

Museums & Sustainability

**North Central:
Saskatchewan's First
Urban Ecomuseum**

**Seeds, Storytelling,
and Sustainability**

**Hunger and the
Uses of History**

and much more!



**Museums Association
of Saskatchewan**

Message from MAS

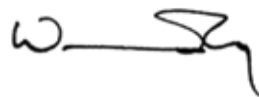
Museums and Sustainability has explored the idea of sustainability in some depth. We know it means thinking long-term, and being mindful about the future effects of what we're doing now. We know it means building relevant, resilient institutions and communities. We've looked at it from environmental, economic, and social perspectives.

This time, we're looking at cultural sustainability. "Culture" is a pretty broad idea, and it means a lot of different things to different people. One person might use it narrowly to mean refined tastes in things like wine and artwork. An anthropologist might consider everything people think and do to be culture.

But when I think about a culture of sustainability, I'm thinking of values, practices, and ideas. A culture of sustainability means thinking long-term about our impact. It means being responsive, respectful, resilient, and ready to change. It means finding and learning about parts of our community we may have ignored or neglected, and respectfully engaging and inviting their participation. It means being willing to listen, and to make the changes required to show that we're an active and vital part of a healthier, more inclusive society. It means inviting our communities to change us.

This can be hard for museums. Often, our goal with our artifacts, art works, and buildings is to maintain them in their present state for as long as possible – to safeguard the things that embody our heritage. This is an important function of museums, and something we do pretty well. But there's a danger that we'll also work to preserve the same patterns of behaviour, the same ideologies, the same vision that founded us, whether or not it reflects what's going on right now in the constantly evolving communities where we live. If we do this, we'll become artifacts ourselves: disused, forgotten, obsolete, irrelevant. Our communities will move on without us. Without their support, we won't preserve history – we'll be history.

We can't let that happen. Instead of preserving ourselves like so many artifacts, we need to change and adapt with our communities. We need to sustain ourselves and our communities like the living, growing things we are. As the accompanying stories show, heritage has tremendous potential in growing and nurturing healthier, more sustainable communities.



Wendy Fitch, MAS Executive Director



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Culture in the Winds of Change

By Douglas Worts

Culture and Sustainability Specialist, WorldViews Consulting

Humanity is experiencing a period of unprecedented change. Society is not simply in the winds of change; it's in a storm. It will likely take all sorts of innovation to find our way through it – technological, political, economic, and social. But for me, the critical shift will have to be cultural.

I think of culture as how we live our lives, which includes how well we adapt to changes that occur around us. We might ask ourselves today, do we have a culture of resilience? A hallmark of ancient cultures – from the Greeks and Egyptians to Aboriginal societies – is the Muses, those forces of inspiration and innovation that help address challenges and seize opportunities. Museums are “places of the muse” that can do just that. Although museums are generally thought of as physical spaces, an experience of the muse occurs in psychological space and is characterized by reflection, creativity, dialogue, and trust. To be in the presence of the muses requires humility, because the innovation that happens there comes from a place of mystery. We are currently experiencing forces of change on many fronts, and it will take a transformation of our cultural values, attitudes, assumptions, and systems – both individually and collectively – if we are to redirect this ship and adapt to the changing realities in our globalized world.

Museums, like so many organizations that have adopted corporate structures, are facing uncertainty. Finances are dwindling, audiences are shrinking, and communities are changing – all of which have ramifications for organizations that, presumably, exist to foster a culture of individual and collective well-being. Many museum professionals ask, “What can I do to make my museum sustainable?” I wonder if a better question might be, “What can my museum do to help make my community sustainable?”

This raises the question of whether museums can play the role of agents of change. By this I am referring to *facilitating* change within the community – not deciding on or directing that change toward a particular outcome. Some museum professionals are excited by this topic, while others are curious, dismissive, fearful, or even angry at the

prospect of fostering such a role for museums. For me, this notion involves assembling the creative forces of our living culture, including artists, scientists, historians, storytellers, psychologists, business people, government, and the larger population to take stock of the past, anticipate the future, and consider how our collective

“Many museum professionals ask, ‘What can I do to make my museum sustainable?’ I wonder if a better question might be, ‘What can my museum do to help make my community sustainable?’”

wisdom and expertise can guide us in a constantly changing world. It is a challenging role! Certainly, no museum should embark on this path unless they feel passionate about it.

