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ADAPTATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE



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The Sunken House

Using art to provoke debate about climate change in Vesterålen, Norway

The Sunken House is an urban artwork which uses NASA projections to visualise the worst-case scenario for sea-level rise in Vesterålen. The artwork covers the façade of a house at the heart of a region where only half the population believes in a human-driven climate crisis.

Key Learnings

- **Constructive community engagement:** The art project successfully engaged the local community in debate about the climate crisis, highlighting the political and emotional possibilities of visual art. Lifting the debate out of the internet and into the local community through a face-to-face panel debate engaged a considerable number of people in the community and facilitated a civil debate on a divisive issue.
- **Overcoming initial critique:** The artwork initially spurred debate online, where some critics were concerned about the artwork's potential to unduly scare children. In the public panel meeting, which was arranged in response to the online debate, it was suggested that children were more scared by adults not taking climate science seriously.
- **Involvement from children and young people:** The younger generations have made it clear that they want a seat at the table in climate discussions, and they seem no more vulnerable to climate anxiety than adults.

About the region

Vesterålen is an archipelago in the Norwegian Arctic made up of five municipalities with a total population of just over 30,000 people. Across 2,511 km², the islands rise from the sea and peak at the summit of Møysalen (1,264 m). Fishery and aquaculture are cornerstones of the local economy but rising sea temperatures reduce fish health due to emerging parasites adapted to warmer conditions. Furthermore, many inhabited areas and roads are near the sea and vulnerable to the effects of sea level rise and extreme flooding.

Climate hazards

Sea Level Rise, Flooding, Extreme Temperatures

Sector

Marine and Fisheries, Buildings

Key system

Land use and Food systems, Critical Infrastructure



Climate Threats

Sea level rise is threatening Vesterålen's roads and inhabited areas. Storms, causing coastal flooding, pose a risk to the community and require adaptation measures. NASA also simulated how climate change will impact the fishing and aquaculture industries in the area. To sustain resilient economic activities, those industries must adapt to climatic changes and address associated biological threats. Rising sea temperatures, for example, cause suboptimal conditions for cold-water species like Atlantic salmon, a vital species for aquaculture in Norway. Salmon are highly sensitive to temperature, and prolonged exposure to warmer waters can lead to increased stress, slower growth rates, and higher mortality. In recent years, warmer water temperatures have also caused more algal blooms, which are becoming increasingly problematic for the Norwegian coastline, including Vesterålen.

"Due to its coastal location and economic dependence on the sea, the Vesterålen region is particularly vulnerable to sea level rise and temperature changes. Local aquaculture already suffers adverse consequences from warmer surface water, requiring innovative work to build resistance to this and other threats."

Ane Høyem, Project Manager at GaiaVesterålen

Art for nature's sake

The Vesterålen archipelago is a region marked by significant climate scepticism. Just over half of the local population believes that human activity is the primary driver of the climate crisis – a remarkably low figure in both a Norwegian and a European context.

GaiaVesterålen is a museum with a strong focus on Research and Development. It aims to demonstrate innovative approaches for the region and the planet's future. The museum was established in response to the local children's concern about nature and the impacts of climate change. GaiaVesterålen takes an innovative approach to museum work, guided by sustainability principles, co-creation and inclusion.

As part of the [AiR Vesteraalen](#) (Artist in Residence Vesteraalen) and [RESIST](#) projects, the artist Deana Kolencikova, GaiaVesterålen, and a group of local collaborators began conceptualising and developing *The Sunken House* at Sortland's town square in 2022. The artwork demonstrates Sortland's projected sea level according to NASA's worst-case scenario calculations for the area for 2150.

The aim is to raise awareness about the concrete local climate risks and to encourage the local population to voice their concerns and be heard by the local decision-makers. It also seeks to inform citizens, enabling them to make climate-smart decisions in their daily lives.

Due to its prominent location and powerful message, the artwork sparked strong reactions within the local community. A mix of opinions began to circulate online, both in favour of the artwork and criticising it, with one critic suggesting the artwork was causing climate anxiety among children and young people.



Figure 1: *The Sunken House*, Deana Kolencikova, Sortland. Image Credit: GaiaVesterålen.

Inclusive Climate Debates with the Community

In response to the increasing climate-change-related threats and scepticism, the museum and [GaiaVesterålen](#) held a public meeting in the local arts building in May 2023. Panellists with opposing views on the severity and causes of climate change were invited to present. Fifty members of the public attended the meeting in person and a further 1,224 people joined online.

