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PROJECT REPORT

The Dark Mountain Project

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The cultural movement centred on the Dark Mountain journal has generated considerable debate over the past ten years. In this report, one of Dark Mountain's co-founders discusses the reception of the project, the relationship to the emergence of the 'Anthropocene' concept over the same period, and the relevance of Dark Mountain thinking and practice to the theme of 'Endangered Knowledge.'

Keywords: Anthropocene; environment; climate change; activism; remembrance; storytelling

> 'The end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world, full stop. Together, we will find the hope beyond hope, the paths which lead to the unknown world ahead of us.'
>
> — closing lines of *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto* (2009)

Almost a decade ago, Paul Kingsnorth and I published a twenty-page manifesto. Out of that manifesto grew a cultural movement: a rooted and branching network of creative activity, centred on the *Dark Mountain* journal, which has been variously described as 'the world's slowest, most thoughtful think tank' ('Report from Dark Mountain,' Tom Hart, *Geographical*, May 11, 2015), 'changing the environmental debate in Britain and the rest of Europe' (Daniel Smith, 'It's the End of the World as We Know It…and He Feels Fine,' *The New York Times Magazine*, April 17, 2014), a case study in clinical 'catastrophism' (Hoggett 2011), and 'a form of psychosis' likely to 'create more corpses than ever dreamed of by even the Unabomber' (Bryan Appleyard, 'The New Luddites: Why Former Digital Prophets Are Turning Against Tech,' *New Statesman*). The diversity of these responses gives some indication of the difficulty of summarising the Dark Mountain Project and the 'charged' nature of the cultural terrain in which the project has been operating.

Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto (https://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/) was written in the autumn of 2008, as the financial system shook to its foundations, and it grew out of a sense that our whole way of living – 'life as we know it' – was endangered. While the rolling news that autumn gave an immediate edge to that sense of endangerment, our concern was not only with the self-wrought destabilisation of the project of economic globalisation, but the fraying of the ecological foundations of this way of living by the consequences of industrial exploitation. Against such a background, the manifesto calls for a questioning of the stories our societies like to tell about the world and our place within it: the myth of progress, the myth of human separation from nature, the myth of civilisation. And it claims a particular role for storytellers and culture-makers in a time when the stories we live by have become untenable.

Ten years on, I would locate the cultural and intellectual project set out in the manifesto as bordering onto the work of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (the abandonment of the 'dreams of modernization and progress' and the multispecies storytelling of *The Mushroom at the End of the World*), Amitav Ghosh (*The Great Derangement*), Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (*The Ends of the World*) and the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures collective (https://decolonialfutures.net/), as well as that of James C. Scott (*Against the Grain*), who, having assembled the archaeological evidence against the myth of civilisation, writes despairingly: 'Dislodging this narrative from the world's imagination is well nigh impossible; the twelve-step recovery program required to accomplish that beggars the imagination' (2017: 9).

Meanwhile, among those working directly with climate change, there is an increasing willingness to voice the question at the heart of the manifesto: if this way of living cannot be made 'sustainable' and a great deal of loss is already written into the story, what kinds of action continue to make sense? See, for example, Jem Bendell's work on 'The Deep Adaptation Agenda', or the recent *Guardian* interview with Mayer Hillman

('"We're doomed": Mayer Hillman on the climate reality no one else will dare mention,' Patrick Barkham, April 26, 2018).

As discussed in that article, there is a lag between the willingness of artists and writers to contemplate the possibility that we are already living through an event that might well be described as 'the end of our civilisation' and the willingness of scientists to suggest that this is the case. Perhaps there is a parallel here to what has happened over the past decade with the Anthropocene, a concept which is still following the slow process of authentication at the International Commission on Stratigraphy, but which has already been the subject of vast amounts of artistic and intellectual output.

Even more than with the Anthropocene, there is a clash between attempting to write about this subject in reasonable prose and the content of what is being written about. Much of the early criticism of Dark Mountain seems to waver between a moral objection ('you are giving up and if people listen to you, the consequences will be terrible') and an existential recoil ('this is unbearable to think about'). In relation to the second of these, the artistic nature of the project is important: as I have argued elsewhere,[1] one of the roles of art under the shadow of climate change can be to create spaces in which we are able to stay with unbearable knowledge without falling into denial or desensitization.

Concerning the charge of 'giving up,' as Paul Kingsnorth wrote in the early days of the project, there is something missing here: giving up *on what*? There are those who move from giving up on the project of sustaining our current way of living to embracing the imminence of human extinction (see the work of Guy McPherson). From the manifesto onwards, however, Dark Mountain has sought to open up the considerable territory which lies between these two outcomes. 'That civilisations fall, sooner or later, is as much a law of history as gravity is a law of physics,' we write in the manifesto.

John Michael Greer, a regular contributor to Dark Mountain, offers the helpful distinction between a 'problem' and a 'predicament.' A problem is a thing that has a solution: it can be fixed and made to go away, leaving the overall situation essentially unchanged. A predicament is a thing that has no solution: 'Faced with a predicament, people come up with responses. Those responses may succeed, they may fail, or they may fall somewhere in between, but none of them "solves" the predicament, in the sense that none of them makes it go away.'

The claim that Dark Mountain makes is that our situation cannot be reduced to a set of problems in need of technical or political solutions. Rather, it is best conceived as a predicament. In the face of a predicament, it is not that there are no actions worth taking, but the actions available belong to a different category to those one would take when faced with a problem.

If I were to propose a list of the kinds of action worth taking in the face of our current predicament, it would include (1) taking responsibility for kinds of knowledge that might not survive the likely turbulence of the coming decades and doing what you can to better their chances of survival, (2) making sure that the losses (of species, landscapes and languages) that already form the background to our way of living are mourned rather than forgotten, not least by telling stories of loss which themselves become a form of knowledge that can be carried with us, and (3) creating circumstances under which we have a chance of 'knowing what we know,' encountering the knowledge of a thing like climate change not as arms-length fact, but as the experience of knowing by which my sense of who I am is changed.

In each of these three cases, the work of writers and artists, storytellers and culture-makers has a role to play, and these roles have been explored over the past ten years in the work that has taken place around Dark Mountain. So far, the project has been responsible for thirteen book-length collections of writing and art, while inspiring manifestations as various as a number-one album in the Norwegian music charts, an enormous mural on the side of a disused art college in Doncaster, and a year-long workshop at Sweden's national theatre. To the best of my knowledge, it has not been responsible for any corpses.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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[1] See, for example, https://dark-mountain.net/2016-you-want-it-darker/.

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