

Is there a role for **adaptive release** in heritage practice?

What is it?

Adaptive Release (AR) is an approach that supports the **transformation of a heritage asset** (including its values and significance), within wider landscape settings.

AR is **proactive and positive**, intended to be applied in situations where **anticipated environmental change is likely to lead to eventual loss and/or alteration**.

What does it involve?



Ongoing monitoring of the asset and its connection to the wider landscape setting.



Structured engagement to take stock of new values and significance stemming from gradual transformation.



Openness to adjusting and adapting decisions following community and stakeholder consultation.

The heritage sector recognises that the combined climate and ecological crises present real challenges for the care of the historic and natural environment. Recent analysis suggests that almost four in five sites on the National Heritage List for England will face high levels of risk by the second half of the 21st century, with climate-driven hazards intensifying the impact of background environmental processes such as weathering and erosion.

The sector is currently engaging in assessment and prioritisation exercises to ensure that resources are allocated appropriately in the face of future challenges, but it's already clear that some assets will be difficult to conserve using available approaches, and some management of loss will be necessary.

Currently, however, there is little in the way of practical and policy guidance about how to manage such change proactively, particularly with reference to assets that have some form of protective designation (e.g. NHLE listing). Managed decline offers some precedent for the intentional accommodation of deterioration, but it tends to be applied as a last resort for low significance assets, and can be perceived as neglect if the rationale for the decision is not clearly communicated and understood. There is a real need for more integrated and holistic approaches that recognise the potential benefits arising from the careful management of transformative change.

Adaptive release is a new approach developed through a two-year process of collaboration and consultation which brought together historic and natural environment practitioners and academic researchers. The Landscape Futures and the Challenge of Change project, which was led by the University of Exeter in collaboration with the National Trust, Historic England, Natural England and University College London, followed on from the AHRC-funded Heritage Futures research programme, with support from UKRI Landscape Decisions.

“*Heritage has seen a shift from preservation and protection to conservation and managing change, and beyond. Just as we have come on a journey up until now, there's no reason why the journey shouldn't continue to consider whether there is a place for approaches like adaptive release.*”

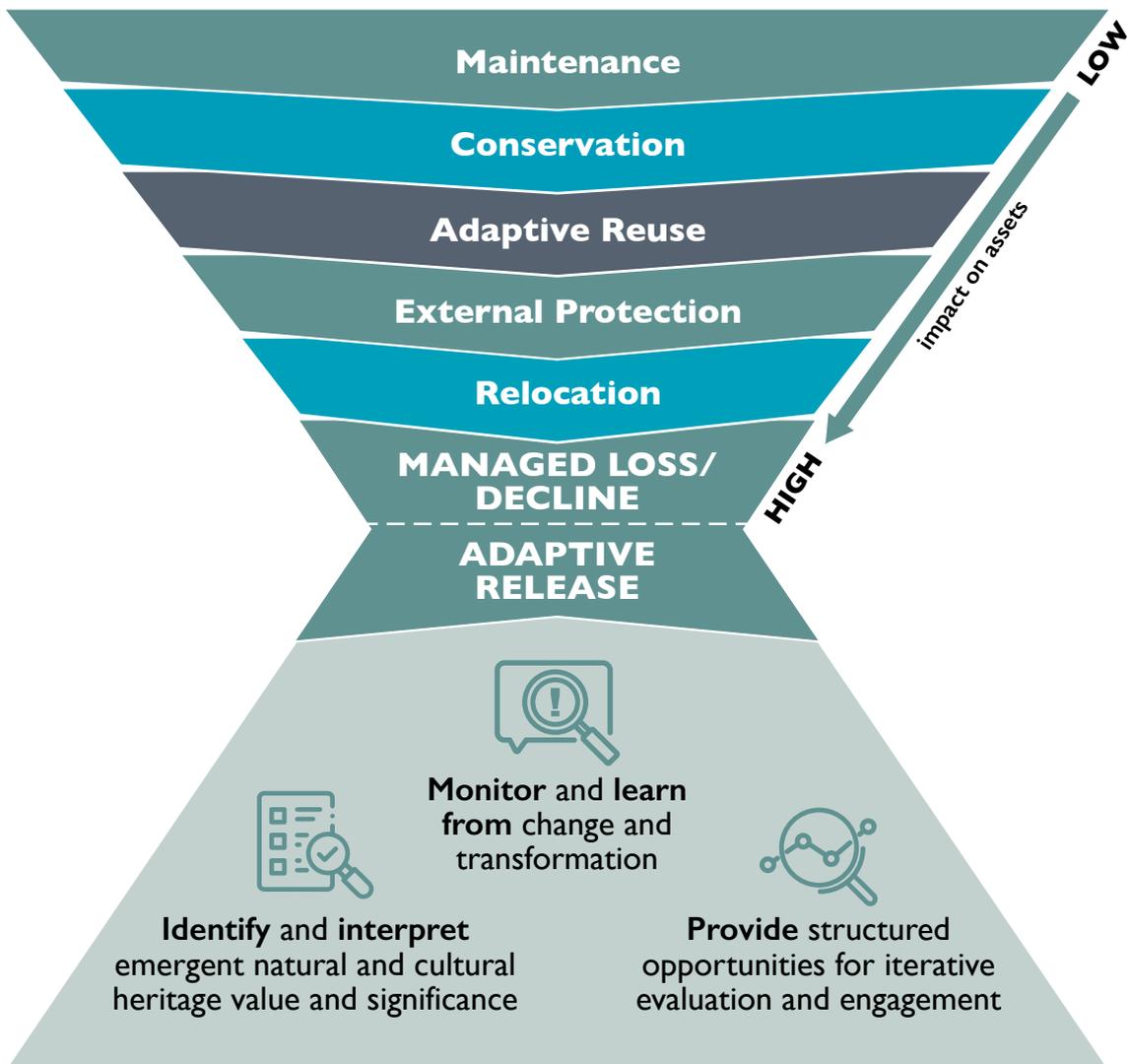
Duncan McCallum, *Strategy and Listing Director, Historic England*

