**Considering the Future of Our Past**

*Opinion: British Columbia’s history and cultural sector is in a fight for survival*

We hear almost every day about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. From staggering statistics to tales of heroism, news cycles are filled with stories of the impact the pandemic is having on our lives. But there are many other stories that are not profiled by media outlets, although they are no less concerning for our communities.

One of these unheard stories is the effect of the pandemic on British Columbia’s history and heritage.

When the pandemic was first announced, every single BC museum and historic site was shuttered. Thousands of paid and volunteer jobs were put on hold. Fundraising events were cancelled. Buildings were closed and exhibitions were cancelled, as were all education programs and youth activities.

We cannot think the closure of the province’s museums is of little consequence. In 2015, Canadian museums and heritage sites welcomed 75 million in-person visitors and BC’s culture sector (which includes museums and heritage organizations) contributed $7.9 billion to the GDP, which is a similar in size to the impact of the food industry or the mining, oil, and natural gas extraction sector.

Many, but not all, museums or heritage sites have been able to reopen, but almost all with reduced access and hours and many with reduced staff. By the end of 2020, Canada’s museums will be lucky if they welcome even a quarter of the regular visitors to their sites.

Surveys and statistics from across the country all point toward an undeniable truth—Canada’s cultural sector is facing a fight for survival.

A recently completed survey of BC museums and heritage sites found 60% of the organizations do not believe full economic recovery is possible before the end of 2021, and one-third believe full recovery may never be possible.

The same dismal predictions are seen around the world. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) reported one in eight museums worldwide could close permanently due to COVID-19, while an American Alliance for Museums study reveals *one in three* US museums may disappear.

The effect of the pandemic on the heritage sector was swift and sweeping and quite possibly permanent. With nearly 500 museums, galleries, and cultural heritage organizations across the province, the threat COVID-19 poses to our community’s heritage in unimaginable.

Widespread closures could put millions of our community’s artifacts and cultural items at risk. If these items are misplaced or lost due to sudden closures, it would be a massive loss to our cultural knowledge and a tragic setback for the repatriation efforts of Indigenous communities.

Across Canada, in communities small and large, museums and heritage sites bring together families, friends, residents, and visitors to appreciate and learn from our shared arts, culture, and history. This is a time to think about revisiting your local museum (which has worked diligently to put into place safe reopening protocols). If you’re looking for a fun new facemask that supports a good cause, many BC museums are selling custom masks in their gift shops. If you are able, your local museum, gallery, or heritage site would deeply value a small donation. But the single biggest thing you can do to support the recovery of BC museums is to talk to your local, provincial, and federal representatives and let them know the critical role that museums play in preserving and sharing Canada’s cultural heritage.

If we all don’t step up to support our local museums now, soon heritage organizations might become a thing of the past.