

Beached! An Ark hits sinking sand

An experiment in self-sufficiency, launched with high hopes in 1976, is becalmed by local hatred and political apathy

By David Miller Toronto Star

SPRY POINT, P.E.I. — The gate is barred and the road rutted for two twisting miles up to the wind-swept point; the building is rusted and stained, the insulating shades are closed against the sun, the windmill bent and broken, the greenhouse roof is gone.

It was called the Ark and when it was opened in 1976 it was hailed across Canada and the world as the globe's only self-sufficient dwelling. It was heated by solar panels, drew electricity from a windmill, provided food from greenhouses and hydroponic gardens, fresh fish from the ocean and tropical fish from tanks.

The Ark was complete: designed, built and financed by two levels of government determined to have it last longer than 40 days and nights. But in June the Ark foundered on a Mount Ararat of squabbling, backstabbing and government infighting — the victim of little money, little care and a hatred of the project by the Islanders themselves.

Ironically Prince Edward Island was thought the perfect place to build the Ark and when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau opened it he called it an adventure in "living lightly on the land."

The island has no natural resources other than the wind and a marvelous agricultural economy. The only fuel on the island is wood and if the tiny province was to survive in the energy-short world of

the 1990s, some form of self-sufficiency had to be developed.

Hence the Ark and a generous federal seed grant of \$365,000 to get it afloat. But Trudeau, after clipping the ribbon, took off for Ottawa and the Islanders looked at the Ark and harrumphed: "Give me \$365,000 and I'll be self-sufficient, too."

Over the years, the Ark gobbled up more than \$150,000 a year to operate, became an embarrassment to then-premier Alex Campbell's Liberals and angered Islanders when they read of fish dying, the windmill not working, the solar-heating system freezing up and the garden producing stunted tomatoes.

In limbo

"The Ark was neither fish nor fowl," says Art Hiscock, operations manager of the island's energy corporation. "Like everything else on the island, it was caught between a provincial government with little

money and a federal government that changed its mind.

"Now it's sitting there in limbo with no funding and everyone trying to figure out what to do with it. The province would love to give it away for a buck, but no one wants it. The university even turned it down as a research centre."

The Ark was conceived by the New Alchemy Institute of Woods Hole, Mass., as a bioshelter in which a single family could live in complete self-sufficiency. The federal government, carrying out part of its election promises, paid for the cost of design, construction and equipping the building and the province chucked in a 22-year-lease agreement and 100 acres of land on barren Spry Point, 70 kilometres east of Charlottetown.

New Alchemy lasted until 1978 under funding with Environment Canada and the Ottawa-P.E.I. agreement on renewable energy development. But then John Todd, director, asked the province's Institute of Man and Resources to take it over and operate it as a research station.

The province agreed (it was the only way to ensure federal funds continued) and Man and Resources kept up the building but shifted the emphasis from self-sufficiency to conservation, agriculture, horticulture and food production.

But the Canada-P.E.I. agreement ran out last year and the institute gave up, locking the gate and giving the Ark back to its original owners, the two governments.

Then Campbell's Liberals were defeated by Angus MacLean's Tories and the new government took a dim view of using \$150,000 to feed fish when the island's economy was one of the most depressed in the country.

So there it sits: The parking lot, which once held the cars of 5,000 visitors, is overgrown with weeds, the land around is choked with hay and the tropical fish tanks are dusty and empty. The only constant is the wind, blowing through the broken windmill.

"Yes, it's a sad, sad story," says Dr. Kirk Brown, research director for the institute. "Don't you think it hurt us to close it? We had visitors from around the world; the Chinese marveled at it. It was ahead of its time."

He stops, gazes through the window of his Charlottetown office, and says: "It never really worked, at least not as it was planned. It never became self-sufficient because the power never worked.

Average wage

"Toward the end, when we could see the writing on the wall, the family that was living there moved out. They couldn't stand the crowds of visitors."

Brown, a scientist who admits he is happiest away from the office, says the Ark never received adequate financing and it was impossible to convince Islanders that more money was needed, especially since the average wage of an island farmer or fisherman was about \$12,000 a year.

"However, a prophet is not without honor," he says. "Even though it's closed it had a worldwide reputation. It's just damned hard to have to cut our losses."

He admits it is painful to talk of it now because conversation invariably comes around to what is going to happen. A government, even Prince Edward Island's, cannot abandon a \$365,000 building even if it is in the middle of nowhere.

"It could be a research station or an educational unit but it's so remote," says Brown. "It's almost impossible to get there in the winter. But it still has appeal, it still has power. People still walk around up there, despite the two-mile hike in and out. People still wonder at it."

Not the Islanders, though. In nearby Dundas, Ray MacDonald calls it a "disgrace."

"Writing about the Ark, are you?" he asks. "Well, put down that it's just like the Post Office — it doesn't work either."

The P.E.I. Department of Tourism, Energy and Industry says it is working on alternative programs for the Ark but no one is holding his breath.

Deputy Minister Philip MacDougall expects the government to know soon what direction will be taken, but the final decision will not be known until the fall.

Back in Dundas, Hilda Dingwall says the Ark was a foolish dream, a "nutty building run by a bunch of hippies."

The "hippies" are gone now, taking research fellowships in American colleges. The Ark's only inhabitant is caretaker Bob MacDonald who cuts the hay. There is also the odd crow and always the wind. But standing beside it one can almost hear Kirk Brown saying: "Some day, some day they'll need this."