

Seeking Sustainability in South-Africa

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Guests

Tammy Hodgskiss (ZA)

Introduction

Striving for sustainability is increasingly important in both archaeology and experimental archaeology. EXARC actively promotes the sharing and adoption of sustainable practices by its members. In today's conversation **Maria Josefina Villanueva** talks to **Tammy Hodgskiss**, curator at The Origins Centre, a museum on the campus of the University of the Witwatersrand in South-Africa. **Tammy** gives us valuable insights into the ways that sustainability is viewed and addressed in a country with great inequalities and a turbulent history. **Maria Josefina** is an Argentinian student at Leiden University, currently studying International Relations and Organisations. In the past, she has attended the University of St Andrews, where she has taken International Relations, Philosophy, Sustainable Development and Anthropology courses. Her interests range from heritage and "costumbres" in Latin America to the practical implementation of philosophical argumentation to government policies. Maria Joesphine is EXARC's Team Member.

Transcript

Phoebe: Hi everyone! Striving for sustainability is increasingly important in both archaeology and experimental archaeology. EXARC actively promotes the sharing and adoption of sustainable practices by its members. In today's conversation Maria Josefina Villanueva talks to Tammy Hodgskiss, curator at The Origins Centre, a museum on the

campus of the University of the Witwatersrand in South-Africa. Tammy gives us valuable insights into the ways that sustainability is viewed and addressed in a country with great inequalities and a turbulent history. Coming up next.

Josefina: Just to start off: tell me about you, what you studied and how you ended up at the university, and eventually how this led to you being interested in sustainability.

Tammy: I'm Tammy Hodgskiss. I grew up, was born and bred in Joburg and went to Wits and have just stayed in Joburg my whole life. I kind of got into archaeology in first year when I went to university, not knowing what I wanted to do and just absolutely fell in love with archaeology. I've always liked the experimental side of it, like talking, you know, about it. Just being able to do things hands-on, not just excavating, but being able to understand the past better, and always just enjoyed museums and the study of the past. And then I got into..., my Professor was Lyn Wadley, I started my masters and my PhD with her, and she had a really nice approach to studying archaeology that you kind of...a very rounded approach. It wasn't just, okay, you're just studying this. It's all about how everything affects you in your life as well. I think it kind of set me up for having a career in archaeology, not knowing exactly what I wanted to do, but really enjoying just studying it. So I worked at the Rock Art Research Institute for a while in the digital lab, and I worked at Sterkfontein and Maropeng visitor centre for a bit and then worked for a company that did courses for museum professionals on digitizing collections, education, a whole range of things. And then started at The Origins Centre, which is a museum on Wits campus, at the beginning of 2018.

My research in archaeology was all on the use of ochre, so the use of pigments in the past, mostly in the Middle Stone Age. So when humans are first becoming human and trying to understand how humans thought a hundred thousand years ago. Did they use ochre as paint or colour symbolism and things like that. So that was my research and I still dabble in it a little. And that's where I've come into the experimental side, trying experimenting with hafting adhesives with ochre powder in it and just different experiments with ochre to understand the use-wear on ochre. And so I try and I've been really lucky that in my job in the museum, I do workshops with kids and adults on making your own paints. So actually collecting pieces of ochre and then processing it and making your own paint and looking at the rock art in South Africa as well and how they made paints. So I've really liked that element and I really missed it this year, that we haven't been able to have that one-on-one interaction and see kids get it all over their face, you know, I always liked that side of it.

Josefina: That is one of your functions within the centre, you'd say? Like you organize workshops and what else do you do or how does your job look like at the moment?

Tammy: So the museum...I'm the curator, there's only one curator in the museum and it's a very small group. There's about nine of us, including front of house staff and everything. It's a small space and we fit within the Science Faculty within the School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies. And my job, so essentially I'm a curator, but we don't actually have our own collections. So we work with the Rock Art Research

Institute's, with their collections, because the museum itself, I should say that as well, the museum itself focuses kind of on the origins of humanity. But then a lot on the origins of art. So, a huge amount of the museum is dedicated to Southern African rock art, engravings and paintings and the different people that made it and their culture, which of course is living community in South Africa today. My job is oversee the permanent exhibits and help with, if we do have any upgrades in the permanent exhibits. But then I get temporary exhibitors in, and we can have temporary exhibits from contemporary art to archaeological things. It's that really nice big range, and it's a nice way to get other audiences in. But then I also do the public outreach programs and workshops and run the public lectures if we have visiting researchers or just really nice researchers from Wits University, we do public lectures as well. So that's my basic job. So it's really nice since you are dealing a lot with public. But a whole range of things within the museum.

