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## INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION BETWEEN ECOMUSEUMS AND COMMUNITY MUSEUMS

The experience of the EU-LAC Museums  
Bi-Regional Youth Exchange in fostering identity,  
building community sustainability and resilience

*Karen Brown and Jamie Allan Brown*

### **Ecomuseums and community museums: nature and culture**

Understanding relationships between culture and nature has seldom been more urgent for museum and heritage professionals. In recent years, cultural heritage sites and their communities around the world have been acutely affected by natural disasters, conflict, lack of security, youth unemployment and related societal challenges.

In Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, young people participate in their respective societies under unequal circumstances and expectations. At the most recent European-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (EU-CELAC) Youth Day held in Quito, Ecuador (2015), it was reported that youth unemployment is at 22.8 per cent in Europe, and 18.7 per cent in Latin America (European Youth Forum, 2015). More recent reports produced by Eurostat demonstrate that 28.8 per cent of young people in the EU face poverty and are at risk of social exclusion, with young women at slightly higher risk than young men, while the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean reports that 41 per cent in Latin America face the same circumstances (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2018; Eurostat, n.d.; Youth Policy Labs, 2007; CEPALSTAT, 2020).

The situation is exacerbated in low- to middle-income countries where maintaining equilibrium, well-being and community resilience is an urgent necessity in the face of global imbalances and rapid change. Social exclusion for young people as they transition into adulthood has the potential to have ongoing consequences for both individuals and society, as it often affects all aspects of young people's lives (UN DESA, 2016). Increased social exclusion and poverty can contribute to an increased risk of inequality in terms of young people's well-being, lifestyle,

access to culture, education and employment opportunities (Eurostat, 2021). For communities in remote rural and island locations, the challenges of globalisation are also intensified by socio-political and environmental instability, lack of access to resources, depopulation and unethical development. Viewed in this context, museums and heritage organisations bear a considerable responsibility for the communities they serve, and they need to invest in their young people through intergenerational dialogue to strengthen their roots because, in the words of one Scottish ecomuseum director, ‘young people are us tomorrow’ (Ghilleasbuig, 2019).

Studies have shown that museums are among the most trusted public institutions around the world, and as such, they have an ethical obligation to support social cohesion and development, as well as to maintain traditional standards in collections care and management.<sup>1</sup> Discussions about relationships between nature and culture are also gathering pace, as museums—and especially ecomuseums—become increasingly appreciated for the work they do in attaining a wide range of Sustainable Development Goals. Heritage Studies has always been preoccupied with landscapes, but in recent years, the international museum world has also begun to acknowledge its responsibilities towards cultural landscapes as a fundamental resource for a sustainable future (Mac Devitt, 2017; Riva, 2017). Increased participation and access to museums and culture can facilitate a ‘sense of place’ (Davis, 2011) and belonging to a community, promoting social inclusion and lifelong learning. In addition, museums are increasingly addressing the climate emergency (Museums Association, 2020; Janes and Sandell, 2019). Within this emerging corpus, we focus on the integral role of youth in maintaining sustainable museums through the example of the Horizon 2020 project’s Work Package 4, ‘Museum Education for Social Inclusion and Cohesion’ Bi-Regional Youth Exchange.

## EU-LAC Museums project background

Museums are important because they serve to remind us of who we are and what our place is in the world. [...] Museum professionals, with reference to their visitors, frequently use the expression ‘museum community’, but can this be defined? We also need to discover how museums interact with their community, and the community with its museums, and place this in historical perspective.

*(Davis, 2007, p. 53)*

The EU-LAC Museums project at large seeks to carry out a comparative analysis of small- and medium-sized rural museums and their communities in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and to develop an associated history and theory. The basis of the project is that community museums allow under-represented communities to stake a place in history, as well as to contribute to environmental sustainability and community empowerment. Funded by Horizon 2020, the

