

'Ocean Rhapsody' by
Robert Bateman
Photo credit:
Courtesy of The
Bateman Foundation



RECONNECTING PEOPLE TO NATURE

How a gallery can move away from being a static, retrospective space to an interactive and innovative one

Samantha Flood

The Bateman Foundation's first project was a 4,000 square foot art gallery in downtown Victoria; however, it started with a bigger vision to create more impact in the community. The challenge to become a more engaging and innovative space, attracting over 25,000 visitors each year, is being met by incorporating organic changes and exploring non-traditional partnerships.

Established in 2012, the Foundation's mission is to connect people to nature. Due to the constant pressures of technology and social media, there are growing levels of depression, anxiety and nature deprivation, particularly amongst young people. Nowadays, some children spend six hours per day on screens and less than 30 minutes per week in nature. How could the gallery encourage people to explore nature while inviting them inside? How could rapid developments in technology be seen as an opportunity rather than an obstacle? This is where it became more important than ever to get creative.

“Most of us go through this wonderful, complex world barely even tuned in, like listening to the radio when it is not on the station. We (me included) miss most sights and sounds. We do not really pay attention... In recent years we have become even less mindful of our sense of place... How can we preserve and protect our natural heritage if we do not even notice it?”

— Robert Bateman

The Gallery harnesses new technologies as a way of inspiring a love of nature and the outdoors. Bateman’s philosophy is captured in a beautifully-crafted video, where his voice warmly welcomes visitors with poignant reflections on life, art, nature and hope. One of the permanent installations is the Birdsong Gallery where local experts have captured the sounds of various birdcalls, which are activated by waving a hand in front of a sensor. Then, a corresponding painting helps the viewer identify which bird has been brought to life by the audio filling the space around them. More recently, the gallery installed a virtual reality experience, which brings Bateman’s vivid paintings to life using state-of-the-art equipment.

In addition to gallery and school-based initiatives, the Foundation began pioneering an outdoor education program to help connect children to nature. *Nature Sketch* encourages people to connect with their local area using a pencil and sketchbook. Guided by a sketch artist and naturalist, they learn about local wildlife and ecosystems using eco-literacy principles and sketching inspiration from Bateman.



Studies have shown that exposure to both nature and art can have a profound effect on physical and mental well-being. In an effort to diversify approaches to illness and recovery, innovative partnerships between local art museums and doctors’ associations have led to physicians prescribing time in art galleries to ailing patients. The Bateman Foundation has launched similar partnerships in order to offer *Nature Sketch* to children facing complex mental and physical health issues.

Working with Anxiety Canada, *Nature Sketch* was introduced to a Vancouver school for the highest-risk adolescents within the School District who are facing severe anxiety, depression and suicidal tendencies. Many of these students face daily challenges to attend school altogether, but since the introduction

A young girl taking part in the *Nature Sketch* program
Photo credit:
Leanne Cadden



A young girl taking part in the
Nature Sketch program
Photo credit: *The Bateman
Foundation*

“The transition to the Gallery to Nature has been an exciting journey for all our staff, volunteers and board members. We look forward to developing more exciting partnerships to meet the original mission of Mr. Bateman to connect people to nature and preserve the environment.”

— Peter Ord, Executive Director

of *Nature Sketch* they are inspired to go to school specifically for the class. For the first time, a lot of these youth are participating, communicating and excited about learning. With more partnerships like this, the Bateman Foundation is exploring how to effectively measure the impacts of this work on overall health, and how it can successfully support children to connect with nature.

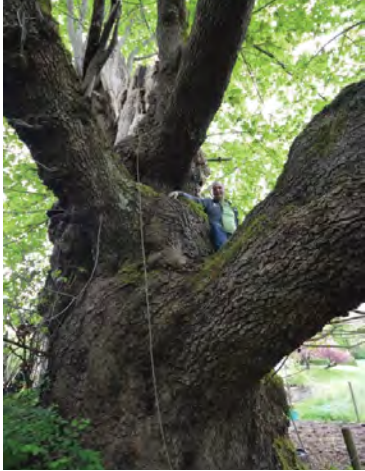
Yet, the Bateman Foundation acknowledges the role that technology has played in helping to reach more people. In partnership with TELUS, the team developed online video tutorials to enhance the program while encouraging young people to practice their skills at home before venturing outside. Partnerships with leading environmental organizations, such as World Wildlife Fund Canada, led to the program being disseminated in schools across eastern Canada. *Nature Sketch* has expanded from a local gallery program to a national program that is now being offered in six major cities and schools throughout Canada supporting more than 3,000 children annually.

With the shift in focus from being simply a gallery to an organization that provides hands-on educational programming, the board and staff made the decision to transition from the original Robert Bateman Centre to the Bateman Foundation Gallery of Nature. This shift places the focus on the Foundation as the over-arching non-profit



Left: Robert Bateman painting 'Chief', 1997
 Photo credit: The Bateman Foundation

Right: Participant in the Nature Sketch program showing off their work
 Photo credit: The Bateman Foundation



with a clear mission and allows the static Gallery to be a critical piece of its mission in action. This re-brand is seen as a gradual, organic and evolving process in order to put the focus back onto the cause at the heart of the organization: nature.

The Gallery of Nature still houses the largest collection of Robert Bateman's work, but the vision is to welcome a rotation of nature-inspired artists throughout the year with a specific focus on some of the world's most pressing issues. These include larger challenges such as climate change and habitat destruction, as well as shining a light on the smaller, manageable changes we can make as individuals, such as recycling and simply being educated on our local environment and the impact we have.

Collaborative partnerships have been an integral part of the Bateman Foundation's work to reconnect people to nature. One of the most successful examples is the *oneTree* project. Working with Live Edge Design, a furniture company that specialises in the use of reclaimed wood, the project celebrates the life and value of a single tree by inviting contributing artists to create as much beauty from its wood as possible. In line with the philosophies of both organizations, the idea is to respect the role one tree has played in the environment, and make use of it in its entirety.

This year, the oneTree is a Bigleaf Maple, over 200 years old and 31 feet in circumference. It began its life around 1815, 50 years before the land was settled by Europeans, growing in the Chemainus River Delta in the traditional territory of the Halalt, who are part of the Coast Salish. The tree's full story weaves a fascinating history; from its early days nourished by bountiful salmon, to bearing witness to the lives of the Barkley family who purchased the land on which it stood. Earlier this year, artists were invited to submit proposals, which ranged from furniture to musical instruments, intricate sculptures to poetry and performances, and now each will receive part of the oneTree to bring their creations to life.

With partnerships like oneTree, the Gallery of Nature becomes not simply a showcase of nature-inspired artwork, but a platform for artists to educate visitors through their personal and artistic experiences, and for the public to participate in a meaningful conversation. Combined with educational programming, the Gallery is an interactive space that allows people to develop awareness about the environment through art, technology and experiential learning.

From left to right: the 200-year-old Bigleaf Maple Tree that is oneTree 2019; the oneTree 2019 being taken down; oneTree 2017 wood being treated; a selection of pieces from the oneTree 2017 exhibition. *Photo credit: The Bateman Foundation and Live Edge Design.*

More information
www.batemancentre.org