Introducing Adaptive Release

Adaptive release (AR) presents an **alternative management strategy that supports the transformation of heritage assets** when other lower-impact conservation options are not viable (see below). Central to an adaptive release approach is a focus on understanding how discrete assets are connected to wider processes of landscape change and continuity. The core working principles of AR emphasise integration between historic and natural environment planning and regulation, and commitment to shared goals and outcomes. It's only by taking an integrated approach that AR can deliver both cultural and natural heritage benefits and help build resilience at the landscape scale. AR is not a pathway to neglect, but rather reflects an active commitment to work with natural processes while sustaining cultural heritage interest.

- ▶ AR will require ongoing, meaningful engagement with local communities, stakeholders and interest groups.
- ▶ Historic and natural environment expertise will be needed to support the identification and interpretation of emerging values and benefits.
- ▶ Adaptive management structures will provide set decision-points for assessment of resource availability and monitoring data.
- ▶ Adjustment of management pathways may involve minimal intervention to prolong access and interest, where appropriate.

The application of an adaptive release approach will differ depending upon the asset, the landscape and the specific social and economic context. There will be no one size fits all approach, even for assets that are ostensibly similar.





CASE STUDY

A designated coastal structure is threatened by erosion and ground instability due to rising sea levels and changes in precipitation patterns. Under current practice, the asset might be placed on the Heritage at Risk register to call attention to its vulnerability, but unless resources were made available for protection or relocation it would remain 'at risk' until it was eventually lost. In an AR approach, an initial phase of recording could be followed by citizen-monitoring and interpretation of the structure's gradual transformation (where safe to do so), with each phase releasing information about the material and methods of construction – even as the material becomes incorporated into coastal processes and contributes to the creation of dynamic ecological niches. As the interest of the asset transforms from architectural and historical to primarily archaeological and communal (as well as, potentially, ecological and geological) the designation could be updated accordingly.

What actions are needed to prepare the ground for adaptive release?

AR is currently being explored to identify how it might apply in different contexts and to establish criteria that would need to be met to prompt its consideration. Applied examples are needed to help refine the concept and illustrate points of tension with existing policy and regulatory frameworks. It is hoped that understanding and acceptance of change at challenging sites will be improved through proactive and iterative engagement with communities and stakeholders, but this also needs to be demonstrated.

- ▶ Work is underway to identify a selection of at-risk assets where AR can be trialled, which will include establishing a series of tests for adoption of the approach. No site will be piloted without first consulting with the relevant authorities and local communities.
- ▶ Historic England has established an online network in the Heritage Workspace, Heritage Lost & Found, to encourage dialogue and debate about new approaches (including AR) and to share information about relevant projects and initiatives. Practitioners who are interested in contributing are encouraged to contact Jack Shaw (Jack.Shaw@historicengland.org.uk).

Further Reading

When Loss is More: From Managed Decline to Adaptive Release, [DeSilvey et al, 2021](#).

Identifying Opportunities for Integrated Adaptive Management of Heritage Change and Transformation in England, [Historic England Research Report 18/2022](#).

Heritage Futures: Comparative Approaches to Cultural and Natural Heritage Practices, [Harrison et al, 2020](#).

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Note: This document supports the further development of the AR approach and does not represent a formal position by Historic England, the National Trust or Natural England.