

CHASING SANCTUARY

Collaborations that Reach Deep into the Community

Cassie Holcomb

The Robert Bateman Centre is truly the gallery of art and nature. With inspiration from Robert Bateman, the Centre uses art to explore issues around nature, environmentalism, and conservation through its exhibits and programs. "Art provides the opportunity to tell the story about conservation and awareness. It drives a conversation" says Ian Hinkle, one of the artists featured in the Centre's winter exhibit entitled *Boxed Sanctuary*.

Boxed Sanctuary was a collaborative of local artists work as they explored personal expressions of sanctuary. Selected artists submitted mixed-media boxes that were filled with reclaimed materials, hand-crafted objects, photographs, or drawings that explore the question, "what is sanctuary?" The exhibit highlighted the importance of sacred spaces. Whether it is an old growth forest, or a childhood home, building a sense of place is a crucial backbone when engaging with our natural world.

The project is not just a chance for the Centre to alone promote its vision to the public, it is also an opportunity to collaborate with various local community groups and environmental organizations



Above: *Bufflehead in the Urban Sanctuary.*
Photo credit: Stuart Clarke

to jointly spread the word about these valuable ecosystems and possibly advocate for UNESCO heritage designation for the sanctuary sites. These collaborators will help bring the message of the project directly into the community and also reach many people who may not be familiar with the work of the Centre and gallery.

For artist Ian Hinkle, an actual nature sanctuary, Midway Atoll in the North Pacific Ocean, inspired his art piece for *Boxed Sanctuary*. Hinkle's work featured not only beautiful pictures of the albatross that inhabit the island, but also pieces of plastic from all over the world that wash up on shore found in their

nests. The birds "literally survive in a sea of plastic" according to Hinkle.

The *Boxed Sanctuary* exhibit was a collaboration with a local Vancouver Island environmental organization called The Surfrider Foundation. "We were keen to partner with the Robert Bateman Centre to expose a whole new demographic of people to issues surround our coast in a different and refreshing way. Using art as a starting point for a dialogue about our values was a powerful way to get our message across", said Annie Gibson, Event Coordinator.

"Collaborating with local NGOs fulfills two parts of our mandate. Not only are we a place where emerging

and professional artists can display their work to the public, we can also start conversations about important issues in nature and encourage people to reconnect with it” says Peter Ord, Managing Director of the Robert Bateman Centre.

The exhibit was a key part of the collaboration, but it was also important to hold some community events away from the Centre. “We wanted to ensure we were getting the greatest reach and engaging with those people who may not have seen the exhibit,” says Ord “and inspire action in those that had.” Through Surfrider, a successful beach cleanup was organized as a complementary community event.

Boxed Sanctuary was the second part of two year-long initiatives to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Migratory Bird Convention Act, one of the first pieces of legislation that protected the non-human inhabitants of Canada. The Act took action to limit destructive human impact of precious coastal eco-systems before they had been destroyed. *The Urban Sanctuary Project* is a community initiative that aims to inspire others to become involved in the practices of a healthy ecosystem, with a special focus on 3 migratory bird sanctuaries on southern Vancouver Island. With increasing environmental concerns and decreasing bird populations worldwide, there is a need for appreciation and stewardship of our

local ecosystems and the organisms within them.

After the arrival of the first European settlers to Victoria in 1841, the coastal habitats within the harbours of Victoria underwent significant changes due to industrial and urbanization activities. A decrease in the abundance of birds began as many were being slaughtered for the use of their feathers for fashion. As a result, the Migratory Bird Convention Act of 1917 was established resulting in the protection of over 400 species of migrating birds. Soon after the creation of this act, the federal government designated migratory bird sanctuaries in Victoria and Shoal Harbour, and the Esquimalt Lagoon.

As Canada moved further into the 20th century, environmental awareness steadily increased, along with a commitment to preserving wildlife and ecological habitats. Over the past six decades there has been a regenerative naturalisation and ecological restoration of these marine ecosystems. Species that had disappeared from the area - like the Pacific herring - have returned along with species of birds, salmon, otters, seals, whales and other wildlife. All rely on a healthy marine habitat to survive.

Over a year and a half, *The Urban Sanctuary Project* will look to shine a spotlight on the migratory bird sanctuaries right in our backyard

through community displays, publications, symposiums, and informative and entertaining exhibits over the course of the year. According to Ord, “*The Urban Sanctuary Project* is an excellent reflection of the philosophy of Robert Bateman, that nature sanctuaries are not just sanctuaries for animals, but for humans as well, as they find refuge in a hectic, changing world.”

The project has a dual role of not only increasing awareness of the sanctuaries, but also increase awareness of the Centre as an important cultural institution in the community.