The debate revealed a strong desire for climate action among the children and young people present, highlighting that adults' inaction troubled them more than scientists' warnings about climate change. It also became evident that local children and young people don't want to be shielded from the climate conversation. Instead, they want to collaborate with adults in the community to take constructive action and build resilience to climate threats now and for the future.

One panel member expressed appreciation for the critic who sparked the online debate and thanked GaiaVesterålen for bringing the discussion into an open, respectful forum. The meeting allowed all panel members and the audience to express their views. Although the parties did not reach a consensus on the severity or causes of the climate crisis, the debate showed that the local community can address complex issues with civility and mutual respect.

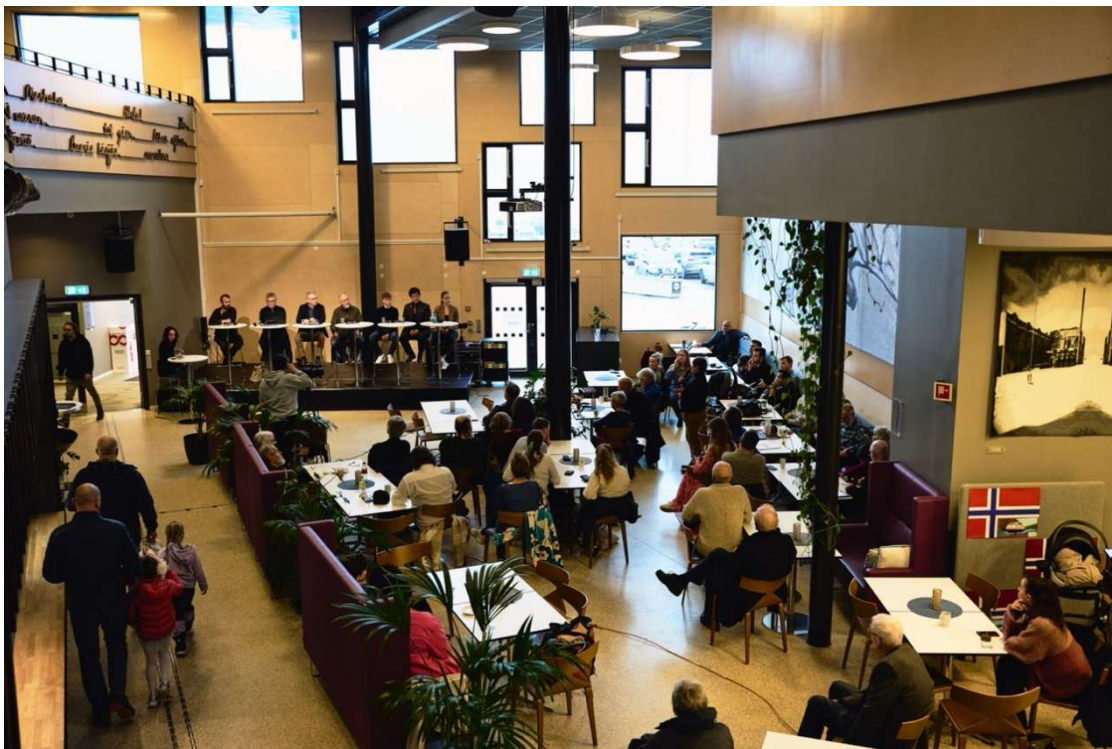


Figure 2: From the public meeting in Sortland 24 May 2023. Image Credit: GaiaVesterålen.

Summary

The Vesterålen archipelago in the Norwegian Arctic is facing warming sea temperatures and sea level rise, disrupting human and animal life now and in the future. As part of the [RESIST project](#), GaiaVesterålen commissioned an urban artwork from Deana Kolencikova titled The Sunken House – a projection of NASA's worst-case scenario for sea level rise in the area – which spurred debate in the local community, culminating in a well-attended public meeting.

Further information

- <https://www.gaiavesteralen.eco/aktuelt/-fantastisk-at-vi-kan-ha-dette-p-sortland>
- <https://www.gaiavesteralen.eco/thesunkenhouse>

Contact

Ane Høyem, Project Manager at GAIA Vesterålen (ane.hoyem@museumnord.no)



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