

Museums & Sustainability



**Ecomuseums:
Caring for
Communities**

**Art Across
Generations**

**Interview with
Acclaimed Author
Candace Savage**

and much more!



**Museums Association
of Saskatchewan**

Message from MAS

The Museums Association of Saskatchewan (MAS) is a non-profit, collective organization with more than 400 members, including 200 member museums and galleries. MAS is governed by an elected Board of Directors that develops policy and provides direction for programs and services to benefit all Saskatchewan museums.

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Museums ought to be one of the best places to figure out what a community and its people are all about. But sometimes it's hard to see the connections between a contemporary community and the way it's represented in a museum. The present becomes the past, and history keeps changing and growing, but we don't always change and grow with it. The history, art, and ecology that museums show and interpret don't always speak to our current concerns and don't always include the diverse people and perspectives that we encounter every day.

When museums lose touch with their living, changing communities, they stagnate. Visitors have little interest in an unchanging picture of the past that has only a faint connection to the world they live in right now. Gradually, our museums fall into irrelevance.

Successful museums, on the other hand, continue to grow and change with their communities. This doesn't mean we forget the past; it means we make ongoing efforts to show how that history is relevant to our contemporary concerns. It means that we provide a forum for the many voices – old and new – that our communities include. And, increasingly, it means that we focus less on telling one definitive story about the past and more on facilitating conversations about who we are, what we've done, and where we're going together.

The articles and case studies in this publication show that museums can play an important role in creating strong, vibrant communities. Glenn Sutter's essay explains how an ecomuseum approach can empower communities to be more effective stewards of their natural and cultural heritage. Our interview with Candace Savage demonstrates that history is embedded in the present. And the case studies demonstrate the many ways that Saskatchewan's museums are bringing together people of different ages, cultures, interests, and identities, helping foster a broader, more inclusive sense of community in an increasingly diverse province.

We're proud of the work that museums have done and of the contributions they make, both to their local communities and to the larger community we form together. Even more, we're inspired by their example as they empower communities to find and safeguard what they value, what makes them who they are. As you read their stories, we hope you're inspired, too.



Wendy Fitch, MAS Executive Director



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Museums for Evolving Communities

By Dean Kush, SaskCulture

All museums aspire to be places where visitors can gain insight into what makes a community special or unique. Museums tell stories of who we are and where we came from, and, hopefully, they give us a glimpse as to where we are going. But how do we know we are truly serving our community? I am certainly not an expert in community engagement or, for that matter, museums. What I can say with utmost confidence is that when people walk into a museum, they need to see a glimpse of themselves.

Last year, our family helped move my parents out of their home in Hyas to a retirement complex in Yorkton. You can probably imagine the kind of work that went into sorting through 50 years of items that had been gathered, stored, and stacked by all six members of our family. We worked for days, and I can tell you, we would have been done a lot earlier if we hadn't had one problem. Every half-hour or so, as we sorted through what would go to storage and what would move to my parents' new home, we would stumble upon a picture or some type of coin or knick-knack that started a conversation. Statements like "What the heck is this?" or "I remember this came from Baba's house" or "You don't see these much anymore" came up, and of course more conversation ensued.

I was truly fascinated by the discoveries I made over those few days. I saw a painting that my mother did some 40 years ago. I hadn't known she ever picked up a paintbrush. I found an old licence plate frame from a Chevrolet dealership in my hometown of Hyas, which never had more than 175 residents. I was stunned to learn that at one time we actually had a Chevy dealership.

My experience sorting through my parents' belongings was fascinating because it had everything to do with me. These items told stories about my family and my town, and each conversation sparked by the discovery of a new treasure told a story about me, my home, and where I am from. If you had been there, I am sure you would not have been nearly as interested.

My point is, when people walk into your museum, do they see a glimpse of themselves? Do they feel "at home"? Would


a person of Chinese ancestry see a history of Chinese immigrants and their contribution to the Canadian Pacific Railway? Could someone from a nearby First Nations band come into your museum and see how their family, culture, and traditions are a part of your community? Could they refer to objects and stories that help them learn more about themselves, just like I did when I combed through the contents of my parents' home?

Most museums were established by settlers or their descendants and reflect the rich history of those who came to this province to farm, establish businesses, and build the

When people walk into your museum, do they see a glimpse of themselves?

communities we all call home. And it's important to tell that story. However, Saskatchewan's demographics are changing. Our perspectives on the past have evolved, and should continue to evolve.

For newcomers to Canada, visiting a museum can be an excellent way to understand more about their new home and surroundings. But does your museum reflect the current demographic makeup of your community? Even if the recent wave of immigration is just that – recent – that doesn't mean your museum cannot tell the stories of your newly arrived neighbours.

The sustainability of your museum is directly related to its relevance to the diverse community that surrounds it. By taking steps to tell the story of your community in a way that reflects the lives of all those in it, you will draw in and retain visitors, volunteers, and supporters for your museum. Your museum will be inclusive, active, and relevant. By making your museum feel like home to everyone in the community, it will thrive. And your community will be the better for it. 



Putting the Culture Back in Agriculture

The concept of a “terroir” holds the promise of revitalizing Saskatchewan’s rural communities, but it’s still barely known. A program led by Saskatchewan’s Fransaskois community is working to change that.

Marc Loiselle is no stranger to sustainable agriculture.

