

14 February 2022

Open letter to the Director and Trustees of the British Museum

As specialists in the human past – archaeologists, museum and heritage professionals, and students and collaborators in these fields – we have a unique understanding of the unprecedented climatic and environmental crisis now facing humanity. The scale of this crisis exceeds even that of the grievous current pandemic. Climate change threatens our security and wellbeing, will exacerbate existing global inequalities, and poses particularly catastrophic dangers to Indigenous peoples. We are deeply concerned by this situation, and believe that we must all take action in order to reduce the harm that is already being done by increasing global temperatures. We are therefore writing to urge you to end your sponsorship relationship with BP.

Rapid transition away from fossil fuels is crucial if we are to avoid the worst outcomes of the climate crisis over the coming century. This requires major economic and social changes that will affect the profitability and viability of fossil fuel companies as they exist today. Recently, some companies, including BP, have announced ambitions to become "net zero by 2050", seeking to create the impression that they can be trusted to manage the energy transition themselves. BP continues to use sophisticated public relations techniques to manage its image and discourage scrutiny of its activities.

We believe that BP's ongoing sponsorship of the British Museum should be seen in this light, as part of a strategy of reputational management. BP is taking advantage of the British Museum's status as a highly respected institution, and of the public's love of museums and heritage, to associate its brand with values of high culture, art, education, sophistication, reason, and knowledge. These values have powerful significance and appeal within our society and, crucially, among our political and civic decision-makers.

In reality, BP remains a "supermajor" oil and gas company, highly specialised in fossil fuel extraction and processing. Its low carbon energy expenditure is dwarfed by the [\\$9 billion](#) it is investing in fossil fuels in 2021. [Multiple analyses](#) have [found](#) that BP's plans will not deliver "net zero" emissions by 2050. Its goals are unachievable without massive utilization of unproven [carbon capture technologies and offsetting](#). Although many known reserves of oil and gas [need to be left in the ground](#) if global heating is to be kept within the [1.5 °C limit](#) of the Paris Climate Agreement, the company is continuing to look for new sources to extract, and it plans to still be drilling for oil and gas in 2050. Its emissions reduction plans also [entirely disregard its 20% stake](#) in Rosneft, which accounts for roughly one third of BP's total oil and gas production. Rosneft is embarking on a \$134 billion project to drill in the Arctic, where it plans to tap an estimated 6 billion tonnes of new crude oil.

These activities are not a matter of reluctantly meeting consumer demand. BP has long been a [major lobbyist for fossil fuels](#), successfully pushing to [lift drilling restrictions](#), [weaken support for renewables](#)

and [undermine climate policy](#) around the world. In short, BP has actively and knowingly contributed to furthering climate breakdown when we have urgently needed to work together to solve it. The damaging impacts of BP's extractive activities on [Indigenous peoples](#) and [frontline communities](#) are well-documented. This is a company whose activities are entirely at odds with values of humanistic enquiry and education.

We are acutely aware that the UK's museums and heritage sector has suffered greatly from cuts in financial support over the last decade and is facing unprecedented challenges as a result of the current pandemic. Many of us work closely with British Museum employees and count them as personal friends and esteemed colleagues. We know from their outstanding work that these curators and researchers deserve to be properly funded. However, we do not believe that BP offers a necessary or sustainable solution. BP's annual contribution represents a very limited proportion of the [museum's overall income, estimated as less than 0.5%](#), and has been described by a former Trustee as ["not unattainable elsewhere"](#).

The British Museum's leadership on this issue would have far-reaching consequences. Refusing further sponsorship from BP would send a strong signal that fossil fuel corporations – like tobacco and arms companies – are no longer welcome in cultural life. By diminishing BP's "social license to operate", it would help to support our society's transition away from fossil fuels. It would undermine BP's efforts to deflect criticism of its activities through sponsorship, and demonstrate to BP that it must work yet harder to transform its business if it is to find respectability. Ending this sponsorship arrangement would also, we believe, enhance the Museum's public image, and in particular strengthen the Museum's ability to inspire children and young people, who are [highly conscious](#) of the threats posed by the climate crisis.

The Royal Shakespeare Company, National Galleries of Scotland, Tate, and Edinburgh International Festival have all now terminated sponsorship arrangements with BP. The National Theatre, British Film Institute, Southbank Centre, and Edinburgh Science Festival have also renounced partnerships with fossil fuel companies. The British Museum has become an outlier by continuing its association with this increasingly unwelcome brand.

However, another way is possible. The British Museum has a significant opportunity to reassert a leading role within its field by taking an important moral stance on the central challenge of this century and affirming that fossil fuel promotion has no place within our great cultural institutions. As colleagues and as friends, we respectfully ask you, the Director and Trustees of the British Museum, to do everything necessary to end the Museum's association with BP, and to publicly commit to doing so as soon as possible.

All signatories are participating in a personal capacity.

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The letter was conceived, written and organised by Dr Natasha Reynolds. Signatures were collected between November 2021 and February 2022. Total number of signatories: 302.