



CANADIAN COUNTERCULTURES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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SECTION 1:

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

Back-to-the-Land Environmentalism and Small Island Ecology: Denman Island, BC, 1974–1979

Sharon Weaver

On August 14, 1979, Leslie Dunsmore of Denman Island testified before the Herbicide Appeal Board, arguing against the use of Tordon 22K by Weldwood of Canada. In the *Denman Rag and Bone*, a local newsletter, editor Des Kennedy reported on Dunsmore's impressive performance:

I can't see anyone in the room who isn't listening intently. Her presentation moves like a just-honed scythe through dry grass. She discusses her own livelihood as a beekeeper, the potential for contamination of domestic water supplies, the soil classifications and topography of the area, the properties and hazards of Picloram, forest management alternatives and the limitations of the licensing and appeal processes. Her text is laced with references to experts, commissions of inquiry and scientific studies.¹

Following her brilliant testimony, Weldwood's cross-examination faltered and sputtered out, reported Kennedy. Dunsmore, like Kennedy, was a back-to-the-lander who had settled on Denman Island within the previous five years. Both came from large urban centres where

they had obtained university degrees, and while their degrees were not in science, their education gave both the confidence to question authority and to do their own research. Kennedy reported that “being at the Hearing made one feel proud and happy to be from Denman, to have neighbours of such skill and dedication.” This fight against the spraying of herbicides was one of a series of environmental struggles in which Denman Islanders had engaged over the previous six years. Through local media and debates, back-to-the-landers on Denman Island confronted very local environmental pressures, and in a number of cases—and despite the odds against them—they succeeded in changing decisions and regulations. Their successes were frequently predicated on their ability to engage the concerns and energy of other islanders.

SMALL ISLAND ECOLOGY

Small island ecological systems have been at the cutting edge of environmental concerns and science since at least the seventeenth century. Resource depletion on small islands becomes evident long before it can be detected on the mainland and thus serves as a warning, much like the proverbial canary in the coal mine, to unsustainable draws on natural resources. Their small, bounded geography allows no easy solution to the unexpected collapse of a resource. Historian Richard Grove noted that island contexts led to very early efforts to mitigate environmental change. Both French scientists on Mauritius and English scientists on St. Helena alerted their metropolitan governments in the eighteenth century to the threats posed to the islands’ viability by the unrestricted use of resources such as timber, fruit, and water.² Even in less isolated locations, ecological impacts are often much more visible on islands than on continents.

Ironically, Denman and other small Gulf Islands located on one of the world’s wettest coasts face serious water problems.³ Sitting in the rain shadow of Vancouver Island’s mountains, they are arid, with just half the rainfall of the Vancouver region.⁴ In years of light winter rainfall, groundwater is not replenished, and summer shortages

are more likely. Because groundwater from wells on Denman is the principal source of domestic and agricultural water, in addition to the two small lakes, the summer rise in population due to cottagers and tourists exacerbates water problems. Overuse of aquifers can lead to saltwater intrusion;⁵ by the 1970s, this potential threat to the water table had become a source of concern for most islanders, old and new settlers alike. As well, the cutting and hauling of timber contributed to water degradation, and with increased settlement, the impact of logging on water resources grew more alarming.

In the 1970s, environmental unease among North Americans intensified, moving from the margins to the mainstream. The emergence of the environmental movement provided ordinary people with the sense that they could have a say. Ecological disquiet often motivated back-to-the-landers, with many arguing that their way of life testified to their environmental concerns: gardening without pesticides, herbicides or artificial chemicals; heating with wood; building with local materials; and opting out of consumer culture all demonstrated their environmental credentials.⁶ By moving to relatively remote areas such as the Gulf Islands and Cape Breton, back-to-the-landers were trying to escape the long reach of capitalist, industrial society. However, they quickly discovered that they could not entirely break free from it. Even those for whom the environment was not a primary motivation were quick to defend a right to clean water and clean air.