Being an agent of change also requires the humility to embrace the unexpected while heading into the future. We will need transformations on many fronts to change the forces that created the unsustainable world we now inhabit, and there are choices to be made. Do organizations and individuals simply hold on to what they know, or do they embark on new paths of innovation and experimentation that are rooted in realistic understandings of the present and the best options for our collective well-being in the future? The latter requires courage, intelligence, and heart. It also requires the right feedback loops to help guide forward movement.



Historically, museums have seen themselves as having a set of core functions revolving around significant objects – specifically collecting, preserving, exhibiting, and interpreting. Internationally, museums have been expanding their focus to include intangible culture, which has opened many new opportunities for community engagement. There has always been a general sense that traditional museum activities serve individual and collective well-being, even though the reasons have been vague. Museums continue to use two main indicators of success – attendance and revenue. Neither of these are cultural indicators; rather, both reflect corporate operations. Any shift by museums towards becoming agents of cultural change will require a much clearer vision of an evolving mandate as cultural facilitators, as well as being much more focused on the influence they hope to have on individuals, communities, societies, and the natural and built environments.

It is useful to differentiate these *outcomes* from the *outputs* that are the traditional fare of museum activities, such as exhibits and programs. Being an agent of change requires

great clarity around underlying goals, the strategies used to achieve those goals, and indicators of success.

The frontiers of change in the museum world will include policy, financing, planning, community engagement, collaborative programming, skill-development, impact measurement, and more. Leaders will find this path challenging, but also gratifying. Sustainability planning models and tools will be very useful.

There are many examples of museums that are already stretching themselves to meet their communities on issues that are central to our changing world. One good example is the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History in California. There, Director Nina Simon has recently led her staff through new “theory of change” planning processes, as well as a complete analysis of their operations and public impacts. It is imperative to share and learn from these inspiring examples, including the ecomuseums featured in this issue. Humanity is at a unique crossroads, and museums are well positioned to bring essential light to the challenges and opportunities that await. ♦♦



Sowing Diversity

Jim and Rachelle Ternier are among the prairies' most ardent advocates of home gardening and seed saving. For the Terniers, who together manage an archive of over 850 varieties of seeds, preserving biodiversity is not only about securing a stable food source for future generations, it's about saving – and sharing – the cultural memory that seeds embody.

“**G**ardeners know by instinct that the only way to preserve something that's important to them is to give it away,” explains Jim Ternier as he sifts through sea holly seeds at his kitchen table, separating errant leaves. “They do it spontaneously.”

Soon after Jim founded Prairie Garden Seeds in 1986 he began receiving packets in the mail from gardeners hoping that a cherished seed of theirs – perhaps a family heirloom – might be incorporated into his archive and safeguarded from oblivion. Some years it was as many as 70 or 80 samples. In that sense, Jim describes the evolution of his seed bank as “a complete accident.”

Prairie Garden Seeds began as a market garden business in 1977 after Jim returned from a six-year stint in Europe, where he worked as a gardener after completing his degree in mathematics. “I had no money and no place to live,” he explains. “But my family had this wonderful land and this wonderful gardening space, so I gardened, because that's all I really knew how to do that was practical.”

Jim soon discovered that if he had a good crop of vegetables in a given season at his family farm on Murray Lake, then nearby gardeners likely did as well. “The stuff I produced didn't sell very well. So one year, I simply took some of the seeds I'd saved for planting a garden and put them on the table at the market. As the seed sales grew, the vegetable sales diminished, and eventually I became a full-time seeds person.”

Now in its 29th year, Prairie Garden Seeds has upwards of 850 varieties in its collection, all grown without the use of pesticides or synthetic fertilizers. While the business has always been a family endeavour, Rachelle, the youngest of the three Ternier children, has recently partnered with Jim in preparation for taking over the family business. She's no stranger to growing seeds herself, having been entrusted

“If you start collecting seeds, they will tell you about history.”

with a small garden plot at an early age, together with her brothers, and a place alongside her father at the market. “We'd each have a muffin tin labelled with different dried beans,” says Rachelle. “There were a few of us kids who were vendors alongside our parents. It was part of our upbringing.”

Because there was no high school in Cochin, the children later moved to North Battleford with their mother, Marie-Louise, while Jim kept the seed business going on the farm. After graduating and travelling for a few years, Rachelle began studying languages and linguistics at the University of Saskatchewan, an experience that encouraged her to consider the family business in new ways.



Rachelle Ternier fields questions from gardeners at Seedy Saturday in Yorkton, SK.