His family has been farming near the small community of Vonda for five generations. As an organic farmer, a proponent of food sovereignty, and an active member of Saskatchewan’s Fransaskois community, he’s a passionate advocate for initiatives that strengthen local culture and promote local food.

A decade ago, Loiselle travelled to Italy for the Terra Madre conference, an international gathering of food activists affiliated with the Slow Food movement, to showcase the red fife heritage wheat he grows on his farm. Loiselle set up

a booth at the conference to share samples of bread that had been made using his prized grain.

It was there that Loiselle truly understood the importance of *terroir*. A loanword from French, *terroir* refers to a geographical region recognized for its distinctive products or services thanks to its unique environmental and cultural conditions.

“People kept coming by, telling us it was the best bread they’d ever eaten,” says Loiselle. “I suddenly realized that the combination of our efforts, our knowledge, and our past experiences, spanning multiple generations, can be

expressed and defined by the term *terroir*. For me it was kind of a watershed moment.”

Since then, Loiselle has been an active participant in the *terroir* program, an initiative of the Institut Francais and the Assemblée Communautaire Fransaskoise that, since 2005, have worked to revitalize French-speaking Saskatchewan communities.



Photos courtesy of the Institut Francais.

The program has so far produced two booklets, each showcasing a specific *terroir* region of Saskatchewan. One covers the greater Batoche area, and the other discusses the Trinité region, both located northeast of Saskatoon.

The first booklet of *Saveurs et savoirs* (meaning “flavours and knowledge”) introduces the program as follows: “The *terroir* program aims to revitalize rural communities by recognizing and reclaiming ancestral knowledge and skills. At the same time, it seeks to increase appreciation of the farmer’s role by ensuring the region’s sustainable development and protecting the cultural integrity of the communities who live on the land.”

One of the projects that has emerged from the program is an intergenerational garden in the village of Saint Isidore de Bellevue. Seniors from the Jésus-Marie home collaborated with school children to plant and care for a community garden.

Another project involved developing an educational program for the provincial school system that focused on teaching students about agri-food entrepreneurship, with an eye to building sustainable communities for future generations.

When asked about the unifying vision of the project, Frédéric Dupré, director of community engagement at the Institut Francais and the *terroir* program’s coordinator, lists off the key components in quick succession: “building community with a balance between nature and culture in a really sustainable way. It’s about food sovereignty – preserving, sustaining, ensuring that our future generations can survive on the land.”

“IT’S ABOUT ENSURING THAT OUR FUTURE GENERATIONS CAN SURVIVE ON THE LAND.”

Since 2005, Dupré has been the initiative’s driving force, coordinating the *Saveurs et savoirs* publications and meeting with farmers and members of rural Fransaskois and Métis communities to promote the idea.

The results so far have been promising, but both Dupré and Loiselle emphasize that there’s still much work to be done.

“It’s a program of 15 to 20 years,” said Dupré. “It could go faster, but here, it’s challenging.”

“It’s catching on,” Loiselle adds. “But it’s got a long ways to go. We’re hampered in some ways in Saskatchewan with efforts to do something like this, and that has to do with our geography: we’re a huge province, a huge agricultural growing area.”

Nevertheless, Loiselle sees great promise in cultivating and promoting Saskatchewan’s distinct *terroirs*. As he told a recent gathering of Slow Food Saskatoon: “*Terroir* can and should be a forum to put back more culture in agriculture; to honour the wisdom, faith, and experiences of our ancestors, our traditions; and to permit us to enjoy a full and abundant life.” 🌿



Seeking Peace of Mind

Wanuskewin Heritage Park

For over 6,000 years, the sheltered valley where Opimihaw Creek meets the banks of the South Saskatchewan River served a gathering place and occasional wintering ground for six Indigenous nations of the Northern Plains. Amid an expanse of flatland, the valley's steep cliffs provided not only shelter and freshwater springs, but also a destination for drive lines used to herd and trap bison.

"Historically, bison were the main source of sustenance for First Nations people in the Northern Plains," says Dana Soonias, CEO of Wanuskewin Heritage Park, an interpretive centre established at the site in 1992. "Bison provided everything for them. So where the animals went, the people would follow."

The word *Wanuskewin*, loosely translated as "seeking peace of mind" or "living in harmony," was selected by Cree Elders to describe the history of the area.

"It really is a special location," says Soonias. Wanuskewin is the longest-running active archeological site in Canada, and was designated a national historic site in 1987. Five years later, Wanuskewin Heritage Park opened to the public as a

Soonias hopes that spending time at Wanuskewin gives Indigenous children "a little more pride in who they are."

joint project between First Nations, Métis, and non-Native people with a mandate to promote the "understanding and appreciation of the evolving cultures of the Northern Plains indigenous peoples" and serve as a "living reminder of the peoples' sacred relationship with the land."



The stately interpretive centre atop the banks of Opimihaw Creek houses two contemporary art galleries, a theatre, gift shop, and restaurant featuring buffalo burgers and bannock alongside contemporary cuisine. Toward the northeast corner of the centre is an activity room where staff lead programming for children of all ages that uses music, dance, storytelling, and hands-on activities to connect youth with Indigenous cultures on the Northern Plains. Past the activity room are doors leading through an amphitheater and down into the aspen groves of the valley below where visitors are guided through a trail system spanning 360 acres. Each path tells a different story, and leads hikers to destinations


that include a Medicine Wheel site, tipi village, and active archeological digs.