Josefina: And how do you see those activities starting to engage with sustainability or what is your interest?

Tammy: It's definitely something that's been brought up a lot because of Covid that you suddenly think: can the museum carry on going? Are we relevant enough to actually have the university pay our salaries? Your know, heritage is something that is so important to me, but a lot of people that come to the museum, maybe if we have an event or something, they come into the museum and they think..., they didn't even know it was there. They know maybe they have great-grandfathers, but they don't know anything more than that. A lot of history isn't taught and South African history, past the last 2000 years, isn't taught at schools. And so for me it's understanding of the origins of humanity are rooted in Africa and that there's just so many more stories to tell. And I think being able to make spaces relevant to people in whatever way they can connect with the past, to make the museum relevant, is going to help it be sustainable, to make it meaningful to people, and hopefully mostly on the content. But unfortunately, history museums, it's kind of a privilege in a way. In South Africa there's a lot of people that don't have a lot of money, that can't pay 40 Rand or 80 Rand to come and see a museum, you know? And so it is something that's..., I wish all museums could just be open. I think people would appreciate them more then. We do get money and important income from getting events, so from banks or private individuals or companies that come and have a gala dinner or conference at the centre. So they're not necessarily interested in the content of the museum and in the past even, but it's a beautiful space and when they [share] so many people really enjoy it, and they say they really want to come back. So it's an interesting dynamic. And I think in being sustainable and being relevant - I kind of think the two terms can go together - you need to appeal to different audiences that might not like the past even, or the study of the past.

Josefina: I like what you say that to you, the museum, sustainability equates to relevance. Because that leads me to my next question, which was, what does sustainability mean for your institution or your work? What other words come to mind aside from being relevant? The general definition of sustainability is basically 'using

something today without hindering the possibility of future societies to use it as well'. That's a very academic definition. But what does it mean to you and to your work and to your institution?

Tammy: I think as well...the displays in the museum haven't changed a lot over the years, but there's a lot of discussions on what is wrong, because the information might have changed depending on different communities that have come up and said: 'well, why did you use that term?' So for example, the term Bushman versus San, why is this term used instead? And are the displays..., do they stay the same and a lot of the displays in the museum do. So it's about being able to add in these new narratives, I think, that are coming up. So even though the displays themselves can...are mostly going to stay the same, you'll have some temporary exhibits, it's about still having the conversation going. You might have the display, but all the information that comes with it has still grown, as you go through the years and then in 20 years time, it's the same, but not, in a way. So for me, I think what I really like about working in a museum space is having a really nice bridge between academia and public. We are a university institute, so obviously the focus is often on research and on learning and that's what we're doing, but I think it's so important to understand, especially when you're dealing with living communities, working with those communities as well, and giving both as much importance and saying, okay, 'how does this make you feel - how we've represented your people?' And then linking it with the archaeological evidence and other ethnographic research that has been done. So I think that's really important because it makes for a sustainable display and a sustainable understanding of the past, even though that always changes. Interpretations of the past are always going to change as well. I hope that answers the question.

Josefina: Again, there's no right or wrong. This is just us speaking, and especially thinking of things that we might not think about every time. I'm guessing you're in the gist of creating an exhibition and you're like, okay, I need to get these things from this institution that are going to land and they're going to come and then we're going to have a lecturer talking about this, but then, is there a point where you stand back and you're like, okay, why are we doing this? And how are we doing this, in order to represent in a way that it is respectful and that's fulfilling?

Tammy: Yeah, it's fair and I think there are also many avenues that one can easily mess up, you learn as you go along.

Josefina: On that note, you kind of talked a little bit about making history relevant, but I just want to keep diving into: how can your work be part of people's everyday life? In what ways do you believe that culture preservation or transmission is part of someone's personal development as well as community development?