“I started thinking a lot more about the industrial food system and how the work that my dad was doing had become really political, even if it didn’t start for political reasons. With my degree in languages and linguistics, I saw a lot of parallels between linguistic diversity and biodiversity. A society that will thrive is a society that is diverse and has all kinds of ways for people to problem-solve and learn from one other. With a changing environment, people wonder if we can rely on these systems that are too big to fail. One thing we can do about it right now is start to take back a bit of that control and decentralize what’s been centralized.”

It’s for that reason that the Terniers encourage gardeners to jettison the idea of “normal” beans or tomatoes and experiment with the different tastes, textures, colours, shapes, and sizes of the dozens of varieties in their catalogue.

In addition to their mail-order business, the Terniers are longtime vendors at “Seedy Saturday,” a circuit of seed fairs that is taking off across the prairies. There were nine such events in Saskatchewan towns and cities this spring, featuring everything from potlucks, film screenings, and children’s activities to presentations on seed saving and permaculture.

“It used to be that many of my customers were elderly people, and that was fine,” says Jim. “But in the last five or ten years, more and more and more young people, often with children, are saying ‘I’ve never gardened, and now I have children and I want the best for them, and that means growing my own and being chemical free.’ So we’ve built a new clientele, and Rachelle is coming in at just the perfect time.”

For both Rachelle and Jim, growing seeds is about much more than producing something of utilitarian value. They see themselves not just as stewards of seeds, but of the stories they embody.

“History does in a sense define us,” explains Jim. “If you start collecting seeds, they will tell you about history if you know where the seeds come from and who they’re connected with. It’s always a disappointment when someone sends us a seed and they know absolutely nothing about it!”

Himself a storyteller extraordinaire, Jim recounts the tale of a tomato he acquired from the Seed Genebank in Saskatoon about a decade ago. “I grew it. And I put it in the catalogue. Some months later, I got an email from a young woman in BC who said, ‘The name you’ve given this tomato is my mother’s maiden name. I wonder if it’s our tomato?’” She purchased some to give to her mother for Christmas, who later wrote a long letter to the Terniers with the story of her father’s tomato.

“She said, ‘unfortunately I was a little girl then and didn’t really pay much attention, and my father was born in Japan, and he had stopped working on his tomato garden.’

Reading between the lines,” Jim muses, “I think he must have been interned during the war, and when the war ended he probably got discouraged. He was a market gardener in the Okanagan. I’ve still got her letter. We want to preserve stories, and they’re often family stories.”

Since 2005, the Terniers have been operating out of Humboldt and gardening at St. Peter’s Abbey, a nearby Benedictine monastery where there’s “as much land as you can handle and then some.” But Rachelle has plans to move

“A SOCIETY THAT WILL THRIVE IS A SOCIETY THAT IS DIVERSE AND HAS ALL KINDS OF WAYS FOR PEOPLE TO PROBLEM-SOLVE AND LEARN FROM ONE OTHER.”

the business back to the family farm near Cochin, where she grew up. Beginning this summer, she’ll be spending summers there and working alongside her Aunt Judy in the garden.

“Eventually, the plan is to be out there permanently with Prairie Garden Seeds, but winter infrastructure is a bit tricky,” says Rachelle. One of the garages on the 80-acre property has been renovated into a community hall with a new cook stove. “I’m excited to have the hall as a gathering place,” she says.

Increasingly, the Terniers are working not just at growing seeds, but educating and empowering people to grow their own food and become seed savers themselves. “The fact that so many people send us seeds means that there are an awful lot of seed savers out there, even if they don’t call themselves such,” says Jim.

Now that the Prairie Garden Seeds catalogue is online, mail is coming in from far and wide. Just recently the Terniers were contacted by someone from the Czech Republic who was impressed by their collection of grains and proposed a trade.

“Gardeners are lovely people,” says Jim. “It’s been a pleasure.”



University of Regina students on a field trip to the Calling Lakes ecomuseum. Photo: Fort Qu'Appelle Times.

A Community of Waterkeepers

The Calling Lakes Ecomuseum

It all started with a six-inch rain. In the final days of June 2014, the skies of southern Saskatchewan dropped a spring's worth of water over the span of a weekend. Highways closed, deluged towns declared states of emergency, and the Queen City's wastewater treatment plant brimmed at maximum capacity. Days later, Regina diverted one million cubic meters of raw sewage into the Qu'Appelle watershed. When test results revealed toxic levels of *E. coli* downstream, the Department of Health ordered the closure of 28 beaches.

"Here's a community that loves its water, and for seven days we were forbidden to go in it," says Auralee MacPherson, who has a cottage on Katepwa Lake. "We lost our ability to play. We had no idea how much that water was part of our being."