European Union's most extensive research and innovation programme to date, the project places emphasis on sustainable economic growth and industrial leadership while tackling societal challenges.<sup>2</sup> We have eight international partners from Scotland (Coordinator), Portugal, Spain, France, Peru, Chile, Costa Rica and the Anglophone Caribbean (Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago) (see EU-LAC Museums, 2021b). Dr Karen Brown is the Project Coordinator; Jamie Allan Brown is the Project Administrator and dedicated Youth Programme Worker. A project Advisory Board and Steering Committee consists of world-leading experts in EU-LAC relations and selected for their distinct areas of expertise. They include prominent ecomuseum and community museum specialists, Hugues de Varine, Peter Davis and Teresa Morales. Luís Raposo, the former President of International Council of Museums (ICOM)-Europe, and Samuel Franco Arce, former President of ICOM-LAC and an expert in disaster management in cultural heritage, were instrumental in helping us to plan the project, set goals and measure impact (see EU-LAC Museums, 2021a). The project is rooted in a belief in the potential for youth to transform society. It aims to help those young people become tomorrow's leaders with an awareness of their heritage and identity and how these are changing, an understanding of the challenges they face, and how these are perceived within a global context. EU-LAC Museums encourages mutual understanding between the regions to build on existing and new partnerships and aims to overcome challenges for mutual sustainability and continuous dialogue within our museum communities.

To reach the Horizon 2020 goal of 'fostering inclusive, innovative and reflective societies', the EU-LAC Museums project sought to research state-of-the-art initiatives in museums and community empowerment and move beyond those initiatives to implement actions in each partner country. The project also produced a number of academic and scientific outputs, notably an extensive bibliography dedicated to ecomuseology and community museology, and a new collection of essays, *On Community and Sustainable Museums* (2019), in which many of the project's guiding principles are explained by our project advisers (Brown et al., 2019; EU-LAC Museums, 2019b).

### **Recruiting young people in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean**

Participants in the EU-LAC Museums Bi-Regional Youth Exchange were Druim Nan Linntean (the Isle of Skye Ecomuseum), in Scotland; Ecomuseo de la Cerámica Chorotega de San Vicente de Nicoya (San Vicente de Nicoya Ecomuseum), Museo Comunitario Indígena de Boruca (the Community Museum of Boruca) and Museo Comunitario Yimba Cajc de Rey Curré (the Community Museum of Yimba Cajc de Rey Curré), all in Costa Rica; and Museu da Chapelaria (The Hat Museum) in São João da Madeira, Museu de Olaria (the Museum of Pottery) in Barcelos, and the Museu Municipal in Penafiel, Portugal. These locations and entities were

selected precisely for their remote locations, their precarious socio-economic sustainability and the significant work they are carrying out to maintain tradition and foster resilience for the future.

The Youth Exchange project involved young people aged between 15 and 18 from geographically rural communities and different socio-economic, ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds linked to museum communities in Costa Rica, Scotland and Portugal. Through a tailored recruitment process, the young people were brought on board according to their proven commitment and contribution to volunteering, local heritage and community museum projects. During the programme the focus was on raising awareness of their culture and their identity, how these are changing, and how they are understood in the context of the wider world. In Scotland, a rigorous application process was developed which required each young person to produce a video, take part in assessed group work, complete a comprehensive written application and attend an interview with a member of our team, a Scottish Gaelic language school-teacher and a local ecomuseum representative. The programme's local community partner, the Staffin Community Trust, and Ecomuseum Druim Nan Linntean in Skye advised that the project should involve young people learning or speaking Scottish Gaelic to ensure an understanding of the local community and heritage. This process was an opportunity for young people to display their skills and personality outside their formal school education, and to demonstrate a commitment to their local community and the Scottish Gaelic language.

In the end, the project involved over 100 young people: 90 from Costa Rica (11 selected for travel), 6 from Portugal and 6 from Scotland. Our project goals were

- 1 to empower each young person to learn more about their own community, language, identity, heritage and culture, and to locate similarities with the other communities involved;
- 2 to foster confidence in each young person to take an active role within their individual communities and
- 3 to encourage each young person to reflect on and document their journey as they took part in the Youth Exchange.