Tammy: I think that's a hard thing to do because like I said, I love history and I love the past and I love nature and that's what I like to study, but a lot of people, it isn't relevant to them and they think, 'why come?' 'Why even have these conversations, it doesn't matter'. That's why I like that our museum is a really nice mix of this contemporary art [...] as well these permanent exhibits, these huge exhibits that are really beautiful. And I think it helps people see things in an artistic or visual way to go: 'oh, that beautiful artwork has [...]

copper..., we have an aluminium art sculpture, this huge sculpture of Africa and the world, and there's copper thread through it that shows the movement of humans out of Africa. And so instead of just saying, 'oh, well, humans moved out of Africa, however long ago', this actually shows a vision and it's really nice to kind of have that mix of art and science. So you could appeal to people on different levels, and also to get people engaged with it. So you kind of have that mixture of art and science, but you actually have people interact with it. So to touch a stone tool and feel how heavy it is and to think about or try make one, and being able to actually engage in and you can actually appreciate that something that just looks like a stone, that's got random chips on it and shouldn't take any skill to make, is actually really complicated to make. And then people can have a bit more of an appreciation for the tools that you see on display, but don't mean anything. So I really like having that interaction and I think that's quite important for being sustainable because it makes people understand it better. And then hopefully they'll say: 'oh, we did this cool thing at this museum' and it'll spark an interest and maybe they'll tell someone else, or maybe they'll want to come back and visit, but it kind of needs that spark. It makes it more real. It's not just texts that you're reading or this story that some person has made up and is telling you.

Josefina: How do you think that sustainability is important for the culture preservation field as a whole? Do you feel when you're contributing to an archaeological discovery, that has an impact on a more sustainable future? How do you believe that applying a more sustainable outlook within your specific field, archaeology, contributes to a sustainable future in the broader sense?

Tammy: I think it's quite important, especially going into the field with archaeologists, there's a lot more - and anthropologists and there's even paleo scientists, so you're not dealing with living cultures, but you're going onto land where people are living now and they might not be the people that lived there, or the ancestors of the people, descendants of the people that lived there in the past. But it's being very sensitive to those kinds of social intricacies. And I think especially in South Africa, we've got the horrible history of Apartheid. There is still a lot of emotion and a lot of anger, and when people go into the field, luckily the Heritage Resources Agencies do protect it and they do make sure that there's a whole lot of protocol observed, because some of these sites, they are going to be excavated for years. So you do have to have a way of thinking of how it's affecting the people in the area, how it's affecting the environment. So that you're affecting as little as possible or if anything, in a very positive way. So a lot of the excavations that I have been on, they have dealt with the local communities... they have had people of the local communities' work on the sites and pay them to work on the sites doing various jobs. You will go and get permission from the chief in the area to actually work there. So I think it's very important to set up those relationships that we're not 'white colonizers' coming into these areas and taking over and claiming the objects as ours, as a researcher or as a museum, hopefully that happens. And I think because of the legal side, that it helps restrict that from happening, so that people will see that these objects aren't just going to be owned by people, or sold overseas. They're actually going to understand South Africa's past and Africa's past better rather than just as objects. And hopefully, I don't know how often it happens that the research actually goes back to the community so they

can, instead of just maybe being at the site and saying, 'oh, we found little beads and some ostrich eggshell' or something, they can actually say, 'well, they found out the site was 800 years old and there were probably this many people'. I don't know if that [...] happens, because I think with a lot of academia, you do your research, go to the site, do your research, publish your paper, and you're done. I don't know if people actually go back into the field and share that research and their finds with the communities. But I think that would be pretty important. And then you share that thing of... within just general social and then the general public that they don't see it as just people coming in and taking stuff away, but it's rather something that is valued and it was something important found here and it's being looked after somewhere else, even if it's not there. And if you can have onsite museums, that's also a really nice thing, so that it's relevant to the space. So if you go to a site and it's a really important site, to have a museum there, which is, obviously, not always doable.

Josefina: How do you think in general we can achieve sustainable development? By this I mean, do you believe that it's something that should be human-driven? So, say, we should be sustainable because for us to be living in the future in the same way that we're living today, it's important. Do you think it should be environmentally focused, say, the environment was always here and has given us food and air and all the things that we freely use in the environment, we should give back to it? Do you also see that it's a problem when approaches are top-down versus bottom-up? And by that I mean a top-down approach as in an administration or a smaller group dictating what's happening bottom-down, obviously coming more from the community and working along with them. Which approach do you think is the most effective or have you tried any and do you see some drawbacks or advantages in any of these?