Water quality has long been a concern in the Qu'Appelle Valley, but MacPherson describes the events of last June as a tipping point that galvanized a community of people accustomed to keeping to themselves. Together with

Edmund Bellegarde of the File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council, which represents 11 First Nations in region, MacPherson convened a forum on water quality at the Treaty Four Governance Centre in Fort Qu'Appelle last August.

"Anything that touches the water is part of the ecomuseum."

"We thought if we had 100 people we would be happy. And 250 showed up. That told us the community was scared," says MacPherson. "They recognized they had lost something. They came out of their gopher holes and were willing to learn and to do something different." A working group was established that brought together the Calling Lakes District Planning Commission, Friends of Katepwa Park, the File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council, and KAIROS,

a faith-based organization devoted to issues of social and environmental justice.

Soon after this working group was formed, MacPherson was contacted by Glenn Sutter from the Royal Saskatchewan Museum, who first introduced the idea of an ecomuseum. Sutter connected her with a professor of biology, Dr. Mary Vetter, who was looking to collaborate on a new interdisciplinary course on ecomuseums being offered at the University of Regina.

"They were an organized and enthusiastic group who really welcomed student participation and had some concrete ideas for projects they could be involved in," says Vetter. The highest priority for the working group was conducting a survey of local residents to determine what the area meant to them, what they would like to see it look like in the future, and what they considered to be the most significant challenges and opportunities.

"Students learned about the interviewing process, about storytelling, and about listening," says Vetter. After drafting questions, they conducted interviews and produced a report for Calling Lakes on their results. The course curriculum also had students researching ecomuseum initiatives around the world with the aim of developing a blueprint for an ecomuseum at Calling Lakes. "We were very careful to say 'This isn't our prescription, but based on what we have learned, these are some things you might want to include,'" says Vetter.

On the last day of class in December, students travelled to the Treaty Four Centre to present the results of their research to the Calling Lakes working group.

"I wasn't convinced that a second-year class could do anything, but it was like a million dollar gift to the water," says MacPherson. "It was Mary's class that convinced us we needed an ecomuseum."

"Involvement with the community was critical to the aims of the course and to its success," Vetter explains. "The students really, really enjoyed the course. One of the things they mentioned many times in course evaluations was the value they got from the community telling them over and over again, 'This saved us years worth of work.' It was so empowering for the students."

True to its beginnings, water will remain a central focus of the Calling Lakes ecomuseum, which is currently working on a mission statement and preparing to unveil an official name. Like most ecomuseums, the

WHAT IS AN ECOMUSEUM?

Ecomuseums are locally driven place-based organizations that encourage sustainable community development based on in situ heritage conservation and interpretation. Sometimes called "museums without walls," they bring members of a community together to highlight features of cultural and natural significance. In addition to artifacts and specimens, their "collections" can include building, places, living things, and traditional activities. The ecomuseum works to conserve these things where they exist 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. All of these things are 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.

In 2014, as a core project of the Saskatchewan-UNESCO Regional Centre of Expertise, the Saskatchewan Ecomuseums Initiative received an award from the United Nations University as an "outstanding flagship project" on education for sustainable development.

– Glenn Sutter, Royal Saskatchewan Museum



Auralee MacPherson, member of the Calling Lakes Ecomuseum working group. Photo: Fort Qu'Appelle Times.

boundaries of this one are indeterminate, but according to MacPherson, “anything that touches the water is part of the ecomuseum.” That includes cottagers, permanent residents, and First Nations communities, as well as farmers and ranchers in the uplands that drain into the valley.

One of the ecomuseum’s first tasks will be to name riparian areas of aspen, willow, and bulrushes in the valley. “Giving something a name gives us pride,” explains MacPherson. “Those are powerful water cleaners, and we think they’re garbage. We’ve taken out riparian areas, rolled out our lawns, added fertilizer and pesticides, and then we wonder how the toxic blooms in the lake happened.”

Plans are underway for a campaign urging cottagers to return 10% of their lawns to riparian areas in order to capture and filter rainwater and runoff.

“In the ecomuseum, our treasured object is the water. But the water is sick because the land is sick, and the land is sick because the people are sick. It’s not until we come together that we have a hope of making sustainable changes,” says MacPherson. “And it’s not going to take a lot of changes to make a big impact.”