Known for their extraordinary beauty, unique ecosystems, and biological diversity, the Gulf Islands had come under increased developmental pressure during the 1960s.⁷ Growing public alarm over uncontrolled development, possibly beyond their carrying capacity, led W. A. C. Bennett's Social Credit government to impose restrictions in 1969, limiting island subdivisions to lots no smaller than ten acres. Previously, a lack of planning for the islands had arisen out of the fact that British Columbia provided only a reduced framework for local governance outside of municipalities. With the creation in 1965 of twenty-nine regional boards spanning the entire province, citizens living in rural districts obtained a limited form of governance—which was clearly inadequate, as district boundaries combined

municipalities with surrounding unincorporated areas.⁸ Because population determined the voting weight of each elected member to a regional board, this usually resulted in the islands having little to no individual representation on these boards. As an example of scale, in 1981, the Regional District of Comox-Strathcona had a total population of 68,621; within it, Denman Island's population was 589, and Hornby Island's, 686.⁹ With next to no input from island residents on any of the boards, little time or effort was devoted to island issues.¹⁰ As a result, many islanders viewed the imposition of policies by the larger region as "illegitimate uses of political power," and the problem "resulted in considerable dislike for regional district government in some rural areas."¹¹ Acknowledging "the special planning needs of island environments," the New Democratic Party government held meetings in 1973 on the thirteen most populated islands, seeking input on how best to create a governing structure for those islands. As a result of these consultations, the Islands Trust Act was proposed and enacted in 1974.¹² The Islands Trust staff act as a regional board for the thirteen islands that fell under the new legislation, with two elected trustees from each island, who, as of 1979, then elected a chair and vice-chair.¹³ The freeze from further subdivision into parcels smaller than ten acres continued until a community plan could be developed on each island. It was hoped that the new legislation would put in place controls to preserve and protect the rural qualities of the islands, "given the uniqueness of island environments, the insignificance of island concerns in regional districts and the sense of community that exists among island residents."¹⁴

Like other islands in the Strait of Georgia, Denman experienced a rapid increase in population beginning in the late 1960s and continuing throughout the 1970s.¹⁵ Many of these newcomers were young, often well educated, and in search of a retreat from uncontrolled growth, industrialization, and pollution. A large proportion came from the United States, where debates about the environment were gaining public attention. The population on the island at this time consisted of, in addition to the newcomers, descendants of the original European families who had settled on the island in the latter part

of the nineteenth century along with recent retirees, many of whom had summered on the island and then chosen to make it their year-round home.

THE *DENMAN RAG AND BONE*

On Denman, the vulnerabilities of small island ecologies soon brought the back-to-the-landers into the open, as the best hope for mitigation depended on both disseminating information and generating activism. In 1974, Des Kennedy and Manfred Rupp began the *Denman Rag and Bone*, a newsletter of local environmental concerns. Kennedy later stated in an interview that

myself and a number of others, sort of more politically oriented people, very quickly realized . . . the islands were totally ripe for plucking by land speculators and developers and stuck our noses in and said that's not what we want to have happen here . . . and that's where the *Denman Rag and Bone* sprang out of, that desire to mobilize the community around the need for, at least from my perspective, for that kind of vigilance, because you could see it start to happen, whether gyppo loggers coming in and just butchering the place, . . . [or] land speculation and development.¹⁶

Conceived of and launched as a community newspaper, the *Denman Rag and Bone* encouraged islanders to communicate with one another. In the span of five and a half years, it reported on numerous issues that constituted a threat to the island's ecosystem and that local people tackled. Concerns included inappropriate recreational use of Chickadee Lake, road maintenance, and the impact of summer tourism on island capacity, all of which required wider discussion. The threat of contamination posed to the water table by excessive subdivision development and the proposed herbicide spraying by both BC Hydro and Weldwood were particularly alarming to Denman Islanders. With each of these environmental concerns we see how the

repeated stresses on Denman Island's small ecosystem became inescapable and how residents were forced to address them and, in the process, reconfigure social alignments.