The Bateman Foundation (including the Robert Bateman Centre) is proud to collaborate with the following community partners on the *Urban Sanctuary Project*: Canadian Wildlife Service, Capital Regional District, Creatively United for the Planet, Eagle Wing Tours, Esquimalt Lagoon Stewardship Initiative, Friends of Shoal Harbour, Friends of Victoria, Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary, Gorge Waterway Initiative, Sierra Club BC, Songhees First Nation, Surfrider Foundation – Vancouver Island Chapter, Victoria Natural History Society, and World Fisheries Trust.



“With so many NGOs competing for funding and space in the market, it makes sense to combine ideas, knowledge, and resources to get your message across to the public. As a museum and gallery, we can use our exhibits and programming to promote or partner's message in a creative way all while fulfilling our mandate. Our combined efforts will only make our message stronger”, says Ord.

Before *Boxed Sanctuary*, The Centre featured an exhibit in partnership with the Songhees First Nation called *Resilience of the People: A Visual History of the Traditional Territory of the Lekwungen/Songhees People*. The exhibit covered a visual history of what is now Greater Victoria, the Songhees First Nation's traditional territory. Visitors discov-

ered the complexities of the lands around them, and witnessed how the Songhees' resilient relationship to the conditions of their ancestral lands has changed, including how their relationship has developed up to the present day. Based on the success of this partnership, the Songhees will continue to partner with the Centre on a mobile exhibit that will tour public events this summer.

The 3rd initiative of the *Urban Sanctuary Project*, a travelling exhibit, is being produced to further the reach of the collaboration. It will not be housed at the gallery like *Boxed Sanctuary* and *Resilience of the People*. Instead, it will act as a pop-up exhibit at different community events across Southern Vancouver Island. Staffed with volunteers and a summer student, the exhibit will

highlight the unique aspects of the 3 migratory bird sanctuaries in the area, explore some of the unique species and habitats of the sanctuaries, especially bird, highlight the valuable role played by conservation workers and volunteers in preserving these unique spaces and engage individuals and communities in protecting natural areas through the programming. Visitors will be encouraged to sketch what they see at these ecosystems.

“British Columbia has enjoyed a strong tradition of recognizing and protecting its wildlife and areas of critical habitat. These achievements have helped to preserve spaces for important species, most notably, birds, one of the most visible, iconic and engaging animals. By sketching to notice nature, you will only

Top: Guests enjoying the *Resilience of the People* exhibit at the Centre. Photo credit: Peter Ord



increase your love and understanding of the natural world”, says Ord.

The exhibit will also highlight the traditional use of the lands by the First Nations along with a component to have visitors look forward to what the next 100 years may bring for the sanctuaries.

But why produce a travelling exhibit when the Centre has space for this kind of display?

“We see about 30,000 people visit the gallery each year. But there are still some members of our community who haven’t visited the gallery. At some community events, like the Downtown Victoria Business Association’s Car Free Day, you may see that many people in a day. It is not the same experience as joining us

directly at the gallery, but maybe by giving a taste of what we have to offer, we can encourage people to engage or visit us”, says Ord.

There are also additional benefits to the direct community exposure including membership sign-ups, donations, and awareness building. But more importantly, exposure at these community events makes galleries and museums more accessible. Ord says, “I think people can be intimidated by cultural institutions. By showing them who we are in a fun environment, and their terms, support for the arts and culture can be increased. People will realize the importance of the sector and advocate for its support.

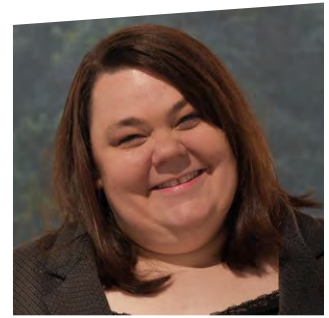
“Museums and galleries are so much more than the artifacts and art they hold. They are about telling stories, and creating new ones. We can do that by going directly to people who may not be aware of us and get them engaged with our sector.” – Peter Ord

The *Urban Sanctuary Project* will be touring community events in the Capital Regional District between May and September 2017 including Car Free Day and Canada Day celebrations in downtown Victoria. For more information on the *Urban Sanctuary Project*, please visit sanctuaryproject.ca.

Top: An exterior view of the Robert Bateman Centre.
Photo credit: Robert Bateman Centre



Cassie Holcomb is the Development and Communications Manager for the Bateman Foundation. Holcomb studied biology at UVic. She took her love of science to the Centre of the Universe where she delivered science programs to kids of all ages. Since then, she has been working in the non-profit sector in the areas of communications and fundraising.



Top left: Ian Hinkle's piece from the exhibit shows Albatross from Midway Atoll and the plastic that washes ashore there. Photo credit: Erin Henshaw.



Bottom left: A visitor interacts with one of the pieces in the Boxed Sanctuary Exhibit. Photo credit: Cassie Holcomb

Below: In conjunction with the exhibit, a beach clean-up was held by the Surfrider Foundation. Photo credit: Peter Ord

