

## ***Remembering Extinct Species—Fast Memory for Slow Change?***

*Jenny Wüstenberg*

During my time as Rachel Carson-Simone Veil Fellow, I will write an empirical chapter for a book entitled *Slow Memory: Remembering Gradual Change in an Accelerating World* (currently under review). This chapter, on remembering extinct species and biodiversity, is crucial to the book's focus on the disconnect between the gradual and diffuse nature of fundamental contemporary challenges and the accelerated temporality through which we must address them.

Shaped very much by the experience of the Holocaust and the world wars, memory studies and remembrance policies have focused almost exclusively on how humans make sense of extreme events—war, atrocities, disasters—that are located in specific places and happened at definable moments. Our cultural practices of creating memorial sites, marking days on the calendar, and producing cultural engagement reflect our attention to sudden violence, pivotal incidents, and extraordinary individuals as the reference points of public memory. I argue that scholars and societies have not found equally evocative ways of addressing histories of gradual change and slow violence—such as climate change, structural racism, deindustrialization, democratization or shifts in gender relations—despite the fact that these have been and continue to be at least as transformative for our everyday lives. Slow change is often as devastating and traumatic as armed conflict or dictatorial repression. And conversely, it can bring the most profound progress in human relations. Attending to this “slow memory” matters because if we do not recognize and make an affective (rather than merely intellectual) connection to the forces that impact the way we live with the planet and each other, we can neither find ways to reconcile with historical injustice nor devise effective collective action to address the most serious threats of the future.

The chapter to be written during the fellowship will begin by outlining key venues for negotiating responses to biodiversity loss and charting the (uneven) awareness of it in politics and culture, linking this to the concept of slow memory. I will then offer an analysis of the framing of extinction in prominent museums of natural history and science. As well-funded state institutions, informed by science, and often existing since the European “age of discovery,” these types of museums are especially important when it comes to understanding the narratives around biodiversity loss. This institutional backdrop is crucial to the in-depth case study at the center of this chapter: the story of the Mass Extinction Memorial Observatory (MEMO) Project on the Isle of Portland in Dorset (UK). I offer the first comprehensive analysis of this project and the puzzle for environmental memory politics that it exemplifies. Since summer 2021, I have engaged closely with the activists behind MEMO, have conducted interviews, collected documentation, and observed community meetings in Portland. I believe that this project is both intrinsically important as an ambitious and internationally supported effort to grapple culturally with species loss, as well as an emblematic case study of the cultural and political challenges of mnemonically marking slow-moving transformations. It will allow me to tease out fast and slow modes of remembrance of ecological change, focusing especially on physical sites that recall “unsited” processes, human mourning rituals for nonhuman beings, and fossilized forms of memory.