Fundamentally a back-to-the-land source, the newsletter—which was published from May 1974 until August 1979—included the voices of others as responders or guest contributors. It featured local, regional, and provincial developments that might affect the island, thereby fostering a greater sense of community. Small as Denman Island was (the size of Manhattan Island, with 379 permanent residents in 1976¹⁷), gossip and informal networks were inadequate for the dissemination of complex information, especially that needed for informed voting. My research, both in reading the newsletter and through conducting personal interviews, made it clear that islanders felt that bylaw decisions and development policy were controlled by a few key individuals, who were unaccustomed to sharing information with fellow residents. A newsletter delivered to each mailbox about six times a year seemed the best way to share information, create informed discussion, and perhaps circumvent the established powerbrokers. The *Denman Rag and Bone* was delivered free of charge up to and including issue number 25, after which the cost was twenty-five cents per issue in the general store, or ten issues delivered on the island for four dollars (five dollars off the island).¹⁸

While environmental matters were an important part of the content, a typical issue included artwork, poetry, short fiction, recipes, gardening advice, children's or school pages, editorials, letters to the editor, and occasionally pieces originating on other islands or elsewhere in the province. A page or two under the heading of either "Rumours Galore" or "Bits & Pieces"¹⁹ included short paragraphs about individuals on the island, upcoming meetings, ongoing issues, and almost always a paragraph on local road conditions. Notices appeared about the food co-op and forthcoming meetings of the Ratepayers' Association, the Fire and First Aid Committee, and the Recreation Committee. The newsletter also contributed to island history, frequently in the form of an interview with a long-time resident. Women contributed to the newsletter as both writers and workers.

Their contributions covered topics that were typically associated with women's concerns, such as children, food, and gardening, but they, as well as a few brave men, also wrote about women's changing role in society, motivated by the growing awareness created by the feminist movement. Fifteen to twenty people contributed content, while about ten volunteers typed and laid out the text and ran the *Gestetner* to produce each issue. Then, to ensure a wide readership, volunteers delivered the newsletter to (in the beginning) every island mailbox.

For the first two years, the strongest voices in the newsletter belonged to its two founders, Des Kennedy and Manfred Rupp. Kennedy was born in Liverpool, England, in 1945 and moved to Toronto with his family at age ten. He "then spent eight years in a series of monastic seminaries in the Eastern United States, studying for the priesthood," which he left in 1968 to move to Vancouver; there he met his wife, Sandy, while they were both employed as social workers.²⁰ As a former monk, Kennedy was drawn to the quiet and seclusion of the woods, as was Sandy, and so together they spent their weekends, "weather permitting, out in the woods somewhere . . . camping." Rather than have to "drag" themselves "back to the city" every Sunday evening, the couple bought land on Denman Island in 1971 and took up permanent residency in 1972. According to Kennedy, "I had an ambition to be a writer and so we were looking for simplicity, frugality and quiet."²¹ He planned to support himself as a professional writer and, with his exceptional gardening skills, wrought a wondrous transformation of his eleven acres on Denman Island and then wrote popular books on gardening, among other genres.

Manfred Rupp and his wife, Marjo Van Tooren, bought land on Denman Island in 1969 and were some of the earliest to arrive of the back-to-the-lander group. Born in Germany in 1931, Rupp recalled one of the more formative experiences of his early years:

Growing up in Germany as a teenager I spent my holidays hitchhiking to what was then [a] very popular international work camp where some organizations, in my case it was a branch of the Quakers, . . . set up camps in places where

there was need. . . . In one case we went into Holland after a flood and did cleanup, same in Austria, or in Norway we blasted a road, . . . this kind of stuff. That was really high times . . . that made me begin to see how nice it is when people get together and manage to organize for a common purpose.²²

Rupp became a teacher, and to his surprise his immigration application to Canada was accepted. Arriving by boat in 1958, he picked fruit in southern Ontario to repay his fare and then found administrative work at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. He saved enough to buy a tea house in Horseshoe Bay, BC, hoping also to make pottery, but, in his words, the business “flopped” because “Horseshoe Bay is hamburger country.” After owning an art gallery in Vancouver for a few years, the couple had recouped enough money to buy a small property on Denman Island, where Rupp thought he might finally attempt to live in a way that reflected the inspiration he had felt working cooperatively with the Quakers as a teenager in Germany:

We didn’t necessarily, primarily, go back to the land; for us we were four couples living in Vancouver . . . looking for land. . . . It was a real attempt, failed attempt I might add, to invent a co-operative lifestyle.²³

When his son was about to enter school, Rupp decided to move his family to Germany, where his son would learn German and become acquainted with his relatives. With Rupp’s departure, Kennedy became chief editorialist and frequent “Bits & Pieces” columnist. Although his voice and politics tended to dominate the *Denman Rag and Bone*, the viewpoints of others also appeared regularly—and they were not always in agreement with Kennedy. The newsletter conveyed countercultural approaches to island living, but it also attempted to address the concerns of the entire population, which were frequently discussed at local community meetings.

