Safe & Sustainable Craft Practice
Empowering Wood Buffalo Artists as Environmental Changemakers

Arts Council Wood Buffalo (ACWB) & SCALE-LeSAUT 2026

1. Why This Guide Exists

This guide has been developed as part of **Arts for Change: Empowering Wood Buffalo Artists as Environmental Changemakers (2026)**.

The project is rooted in a central premise: artists in Wood Buffalo are not peripheral to environmental change. They are embedded within it. They live in a region shaped by wildfire, industrial development, rapid economic shifts, long winters, and profound ecological transformation. They hold lived knowledge of what climate change looks and feels like in a northern extraction-based context.

Craft is the first discipline in this series because it works at the level of matter. Craft artists make direct decisions about fibre, leather, metal, clay, wood, finishes, adhesives, and reclaimed industrial remnants. Each decision carries environmental, cultural, and economic implications.

This guide does not exist to regulate creativity. It exists to support agency.

To empower Wood Buffalo artists as environmental changemakers means:

- Increasing material literacy
- Strengthening studio safety and longevity
- Deepening place-based sourcing awareness
- Supporting repair and skill transmission
- Recognising Indigenous land relationships
- Encouraging slow, intentional production
- Building resilient, community-embedded practice

Environmental changemaking begins not with policy — but with practice.

2. Craft in Wood Buffalo: Between Extraction and Care

Wood Buffalo exists within a landscape marked by large-scale extraction. The dominant economic narrative in the region has long been one of removal: removal of resources, acceleration of production, maximisation of output.

Craft operates differently.

It slows down.
It repairs.
It restores.
It reuses.
It attends to material rather than extracting from it.

At the same time, craft artists here face real constraints:

- Long supply chains
- High shipping emissions
- Limited hazardous waste infrastructure
- Energy-intensive heating requirements
- Periodic wildfire smoke
- Transient populations
- Isolation between makers

Sustainability cannot be abstract. It must respond to these realities.

In this region, environmental leadership is not about purity. It is about intention within constraint.

3. Studio Health as Environmental Responsibility

Environmental changemaking begins at the scale of the body.
Craft materials enter the body through:

- Inhalation (silica dust, sanding particles, solder fumes, aerosolised finishes)
- Skin absorption (solvents, heavy metals, dyes)
- Ingestion (contaminated surfaces, shared living spaces)

In northern climates, winter air recirculation can intensify exposure. Wildfire smoke adds seasonal particulate burden. Some artists may also work in industrial or trades-based roles, compounding exposure.

This cumulative exposure is often described as **total body burden**. It reminds us that risk does not operate in isolation.

Reducing studio risk is not a bureaucratic obligation.
It is a commitment to creative longevity.

Core practices include:

- Retaining and reviewing Safety Data Sheets (SDS)
- Avoiding high-toxicity substances where viable
- Separating food preparation from studio areas
- Wet-cleaning rather than dry sweeping
- Using respirators appropriate to task
- Washing studio clothing separately
- Avoiding fuel-burning devices indoors

Artists who care for their own health strengthen the sustainability of their practice over decades. Environmental changemaking includes self-preservation.

Studio Health and Safety Checklist
CCOHS – WHMIS (GHS) Overview
CCOHS – WHMIS Pictograms

4. Material Literacy and Less-Toxic Substitution

Empowerment requires knowledge of what we touch. Material literacy means understanding:

- Which pigments contain heavy metals
- Which adhesives emit volatile organic compounds
- Which glazes contain lead or cadmium
- Which finishes are solvent-heavy
- Which processes generate airborne dust

Less-toxic practice does not mean abandoning craft tradition. It means asking informed questions.

Developed by Environmental Defence in partnership with CARFAC Ontario for the toxic nation project. For an online version of this Guide and more information on artist health and safety please visit www.toxicnation.ca/artists

The Healthy Artist Guide to a Less Toxic Studio

5 Tips for Using Less Toxic Art Materials

1. Know the relative hazards of your materials.
2. Use water-based materials where possible.
3. Avoid powders and dusts.
4. Choose the safest process.
5. Be patient as you learn how to use safer substitutes.

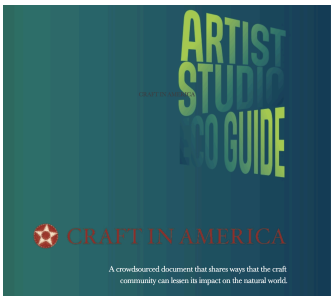
Where feasible:

- Use water-based adhesives rather than solvent-based.
- Select certified lead-free glazes.
- Avoid unnecessary spray applications.
- Replace powdered materials with paste or liquid forms.
- Capture acrylic sludge rather than rinsing into drains.
- Choose vegetable-tanned leather when appropriate.
- Source recycled or reclaimed metals.

Learning safer substitutions may require experimentation. It may alter technique. It may slow production.

But these shifts reduce risk not only to artists, but to wastewater systems, households, and regional ecosystems. Material literacy transforms consumption into stewardship.

Further reading:



The Artist Studio EcoGuide is a crowdsourced document that enlists the involvement of the craft community and artists overall to be mindful and effective in all actions that impact the natural world. The EcoGuide is intended as a tool that offers pragmatic and meaningful solutions for the logistical operations and design of art spaces. This accessible resource, for all artists, across media, provides adoptable ideas for improv-ing the eco-footprint of art making.

5. Energy & Shipping in Northern Regions

Heating loads are unavoidable in cold climates.
Artists can reduce impact by:

- Using LED lighting
- Turning off equipment when idle
- Batching kiln firings
- Identifying energy “hot spots”

Shipping often exceeds studio emissions in remote regions.