Soonias believes that Wanuskewin plays an important role in cultural revitalization. “A lot of the youth today have lost their language because their parents never taught it to them – myself being one of them. My parents spoke Cree, but they went to residential schools and they didn’t hand it down to their children. Even in our communities on reserves, children don’t always have their culture and their customs available to them,” Soonias says. He hopes that spending time at Wanuskewin gives Indigenous children “a little more pride in who they are.”



“WE WANT PEOPLE TO SEE FIRST NATIONS CULTURE AS IT’S EVOLVED, AND WHY IT HASN’T GONE AWAY. IT WENT UNDERGROUND FOR MANY YEARS, BUT IT HAS RESURRECTED ITSELF.”

For Wanuskewin’s first 15 years, exhibits focused on the pre-contact period prior to European colonization. Since 2007, however, the park has expanded its mandate to include contact up until the present.

“We want people to see First Nations culture as it’s evolved, and why it hasn’t gone away,” says Soonias. “It went underground for many years, but it has resurrected itself. It’s still a vibrant community, and that’s what we want to make sure the public understands. We’re still here, we’ll continue to be here, and the culture will remain alive and well.” 



Unlimited Possibilities

Building Community Through Art at the Signal Hill Arts Centre

On a cold, snowy morning in Weyburn, artist Casey Kievits stands in a spacious pottery studio on the fourth floor of the Signal Hill Arts Centre and coats a ceramic serving dish with wax. Climb the stairs to the fifth floor, and writer Anne Lazaruko is working on her second novel.

Built in 1912, the Signal Hill Arts Centre is a five-storey heritage building owned and operated by the City of Weyburn. When the City purchased the building in 1985, the Weyburn Arts Council was instrumental in convincing the city council to repurpose the facility as a cultural arts centre. The centre has since become a hub for artists and has been described as Weyburn's "cultural heartbeat."

The historic building boasts 17,000 usable square feet and is home to a variety of arts and cultural groups including the Weyburn and District Multicultural Council, the Weyburn Pottery Club, the Weyburn Arts Council, the Soo Line Camera Club, the Hill Top Painters, and the Weyburn Artists Workshop.

"Instead of working alone in your house, you come up here and you work on whatever you have," says arts director Alice Neufeld. "If it's knitting, you bring it; if it's scratch art, you bring it."

Sitting in Neufeld's office, a steam-heat radiator clangs as an old boiler heats the building. Due to its civic heritage status, the brick exterior of the arts centre has been preserved, but the interior has undergone significant changes. Over the years, the building has served as a general hospital, a training school for nurses, a nursing home run by Mount Saint Mary's, and a school for people with intellectual disabilities.

"Many people have died in this building, and many were born in this building," says Neufeld. "People have had their tonsils out here."

Remnants of the building's rich history can be seen while walking the halls of the arts centre. The sturdy concrete

The centre has become a hub for artists and has been described as Weyburn's 'cultural heartbeat.'

floors show traces of walls that were knocked out to create open space for group art and cultural activities.

The centre houses a dance studio, photography darkroom, kitchen, gallery, office spaces, meeting rooms, and an art resource library. A large mural painted by a father-daughter duo greets visitors at the entrance of the building, and original artwork hangs on many of the building's walls. A variety of courses are offered at the centre year-round, ranging from cake decorating to stained glass, landscape painting, and karate. Children's programming includes everything from playing with clay to drawing, drama, and potato-head carving.


"Art makes a community come alive," says Neufeld.

Neufeld believes that the Signal Hill Arts Centre contributes to the sustainability of the broader community.

"A community without art is a dead community," she says. "Art allows the children's imaginations to grow. It allows people to be able to express themselves. It's something that, as far as I'm concerned, can never die."

In addition to volunteers, the membership, and support from the City, one of the keys to keeping the centre alive, says Neufeld, has been successful partnerships with local organizations. In order to make art more accessible to the community, the centre has offered programming outside of the facility – in seniors' homes, for example. It has also partnered with the Canadian Mental Health Association to provide programming to those living with mental illness. Last summer, participants made picture frames, ceramic pots, and landscape paintings. The Centre also has a strong summer children's program. Each week, it offers a different activity for kids to participate in, ranging from painting murals to playing with clay.



"Not all children are sports-minded, and when they're able to get excited about what they've created, it allows for a happier and healthier community," says Neufeld. "Anybody can do art. It may not look the same for everybody, but it's exciting to know that there are unlimited possibilities." 

The Saskatchewan African Canadian Heritage Museum

Gathering Stories, Honouring Contributions

At the northern tip of Regina's Wascana Park, a stainless steel sculpture rises above the trees. Atop the spire are 10 five-pointed stars that lean toward the sun like leaves, reflecting shards of light.

The public art piece, known as the Honouring Tree, commemorates the first wave of settlers of African descent to come to Saskatchewan: a group of 75 people from Creek County, Oklahoma, who established a colony north of Maidstone in 1910.

"A lot of people don't know that settlers of African ancestry were here beginning in the early 1900s," says Carol LaFayette-Boyd of the Saskatchewan African Canadian Heritage Museum (SACHM), which led the charge to erect the monument.