Ratepayers associations and community clubs were important forums for debate on all of the islands. Because of the small populations

of the areas involved, many of the meetings of these groups resembled old-fashioned town meetings where issues were discussed by a large proportion of the community, in contrast to the professionalized, superficial, mass media presentations so often found in the larger urban municipalities.²⁴

The *Denman Rag and Bone* regularly recorded concerns and debates raised in the ratepayers meetings on Denman. Not surprisingly, the back-to-the-landers and some of the long-time residents often represented different perspectives. With regard to the Islands Trust legislation, the back-to-the-landers, alarmed over resource depletion and uncontrolled development, welcomed the possibility of greater control that the new legislation represented. Back-to-the-land settler values often clashed with those of the other stakeholders on the island. Forming the bulk of the back-to-the-land settlers, the baby boom generation, unlike preceding generations, had the luxury of a relatively peaceful existence coupled with financial security, which allowed them to focus on issues of equality and environmental protection.²⁵ The larger landowners, in contrast, worried over what the new act might mean for their ability to manage their property, including their right to subdivide should they wish. Inhabiting the middle ground in the debates were the recent retirees and perhaps a substantial number of island residents.

How representative of the back-to-the-land opinion was the *Denman Rag and Bone*? Given the large number of contributors to both its production and its content over the years of its existence, the substance of the letters in response to its editorials, and the thirty interviews I conducted between 2005 and 2008, it seems safe to conclude that the newsletter reflected back-to-the-land opinion accurately. As for land development issues, certainly some back-to-the-landers held land cooperatively, which meant their interests in subdividing that land might have differed somewhat, but not substantially. The key issues with development, according to the *Denman Rag and Bone* were scale and resource use, including, in particular, depletion of the water table and potential bottlenecks at the ferry terminal. As Kennedy phrased it in the first issue, “logging and road widening . . . along with

rip-off subdivisions do far more to destroy the ‘unique amenities and environment’ than does some poor citizen erecting a supplementary outhouse.”²⁶

When the *Denman Rag and Bone* was founded, back-to-the-landers had been on the island for no more than five years. With the imminent passage of the Islands Trust Act in June 1974, the newsletter provided timely information to islanders about the many issues surrounding this piece of legislation.²⁷ At this point the actual control each island would have in developing its own bylaws and policies was yet to be determined, as were the duties of the elected trustees. An editorial in the *Denman Rag and Bone* read, “we believe that this island is at a critical point in its current stage of development. How we approach that point will in large measure determine the kind of place it will become.”²⁸ Writers for the *Denman Rag and Bone* felt that every citizen living on the island should have a clear understanding and full awareness of the many issues facing their surroundings.

Despite initial enthusiasm for the new legislation and the possibility of thereby gaining increased control over the pace of development on the island, the *Denman Rag and Bone* did not offer an unmitigated endorsement:

Lest our apparent editorial bias in favour of the Trust Act be misconstrued to mean uncritical acceptance, we repeat certain questions asked in our first issue. An obvious one: while the act clearly intends to muscle into Regional Board territory . . . it seems to avoid very adroitly stepping on the toes of fellow ministers such as Highways and Forestry. What influence will the Island Committee have on the policies of those departments, as they affect the islands?²⁹

Whether these issues concerned the two lakes on the island, road widening, herbicides, tourism, the hydro company, or development, any one of them had the ability to negatively impact the environment of Denman Island and the quality of life there. Fundamentally, water quantity or quality underlay all of the issues.

By the end of 1979, when the *Denman Rag and Bone* ceased publication, much had been accomplished in averting some of the more flagrant disregard of bylaws by developers. Logging companies and even government departments had learned to consult islanders before unilaterally initiating action on the island. Ratepayers meetings were much better attended, a new environmental group had been created—Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE)—and a bylaw support group had been formed to research and support the island’s zoning bylaws.