### **Discovering nature and culture through the landscape and intergenerational dialogue**

Within the programme, the young people engaged in a range of activities that fostered a 'sense of place', advocated by Peter Davis (2011) as the main role of ecomuseums, through a greater understanding of nature and culture located around the ecomuseum or community museum. The rural setting of the Isle of Skye in the north west of Scotland was selected because of its unique and protected landscape, its investment in the Scottish Gaelic language and its rural way of life. It is also home to Scotland's first ecomuseum, founded as Ceumannan (translated from the Gaelic as 'Footprints' and currently being re-branded as Druim Nan Linntean, 'Ridge of Ages').

In Costa Rica, La Red de Museos Comunitarios, the country's network of community museums, was identified as a strong partner because of its history of community participation and empowerment. The Costa Rican Youth Exchange Programme was led by the National Museum of Costa Rica and operated within the indigenous village communities of Boruca and Rey Curré in the south, and San Vicente de Nicoya Ecomuseum in the north. Monthly workshops were facilitated in partnership with members of the local community, trained by La Red de Museos Comunitarios de América (the Network of Community Museums of America) using their programme first developed by Teresa Morales and Cuauhtémoc Camarena in Oaxaca, Mexico, called 'Our Vision of Change' (Museos Comunitarios, n.d.).

Similarly, in Portugal, the project recruited young people from the rural communities of Barcelos, Penafiel and São João da Madeira within the Porto region to ensure that they had much in common with their fellow travellers; in this case, the National Museum of Archaeology worked with a consultant from the University of Porto.<sup>3</sup> Within Scotland, the development of the activities and workshop programme, jointly led by the University of St Andrews, the Staffin Community Trust and the Comunn na Gàidhlig (Gaelic language and culture society), fostered an opportunity not solely for the young people but also for the professionals and organisations working at grassroots level in the Isle of Skye. The ecomuseum further consolidated its role as a hub of local knowledge, showcasing, safeguarding and respecting the landscape, the way of life, the Scottish Gaelic language and knowledge of traditional crofting (Scottish subsistence farming).

The monthly workshops in each country involved a number of activities that encouraged young people to engage with their landscapes, heritage and identities, and to think critically about the issues affecting them, such as over-tourism, depopulation, globalisation and access to resources. During the exchange programme, they took part in 'Community Walkabouts', in which each host conducted a guided walk through the landscape of their community, identifying places of significance such as sacred sites, buildings, natural features and animals. The young people were encouraged to compare and contrast the host communities with their own. Their tasks included mapping the various communities and exhibiting findings for community elders and facilitators, highlighting significant sights, resources and places understood to be relevant by the young people themselves.

These maps were also displayed in farewell celebrations and ceremonies and recorded for the EU-LAC Museums Bi-Regional Youth Exchange video documentary produced by John Large. They are available on the project's social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (Community Museums, 2019). The documentary was screened at the Byre Theatre in St Andrews, Scotland, in May 2019, to celebrate International Museums Day. There was also a community screening in Boruca, Costa Rica, during the La Red de Museos Comunitarios de América community facilitators exchange workshop in June 2019, which explored the world of 'community museums' in Europe and Latin America (Byre Theatre, 2019).

Another example of youth engagement in the programme involved ‘Community Festivals’ that were organised in each community to celebrate the exchange and to showcase the young people’s commitment and work. These gave the opportunity to showcase traditional dances, such as the *Fiesta de los Diablitos* (Festival of the Little Devils) in Boruca, *cèilidh* dancing in the Isle of Skye and *ranchos* in Porto, as well as to share traditional food such as *tamales* (chicken in dough steamed in a corn husk, Costa Rica), haggis (innards of a sheep with spices from Scotland) and *francesinha* (a traditional sandwich from Porto made with roast meat, cheese and tomato sauce), as well as folk stories from Boruca, the Isle of Skye and Porto. Young people were encouraged to produce a mural of each community that highlighted their journey and progress as a group. In particular, the Costa Rican and Scottish communities hosted young people so they could experience everyday life in their respective communities by visiting community elders and meeting host families, where they tried traditional food and music in their homes.

