

VALLEY AS A LIVING LAB



Finding out what matters most

If you ask five different people for an iconic, yet natural, image of the Okanagan valley, chances are you will get five completely different answers.

And that's the beauty of this area; whether it's the Ponderosa pine, the lakes, the steep hillsides, or the flora, there are so many natural wonders in the Okanagan and each evokes a different sense or emotion in people. For two UBC researchers, identifying those iconic images, and finding ways to preserve and appreciate them, has the pair scouring hillsides, beaches, and communities looking for answers.

Associate Professor of Creative Writing Nancy Holmes and Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Performance Denise Kenney at UBC's Okanagan campus are members of the Okanagan Sustainability Institute's Okanagan Aesthetic Working Group. With the assistance of a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and under the auspices of their umbrella project The Eco Art Incubator, the group is gathering information about important aesthetic values of the Okanagan Valley and how they can be maintained and protected.

"We're asking people, 'What do we have in the valley, what do we love about the valley, and what are we afraid of losing?'" says Holmes.

The working group hopes to establish design guidelines that will help municipalities and developers deal with growth. Its end goal is to establish widely-adopted guidelines that complement the Okanagan climate, culture, history, industry, and lifestyle.

They point to Peachland as a good example of a community working to preserve its inherent beauty. The area is slated to change dramatically during the next 10 years, with the development of the 125-acre New Monaco site just north of town. The development is part of Peachland's official community plan and the district is working with the developers and UBC's Okanagan Sustainability Institute.

Kenny also points to the community's reaction when renovators discovered a large colony of Yuma bats in the attic of the former

Peachland Primary School. The community rallied around the bats; renovation was halted until the bats could be studied and counted. The colony, possibly the largest in North America, is now protected and the community hosts science talks, organized bat counts, school field trips, and bat-friendly eco-tourism programs.

"The Peachland bats are a good example of community engagement and they generated a discussion about what was important to the residents," says Kenney. "Development is happening around us, and right now people are working hard to preserve the orchards. But we need to stop and think about what was here before the orchards, because the orchards changed what was here previously."

As part of this group, Kenney is working with the developers of the New Monaco site and will install several time-lapse cameras on the property, which will film how the landscape changes during construction. The multi-year documentary project will witness the metamorphic change from old orchard and rocky bluffs to multi-use development.

"Art is an interesting way to get people to talk about issues they are passionate about," says Kenney. "The feeling that people have towards a place is something that we should record. With New Monaco we are going to witness, write about, act, perform, and photograph the changes and this will all culminate in a documentary about the transformation of that property."

With development happening at a rapid pace, the pair is aware that this type of research should have begun years ago. They are anxious to start talking with people, getting answers to what matters the most, and working to preserve the beauty of the valley.

"We are living in a homogenous world where all the box stores on the highway look the same and we're told how to shop, how to dress, how to look," says Holmes. "We want people to put something forward that they find special about the Okanagan. Is it the lakes, the views, the wineries, the arrowleaf flowers? What is it essentially about this place that evokes this sense of emotion and how do we maintain and protect it?" ●