

# Eco-art takes off in Woodhaven Regional Park

By GLENNA TURNBULL

Special to event

**E**co-art isn't really all that new, but thanks to some enterprising UBC Okanagan staff members, it's about to be doused with fertilizer — make that organic fertilizer — to help it flourish even more here in the Okanagan.

When associate professor of creative writing Nancy Holmes met up with eco-artist Lori Mairs in the fall of 2009, they began talking about how great it would be if they could do an eco-art project in the park where Mairs is a caretaker.

"Everyone loved it," said Holmes, as we tromped through Woodhaven Regional Park recently to talk about eco-art. "What happened, over four seasons, we invited all kinds of artists — mostly students and faculty — who created various works of art in response to this particular park."

It was so much fun, Holmes began to think when the Regional District commented that it would be great if she could do more of these kinds of things in the parks. "So I began thinking about how great it would be to have more eco-art that focuses people on the conservation and ecological issues of (the Okanagan), which are pretty serious — with all the pressures of development and climate change."

She began writing a grant application and decided to rope in associate professor Robert Belton of the Critical Studies

department and Denise Kenney, an assistant professor in Creative Studies.

"We began to think big," said Holmes, and much to their amazement and delight, they were awarded a Partnership Development Grant of \$198,000.

Their project is called the Eco-Art Incubator. Using the idea of business incubators, where you set up an umbrella for people who need help developing their business, they will do the same for helping to develop eco-art projects in the Valley, primarily in the Central Okanagan.

What exactly is eco-art? Belton described it as "non-destructive renewable creative activities that doesn't harm the environment."

Walking through Woodhaven Regional Park, we come across a perfect example, created by some of Holmes' creative writing students last year. Much like the idea of fridge magnet poetry, the students painted words on



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**Nancy Holmes, left, is joined by Denise Kenney and Robert Belton in Woodhaven Regional Park. The three received funding to create the Eco-Art Incubator project.**

dozens of rocks and placed them atop a fallen log, along with a bigger rock that has the instructions painted on it, inviting people to feel free to move the rocks around to create their own poem.

"It's also art in response to the environment in which it

finds itself or is responding to and has an awareness of ecological concerns," said Holmes, "that it's not destroying the environment when you're making the art... (and) you perhaps allow nature to participate."

With the windfall of money they received, they have hired consultants and will begin recording the projects under way.

"There are a number of areas we're hoping to nurture, hoping they'll be more long term so it's not just a plethora of activity over three years, but rather set up structures that can be maintained over the years," said Kenney.

Kenney, who specializes in theatre performance, created a film last year in the park, called *Chainsaw Ballet*, which recently screened in Vernon.

"It was great," noted Holmes, "it was guys as lumberjacks with chainsaws dancing in the park."

Kenney also brought three different groups of performance art students to the spot to create pieces as well.

In addition to installation ideas, such as the log poetry, and film work, they're also encouraging other creative events, such as visual arts and writing.

Holmes is one of the editors and co-founder of *Lake Magazine* — a *Journal of Art and Environment*. While she said there is no direct tie between the two projects, there should be a great potential for the two to complement each other.

They are also looking to move beyond the boundaries of Woodhaven Regional Park. "We're looking at creating events at various locations throughout the area," confirmed Kenney.

Holmes has an additional goal of trying to make UBCO a centre for eco-art.

"We're hoping the artists, graduate students and faculty interested in that area will flock here."

For Belton, his job will be to create an online repository of the results of activities, structured in such a way that he hopes will inspire others to create something new. "We've nicknamed it a 'recyclopeda' and the actual measure of success, in my mind, will be the degree in which it surprises me as it goes off in new directions. That will be great," he said.

To find out more about the project, contact Nancy Holmes at UBC Okanagan or via email at [nancy.holmes@ubc.ca](mailto:nancy.holmes@ubc.ca) or Denise Kenney at [denise.kenney@ubc.ca](mailto:denise.kenney@ubc.ca).