LaFayette-Boyd's grandparents, Lewis and Lillie LaFayette, immigrated from Iowa in 1906, drawn by "the promise of land and of greater freedom for their children." They established a homestead near Fiske, breaking land with a team of horses before acquiring an International combine in 1929. Together with brothers Jesse and Golden, Lewis LaFayette brought the first all-black threshing crew to Saskatchewan from the United States, which travelled throughout the Maidstone district helping farmers bring in their crops.

It's stories like the LaFayettes' that SACHM showcases in its virtual museum, an online collection that honours the histories and contributions of people of African ancestry in Saskatchewan. Among those whose photos and stories are profiled in the galleries are farmer and CCF activist Willa Dallard; all-star running back for the Saskatchewan Roughriders George Reed; and engineer, gospel singer, and youth worker Pamela Brown.

Also featured is the first documented immigrant of African descent, Alfred Shadd, who moved to Melfort in 1898. On top of running a medical practice, Shadd established a pharmacy, worked as a newspaper editor, operated a mixed farm, and served on town council. According to



The Honouring Tree.

LaFayette-Boyd, legend has it that "he was only allowed to practice medicine with First Nations people and do veterinary medicine until an influential man of European descent became ill. The only doctor around was Dr. Shadd, and he saved his life. After that he was allowed to practice medicine."

The virtual museum isn't limited to historical figures like Shadd, however. "We have the living histories of anyone of African ancestry who wants to put their story out there," says LaFayette-Boyd.

SACHM was incorporated as a non-profit in 2004 with a mandate to “celebrate, explore, research, document and preserve the history, heritage and contributions of people of African ancestry.” The volunteer-run organization works extensively with cultural groups like the Ugandan Canadian Association of Saskatchewan and Daughters of Africa to celebrate the heritage of African-Canadians and promote SACHM’s core values of equality and human dignity.



Carol LaFayette-Boyd

As part of their efforts to raise the profile of African-Canadians in Saskatchewan, SACHM also provides speakers for schools and other institutions hosting events for Black History Month in February. This year, LaFayette-Boyd spoke at the University of Regina about her own family’s history and her personal experiences as the only black student in all six of Regina’s high schools when her family moved there in 1956. Track and field provided an outlet for LaFayette-Boyd’s frustrations with the discrimination she faced at Sheldon-Williams Collegiate. In 2007, at the age of 65, she won three gold medals in sprinting and long jump at the World Masters Championships in Riccione, Italy.

On the last Saturday of every June, SACHM members and their supporters assemble at the Honouring Tree for an annual walkathon. It’s a meeting place with symbolic significance. As project co-ordinator Christine Lwanga explains, the Honouring Tree is a symbol of the “life, legacy, and diversity through which we remember and honour our past, our heritage and



Lillie and Lewis LaFayette with their children, 1920.

contributions, the good and not so good times. It gives us a sense of belonging, freedom, hope, and opportunity for the future.”

“We use it as a gathering place,” says LaFayette-Boyd. “We just walk over to the legislature and back and talk to people, whoever joins in.”

The Voice of the Land

An Interview with Candace Savage

Candace Savage has earned an international reputation for the charm and vitality of her thinking and her words. The bestselling author of more than two dozen books on an impressive breadth of subjects, she is a distinctive voice of western Canada, in conversation with the world. Her most recent book, *Geography of Blood: Unearthing Memory from a Prairie Landscape*, won the Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize for Nonfiction. MAS caught up with Candace to discuss history, memory, and what it means to listen to the land.

In the western tradition, we tend to think of history as something inscribed in texts or embodied in artifacts. In *Geography of Blood* you ask if it's possible that the land around us remembers. Tell me what you mean by that. Is the land itself a keeper of history?

In the case of the Cypress Hills, it's literal, because the Cypress Hills are an erosional remnant. So they really are an archive. Scientists use them that way to study climate over long periods of time, because there are lake bottoms in the hills with ancient layers of sediment that they can look at and read the climate from. They're also special for archaeologists because there have been successions of slumping and flooding there that leave archeological traces in layers, whereas in most of the prairies there hasn't been that process of deposition and the separation of layers and everything gets jumbled together. So in that landscape, there are some things that the land literally bears witness to.

I'm very impressed by the idea that places will speak to us if we let them. One of the things that you'll know from looking at the book is that I had this weird sense that the land was trying to tell me something. And for me, being a western person, that's embarrassing. The idea of voices coming from beyond is uncomfortable for me. Maybe that was happening, and maybe it wasn't. Who am I to say?

What has just recently become clear to me is that, at the very least, places speak to us through our senses. If you're

in a place where the hills are weird shapes and you know that that's because of glaciation, then that landscape tells you the story of glaciation. And if you're in a place where the air smells of sage, then that land speaks to you differently than in a place where the air smells of nothing. I think that if we pay attention, places give us lots of clues.

You also describe how you gradually became "unmoored" from our national creation story, which set in motion a process of rediscovery and reckoning using the land as a guide to a more authentic history. Where does one begin a process like this? What advice would you offer to those interested in learning about history with the land as their text?

My only advice is to pay attention. What that means is that you are noticing what you notice, and how you respond to it. You honour the questions, and you go and find out. It's not just the stones and the dirt and the birds that can tell you things.

In *Geography of Blood* you write that bison used to be so ubiquitous that "their hair was woven into every bird's nest." First-hand accounts from Saskatchewan describe herds of hundreds of thousands stretching as far as the eye could see across the prairie, and estimates of their total population in the Great Plains are placed anywhere from 30 to 70 million. Regardless of which figure is accurate, it seems safe to think of them as outnumbering the entire human population of present-day Canada.