Working under the theme of ‘Community Crafts and Collective Memory’ further helped young people to understand the importance of memory for each community, promoting debate about young people’s identities. For example, various workshops were held, facilitated by community elders and artisans, to involve the young people in, and inculcate an appreciation for, the unique artisanal skills and industries in each community. These included

- masks and textiles at Boruca and Rey Curré;
- pottery at San Vicente de Nicoya;



FIGURE 2.1 Community Festival, Boruca, Costa Rica, August 2017. © Jamie Allan Brown



FIGURE 2.2 Home visit, Isle of Skye, Scotland, July 2018. © Karen Brown

- crofting, textiles and fishing on the Isle of Skye;
- pottery at Barcelos and Penafiel and
- hats, shoes and pencils at São João da Madeira.

Through these activities, young people developed a greater appreciation of their natural and cultural landscapes and of traditional crafts and practices. As a result of the workshops, relationships between nature and culture became more fluid and open for the young people, and they left the programme with a more profound sense of place.

A commitment to hold on to tradition and community identity was also deepened through the Youth Exchange process. One aspect shared by the young people from Scotland and Costa Rica was a concern about the issue of over-tourism and how it relates to questions of environmental, economic, social and cultural sustainability in the context of the Isle of Skye. In Skye, the district of Staffin, where the ecomuseum is located, has been appointed a National Scenic Area and is protected by the government. This poses a problem for the mass tourism that has grown on Skye, which has been made popular by not only the ecomuseum's marketing but also the filming in the locale of popular movies such as *Prometheus* (2012), *Macbeth* (2012) and *The Big Friendly Giant* (2016). In Costa Rica, tourism issues are slightly different: they concern the ethical economic development of their craft industries of

mask-making, textiles and pottery (see Brown, 2017). Both locations—Scotland and Costa Rica—were seen to face threats to their traditional ways of life.

Linked to this discussion were workshops held on disaster resilience suitable for community and ecomuseums. In Skye, Samuel Franco led a theoretical and practical workshop with the young people on disaster preparedness and community resilience. The group engaged in a range of activities, including writing a report on risk-assessing their building and discussing what areas of the ecomuseum were currently most at risk from erosion (caused both naturally and by humans) due to the heavy footfall of tourism on the island.

A similar workshop was held in Rey Curré and neighbouring UNESCO site Finca 6, also led by Samuel Franco in association with the National Museum of Costa Rica and ICOM Costa Rica (then chaired by Lauran Bonilla-Merchav), and supported by the University of St Andrews Scottish Funding Council Global Challenges Research Fund project, Community Crafts and Culture (2016–2021). In this case, local first responders, such as firemen, police, first-aiders and community elders, were recruited to take part in a workshop, initiated in direct response to the severe floods that affected the community as a result of Hurricane Nate in 2017.

Rey Curré is located in a pre-Colombian settlement close to the Térraba River in the south of Costa Rica, close to the Panama border. Called Diquis ('great river') in the Borucan language, the Térraba is the largest river in the country. In the first week of October 2017, Rey Curré suffered torrential flooding. Many lower-lying family homes close to the river were ruined, and the school and community museum with which we had worked so closely and which had been constructed from traditional materials and using traditional techniques were flooded to roof height. The community suffered degrees of disruption and trauma that affected community life and indigenous systems of governance. However, their response showed enormous community resilience, as the entire community helped to rehabilitate the facilities and assist neighbours whose homes had been most affected by the disaster. Thus, they turned the challenges into opportunities through adaptability, flexibility and innovative approaches. Heritage preservation and safeguarding in this context was not always the priority of the community, and so the project needed to adapt to assist the community on its road to recovery and preparedness for the future. Adhering to the Blue Shield standards and promoting international standards in risk assessment and management, the programme addressed how to coordinate the preparation work needed to meet and respond to emergency situations and how to recover and store cultural objects until they could be rehomed. Focusing on practical tasks, the training gave participants an opportunity to reflect on past experiences and think of ways to secure their own community museums, especially to preserve local sites and artisan workshops.

In the monthly Youth Exchange workshops, young people were also encouraged to analyse and reflect on *Community Resilience* by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of their heritage communities, along with any future opportunities and threats they face. Prompted by community facilitators, young people led discussions about what a community is, what a community museum is, its role within the





FIGURE 2.3 Community presentation, Isle of Skye, Scotland, July 2018. © Jamie Allan Brown

community and how communities can be empowered to find solutions to problems. Building on their previous workshop activities of interviewing community elders, the young people debated community resilience and identity, with a view to determining how this could be achieved in an ever-more globalised world.