Strategies include:

- Consolidating supply orders
- Avoiding rush air freight
- Using reusable packaging
- Offering slower shipping options

Logistics planning becomes climate action.

Further reading:

Energy Efficiency

- Natural Resources Canada – Energy Efficiency for Small Business
  https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/energy-efficiency

Shipping & Carbon Accounting

- Gallery Climate Coalition – Shipping Guidance
  https://galleryclimatecoalition.org/shipping
- Gallery Climate Coalition – Packaging Guidance
  https://galleryclimatecoalition.org/packaging

6. Waste & Disposal in Remote Contexts

Hazardous waste infrastructure in northern communities may be limited.

Artists should never:

- Pour solvents or glazes into drains
- Dispose of chemical sludge in regular garbage

Instead:

- Label and seal hazardous containers
- Use municipal hazardous waste programs
- Coordinate shared disposal trips
- Reduce hazardous input at source

Reducing waste at origin is often more feasible than managing disposal downstream. Collective coordination strengthens regional sustainability.

Links:

Environment and Climate Change Canada – Hazardous Waste
Alberta Environment – Hazardous Waste
Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo – Waste Services
CCOHS – Chemical Storage & Disposal

7. Local Materials & Material Sovereignty
In remote northern regions like Wood Buffalo, sourcing is not neutral. Long supply chains increase emissions and disconnect materials from place. Where possible, using regional materials reduces transport impact and strengthens geographic identity.

Material sovereignty - the ability to forage, reclaim, process, and work with locally available materials - resists globalised extraction-based supply chains.

In Wood Buffalo, this includes:

- Reclaimed construction wood (fire-affected timber, demo scraps)
- Salvaged industrial metal (pipeline offcuts, machinery parts)
- Regionally sourced wool (from nearby ranchers or Indigenous herders)
- Plant-based dyes (willow bark, lichens, berries from boreal forest)
- Recovered leather scraps (hunting byproducts)
- Industrial by-product repurposing (bitumen experiments, tailings sand)

Local sourcing isn't always possible in northern contexts. Incremental shifts matter:

- Consolidating orders with other makers
- Sharing supply chain information via artist networks
- Choosing Canadian suppliers over international
- Reclaiming offcuts within regional maker circles

When artists narrate their sourcing choices, materials become stories — transforming "waste" into witnesses of place, time, and care.

8. Repair, Reuse, and Skill Transmission

Repair is environmental leadership.

In a region where large-scale extraction shapes the dominant economy, repair represents an alternative logic.

Offering refinishing services, hosting mending workshops, restoring heirloom objects, and designing for longevity extend the life of materials and reduce demand for replacement.

Skill transmission deepens this impact.

When artists teach:

- Safe kiln practices
- Proper solder ventilation
- Refinishing techniques
- Visible mending
- Tool maintenance
- Material substitution methods

They reduce reliance on industrial systems and strengthen community resilience.

Repair is not nostalgia. It is infrastructure.

Further reading:
Repair Café International – About & How It Works
Ellen MacArthur Foundation – Circular Economy Overview

9. Slow Making as Counter-Narrative

Craft unfolds slowly. Hand-stitching, carving, kiln firing, sanding, finishing — these gestures ask time and presence. Each repetition teaches endurance and attention. In a region like Wood Buffalo, where the economy and landscape have long been shaped by rapid extraction and industrial tempo, slowness is not inefficiency but resistance. It recalls older rhythms of use, repair, and seasonality that predate industrial speed.

Slow making:

- Reduces overproduction and the energy footprint of constant output.
- Encourages material mindfulness — using what is local, renewable, or reclaimed.
- Supports fair compensation and dignifies labour rather than minimizing it.

- Embeds the story of time and care into each object.
- Limits waste through thoughtful scale and design.

To choose a slower pace is to question the logic of endless growth. It becomes a climate decision — an ethic of "enough." By refusing to scale beyond sustainable capacity, craft practices model alternate economies rooted in reciprocity and repair. They honour resources as finite and time as part of material integrity.

In this sense, slowness is both a method and a message: an embodied critique of acceleration and a reminder that cultural health, like ecological health, depends on cycles of rest, recovery, and renewal.

Further reading:

Manifestations of social resistance in craft processes Iku, Nasa and Sami indigenous craft

This article examines how Indigenous craft practices carry social, cultural, ecological, and political resistance, and explicitly connects craft to non-violent resistance, sustainability, and local autonomy.

10. Land-Based & Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Wood Buffalo exists on Indigenous land. Environmental changemaking must acknowledge this.

Land-based practice is relational. It is not simply about using "natural materials." It involves:

- Seasonal awareness
- Ethical harvesting
- Reciprocity
- Cultural protocol
- Intergenerational transmission

Artists engaging with Indigenous techniques or materials must prioritise collaboration, consultation, and respect. Environmental responsibility in this region is inseparable from Indigenous sovereignty.

Craft can support:

- Indigenous-led workshops
- Knowledge-sharing initiatives
- Intergenerational teaching
- Ethical material relationships

Environmental changemaking includes cultural accountability.

11. Intergenerational & Community-Embedded Practice

Craft thrives in relationship.

Shared studio days, collaborative markets, travelling showcases, and mentorship networks reduce isolation and build resilience.

Economic sustainability supports environmental sustainability. When audiences understand the labour embedded in craft, pricing shifts from abstract to relational.

Community-embedded practice strengthens the long-term viability of environmental changemaking.

Craft becomes cultural infrastructure. In a region shaped by extraction, craft offers care.