



From Affect to Effect: ART, ECOLOGY AND ACTIVISM AT SANDY LAKE

by **SYDNEE BLUM** /// EAC Volunteer

A painting of a previously fire-swept forest.
COURTESY Jeremy Vaughan

Just off the Hammonds Plains Road in Kwipek/Bedford is a little-known area that has been fighting for over 50 years to be recognized as a regional park. Sandy Lake and the surrounding Sackville River forest were initially earmarked for designation in 1971, but have remained in limbo despite fervent advocacy. A patchwork of municipally-, provincially-, and privately-owned land, the Sandy Lake-Sackville River area boasts ecologically intact ecosystems hosting diverse, endangered wildlife and significant old-growth forest stands. While some of this area is now protected parkland, the Provincial Housing Task Force has designated much of the remaining old-growth forest west of Sandy Lake to be fast-tracked for development.

Local artists, activists and ecologists are coming together to resist the threat of development – to highlight the area's natural beauty and ecological significance, and find new ways to fight for its continued

existence. One of these initiatives, the Sandy Lake Artists' Collective, demonstrates how local artists can advocate for the preservation of urban wild spaces like Sandy Lake through their work.

Karen McKendry, an ecologist and member of the Sandy Lake-Sackville River Regional Park Coalition, has been working with the Sandy Lake Coalition and the Ecology Action Centre for five years. As a trail runner and naturalist, she appreciated Sandy Lake even before joining the Save Sandy Lake campaign.

McKendry says the Sandy Lake area is an exceptional place from a conservation perspective and a regionally important biodiversity corridor.

“It has a diversity of ecosystems really close together, and because it's not been disturbed for a long time, it has these really rare elements to it; it has old-growth forests more than 125 years old in some spots. Less than one per cent of Nova Scotia's forest is old growth at this point. So these final stands that remain are amazing. And it has 15 different endangered, threatened and vulnerable species; meaning, remarkably, even though those populations are down at dangerously low levels they still find everything they need to live at Sandy Lake. And all of those things are fairly accessible.”

Syd (she/they) is a community and union organizer with a background in ecology and oceanography. When she's not writing a strongly worded letter to city hall, you can find them in the pool at the Y or down at the water watching seagulls.

McKendry sees a future where these spaces are integrated fully into the city: “It’s a large wild area and it’s still connected to other large wild areas. We need to keep it intact for wildlife movement through the city, and for all of the ecosystem services that that wildlife provides: pollinating our plants, and cleaning our waters, and capturing carbon. If something were to happen to Sandy Lake, it has reverberations for the areas around it as well.”

As organizing efforts to protect the Sandy Lake-Sackville River area intensify, the integration of art and environmental activism is emerging as a powerful method to raise awareness and galvanize support for the campaign. Like activism, art has the capacity to evoke emotion and offer fresh perspectives on familiar places. The Sandy Lake Artists’ Collective has ventured twice to the lake for open-air painting sessions to capture the area’s beauty. Supported by the Secord Gallery in Kijipuktuk/Halifax, the seven artists showcased their works to raise awareness and funds for the fight to preserve the Sandy Lake-Sackville River area. Jeremy Vaughan, an artist and key organizer, says this experience opened his eyes to what treasures Sandy Lake and all the wild spaces around Halifax are.

“Four or five summers ago I swam nearly every warm day at Purcells Pond, and I had a kind of water epiphany,” says Vaughan. “I started to think and feel that water was a living entity and that it was such a wonderful thing to connect with and an amazing resource to have areas like Sandy Lake, and the lakes that I love to swim in, so close to the city.”

He says this feeling influences the way he approaches capturing landscapes in his paintings. “The connection that I feel when I go on hikes along the ocean, and I go a lot, feels similar to swimming, where the ocean wind can just lift your spirits and diminish your anxiety. And so for me, sharing that connection, I hope that I’m honouring the local wild areas by putting a spotlight on them and trying to make images that will resonate with other people too.”