Tammy: For me personally, a bottom-up approach. I think dealing with the little guys and the people on the ground, I think is ultimately what's very important, and that includes the environment, in terms of keeping the environment as undisturbed as possible. But from my understanding of it is that a lot of the money and a lot of the power does come from these big companies or does come from mining. I mean in South Africa a huge amount of revenue comes from mines and jobs come from mines. And so that's also really important and one has to kind of consider it a little bit of both. The mines can drastically affect the environment and the landscape, but they can also bring so much good to people that are living there now, but they could also bring a lot of bad in terms of air pollution and everything else and really destroying the landscape. Another thing that does come into it is also overseas researchers. You get funding from overseas companies and sometimes a lot of the sites are run by people that don't even live in South Africa. And it's not to say that all sites have to be, but it would be really nice to have a much more local focus on who's actually doing the excavating and make sure that that teams incorporate local scholars and just the general public in their research.

Josefina: Does any project that you have come to mind, or project that you've heard of, project of someone that you know, which have tried to adopt a sustainable approach, or in which you see a failure of adopting such an approach? Where you see 'in this example I

really can see that this thing failed, and I believe that it's because they didn't think of all these variables', or any experience in particular that you want to share?

Tammy: In my fourth year, in my honour's year I did - there's a site in South Africa called the Makgabeng and it's amazing, and it's beautiful rock art, beautiful scenery, and very remote. A lot of the places don't have running water or electricity or anything, but it is an absolutely beautiful place and there's amazing rock art as well. And so we did a project there, just a small little research report, looking at what kind of tourism we want in. And so you want to uplift the community and be able to make sure that the sites are looked after and protected. What is the best approach to doing it? And generally the term ecotourism comes up, that you want people that are happy to "rough it", do understand that rock art is something that can't be touched and needs to be preserved, that impacts the community in a small way, hopefully brings jobs and brings more people to the areas and more sales and shops and things like that - a few lodges and things there - but at the same time, you wouldn't want a lot of people. So it's that kind of balance between making a place popular, but also making sure it's untouched and actually stays in a really good condition. So that was just one example of it where now I think there's very few people that come to the area because it is quite remote and I don't know how many South Africans even know about it. But it's a beautiful space and I kind of wanted it to be untouched, but at the same time I want the community that's there to benefit from this amazing art that's in the area, that their ancestors had painted. So that's one example.

And then another example was in the Limpopo province and there's a mine that was going to be built. And it was in an area that has a lot of archaeological history. So, from Early Stone Age all the way up. And there was amazing mineral resources and so there is all these discussions going on with the mines as to whether... can they actually excavate in this area? And it was weird coming on board as an archaeologist. It was my first experience working with these mines and realizing that if I said, 'okay, there isn't archaeological heritage in this specific area'. There was a whole lot of people that were putting into the impact assessment. But if I kind of said, 'there's not enough to say that there's a site here, there isn't anything there', then that whole area would be completely transformed. I'd be one of the voices that are saying 'yes, build the huge mine here and potentially destroy some sites that we just can't see'. There were a few stone tools every now and then, but there was nothing you could see. And it was a weird feeling, coming into that and as I said I was very inexperienced at that stage and I didn't... it was interesting to see this whole process and obviously I was one small voice that was consulted. And the impact of the mine could have been very positive, not in terms of the archaeology - hopefully it wouldn't have affected any of the archaeology in the area - but hopefully it's affected the communities really well. And maybe make communities aware of having these archaeologists coming into your area, talking to you about how, what do you think of this stone tool? Does it mean anything to you? What are your stories from your great-grandparents about who lived here and how people lived? It's this interesting interplay between how something that we see archaeologically that can be bad and really affect an area, could be something really good for the societies or the communities living

in that area, and especially in South Africa, when you have a huge amount of poverty and unemployment, it's very important and in some ways I'd almost feel like that's more important than having an archaeological site preserved.

Josefina: I definitely understand, but see, it's again, rethinking what we're doing, with [our] saying: this is very important to preserve and to keep, but then, right now there's other priorities.

Tammy: No, exactly, you have to juggle the two.

Josefina: And just to almost finish off, considering that there's such huge global scale problems, like global hunger and poverty and environmental crisis and inequalities, what do you believe are the key aspects that a sustainable culture sector can contribute to solving these issues? How can your work and everyone in the cultural field contribute to these bigger problems, which seem detached, but then maybe upon greater analysis, we can see how everything is intertwined.