You write about the way that we employ euphemisms like “after the buffalo disappeared” to tread lightly over the slaughter of all but 200 buffalo in the span of a decade, and to shrug off our duty to grieve this ineffable tragedy. What do you think an appropriate collective grieving process might look like?

That is easy for me to answer. An appropriate expression of grief would be to conscientiously, dutifully, and with great love, care for the grasslands that remain, and the species that are still surviving.

“IF WE PAY ATTENTION, PLACES GIVE US LOTS OF CLUES.”

What role do you think heritage institutions – museums, archives, parks – can play in the stewardship and interpretation of memory embodied in the landscape itself, and in guiding us through the process of grieving and reconciliation that you’ve discussed?

Well of course they already do that work, and this book would not have been possible without archives. I relied heavily on the records of the Indian Affairs department, which are maintained by the public archives of Canada and conveniently placed on microfilm at the University of Saskatchewan.

And without places like Grasslands National Park, how would we ever remember? How would we even begin to have a sense of what was destroyed without those places that let us catch a glimpse of it?

You’ve talked about how historians insist on demarcating the crude brutality of the Old West from the perceived civility of the New, and the comfort that we are afforded by assigning the “meanness of Western history to a distant and semimythical past.” How can we go about stitching these worlds together and seeing the past as something that we continue to inhabit?

I don’t know how we do that. My way of doing it was to try and tell the story in a different way so that the process of colonization was included in the settlement narrative. For heritage organizations, retelling the story in different ways is obviously very important. However, it’s also very, very difficult. I have the advantage of being unimportant. I’m not publicly funded – though I did benefit from Saskatchewan Arts Board funding – and I’m not a public institution. I think it would take a lot of courage for the Western Development Museum, for instance, to consider reframing the story that those institutions tell. 🐾

Ecomuseums

Caring for Communities

By Dr. Glenn Sutter, Royal Saskatchewan Museum



What comes to mind when you think of familiar places? For me, it's the smell of Sunday morning pancakes in my kitchen or the aroma of fresh produce at my favourite grocery store. I think of the cluttered but cozy room that passes for my home workshop or the buzz of conversation and bursts of laughter around my office. All of these places are linked to memories that are strong, meaningful, and sometimes deeply personal. At the same time, I realize that I'm not the only one with connections to them. Take the Souris River, which runs through my hometown. I know that river well, since I played in it as a kid, but I'm also aware that it's a wildlife habitat, a year-round recreation site, and a critical source of water for local farmers and communities.

The Souris is typical in that most environments support a range of uses and mean many different things to different people. And this doesn't have to be a problem. For generations, much of the native pasture in southwestern Saskatchewan has been used for ranching, hunting, and wildlife conservation, which are sustainable and complementary uses. Problems arise when the demands on a place are contradictory, like resource extraction and tourism. In these situations, competing uses can quickly become a source of tension and conflict.

Having a neutral forum where people can talk about a place and what it means can help to resolve tensions or

prevent them from developing. Ecomuseums were set up with this in mind. The first ones were developed in France in the 1970s to provide broad interpretations of local cultures. The model was soon widened to include wildlife, geography, and other aspects of a region's natural heritage. Now, with hundreds of sites around the world, ecomuseums are helping communities pursue sustainable forms of development by raising the profile of heritage issues in community decisions.

Ecomuseums are a different sort of community museum; instead of building and preserving collections, they aim to build and preserve key parts of the community. This means that, in addition to artifacts and specimens, their "collections" can include living things, places, or even traditional activities. And instead of taking these things out of circulation and putting them in a display case, an ecomuseum works to conserve them where they are and to protect or enhance the contributions they make to the life of the community.


A social scientist would say that an ecomuseum increases social cohesion by fostering common values, networks of solidarity and mutual understanding, and a sense of place. These community features tend to exist where there's a high level of trust, active participation, and a broad framework for planning and coordinating activities.

Social cohesion is vital for a community to be sustainable. When people work to build networks and relationships where everyone's values are respected, the community is more likely to cope when it goes through a period of rapid change or adversity. If a local water supply is affected by pollution or climate change, for example, residents may be caught off guard or feel unsure about how to respond, especially if the circumstances are new or unfamiliar. In either case, there are clear benefits to being part of a cohesive group.

After much discussion and planning, ecomuseums are taking root in several Saskatchewan locations. Redberry Lake has been operating as an ecomuseum for many years under its designation as a UNESCO biosphere reserve. The Prairie Wind and Silver Sage (PWSS) museum in Val Marie has shifted the focus of its exhibits and is now calling

Ecomuseums are a different sort of community museum; instead of building and preserving collections, they aim to build and preserve key parts of the community.

itself an ecomuseum. Nipawin is moving in this direction as well, with an emphasis on the Torch River Forest and the Twin Lakes Planning District. And the model is also being discussed by the North Central Community Association in Regina, which could lead to the province's first urban ecomuseum.

Ecomuseums are an effective way to bring groups together around sustainability issues, so it will be interesting to see what happens as Saskatchewan communities continue to study and work with the model. The outcomes that PWSS and other groups have in mind include a sense of community, civic pride, and opportunities for networking. These things would add to the social cohesion of their communities, making them healthier, safer, and better able to weather changes that might be ahead. 