During reflection workshops, the young people were encouraged to document their personal journey in an online blog, thereby building and enhancing their critical reflective skills. Blog tasks were set with various themes relevant to the topic at the time. The group acknowledged that blogging for an international audience, rather than for their local peers, community or school, boosted their creativity as they thought critically about what they wrote and how they presented themselves online through their communication and language skills.

The young people's online blogs can be found here:

- Costa Rica: *Blog de la Juventud de Costa Rica* (<https://eulacmuseumsyouthcostarica.wordpress.com/>)
- Portugal: *Blogue de 6 jovens de Portugal participantes* (<https://eulacmuseumspt.tumblr.com/>)
- Scotland: *Òigridh Air Iomlaid na Alba* (<https://eulacmuseumsyouthscotland.wordpress.com/>)

### Accreditation and international recognition

The young people taking part from Scotland were accredited through the Scottish Government's Saltire Award volunteering certification programme in accordance with the framework of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, which is intended to encourage young people to gain knowledge, skills and attributes needed for learning, life and work in the 21st century (Scottish Government, 2008). This award highlights their commitment to the project and their rural community and is signed by the First Minister of Scotland. It can be used in university or further education applications and fully adheres to the national high school curriculum. All six young people have listed their Saltire Award in university or further educational CVs.

Large EU-LAC Museums project meetings were taken as opportunities to develop and share the experiences of the Youth Exchange, and further develop the young people's skills of public speaking with confidence. The Saltire Awards were presented to the group at the project's Second General Assembly and International Committee for Museology of the International Council of Museums conference on 'Defining the Museum of the 21st Century', held in St Andrews, Scotland, in November 2017.

The EU-LAC Museums *Itinerant Identities: Museum Communities/Community Museums* conference in 2018, coordinated by the project's Caribbean partner, the



FIGURE 2.4 Presenting at the *Itinerant Identities* conference, the University of the West Indies, Barbados, November 2018. © Karen Brown

University of the West Indies and by the Museums Association of the Caribbean, explored critical issues researched within the project and beyond. These included gender and migration, sustainable development, the role of youth and the role of new technologies. Youth Programme Worker Jamie Allan Brown presented the Bi-Regional Youth Exchange alongside five of the Scottish young people. The presentation stimulated interactive discussions from the international audience and highlighted the plight of young people's daily lives within rural and island communities, touching on the cultural and colonial legacies between Scotland and Barbados as well as Spain and Costa Rica. The conference also offered an opportunity to run additional disaster resilience workshops, with Samuel Franco leading a session in the Barbados Museum and Historical Society for the museum's 'Young Curators', the Youth Exchange participants and museum professionals.<sup>4</sup>

It is hoped that the Youth Exchange will serve as a model to be applied in other contexts and communities, such as at the parish of St Andrew in Barbados. To this end, during the General Assembly, Kaye Hall from the Barbados Museum and Historical Society arranged for Jamie Allan Brown and Karen Brown to visit a new area of the island targeted for local development, with Jamie Brown also visiting the local high school to initiate early discussions.

Finally, during the 25th ICOM General Conference, held in 2019 at Kyoto, Japan, and entitled 'Museums as Cultural Hubs: The Future of Tradition', Jamie Allan Brown presented the Bi-Regional Youth Exchange to the ICOM Committee For Education and Cultural Action. He and Karen Brown also presented at the ICOM International Committee for Regional Museums before museum professionals, experts, educators and community leaders (see ICOM, 2019a).

During the general conference, ICOM members voted to adopt the EU-LAC Museums' proposed resolution on 'Museums, Communities and Sustainability' with its specific focus on building the capacity of ecomuseums and community museums, in order to remain sensitive to local and regional differences, and to demonstrate awareness of the geopolitical dimension of the concept of the museum, especially relating to the resource needs of community-based museums in low- to middle-income countries such as those involved in the project (see ICOM, 2019b). Future youth exchanges would be one concrete way in which this resolution could be taken forwards.