Recalling the flooding and contamination of the lakes last June, MacPherson finds a silver lining: “We realized what we had to lose. It forced us out of our silos.” ❖❖



Above: North Central resident and ecomuseum coordinator Jan Morier. Photo: Eric Bell.

Pride in Place

The North Central Ecomuseum

It’s no secret that Regina’s North Central community has an image problem. Infamously branded “Canada’s worst neighbourhood” by *Maclean’s* magazine in 2007, North Central has long been associated with high rates of crime, drug use, and gang violence. For residents of the neighbourhood, that reputation is getting old. While the community is not without its share of struggles, popular perceptions of North Central seldom take into account its rich cultural diversity, vibrant community of artists, or historical contributions to the province.

Originally established to accommodate European labourers laying tracks for the Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1880s, North Central is the birthplace of numerous distinguished

Saskatchewanians, from internationally renowned Chinese-Canadian artist Roger Ing to CFL Hall-of-Famer Bill Clarke, philanthropist Jacqui Schumiatcher, and founder of the original Girl Guide cookie Christina Riepsamen. For those who make the 183 square blocks of North Central home, it’s known above all as a neighbourhood with deep community bonds and a place where people take care of one another.

“The main attitude here is ‘How can I help?’” says longtime resident Jan Morier. “It’s been compared to the sort of atmosphere that small towns have, but it’s right here in the heart of Regina. I can get out on my bike and say hello to five people in the span of a couple blocks. It’s friendly that way.”



Above: North Central Smudge Walk, June 2014 (Photo: Jan Morier). Below: Participants in Transition to Trades (recently renamed “Meewasasin”), which provides pre-employment skills training to youth in North Central (Photo: North Central Community Association).



Morier first moved to North Central in 1980 after she was hired as a curator for the Civic Museum of Regina (then known as the Regina Plains Museum). After a time away, she returned to North Central 15 years ago, and has remained there ever since.

“The first time I wasn’t engaged at all...I just sort of lived my little life,” says Morier. “But this time around I realized I had two choices: Cocoon, lock the doors and bar the windows, or jump in, get involved, and meet some people.”

Shortly after attending a meeting of the North Central Community Association (NCCA) Morier found herself on the board of directors and a handful of committees. “I got roped right in – willingly – to the exciting potential of this neighbourhood,” she explains. Five years ago she took the helm of *Community Connection*, a bi-monthly newspaper produced by the NCCA to share stories about North Central residents and promote their work in the community.

In 2013, Morier sat in on an ecomuseum roundtable as part of a contract with Heritage Saskatchewan. “There were groups of people from all over the province bringing forth their ideas of what an ecomuseum would look like. I was supposed to be there as an observer – live tweeting, posting

“AT THE VERY CORE, ECOMUSEUMS ARE AN AGREEMENT AMONG A GROUP OF PEOPLE TO TAKE CARE OF A PLACE.”

to Facebook and all the rest of it – but as people were talking about what they do in their neighbourhood, I found myself putting up my hand and saying ‘Excuse me, we do that too.’ I was quickly brought into the circle,” says Morier.

“They were talking about ‘place-making’ – taking pride in a place – and I was wondering how I could work that into our neighbourhood psyche. The more I listened, the more I got drawn into the plans that people were dreaming up about their communities.”

Morier took the idea back to her community, and is now spearheading Saskatchewan’s first urban ecomuseum. With an inner-city environment, the North Central ecomuseum is taking on a different character than sites



North Central Elder Lilly Daniels with a member of the Rainbow Youth Dancers, a pow wow group she founded in 1978 (Photo: Carol Daniels).

like Val Marie or Redberry Lake. “We’re not a tourism destination, let’s face it,” says Morier. “But we have some wonderful amenities, many of which have to do with social enterprise, and helping agencies related to health, food security, friendship centres, and services for seniors and children. And I thought, that’s what our thrust could be – taking care of ourselves, bringing up our level of sustainability and pride, and enhancing our contribution to the city of Regina.”

Morier is also exploring ways that the ecomuseum could provide practical support and capacity-building services to artists, craftspeople, and small businesses in the neighbourhood, whether it’s low-interest loans, addictions counselling, assistance opening a bank account, or access to collective workspaces. “People could come together as a group and make star blankets or ribbon shirts or moccasins. They could create art...We could be a mecca for artists to get the support they need to become financially independent,” says Morier. “That’s my dream.”

By facilitating greater co-operation among community agencies and more holistic support services for residents, Morier sees the ecomuseum playing a key role in enhancing quality of life and community pride in North Central.