CASE STUDY

Twin Lakes District Ecomuseum

On a crisp winter morning, a cutting wind sends snow swirling across the surface of Tobin Lake. Sunlight bounces off brightly painted shacks where ice fishers are warm inside, waiting for bells to sound a bite at the end of their lines.

Tobin Lake has earned a reputation for world-class walleye fishing and draws anglers from across the continent. Due west is the Torch River Forest, one of four old-growth "island forests" amid the farmland northwest of Nipawin. In the summer, mushroom harvesters forage its forest floor for wild chanterelles with gold-coloured gills, considered by chefs across North America to be the best in the world.



An ice fisher on Tobin Lake awaits a catch.



Left to right: James Reh McKnight, Brennan Jardine, and Darren West.

“This is the part of Saskatchewan where the prairie meets the pines,” says James Reh McKnight, a land use planner with the Town of Nipawin. “It’s the gateway into the great outdoors.”

McKnight is one of three Nipawin residents at the centre of plans to launch an ecomuseum in the Twin Lakes District east of Prince Albert.

The group first came together in January 2013 after learning of plans to clear cut the old-growth forest. Brennan Jardine, with Friends of the Torch River Forest, explains that the first response of those intent on halting the clearcut was to reach out to everyone with cultural or economic ties to the forest, be it mushroom pickers, hunters, bird watchers, campers, or long-time residents who’ve raised families in the shadows of the pines.

“What started out as ‘stop the clearcut’ became an opportunity to look at doing development differently in the whole region,” says Jardine.

According to McKnight, “a lot of people can’t really see how development will happen in the northeast without fishing the lakes dry or cutting the forests down.” He’s hoping that an ecomuseum will provide opportunities for youth to step outside the classroom and into the pines. “Perhaps it will spur a more innovative outlook on the future,” says McKnight. “There’s more here than just plywood.”

The seed was planted last summer when McKnight and Jardine, together with Nipawin’s tourism and business development specialist, Darren West, met with ecomuseum enthusiast Glen Sutter.

The budding steering committee has also joined forces with members of Saskatchewan’s Regional Centre for Expertise, which works to promote education in sustainable development. Together they’ve discussed the possibility of the ecomuseum functioning as a “living laboratory,” a site where researchers, educators, and students can explore hands-on, place-based learning.

Jardine sees potential for the ecomuseum to partner with restorative justice programs in land-based rehabilitation. “There’s something about the Torch River Forest that I’ve found, and that other people have found... it’s got a healing energy to it. There’s just something about it.”

For West, one of the primary goals of the ecomuseum is to “bring people together and create a sense of pride.” To that end, the steering committee is working hard to involve all stakeholders in the region. Residents are being invited to take ownership of the ecomuseum at the outset and contribute their own vision for what shape it might take.

“When you look at ecomuseum models, typically there are no best practices,” says West. “It’s really a matter of finding what works best for us. There’s no cookie cutter approach.”

CASE STUDY

Prairie Wind & Silver Sage



Laureen Marchand.

Dark sky preserves are areas free of artificial light where measures are in place to defend the night sky's starlight. Grasslands National Park, along the southern border of the province where Saskatchewan greets Montana, claims title to the darkest one in Canada. If there were an official designation for sanctuaries of silence, Grasslands might also boast the quietest.

But those who imagine this vast, mostly untouched prairie as empty couldn't be more mistaken. The rolling hills, rugged buttes, and deep coulees of the Frenchman River Valley are home to an abundance of plant and animal life as varied as the land itself.

Each year, this unique landscape attracts nature enthusiasts by the thousands. For many visitors to the park, their first stop is the Prairie Wind & Silver Sage museum in the old brick schoolhouse of nearby Val Marie, a town of 137 that services the surrounding ranching community.

What Prairie Wind lacks in size it makes up for in heart. At a time when independent bookstores are shuttering their doors, Prairie Wind is bucking the trend with a sizeable

"PEOPLE COME FOR THE COFFEE AND STAY TO LEARN."

collection of books for all ages by acclaimed and obscure prairie writers alike. Alongside its permanent exhibits, the museum is also home to an art gallery, gift shop, and espresso bar.

"People come for the coffee and stay to learn," says Laureen Marchand, a local artist and the chair of Prairie Wind's volunteer board of directors. "We offer an introduction to the natural and cultural history of this very special place and create a path for people to leave the building and experience



Heather Sauder.

the place itself, with the information and ideas provided here as a foundation.”

Last July, Prairie Wind launched as an ecomuseum. “We saw the opportunity to move out of the restrictions that are endemic to the traditional museum,” explains Marchand. “My feeling is, does Saskatchewan need another room of carefully labelled cream cans? Or can we offer both visitors and residents a way to situate their experience in some kind of context? That was the aspect of the ecomuseum concept that really appealed to us.”

According to Heather Sauder, a Parks Canada biologist and Prairie Sage board member, the transition to an ecomuseum is an evolutionary process. “I don’t think there’s a moment where you cross the line and say, ‘we are now officially an ecomuseum.’ But we wanted to start calling ourselves that and keep that in mind as we’re making decisions about what we want to do.”

