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Being an Illustrated Compendium of Noteworthy Alternatives & Thought

And as the Ark Sinks Slowly in the East....

It is – or was – Canada's only officially sanctioned, publicly supported, full-scale alternative life styles project. Just when it appeared to be clear sailing, Prince Edward Island's Ark Project has sprung a leak and, if nothing changes drastically, will close its doors on May 31st of this year.

Afloat since September 1976, the Ark Project was launched with a sacrificial bottle of champagne and the effervescent (if recycled) words of Prime Minister Trudeau himself, who declared the Ark an attempt to "live lightly off the land." Fine words for a fine year, when Vancouver hosted the UN Habitat Conference, visionary architects and town planners gathered there from around the world, and the Ark was touted as a Canadian contribution to both that short-term conference and its long-term goals, Canada's own contribution to future energy-saving urban life styles.

Susan Soucoup, in a 1976 article for *Harrowsmith* (Number Two) described the proposed project as "a multifaceted bio-shelter designed to sustain the food, housing and power needs of one or more families." There would be a system of four windmills producing 25 kw each, enough power for "a 'largish' farm." The building (or "bio-

shelter") would be solar heated, with the family's food needs supplied by a solar greenhouse containing vegetables and fish tanks.

This was, indeed, an endeavour to live lightly off the land,

but whether or not the Ark lived just as delicately with its public support remained to be seen. Once the memory of the flashy UN Conference faded, the monies required to keep the Ark in operation were to come

from government funds. Although conceived and executed by the New Alchemy Institute, which had a similar but much smaller project underway in Massachusetts, the Ark was originally funded by a federal grant of \$354,000, not a great sum as federal grants go, but one which received considerable media attention.

Its curiosity piqued, the Canadian public began to seek out the Ark in hopes of getting a firsthand glimpse of their taxes in action. Unfortunately, the experimental design planned for the project included a carefully monitored study of how a single family managed to live and work in such a structure.

Although the project was funded publicly, access to it was severely limited by the family's own need for privacy and its desire to carry on the work of the Ark. But even some of the droves who did manage to coincide visits with the Sunday afternoon visiting hours – there were 15,000 visitors in 1977 alone – were disillusioned by the Ark residents' use of electrical appliances, their "hippie" appearance, the strange named fish (tilapia, eventually replaced by trout) and vegetables that grew under their roof. The windmills were not only inoperative, it was now said that eventually they would provide



only enough power for the small appliances. Meanwhile, the project continued to need money. All glass and odd angles, it looked impressive enough, but where were the results?

Maritimers increasingly saw the Ark as entirely divorced from their down-home, often hard-pressed reality. One critic wrote in 1977, "The Ark is a hype. It's a supersophisticated, computerized, monitored, exotic (and evidently somewhat erotic) white elephant replete with African tilapia (how they fit in with rural P.E.I. God only knows) and an \$85,000 windmill which can't even power the 'Architects' modern electrical kitchen, an indoor John... sorry, Clive, worth at least \$2,000.... And, to make matters worse, it's all being run by Americans."

The hostility grew, fed by the inevitable stumbles made by such an innovative project. Visitors sometimes drove hundreds of miles to arrive at "visiting hours," and found the gates closed. A windmill blew down. Some politicians such as provincial Minister of Energy Barry Clark amplified the anti-Ark sentiments. ("As far as I know," says Susan Mahoney, the Ark's education co-ordinator, "he's never even been here.")

Under such pressure, the Ark began to change. In April of 1978, management was assumed by the Institute of Man and Resources, a Charlotte-town-based, three-year-old, non-profit organization. Financial support for the Ark was now coming from both the federal and provincial governments, in a three-year joint commitment. The live-in family had moved on; the project's staff now lived away from the workplace. Effectively, the whole focus of the Ark was shifting, and the change was even more difficult to communicate than it was to institute.

No longer was the maintenance of a single family the Ark's Habitat-inspired goal. Most energy projects were discontinued and research was now narrowed and altered to focus on food production alone, particularly organic and solar methods that might enable P.E.I. to become more self-sufficient in food. This emphasis persisted despite the Ark's funding coming from the Canada/P.E.I. Agreement on Renewable Energy Development; federal money came not from Agriculture Canada, but from the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources.

The Ark had finally set a true

course, but it was heading away from its funding sources, and the public was still agitated in its wake. Tangible results finally began to appear: publications on greenhouse glazing materials and vegetable variety recommendations, on biological greenhouse management and commercial tomato production in solar greenhouses. Workshops were held for Maritimers, and staff members travelled all over Canada to discuss their research. Work was being done here that was being done nowhere else in Canada. The staff was young, energetic and starting to produce pragmatic information for home greenhouse owners, builders and gardeners.


But the three-year Canada P.E.I./Agreement had terminated in 1980, although a six-month extension and then "ad hoc" funding kept the Ark going "until the anticipated funding came again," said Andrew Wells, director of the Institute of Man and Resources.