CONTESTED VISIONS

CHICKADEE LAKE

One of two lakes on the island, Chickadee Lake was a source of contention between new and longer-term residents, and it was discussed frequently in the *Denman Rag and Bone* during its early years of publication. Tension built over the fact that many of the newer residents (by no means all) enjoyed nude swimming in the lake, which, not surprisingly, offended some of the original islanders. The most vocal of those who took offence was Wes Piercy, president of the Recreation Committee at the time. Piercy, like many local islanders, had fond memories of swimming at Chickadee Lake as a child and wanted his grandchildren to be able to enjoy the lake as he had, and nude swimming by a bunch of “hippies” did not fit with his vision. Weldwood of Canada, a subsidiary of United States Plywood, had acquired a portion of the land adjacent to the lake, which it managed as a tree farm, and ostensibly out of civic duty—but more likely for strategic reasons—had proposed a picnic-site development at the lake. This project involved “opening it up.” The company proposed clearing away trees and brush, hauling in loads of sand, creating a parking lot, and adding garbage cans and picnic tables. This proposal seemed the perfect solution to Piercy; it would open the site to greater public scrutiny and effectively reduce the likelihood that nude swimmers would find the lake an attractive location.

At a July ratepayers meeting, Weldwood representative W. A. Hopwood informed the community that the company planned to construct a logging road nearby, asserting that “no permit is needed [for the road], we just build it.” Furthermore, while a tree farm is normally defined as an area of land managed to ensure a continuous supply of wood for commercial production, Hopwood informed those present that a “tree farm relates to tax status, not forestry status.”³⁰ Close proximity of a logging road would hardly enhance enjoyment of the new picnic site, to say nothing of the obvious environmental impacts to the lake and its water quality. Rupp, in a *Denman Rag and Bone* editorial, questioned whether the increasing demand for recreational access to the lake was incompatible with the necessity to preserve a potable freshwater supply.³¹ Beyond the back-to-the-land crowd, according to a later editorial, the Denman Island Planning Study of 1971 had recommended the lake be preserved in its “natural” state, as did the regional district’s *Evaluation of Proposed Greenbelt Sites*, which went a step further and suggested acquisition of the lake and its surrounding land to “prevent developments harmful to wildlife.” Finally, the proposed community plan recommended that the lake be “preserved in its natural state and not opened up for tourist use.”³²

Peter McGuigan, Harold Walton (president of the Ratepayers’ Association³³), and others visited the lake to provide recommendations for Weldwood. They discovered that the company had already begun to dump sand in a “tasteless nature” but had been forced to desist by adjacent property owners. When McGuigan reported their findings at the next ratepayers meeting, “instead of discussion,” he encountered “loud shouts of comic book treason . . . from the back bench,” ending “with a suggestion that those who didn’t agree [with the company’s actions] should leave the island.” In fact, McGuigan reported, he had wanted to suggest that a *small* picnic site be developed on Chickadee Lake, providing attention was paid to the ecology of the lake and its long-term value to islanders and the people of the province.³⁴ Finally, the Ratepayers’ Association concluded that none of the sites suggested by Weldwood was acceptable to the community.

Thinking the matter settled, those attending a subsequent ratepayers meeting were surprised to discover that Piercy, of the Recreation Committee, had made a behind-the-scenes agreement with Weldwood approving the site that had been rejected by the ratepayers. Asked by Piercy to support his action, Walton insisted on a meeting between Weldwood, ratepayers, and the Recreation Committee.³⁵ Apparently no resolution was achieved, because a year later, Walton, in his role as one of the newly elected island trustees, asked the Islands Trust to intervene to help save the lake, as Weldwood had made the arbitrary decision to go ahead with building a logging road a mere 110 feet from the lakeshore. This meeting was chaired by the Islands Trust manager, Judy Parr, and although it was reported that Weldwood managed to sidestep the entire matter, the final result was that a small picnic site was established at the lake, while the proposed logging road was averted due to the near consensus against it among islanders. Concern over roads and their impact on the watershed was not limited to logging roads; however, the impact of road widening at the expense of waterways or aesthetics was not as readily evident and required more time and discussion.