“At the very core, ecomuseums are an agreement among a group of people to take care of a place,” says Morier. “I see the hardships, and I also see that for every issue there are three groups rallying to resolve the issue and give people more tools to overcome the barriers that are keeping them down. We can make this a successful and happy and healthy neighbourhood for all of us. Everybody has that right.” ♦♦



Bringing Art to the Park

Val Marie's Prairie Wind and Silver Sage Ecomuseum

On a crisp winter morning in Val Marie brightly coloured flags lining the fence of the old brick schoolhouse swell and swivel in the wind. Each is inscribed with a poem by a resident of, or visitor to, the grasslands. “What is it about this place that pieces souls together?” one considers.

These flags are the work of Saskatoon-based singer-songwriter Rhonda Gallant-Morari, one of five artists hosted by the Prairie Wind and Silver Sage (PWSS) ecomuseum last summer as part of its first artist-in-residence program.

Headquartered in the little brick schoolhouse, the PWSS ecomuseum is now in its second year and punching well above its weight. For Laureen Marchand, a local painter and the chair of PWSS’ volunteer board of directors, cutting artists loose in the community of Val Marie was the highlight of a busy year.

“Rhonda Gallant-Morari got it off to a wonderful start. She set up write-it-yourself poetry stations at the Park campground and at Prairie Wind, and spent a lot of time at both locations talking to people and encouraging them to write down their experiences of the park in free-verse poetry. She had examples and resource material. And people could, if they wanted to, transfer their poems onto banners.”

Gallant-Morari also lead “poetry hikes” in nearby Grasslands National Park and hosted an open mic night



Heather Sauder, Grasslands National Park ecologist and leader of the Prairie Wind and Silver Sage ecomuseum committee.

at the Val Marie Hotel in addition to working on her own songwriting.

Aline Laturnus, who manages the hotel, was pleasantly surprised by how events unfolded. “I didn’t know what to expect,” she says. “Poetry in a cowboy town? Yeah, right. But I was quite impressed with the number of people from around here who actually got up and read a piece, either from memory or from a piece of paper. It’s been really good for our community. People come down here and they’re amazed at what a small town can do.”

The pilot program, which also saw a visual artist, musician, playwright, and photographer take up lodging at Don’s Place on the outskirts of town, was supported with funding from SaskCulture and the Saskatchewan Arts Board.

“It’s really a wonderful project because the artists get paid like real people while they’re here,” says Marchand. “Half of their time is spent on their own projects, and half is spent with the community.”

For local residents, this meant access to songwriting workshops, collaborative art installations, painting classes, and a photography field trip to the Park for high school students.

According to Marchand, one benefit of the program was the opportunity it provided to strengthen the ecomuseum’s relationship with Grasslands National Park, which incorporated some of the art activities into its programming and contributed Park staff to the project.

All told, over 500 people participated in the artist-in-residence programming. “I’m still amazed by that number,” says Heather Sauder, an ecologist with the Park and leader

“I didn’t know what to expect. Poetry in a cowboy town? Yeah, right.”

of PWSS’ ecomuseum committee. “People want to explore their creativity, and this is one way they can do that.” Both Sauder and Marchand hope to continue the program on an annual basis.

A large part of the work of the PWSS ecomuseum is organizing regular “Prairie Wind Presentations” for the public, which are typically focused on the natural history of the surrounding native prairie and hosted at the

“One of the things we’re interested in as an ecomuseum is giving our visitors a way to experience the rest of the community, so we do take things outside the walls of Prairie Wind.”

schoolhouse. Recently, however, they experimented with a different direction by hosting Métis elder Cecile Blanke and local songstress Kathy Grant at the Val Marie Hotel. Grant is a Parks Canada employee who researches Métis history in southwestern Saskatchewan. The event included songs performed by Grant and storytelling by both guests, and was attended by locals and visitors alike.

“One of the things we’re interested in as an ecomuseum is giving our visitors a way to experience the rest of the community, so we do take things outside the walls of Prairie Wind,” says Marchand.

Sometimes this takes the form of a concert, such as a recent event that brought together Canmore-based singer-songwriter Julia Lynx and Joseph Naytowhow, a singer, storyteller, and actor from Sturgeon Lake First Nation. “When Joseph was singing in Cree, you could’ve heard a pin drop,” says Marchand. “It was practically church-like.”

When asked what role the ecomuseum plays in the broader community, Sauder speaks to the importance of seeing all residents of the area as carriers of history and active participants in the future direction of the region. “What keeps coming up is this idea of a living heritage. There’s so much history here that’s held in people’s experiences and in their minds. I’d like to get more of those stories out.”