It did not come. On January 27, the Institute decided to relinquish management of the Ark Project as of June 1, 1981, because the funding was not going to be renewed. There were indications for some time, says Wells, that neither the provincial

nor federal government was eager to back what seemed an unpopular project.

The Institute of Man and Resources intends to continue the Ark research as far as possible, especially that in aquaculture and biological greenhouse management. Mahoney feels, however, that it could take years to reorganize projects to their present level. A mud-storage solar greenhouse is suspended in mid-construction. The fate of the Ark's buildings is unknown, although legally they belong to the province.

Andrew Wells agrees that the demise of the Ark is an unfortunate setback and that its budget, used to support 12 full-time staff, 10 part-timers, several research projects, publications and buildings, has been very modest. "I guess it depends where you're coming from," he says of the pressure to close.

Judging from a recent man-on-the-street opinion poll by Charlottetown's *The Guardian*, he is right. "Just about good for nothing," commented one Maritimer. Another added that the vacated bio-shelter might be used as a motel or "it could be sold privately to someone from the States for development." 



Conferences

April 28-30: *Harvesting Small Timber: Waste Not, Want Not*; Hotel Syracuse, Syracuse, N.Y. Contact: Forest Products Research Society, 2801 Marshall Ct., Madison, Wisconsin 53705 (608) 231-1361.

May 16-17: *Third Annual Sheep and Woolcraft Festival*; Cumberland Fair Grounds, Cumberland, Maine. For information contact: Bill Noon, Box 64, Sunset Road, Springvale, Maine 04083.

May 20-22: *Approaches to Rural Development*; University of Guelph. Fee \$75 (\$85 after May 1). Contact: Office of Continuing Education, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1 (519) 824-4120 Ext. 3064.

June 15-17: *Woodfire '81*; International Centre, Toronto, Ontario. Canada's largest wood heat conference and trade show, sponsored by the Canadian Wood Energy Institute. Contact: CWEI, 16 Lesmill Road, Don Mills, Ont. M3B 2T5.

Courses

March 29-May 4: A series of evening lectures and presentations on *Lights From the Past* including the "Pre Kerosene Era," "How to Buy an Oil Lamp" and "Aladdin's Past and Present." Per evening fees: adults \$4.00; children \$1.50. Contact: Dundurn Castle, Hamilton, Ontario (416) 522-5313

Beginning April 11: *Workshops* in plant propagation, restoring old apple trees, cheese making and other related topics; The Rural Education Center, Wilton, New Hampshire. Contact: Susan Stepick, The Rural Education Center, Stonyfield Farm, Wilton, New Hampshire 03086 (603) 654-9625.

April 15: Stephen Gaskin speaks on *The Farm, Plenty and Current Events*; Trinity United Church (corner of Bloor and Spadina), Toronto. Free admission; begins at 8 p.m.

Contact: The Farm, Lanark, Ontario (613) 278-2785.

April 16: Ina May Gaskin speaks on *Spiritual Midwifery and Women's Rights*; Friends' Meeting House, 60 Lowther Avenue, Toronto. Contact: The Farm, Lanark, Ontario (613) 278-2785.

May 1-June 30: *Owning and Operating a Small-Scale Hydroelectric Plant*; Dover-Foxcroft, Maine. Eight-week course covering all aspects. Fee of \$950 includes room and board. Starting date is flexible and shorter courses are available. Contact: Charles E. MacArthur, 16 Vaughn St., Dover-Foxcroft, Maine 04426 (207) 564-8614.

May 4-8, June 8-12: *Introduction to Draft Horses*; Nova Scotia Agricultural College, Truro, Nova Scotia. A number of other draft horse courses are also planned. Contact: Mr. Sandy Patterson, Vocational Education, Nova Scotia Agricultural College, Box 550, Truro, Nova Scotia.

May 30-June 6: *Community Organic Gardening Week*; Dandelion Community, Enterprise, Ontario. Will cover cultivation and planting of spring crops. Fee ranges from \$55 to \$95. Contact: Ira Wallace, Dande-

lion Community, R.R.1, Enterprise, Ontario K0K 1Z0 (613) 358-2304.

June 15-19: *Stackwall Log House Training Courses*; University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Man. Provides instruction in basic construction skills, as well as planning and material selection. Some housing available. Course repeated August 17-21. Contact: Continuing Education Division, 541 University Centre, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3T 2N2.

June 22-24: *Personal Food Production*; Fairview College, Fairview, Alberta. Will consist of more than 20 classroom sessions and hands-on workshops. Fee of \$50.00. Contact: Mark Craft c/o Peace Works, Box 1559, Fairview, Alta. T0H 1L0 or Terry Moore, N.W.P.C.E.C., Fairview College, Box 3000, Fairview, Alta. T0H 1L0.

July 4-9: *Field Ecology Workshop*; Ministik Hills Field Study Centre, Tofield, Alberta. Fee of \$72.50 covers room and board. Applications close June 5th. Contact: Johanna Jacks, Coordinator, World Ecology, Athabasca University, 14515-122 Ave., Edmonton, Alberta T5L 2W4 (403) 452-9990.