And this small but mighty museum is doing a lot. Last season Prairie Wind hosted a range of experts on grasslands ecology who presented research on the black-footed ferret,

swift fox, burrowing owl, and black-tailed prairie dog, all of which are among the many species at risk to be found in the park. Typical attendance ranged from 40 to 60 people – or in other words, nearly half the town. “To me, that’s a really good indication that the need is there,” says Marchand.

“We saw the opportunity to move out of the restrictions that are endemic to the traditional museum.”

Programming also included two art exhibitions and a packed reception for celebrated author and conservation advocate Margaret Atwood. “It was wonderful to see people from town who might not have been here since the day the museum opened,” says Marchand of the Atwood reception. “They figured they knew what was here, or that it didn’t apply to

them directly. That's one of the things that really started to change with the kind of programming we had last year."

The shift to an ecomuseum has also meant moving beyond the walls of the museum itself and incorporating "experiential exhibits" in and for the community. Last August, Prairie Wind sponsored a concert at the Val Marie Hotel for the Wardens, a Banff-based trio of musicians and storytellers from Canada's national park warden service.

In the schoolhouse itself, the number of visitors reached a new high of 4,000 last season, which Marchand and Sauder attribute to the range of services and programming offered that draw tourists and locals alike.

Both Marchand and Sauder readily admit that when they first received funding to establish the ecomuseum, they had little idea what shape it would take. "When it all came together, it was the most extraordinary transformation into a small space that looks like a big one, and reflects back the huge space that's out there," says Marchand. "I love it when something gets dreamed up and is allowed to happen. It seems to be that that's what happens here." 🌲



CASE STUDY

Redberry Lake Biosphere Reserve

On a summer day, there's no mistaking how Redberry Lake got its name. Bunches of brilliantly coloured buffalo berries, hawthorn berries, and prairie rose berries decorate the lake's shores and invite picking. Historically, they've helped sustain both human and animal life, from the Cree traders who mixed buffalo berries with bison meat to make pemmican, to songbirds like the black-masked loggerhead shrike that returns to nests in the thorny brush of hawthorn shrubs year after year.

Redberry Lake lies approximately 80 kilometres east of North Battleford and has been designated as a protected area since 1915, when it was first established as a federal Migratory Bird Sanctuary. In 2000, it was named a World Biosphere Reserve, joining a global network of UNESCO learning sites that test and demonstrate community-based sustainable development. There are 16 such sites in Canada, with Redberry Lake being the first and only one Saskatchewan.

The core area of the biosphere is the saline lake itself, which provides vital habitat for endangered species like the whooping crane and piping plover. In the summer months, birds and other wildlife are joined by hikers, swimmers, canoers, and campers drawn to the pristine beauty of the rolling prairie and wetlands. On the western shore of the lake, the biosphere's sun-soaked Research and Education Centre provides visitors with displays on local history and information on the aspen parkland ecoregion.

But the Redberry Lake Biosphere Reserve extends well beyond the lake's shores. Its boundaries follow those of the watershed, covering a total of 112,200 hectares. This



John Kindrachuk and Susanne Abe.

includes numerous farms and ranches, as well as the town of Hafford. All told, over 5,000 people – most of Ukrainian heritage – call the biosphere home.

"You'll always have interaction between humans and nature," says executive director John Kindrachuk, who grew up on the south side of the lake and went to school at Hafford Central. "That's the whole concept of the biosphere reserve."

Unlike the federal park system, which regulates human development to conserve protected areas, biospheres see



“You’ll always have interaction between humans and nature. That’s the whole concept of the biosphere reserve.”

human communities as an integral part of the environment. In addition to preserving the integrity and biodiversity of natural systems, they aim to support the traditional livelihoods of people in the area and ensure that residents can together plan for a sustainable future. In this sense, community members are active agents in creating a stable and diverse economy that works in harmony with the land.

Education is at the heart of the Redberry Lake Biosphere Reserve’s mandate. Hafford Central is a UNESCO-

associated school that partners with the biosphere reserve for a range of programming, including an annual water monitoring project.

“It’s interesting to teach students about how their daily living influences the environment and water quality,” says Susanne Abe, Redberry Lake’s communications coordinator, who also organizes nature hikes, scavenger hunts, and summer clubs for children in the area.

Since agriculture forms the backbone of the local economy, reaching out to farmers and ranchers is also an important part of the work done by biosphere staff. In addition to hosting workshops on environmental management practices, biosphere staff work alongside farmers and livestock producers to protect the watershed by planting grass along riparian areas or fencing cattle off from creeks and streams.



Students at Hafford Central, a UNESCO associated school within the Redberry Lake Biosphere Reserve.

“At the beginning, people did it for the funding that was available. But at the end, we found that they were doing it for land management, to keep the water clean,” says Kindrachuk.


While the Redberry Lake Biosphere Reserve doesn’t officially call itself an ecomuseum, it shares the same core concepts. Most importantly, it’s bringing communities together and building their capacity as stewards of the natural and cultural heritage of the place they call home.

Last year, biosphere staff organized a series of open houses and community meetings to undertake a long-term land use plan for the biosphere. “If the town expands, where should we build additional houses or whatever else is needed?” Abe asked participants.

Also discussed was the possibility of oil and gas coming to the region. Participants were asked which areas might be suitable for resource extraction and which ones should

“IT’S INTERESTING TO TEACH STUDENTS ABOUT HOW THEIR DAILY LIVING INFLUENCES THE ENVIRONMENT AND WATER QUALITY.”

be marked for protection. “We had community input in everything that we did,” says Kindrachuk.

