity to local concerns about air or water quality, food security, income gaps, urbanization, and other matters. As climate crises threaten local cultures with displacement and livelihood loss (Adger et al., 2013), heritage initiatives like ecomuseums can play a powerful role not only in safeguarding cultural values but also in cultivating sustainable knowledge systems and livelihoods (Harvey and Perry, 2015; Stephano and Davis, 2017). Being familiar with the past and knowing about the current living heritage of a region is critical for communities that want to chart or stay on a sustainable course, but the scope of this work is beyond the reach of any one government, business, or non-government organization.

Provincial and local support for ecomuseum development reflects a vision where the citizens of Saskatchewan are working to preserve and learn from their local living heritage and use that heritage as a basis for sustainable community development. The shift towards more sustainable forms of development means recognizing the value of living heritage and building on it as a basis for social, economic, and environmental trajectories that foster adaptive cultures and wellbeing, both for individuals and for communities. Broad frameworks, like that which supports an ecomuseum,

are one means of achieving a full sense of sustainability challenges and opportunities. As these frameworks are applied, it is important that those involved in on-the-ground projects are able to communicate with and learn from each other through associations like the emerging SEN. There is also a clear need for a multi-agency coordinating body like the SEP, so like-minded organizations have a place and opportunities to share ideas, discuss challenges and create strategies at the provincial scale, reducing the institutional isolation that might hamper this work.

The following articles are contributions from participants and attendees at the ecomuseum symposium. The contributors represent a range of perspectives and organizational affiliations: academics studying ecomuseums, representatives of nonprofit organizations active in the ecomuseum sector, and importantly, community members currently engaged in developing ecomuseums in their own communities. Part 1 is the keynote lecture presented on April 27, 2017 by René Rivard, Fellow of the Canadian Museums Association, which provides a review of the ecomuseum concept and its connections to sustainability. Part 2 presents perspectives from several SEP partner organizations that provide the structural support needed for a thriving ecomuseum network. In the first article, Sandra Massey of Heritage Saskatchewan draws on UNESCO's Living Heritage framework to examine how ecomuseums can advance and exemplify the principles of Living Heritage. Next, Dan Holbrow of MAS provides a compelling case for the central importance of culture to sustainability, while also emphasizing new ways of thinking about the role of museums in communities. Dan provides several practical tips for both preserving and re-conceptualizing culture through museum and ecomuseum initiatives. Wendy Fitch of MAS builds on this point by documenting the development of the Saskatchewan Ecomuseum Network (SEN), which provides a helpful model of an ecomuseums information and networking hub. The SEN structure Wendy describes could usefully inform future efforts to develop other ecomuseums—in the prairies or around the world.

Part 3 presents synopses of talks given by three symposium attendees who are currently involved in building ecomuseums in their home communities. The talks provide concrete examples of ecomuseums in action and illustrate the wide range of activities ecomuseum groups can conduct.

The examples help to clarify what the rather fuzzy concept of an “ecomuseum” really means in practice.

This special issue concludes with a closing article that draws insights from a day-long planning workshop that took place on April 29 and was led by Douglas Worts, a sustainability expert with WorldViews Consulting. Based on systems thinking and a sustainability planning tool developed by Alan AtKisson called Pyramid (<http://atkisson.com/>), the workshop was designed to identify (1) trends and indicators associated with nature, society, economics, and wellbeing, (2) the complex web of relationships giving rise to these trends, (3) innovations that would address tipping points in these systems, and (4) strategies that could be applied to implement these innovations.

The final article connects key insights from this workshop to salient parts of the ecomuseum literature and to broader concepts of sustainability, living heritage, and systems perspectives. We conclude with some recommendations for future ecomuseum research and action.

References

- Adger, W. Neil, Jon Barnett, Katrina Brown, Nadine Marshall, and Karen O'Brien. 2013. “Cultural Dimensions of Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation.” *Nature Climate Change* 3, no. 2:112–17.
- Bierema, L.L. 2003. “Systems Thinking: A New Lens for Old Problems.” *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions* 23, no. S1: S27–33.
- Dyball, Robert, and Barry Newell. 2014. *Understanding Human Ecology: A Systems Approach to Sustainability*. New York: Routledge.
- Goldstein, Joshua S. 1988. *Long Cycles: Prosperity and War in the Modern Age*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gunderson, Lance H. and C.S. Holling (eds.). 2002. *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems*. Washington: Island Press.
- Harvey, David C. and Jim Perry. 2015. *The Future of Heritage as Climates Change: Loss, Adaptation and Creativity*. New York: Routledge.
- Hein, George E. 1998. *Learning in the Museum*. New York: Routledge.
- Heritage Saskatchewan and the Museums Association of Saskatchewan. 2015. *Ecomuseum Concept: A Saskatchewan Perspective on “Museums without Walls.”* Heritage Saskatchewan.
- Holling, C.S. 1973. “Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems.” *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 4, no. 1: 1–23.
- Maggi, Maurizio. 2002. *Ecomuseums: European Guide*. Allemandi.

- Marten, Gerald G. 2001. *Human Ecology: Basic Concepts for Sustainable Development*. Sterling: Earthscan.
- Meadows, Donella H., Dennis L. Meadows, Jorgen Randers, and William W. Behrens. 1972. *The Limits to Growth*. New York: Universe Books.
- Minsky, Hyman P. 1977. "The Financial Instability Hypothesis: An Interpretation of Keynes and an Alternative to 'Standard' Theory." *Challenge* 20, no. 1: 20–27.
- Murtas, Donatella and Peter Davis. 2009. "The Role of the Ecomuseo dei Terrazzamenti e Della Vite, (Cortemilia, Italy) in Community Development." *Museum and Society* 7, no. 3: 150–86.
- Oliver, Pamela E. and Hank Johnston. 2000. "What a Good Idea! Ideologies and Frames in Social Movement Research." *Mobilization: An International Journal* 5, no. 1: 37–54.
- Raworth, Kate. 2012. *A Safe and Just Space for Humanity: Can We Live Within the Doughnut?* Oxfam Discussion Paper. Oxford: Oxfam International.
- Raworth, Kate. 2017. *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*. Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Stephano, Michelle L., and Peter Davis. 2017. *The Routledge Companion to Intangible Cultural Heritage*. New York: Routledge.
- Sutter, Glenn and Douglas Worts. 2005. "Negotiating a Sustainable Path: Museums and Societal Therapy." Pp. 129–51 in R.R. Janes and G.T. Conaty (eds.), *Looking Reality in the Eye: Museums and Social Responsibility*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.
- United Nations. 2018. "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" *Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform* [Online] Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld> (Accessed 13 November 2018).
- United Nations. 2012. *Report of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio de Janeiro, 20–22 June 2012*. New York: United Nations.
- World Commission on Environment and Development. 1987. *Our Common Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Worts, Douglas. 2010. "Culture in the Winds of Change: Fostering a 'Culture of Sustainability' and Making the Case for Cultural Indicators." *International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability* 6, no. 5: 241–54.