

Case Study form for Collaboration with The MERL

- **Name:** Dr Jennifer Clarke
- **Role and HEI:** Associate Professor, Gray's School of Art, Robert Gordon University (RGU)
- **Name of activity co-created or hosted by The MERL:** *Agroforestry Futures* Youth Panel. Also associated public engagement activities developed as part of the UKRI-funded *Agroforestry Futures* Treescapes Project 2022-2026

Describe your overarching project, its significance and reach.

Agroforestry Futures was a UKRI-funded interdisciplinary research project exploring the social, cultural and environmental futures of agroforestry in the UK. My role focused on artistic research, public engagement and collaborative creative methodologies. Working with artists, environmental scientists, museum partners and communities, the project explored how creative practices can contribute to discussions about land use, climate change and future landscapes.

The collaboration with MERL enabled us to work with young people, museum collections and archives to develop creative responses to agroforestry. The work contributed to exhibitions, workshops, publications and wider public engagement activities reaching audiences across England and Scotland.

How and why did you decide to approach MERL to work in partnership?

MERL's collections, expertise in rural histories and commitment to public engagement made it an ideal partner for the project. We were particularly interested in how museum collections and archives could be used as resources for imagining alternative environmental futures rather than simply interpreting the past.

The partnership offered opportunities to engage young people in conversations about agriculture, ecology, climate change and landscape through creative methods.

Which MERL staff did you work with?

Primarily the Head of Learning & Engagement, and other colleagues within the Learning and Engagement and Curatorial teams.

Who did you engage, on what scale and which context(s)?

The primary participants were members of the MERL Youth Panel. We also engaged museum staff, researchers, artists and members of the public through exhibitions and public events. The work took place through a series of workshops at MERL between 2023 and 2024 and subsequently contributed to wider public engagement through the *Grounding Truths* exhibition at The Sill National Landscape Discovery Centre in 2025.

Which methods and approaches did you use? (e.g. co-creation, artistic research etc)

Methods included the co-creation of artworks, which I understand as forms of artistic research and research-creation. Approaches included:

- Participatory workshops
- Multimodal and visual methodologies
- Archive-based creative practice
- Sound recording, listening and voice-based exercises
- Drawing, collage and textile experimentation
- Speculative and future-oriented creative methods

Participants worked directly with museum collections, archives and contemporary environmental research to generate creative responses to agroforestry and future landscapes. Through collaborative making, discussion and experimentation, the workshops created opportunities for participants to engage critically and imaginatively with environmental change, rural histories and alternative futures.

Did anything about the project change as a result of the collaboration with the MERL (e.g. audiences, partners, practices etc)

Yes. The collaboration significantly strengthened the project's youth engagement dimension and introduced new ways of working with museum collections and archives. The young people's contributions directly informed the development of artwork, interpretation and public engagement activities. The partnership also expanded the project's audience and strengthened relationships between researchers, museums and communities.

What level of budget did you have for the project and what did you need to spend funds on? Were some of the costs split with The MERL?

The activities were supported mainly through the wider UKRI Agroforestry Futures Treescapes project budget that funded 1) my travel and time 2) artist funding, 3) workshop materials etc, which allowed diverse engagement activities, exhibition development and documentation. Costs were shared across project partners, with MERL contributing staff expertise, facilities and support for workshop delivery.

How and when did you plan sessions with MERL staff take place?

Planning took place through regular email correspondence, as well as, at the outset, online meetings, and collaborative discussions between project researchers and MERL staff. Planning began several months before the first workshops and continued throughout the project as activities evolved.

What lead in time did you allow for the project?

Approximately 6–12 months of planning and relationship building before any delivery, with ongoing development throughout the project. Funding started Aug. 2022. First public activity Sept. 2023.

Do you have any thoughts about how the MERL-based event / exhibition / initiative went?

The collaboration was extremely successful!

MERL staff were super supportive, flexible and engaged throughout the process. The museum provided an excellent environment for experimentation, learning and creative collaboration. The youth panel brought enthusiasm, curiosity and thoughtful engagement with complex environmental topics.

What sort of impact were you hoping to achieve?

We hoped to:

1. Increase engagement with agroforestry and environmental futures.
2. Encourage creative thinking about climate and landscape change.
3. Support young people to engage with museum collections in new ways.
4. Build dialogue between arts, humanities and environmental science.
5. Generate meaningful public engagement outcomes.

Where you able to gather evidence of that impact and if so, how?

Yes. Evidence of impact has been gathered through participant feedback, workshop documentation, observation, reflective discussion, creative outputs and public engagement activities associated with the project.

Importantly, impact evaluation remains ongoing. The collaboration with MERL formed part of a wider programme of work within the UKRI-funded Agroforestry Futures project, and I am currently continuing to collect evidence relating to the longer-term cultural, educational and societal impacts of the project. This includes feedback from participants, project partners, audiences and stakeholders involved in subsequent exhibitions, workshops and public events.

The significance of this work has recently been recognised through additional impact-focused funding, which is supporting the documentation and evaluation of the project's wider influence and legacy. As a result, impact evidence is still being gathered and analysed, and further findings are expected to emerge over the coming year.

Can you share any results in terms of evaluation and measuring impact?

My initial evaluation suggests that participants developed increased engagement with environmental issues and greater confidence in using creative and artistic methods to explore complex topics such as climate change, land use and agroforestry futures. The workshops encouraged participants to engage critically and imaginatively with museum collections, archives and contemporary environmental research, generating a diverse range of creative responses.

The collaboration resulted in the production of artworks, sound recordings and exhibition content that extended beyond the workshop setting and reached wider public audiences through exhibitions, events and associated project activities. The work also created opportunities for dialogue between researchers, museum staff, young people and members of the public, supporting new connections between environmental research, heritage and creative practice.

As impact evaluation is ongoing, I am continuing to gather feedback and evidence from participants, collaborators and audiences. Longer-term outcomes relating to learning, confidence, relationship-building and public engagement are still emerging, and further evaluation work is expected to provide a more comprehensive picture of the project's influence and legacy.

How would you rate the quality of the evidence gathered as part of the project?

At present, I would rate the quality of the evidence as moderate, with the potential to become strong as further evaluation work is completed!

The project generated a substantial body of qualitative evidence, including participant feedback, observations, creative outputs, reflective discussions and documentation from workshops, exhibitions and public engagement activities. However, some longer-term impacts are still emerging and have not yet been fully captured by me.

One challenge is that we are all extremely busy, making follow-up conversations and longitudinal evaluation more difficult to undertake within the lifespan of the original project. I am therefore continuing to gather additional feedback and evidence through ongoing discussions with collaborators, participants and partner organisations as part of an additional impact project. Recent impact-focused funding is supporting this next phase of evaluation and evidence gathering.

Can you see any longer-term outcomes emerging from the work (e.g. follow-on work, relationship building, influence growing etc)

Yes. The collaboration has led to ongoing relationships between project partners and MERL. The work informed the Grounding Truths exhibition and has contributed to continuing discussions about creative approaches to environmental engagement, museum practice and artistic research.

Are there any recommendations for MERL staff when thinking about future collaborations (e.g. challenges or constraints?)

I hope you will continue supporting experimental, co-creative and interdisciplinary projects. MERL's willingness to support exploratory approaches was a significant strength of the collaboration. Longer lead-in periods and dedicated evaluation support can further strengthen future partnerships.

Any other comments?

The collaboration demonstrated the value of museums as active partners in research, creativity and public engagement. MERL's openness to experimentation enabled forms of dialogue and learning that would have been difficult to achieve elsewhere.