To that end, Sauder is in the early stages of creating a self-guided walking tour of Val Marie that would be integrated with audio and video anecdotes from people in the community.

Sauder recently attended Heritage Week in Regina, which included a day devoted to ecomuseums. “We sat down with people from other sites and shared what we’re working on, what we hope to achieve, what our ecomuseum means, and why it’s important. It’s really interesting to meet with other sites and learn what their focus is on,” says Sauder. “Every ecomuseum is so different.” 🍷



Above: A coyote hunts in Grasslands National Park. Below: Laureen Marchand, local artist and chair of the Prairie Wind and Silver Sage board of directors.



On Hunger and the Uses of History

A Conversation with James Daschuk

James Daschuk is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Health Studies at the University of Regina. His recent book, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (University of Regina Press) examines the roles that Old World diseases, climate, and Canadian politics played in the subjugation and death of thousands of Indigenous people in the realization of Sir John A. Macdonald's "National Dream." In 2014, *Clearing the Plains* received the Governor General's History Award for Scholarly Research, granted annually to the best book on Canadian history by the Canadian Historical Association.

What motivated you to write *Clearing the Plains*?

When I started to work on my thesis for my Masters in History at the University of Manitoba I was lucky enough to get a job as a research assistant at the medical school there. I worked for a physician who was interested in the history of Indigenous health, and he cut me loose in the archives. I spent a month in the archives in Ottawa and discovered a goldmine of information – enough work for my entire career. A whole team of historians, working full-time, probably wouldn't get to the bottom of it.

That's how I got onto this topic. One of the things that really spurred me on was the question of how we arrived at this absurd situation in which we have very segregated health outcomes for First Nations and for other Canadians. Our First Nations neighbours could almost be living in a different country. In fact, one of the things I used in my research was the United Nations Human Development Index, which is basically a statistical measure of quality of life. Up until last year Canada had always made the top ten, and usually the top five. But if you use that same criteria to look at First Nations indicators it drops Canada down to 72nd – the equivalent of Romania. So we have some of the best health outcomes in the world as white Canadians, but First Nations live in conditions equivalent to Romania. To me, that is not acceptable. How did we get into that situation? I went back prior to the arrival of Europeans, when things did seem to be pretty good, to find out how our health trajectories diverged.

It seems that what has gained the most traction about *Clearing the Plains* is the discussion of deliberate policies of ethnic cleansing, initiated at the highest levels of the federal government, in preparation for the arrival of European settlers in the prairies. The *Winnipeg Free Press* called your book "required reading for all Canadians," and it has been favourably reviewed by a number of other major newspapers across the country in addition to national media outlets like the CBC and the *Globe and Mail*. Do you think the attention your book has received signifies that we're turning a corner in beginning to reckon more honestly with this history?

I hope so. One thing I find really interesting is that the issues that have gained the most attention, and for which I've received the most acclaim, are not my primary discoveries. *Clearing the Plains* is unabashedly a synthesis. The person who first wrote about ethnic cleansing in Canada was John L. Tobias, who wrote an article in the *Canadian Historical Review* almost 30 years ago. That was one of the first articles I read in grad school. Anyone who has training in Western Canadian history is familiar with these stories, but there isn't a wide readership outside of professional historians and grad students.

I've been really honoured and humbled by the work U of R Press has done, because they had enough faith that my PhD thesis worth turning into a trade book. And it's really caught on.



In an interview with *Canada's History*, you describe how Saskatchewan identity is constituted around the idea of being the breadbasket of the world, and how in the course of your research you were shocked to find that the foundation of this society that prides itself on feeding others is a "bureaucratized famine" of Indigenous people. Can you talk more about the discrepancy between our popular imagination and collective identity on the prairies, and the historical facts that you discovered in the course of your research?

What I've realized is that following the ethnic cleansing of Assiniboia, of Western Saskatchewan, the land was actually empty. It was cleared. And that territory was marketed as free land for the agrarian settlers who came to set up that breadbasket. They probably had no idea what had gone on before that. But to me, that changes the narrative of the breadbasket, because that breadbasket was founded on a famine. That's antithetical to the narrative of Saskatchewan as the place that gave our ancestors a break when they needed a break, and even to our identity as a kind society.