It’s this type of bottom-up planning and community-based conservation that makes Redberry Lake Biosphere Reserve so unique. As Kindrachuk says, “The biosphere reserve is an ideal place for people of all ages to connect and learn about nature, and how we can co-exist with it.” 



Art Across Generations

Engaging Youth at the Mendel Art Gallery

On a Sunday afternoon at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, a dozen children and their parents are practising weaving with coloured paper and popsicle sticks. The activity is part of Something on Sundays, a free drop-in program for families. Just outside the activity room, a mother and father pose for a picture with their young son. The family is playing with an interactive video installation in the gallery.

“This is what art can do,” says public programs coordinator Laura Kinzel.

Each year, more than 20,000 children and youth learn about art through the Mendel. Whether young people are learning alongside their parents, a guardian, or a teacher,

the Mendel’s programming engages “multi generations in an intergenerational way,” says Kinzel.

Kinzel says that when adults see children making art and asking questions about exhibitions, they begin to give themselves permission to engage with art, too.

According to Kinzel, studies show that if an adult had a negative experience with art while growing up, he or she will be less likely to attend an art gallery or enjoy art-related activities later in life.

“That’s why engaging with children is so important,” says Kinzel, “because you have the opportunity to plant those seeds or formulate those experiences in a really positive way.”



Photos courtesy of the Mendel Art Gallery.

The Mendel offers a wide range of programming for children and youth, including interactive guided tours for schools and youth groups and summer art camps where kids between the ages of five and 12 learn contemporary studio art practices. For 42 years, the Mendel has hosted annual exhibitions of artwork by students in kindergarten through Grade 12. In 2013, 75 schools sent in work, and each year approximately 200 pieces are exhibited.

One of the more unique programs is the SaskTel Mendel Art Caravan – a travelling tent that brings art supplies and customized activities to local events and facilities, including festivals, community gatherings, and service organizations. Through a partnership with the Royal University Hospital, the caravan has also visited the pediatric care unit. When brought to the bedside of sick children, who are sometimes quarantined, the caravan has brought moments of joy and humour to both the children and hospital staff, says Kinzel.

For teens between the ages of 14 and 18, the Mendel offers a Youth Council, which provides professional development to young people who aren't necessarily artists but are interested in the arts. Youth Council members meet with guest artists and curators, visit artist studios, and learn how artists conduct their professional lives. They also create and implement programming for other youth. With 10 active members, the council has organized youth performance




“ENGAGING WITH CHILDREN IS SO IMPORTANT... YOU HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO PLANT SEEDS AND FORMULATE EXPERIENCES IN A REALLY POSITIVE WAY.”

nights, engaged in guerrilla art in the community, and hosted youth art exhibitions at the Mendel.

“We’re trying to give kids tools that they can apply in the future,” says Kinzel.

One of those tools is how to think critically about art. Facilitators at the Mendel encourage parents to have discussions with their children about exhibitions by supplying parents with a list of questions to ask their kids, ranging from “How does this make you feel?” to “Imagine what happened before this ‘scene’ and what might happen next.”

Kinzel believes that art can be transformative. Once, when she was leading a group of Brownies at the Mendel, a little girl raised her hand and answered a question. Kinzel recalls that the room went silent. Later, two parents pulled her aside and told her that no one had heard the little girl speak before, despite the fact that she had been involved in Brownies for a long time.

“She came to the gallery, and there was her voice,” says Kinzel. “It’s those moments, when you work with kids – those one-on-one experiences – that remind us about the power of art and how it is inclusive. There is something for everyone in the experience of art.” 



ABOUT US

Museums Association of Saskatchewan



MAS Staff: Dan Holbrow, Brittany Knudsen, May-Lin Polk, Ele Radbourne, Brenda Herman and Wendy Fitch

The Museums Association of Saskatchewan is a non-profit member organization for Saskatchewan's public museums and museum professionals. Our purpose is to serve our members in Saskatchewan and work for their advancement.

Membership in MAS is open to everyone. MAS provides learning opportunities for museums, personnel and their governing bodies. MAS is responsible for establishing the first Standards for Museums that now guides museum development throughout Saskatchewan.

The Association raises public awareness of museums and fosters communication among members of the museum sector. MAS represents the interests and concerns of the museum sector to all levels of government and with other relevant agencies.

Heritage is our social and natural inheritance: the objects, ideas, places, and traditions of intrinsic value which have shaped our present and will guide our future. We believe our collective inheritance is an asset that must be preserved, understood, and built upon by each generation. Museums, in service to society, provide stewardship for the material evidence of our human and natural inheritance and contribute to the understanding of the world and our place in it - our past, our present, and our future.

Museums and Sustainability is an annual look at sustainability issues in and for Saskatchewan's museums.

Sustainable Communities, the fourth publication in the series, looks at what museums can do toward social sustainability—not just ensuring that they remain relevant to constantly evolving communities, but contributing to the cohesion and vitality of surrounding communities more broadly.

Inside, you'll find thought-provoking essays and interviews, as well as stories and photos showcasing sustainability work in Saskatchewan museums.

The Sustainability Committee of the Museums Association of Saskatchewan produces this publication as part of its sustainability initiative. The Museums Association of Saskatchewan is a non-profit member group for Saskatchewan's museums and museum workers.



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