



# GREENHOUSE BRITAIN

Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom

an artwork by Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison,  
Harrison Studio & Associates (Britain)

## Notes for Teachers preparing to the visit the exhibition

The exhibition Greenhouse Britain has been made by the artists Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison (the Harrisons). The exhibition addresses climate change and rising sea levels from a cultural and ecological perspective. Climate change has risen up the political agenda over the past 18 months and is now regularly featured in the news and media. This exhibition explores many of the major issues facing the island of Britain and begins the process of telling a new story about how we respond to this change.

This exhibition will interest both schools and other groups of any age. It is appropriate for Primary, Secondary and Further/Higher education groups. It is relevant to students working on **geography and environmental studies** and in particular climate change, as well as **science, art and design, and language/literature**.

The exhibition is a fascinating combination of ecology and art, dramatically setting out the challenge of climate change and sea level rise and exploring the ways we can respond. The exhibition is positive in character, exploring a range of scenarios and ways of addressing the challenge of global warming.

Key things to look at:

### 1. This is an exhibition about climate change made by artists.

The Harrisons and their associate David Haley, are all artists who focus their work on the environment. David Haley, a British artist, invited the Harrisons to make a proposal and the result is Greenhouse Britain.

As artists, the Harrisons and David Haley believe that it is important that they draw attention and contribute creatively to the environmental challenges we are facing including climate change.

“Basically, the concept argues that the Greenhouse phenomenon is so urgent, so compelling in the near term, so potentially catastrophic in the long term, and so obviously destabilizing to the environment, that we strongly believe the greenhouse discourse is vital and will benefit from the voice of culture.”

All three have developed an extensive knowledge of ecology and ecological systems – the way soils, water, plants, insects, animals and humans interact. These are their materials. The Harrisons have made artworks addressing a wide range of different ecological systems including water and rivers, meadows and forests, as well as housing and towns and cities. You will notice that the exhibition uses a range of different forms of art including storytelling (spoken and written word), maps and images, video and animation, and the model (which is like a piece of sculpture). Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison believe that being creative with words is as important as being creative with images.

Further information on artists working with the environment and ecology can be found at [www.greenmuseum.org](http://www.greenmuseum.org) including more resources for doing environmental art.

### 2. The exhibition focuses on the impact of rising sea levels on the island of Britain

The Harrisons want us to focus on the fact that Britain is an island. They don't want us to think about the island of Britain as the only place affected by climate change and sea level rise. They focus on the island because we all recognise the shape of the island. In making

any work of art you need to decide on the scale of the work, whether it is a group of objects in a still life, or the scale of a sculpture. This will affect the composition of the work. The artists also believe that the island of Britain is also a useful scale to think about understanding and adapting to climate change.

The core concept here is a statement and a question. “The oceans will rise gracefully. Can we withdraw with equal grace?”

Look at the areas that will be most affected and how the coastline of the island will change shape. The artists highlight the importance of the changing shape of the island of Britain. Predictions of sea level rise during this century range from 1 to 5 metres.

At five metres 2,200,000 people will be displaced and 10,000 square kilometres of land will be submerged.

### 3. The artists believe that there are three ways to respond to sea level rise:

A. The artists look at **Defence** in the context of Bristol. Bristol can be defended with a dam in the Avon gorge. The artists suggest that the dam might also generate electricity. This work takes the form of a short video.

Are there other places that can be defended with dams?

B. They look at **Defending and Withdrawing** in the context of the Lee Valley. At the bottom of the Lee Valley is the Thames Gateway project. The Thames Gateway involves a very substantial number of new homes placed on the shoreline of the Thames Estuary. The Artists believe that new housing should be created in the upper Lee Valley above the 5m mark. They highlight the difference by showing the current plan on a map that is printed backwards, and their plan on a map printed the right way around.

The artists argue that building above the 5m mark provides time to plan for withdrawing to the high ground up the Lee Valley. They make a case for planning to provide homes for people in high rise buildings on the high ground of the Lee Valley, and for planting a new forest over the whole of the valley.

C. They look at **Withdrawing** in the Mersey Basin. They believe that the Mersey Basin is an area where withdrawing is the only option. They propose creating new settlements around the Pennines. These settlements are sited within a new forest ring. The artists aim propose a landscape which they believe will absorb approximately 50% of the carbon produced by the inhabitants, before taking account of any other low carbon technologies.

Each of these locations (Bristol, the Lee Valley and the Mersey/Pennines) is selected in order to exemplify a strategy. Other locations around the country should be explored in relation to these strategies.

### 4. The artists make an important distinction between 'development' and 'settlement'.

“For us, the term “settlement” has embedded in it the idea of habitat, not only for ourselves but also for the other living creatures (animals, birds, insects and plants) with which we share the ecosystem within which all structure is built.”

Look at the difference between the artists' proposal for the Lee Valley and the Thames Gateway proposals.

Look at the different places that the exhibition proposes people could move to – there are two examples – one for new settlements in the Pennines and one for new settlements in the Lee Valley.

Look at the different forms of architecture that are imagined – in the Pennines it is low-rise and in the Lee Valley it is high rise.