What I've found in all of the talks I've given, often to mixed crowds, is that when I'm talking about the most egregious

"AS A CULTURAL NEXUS, MUSEUMS CAN SERVE AS A PLACE TO BUILD BRIDGES AND CREATE A DIALOGUE."

things – like government agents handing out food rations that had rotted because they had been withheld for so long – First Nations people are nodding in agreement, and white people are shocked. You can see it in their eyes. It's challenging the narrative, and forcing people to think about their identity and the identity of their families. I think that's a positive thing. It might change the way people think about contemporary issues. Maybe I'm an optimist, but maybe this is the time.

In describing how the Canadian government denied Indigenous people the economic base that had sustained their autonomy and health for centuries, and proceeded to exploit the ensuing famine by using food rations as a policy weapon to coerce people onto reserves, you write that people were reduced to eating their "horses, dogs, buffalo robes and in some cases their snow shoes and moccasins." Elsewhere you describe how people resorted to eating grass. It would be hard to conceive of a more

searing indictment of the Macdonald government’s policies toward Indigenous peoples. At the same time, you make the case in your book that this isn’t just a point of historical interest, but has deep implications for our contemporary life. Can you explain how we’re seeing the effects of these policies borne out today?

Back 20 or 25 years ago when I began this project, I was looking for the divergence in health patterns. I’d known that Indigenous health was quite good before the arrival of Europeans, and in my research I found that actually Plains bison hunters were the tallest people in the world.

There are two uses for history: one is to challenge our identities; the other is to reinforce them.

They were some of the best-fed people in the world prior to the disappearance of the bison. Within 15 years, when European physicians first started to work on reserves, they characterized entire communities as being sick with tuberculosis and basically destined to oblivion.

There has never been a time, from 1880 to 2015, when the health of the Indigenous population has even been close to the health of the settler population. We’ve never closed that gap. In the lead up to the last federal election in 2011, the Assembly of First Nations Grand Chief, Shawn Atleo, wrote an open letter in an attempt to have Indigenous issues brought to the fore. He talked about how tuberculosis rates are 31 times higher in First Nations communities. There are over 100 communities with boil water advisories. A First Nations teenager has a greater chance of being incarcerated than finishing high school. And there are reasons for all these things.

In what way do you think heritage museums have been complicit in a selective remembering of the history you describe in *Clearing the Plains*?

I think museums are genuinely trying to change. There are two uses for history: one use is to challenge our identities; the other use is to reinforce them. In the old days I think museums really did the latter – a community would get together and celebrate their heritage. But I know that in some situations now, for example in Swift Current, they have a display on the buffalo famine. So I think museums

are trying to commemorate issues that are tough to deal with, but I can understand that that’s a tough row to hoe because you want to get people into your museum and if you’re beating them over the head with a message it might be tough to get them to come back.

You conclude the introduction to your book by saying that “it is for all Canadians to recognize the collective burden imposed on its Indigenous population by the state.” What do you think that process of recognition might look like, both ideologically and materially?


The more voters know about these injustices, internalize them, and really think about them, the more likely they will be to actually push our politicians to deal with discrepancies in educational funding or in housing, for example. Eventually we may come to a tipping point. It’s for all of us to deal with.

As I tell my students, the numbered treaties here in the prairies are the fundamental legal foundation of this society. Without those treaties, settlers would not have legally been allowed to come here and establish their communities. We’re still talking, 130 years later, about addressing the issues in those treaties. They are legally binding agreements. Reserve land in Western Canada encompasses 0.0002% of the land. First Nations people opened up 99.9998% of the territory to our ancestors in exchange for some legal commitments, which we have not followed through on.

If we could acknowledge the fact that we haven’t been honest brokers – I think the treaties were negotiated honestly, but were never implemented honestly – if we could acknowledge that, I think we would be a lot closer to moving forward together.

What role do you think museums might play in bringing attention to the complex past that we inhabit, and guiding us through this process of recognition that you describe?

There’s an entire school of museology in the last decade or two that’s really tried to integrate Indigenous principles into curation. Rather than treating things simply as artifacts, we can treat ceremonial items as living entities, as they would be treated in their communities of origin.

We’ve lived very separate lives in Saskatchewan. Settler communities and First Nations communities can live kilometres apart and not have much interaction. As a cultural nexus, museums can serve as a place to build bridges and create a dialogue. As Saskatchewan artist David Garneau has said, “the past is about the present.” Our commemoration of the past, for museums especially, is about now. 



ABOUT US

Museums Association of Saskatchewan

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.

Cultures of Sustainability, the fifth publication in the series, looks at what museums can do toward nurturing cultures of sustainability—not just within the walls of museums themselves, but in the broader communities that they are part of.

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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