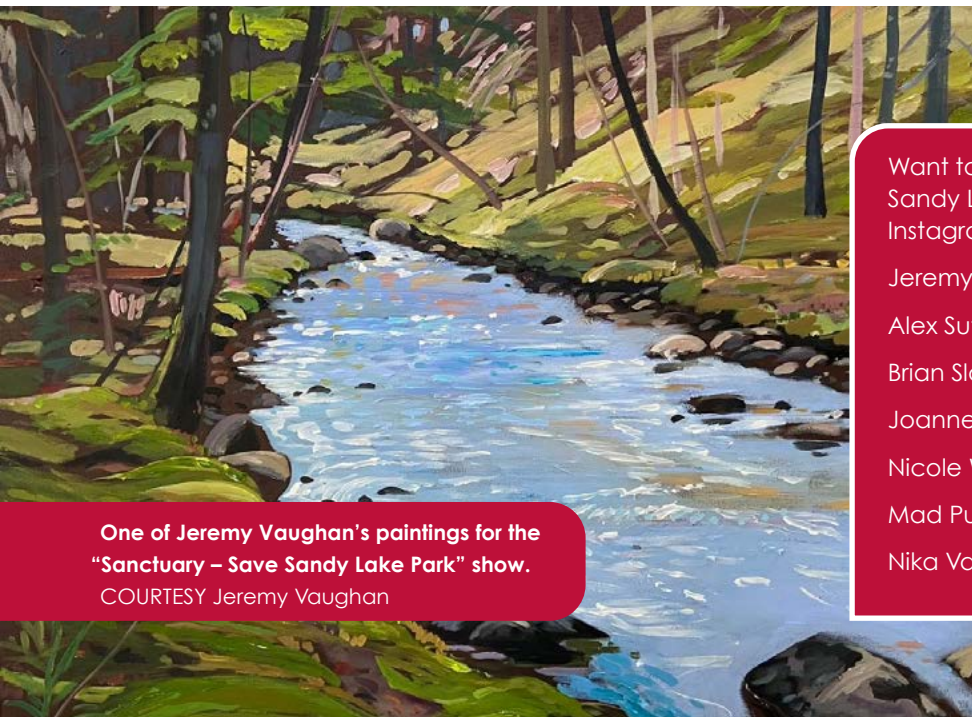
ACTION TEXT

Write your elected officials and take action to Save Sandy Lake by visiting sandylakecoalition.ca/take-action.

“In my art, I’m trying to get really, really close to the things that I paint. I feel like by bringing the beauty of what’s left of the wild areas around Halifax into the city in paintings and in art, it’s a window for people to appreciate a place.”

Vaughan says this relationship with nature influences his art, but also his desire to help protect these wild spaces. “Over years of experiencing nature firsthand, I have gotten a more intimate understanding of a kinship with the wild, how it heals, sustains and offers gifts for free. I feel worry, sorrow and love at the same time; for the Earth and my local favourite places. Folks need to recognize that nature is our close family. If we could mourn the loss of biodiversity and wild places as we would a dear, dear family member, we would be well served.”

Vaughan says the collective raised around \$5,000 at the “Sanctuary – Save Sandy Lake Park” show. “I knew that the people who love the area would put the money to good use. And I was just thinking as well how proud I would feel if I played a small part in helping to move the conversation towards saving that area,” he said. “So much of Nova Scotia has already been mined for its resources, but there’s so much potential left with just a few extra parks. Halifax has a chance to do something right that so many other urban centres have gotten wrong; you can only develop a treasure like Sandy Lake once. And once it’s gone, it’s gone. You can’t recreate it.”



Want to learn more about the Sanctuary – Save Sandy Lake Park artists? Check them out on Instagram:

Jeremy Vaughan - [@jeremyvaughan76](https://www.instagram.com/jeremyvaughan76)

Alex Sutcliffe - [@sutcliffe](https://www.instagram.com/sutcliffe)

Brian Sloan - [@line_and_tone](https://www.instagram.com/line_and_tone)

Joanne ManLennan - [@joannemaclennanart](https://www.instagram.com/joannemaclennanart)

Nicole Well - [@nicolewellsfineart](https://www.instagram.com/nicolewellsfineart)

Mad Putnam - [@madeleinecputnam](https://www.instagram.com/madeleinecputnam)

Nika Vaughan - [@nikavaughanart](https://www.instagram.com/nikavaughanart)

One of Jeremy Vaughan’s paintings for the “Sanctuary – Save Sandy Lake Park” show.

COURTESY Jeremy Vaughan