Tammy: I think often we feel that we are kind of powerless to do anything, in a way, but I think if you, in each of your research projects, is to always look at the bigger picture and see how it's impacting environments, different communities. I think even if it's with museums is to really think about what we can do as a space to bring people together or to start these initiatives that might get people... just uplift them in some way. And then have things like having displays that are focusing on environmental issues. So with us, we're within the School of Geography and we work with the paleosciences and geosciences, so to have conversations or public lectures or temporary exhibitions that actually speak about these issues that get people that are maybe just coming to enjoy a day at a museum and then they suddenly see a display that says: 'whoa, okay, this is what this area used to look like 50 years ago. Look what it looks like now, and humans have done that', so you can have different ways of dealing with these important issues within a museum space and as archaeologists. I think it's that awareness of it.

Josefina: And lastly, is there anything that you'd like to add? Any remarks, any ideas that have come up from this conversation or anything else that you'd like to clarify?

Tammy: Well, I think just in terms of making museums sustainable and cultural spaces, I think that's also quite important to try to appeal to a wider audience. You don't know who's going to be coming, whether it's foreign tourists or if it's locals or kids or adults. And, I think Covid has also highlighted that you can actually reach an international audience now in a quite easy way - you might not make money from it, so that's also a bit of a problem - but you can reach a much wider audience through digital things or through finding out what appeals to people. So whether it's kids if they want activities and fun stuff or families will do that because they want the kids to be entertained for a morning, or if teenagers will want something cool, some cool digital gadgets or virtual reality. Just different things that appeal to different age groups and different interest groups can make spaces more interesting to more people. So it's also looking at collections and displays in another way and going, 'okay, well, this is how I see it. How do you see it?' And kind of bringing that into how you approach bringing it to the audience. It's been interesting to

have to go digital now as well. I'm realizing there's all these things that I don't know in the digital world and none of us, in the museum, we're all kind of learning. And, in terms of sustainability, you think digital as well, it's a term that comes up. Okay, that's where the world is going, you've got to move with it. But me personally, and as an archaeologist, I kind of like touching sand and actually touching these things so...for me, is to find that interplay there's between these two things, still keeping it interesting for others that are not like me.

Josefina: I get that as well. I am really interested in, really involved in sustainability and I believe it's necessary, but I still print my articles because I like underlining them and I like making notes on them. It's that interplay, it's where you can draw the line, it's tricky for everyone.

Tammy: Yeah, it really is. Everyone experiences things differently and start being aware of that and also adapting and saying, well, this new thing that you think is not nice, actually might be quite nice.

Josefina: But do you think that this eventually could lead to having less material culture? Most of our history is determined by the things that we have found from the past and what those things can tell us from the people of the past. Then if everything is going digital, books or arts and our records will be digital, then museums might look completely different in the long, long future.

Tammy: It's a very interesting thought actually, because we actually are going to have less material culture, there won't be need for books, cause you just have it digitally.

Josefina: We'll see what the future holds for us. Thank you very much for chatting with me!

Phoebe: This interview took place a few months ago and Tammy has sent us an update on what has happened since at the Origins Centre. Origins Centre opened to the public again on 9th of April 2021, after the museum was forced to close its doors for almost a year due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The closure allowed time for much-needed renovations and upgrades of the museum building, lighting, audio-visual equipment and display; and also allowed time to pursue an online presence. The revamps in the museum were made possible by funding and donations received from Wits, the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) and the French Institute of South Africa (IFAS). The new displays explore the innovations of the Earlier and Middle Stone Age, southern Africa rock art and delve into the intricacies of how Africa's past cultures and peoples are portrayed.

The past year has been a period of resourcefulness and an exploration of new and creative ideas. The museum staff had to adjust and rethink its activities and find new ways of bringing the museum to the public. This involved virtual seminars, online workshops and online museums tours. The museum will be going virtual this year on the Google Arts and Culture platform. Origins has teamed up with Tshimologong Makerspace

Studios Collective to create an augmented reality (AR) application – OriginsCentreAR. With this free app the museum exhibits come to life! Animals engraved in stone come to life on your screen, or the wooden hyenas in the museum start running and cackling. The experience is an exciting way to interact with the museum displays and installations - in the museum or from home. The museum will soon be launching an upgrade of the AR experience which includes some species of southern African dinosaurs. The AR was made possible with funding from the NIHSS and from the Centre of Excellence in Palaeosciences (CoE_PAL). The app is free and is available on android and IOS. Have a look at Origins Centre social media to see how it works.