## Final reflection

The Bi-Regional Youth Exchange was developed in collaboration with communities around thought-provoking ideas on the challenges facing young people living in rural communities across Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. It was based on the broad EU-CELAC Action Plan themes expected by the funders, including social inclusion, sustainability, gender and addictions (European Council, 2015), but was adapted to each context, such that in Costa Rica, the 'Our Vision of Change' programme was implemented in full as the Red de Museos Comunitarios de America works to strengthen the community for the future. Activities sought

to foster empathy between the young people and to nurture debate and critical thinking, creating a mindset in which our young people believe that they have the power to make a difference. In this way, it is in tune with our global project aim for long-term, sustained societal change based on lasting institutional partnerships, professional relationships and friendships beyond this project.

The programme was developed by the project but, most importantly, was led by the communities involved, who took part in all the decision-making processes. By creating a space for the community as a whole as well as the young people to share their thoughts, debate solutions and physically visit each community, EU-LAC Museums has fostered mutual understanding, and cultivated shared experiences and knowledge among the regions through intergenerational discussions, traditional demonstrations and the empowerment of the young people for each community's sustainability in an ever-more globalised world.

Here is what the young people themselves had to say.

Jonathan Smith (2018), Scotland:

Though many miles lie between them and us we all are brought together through our shared passion for music, dance, art and community spirit. The exchange changed me as a person in so many ways. It made me proud of my island background[. ] improved my confidence and gave me skills which will stay with me forever. I want to stay in Skye, really make a difference to the island, challenge tourism and retain our way of life for both locals and visitors, like the way the Boruca community does.

Yunieth Quirós (2018), Costa Rica:

It's not every day you get to stay with people on the other side of the world, who show you that they're proud of their community, that they work as a team, and it moves you, because you start to understand that you can do the same in your own community. You can become more interested in your own culture, your own heritage and in your own language.

Rita Leite (2018), Portugal:

I am very grateful for the friendships that resulted through the exchange. Of the things I learned, I feel that the most important is to value and respect the different ways of life in all our communities. Our history, our heritage is different, but we are all the same, facing the same problems.

And here are some responses from the professional museum world.

Teresa Morales, Co-Director of La Red de Museos Comunitarios de América:

The testimonies of the young people who participated in this programme are evidence that it is possible to share concepts, methods and experiences in Europe

and Latin America, in ways that enrich the practices of community museums and ecomuseums in both regions.

*(cited in EU-LAC Museums, 2019a)*

Adriana Morales (2019), Community Museum Association leader:

For the Boruca people, it was very valuable for the school, the community, very important because we have seen the change in them [young people]. We have seen that they are more focused in culture, histories, and our memory. It has been very important [...] for us, it has been an achievement as a museum, as a community and also personally [...] [We are] very grateful that we had the opportunity to strengthen our relationship and know that we can work together and knock on doors so it doesn't end here and this legacy grows and more young people get involved and carry on this path.

In conclusion, young people in Europe and Latin America—as in the rest of the globe—face many challenges today. The teenage years are an especially challenging period of transition in which young people seek to understand their family, their heritage and their place within their ever-changing community and the wider world. The EU-LAC Museums Bi-Regional Youth Exchange offered an alternative way to empower young people through shared heritage.

Museums need to be seen as forward-looking and innovative, rather than as institutions that look only to the past. In re-thinking the role of regional museums, we would suggest that encouraging the sustainable use of cultural and natural heritage must include—if not begin with—youth and intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Such an investment will promote positive cultural attitudes towards the environment and re-interpret social and/or ecological issues with fresh eyes and sustain communities with new ideas.

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## Notes

- 1 For the purposes of this essay, we are working with the ICOM (2007) Museum Definition.
- 2 The goal of Horizon 2020 is to ensure that Europe produces world-class research, removing barriers to innovation, thus making it easier for both the public and private sector to collaborate delivering innovation (see European Commission, n.d.).
- 3 The dedicated youth leader from Costa Rica is Ronald Martínez Villareal from MNCR, and, from Portugal, Paula Menino Homem from Porto.
- 4 The Scottish youth group further presented at the “International Conference on Community Heritage” funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 2019, organised by the University of St Andrews, which provided a platform for grassroots initiatives

and organisations to better understand the community heritage landscape of Scotland (Brown and Caesar, 2020).

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