ROAD MAINTENANCE

Roads and the decision-making process within the department of highways endlessly frustrated many islanders, who found themselves pondering whose authority determined what seemed a continuous round of widening and grading, and what logic was behind these decisions. Furthermore, the heavy equipment used had to be ferried over for each job, occupying valuable ferry space. Manfred Rupp editorialized on why the roads kept changing and who made the decisions that led to the “dreadful mess we see spreading along our roads.” He argued,

if we didn't know any better we would have to conclude that what we see is one bunch of machines preparing the way for another bunch of machines, with no observable interference from human intelligence. You talk to any of the

higher-ups in the Highways establishment and they will invariably justify their heavy-handedness by referring to the needs of machines.³⁶

Rupp's frustration lay in the fact that decisions about roads in unincorporated areas were made by the provincial Ministry of Transportation and Highways, while actual road maintenance work involved little interaction between the local population and the decision makers.³⁷ The Denman Island road foreman, Cliff Grieve, stated that road maintenance and budgetary decisions were made in Courtenay, on Vancouver Island.³⁸ Taking matters into their own hands, islanders formed a roads committee charged with investigating problems. This committee reported its findings to the Ratepayers' Association: in addition to excessive widening, roadside vegetation had been destroyed, topsoil removed, cliff-top vegetation uprooted, potentially leading to erosion, and the old cedar fences for which Denman was known were often carelessly battered down. Kennedy noted in an editorial that "road 'improvement' is a touchy subject hereabouts, especially with certain local statesmen who tend to go into an irrational froth when the subject is raised." The reference to "local statesmen" was no doubt directed at the two elected trustees, Harold Walton, former president of the Ratepayers' Association, and Marcus Isbister, whose family had lived on the island for generations. From the back-to-the-land perspective, winding, tree-lined roads, seldom found in the city or suburbs, formed a fundamental part of the island's unique attractiveness, and the highways department's uniform approach of standardizing roads across the province was ruinous to the Gulf Islands. In Kennedy's opinion, the Islands Trust had not "demonstrated much leadership" on the issue, and he "hoped that Ratepayers could fill the breach"; in fact, Kennedy suggested that, "if you're interested, Ratepayers is where it's happening."³⁹ This last quip marked a significant change in the makeup of the association, in fact, as it had only been two years since the Ratepayers' Association had seemed to exclude the back-to-the-landers. Now, Kennedy was proud of the fact that discussion was

already “under way concerning the construction of pathways for pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders along main roadways.”⁴⁰

On a more humorous note, beaver ponds were found to be another casualty of the highways department, which found the ponds and their inhabitants a nuisance to road maintenance. The government’s solution was often to fill in the pond or at least the portion deemed necessary to the road, culvert, or bridge. Not surprisingly, this caused yet more friction between the department and islanders, or at least those islanders with strong notions about watershed preservation and equally strong beliefs that roads and bridges tended to be overbuilt. Following a recent bridge-building project along his road, Kennedy reported that the department of highways had sent

a stiff reprimand to the residents of Pickle’s road who were accused of feeding fertility pills to the beavers in a baldfaced attempt to undermine the Highways Dept bridge-building endeavour. The Catholic members of the accused were particularly shaken because pills (to stop or multiply) are a no-no in Papist circles. A Papal Bull threatening excommunication to anyone counselling fertility manipulation of any kind (other than the Rhythm Method—never very popular with beavers) has been posted on the new bridge which, despite a certain appearance of overkill, has been well constructed and will, we hope, serve Island needs for years to come.⁴¹

Road debates highlighted both aesthetics and watershed worries and fed into discussions of island tourism.

TOURISM

Although tourism was the third largest industry in BC, it remained an industry islanders loved to hate—and on this point, both newcomers and old-timers could agree. As Kennedy argued, “they’re just folks away from home,” but “too often they’re a pain in the ass.”⁴² He also quoted a 1971 article by Doras Kirk, who was born and raised on the

island, to demonstrate, presumably, that it was not just island newcomers who harboured antipathy to tourists. Drawing from a survey, Kirk had stated that “Denman Island Ratepayers want Denman Island for Denman residents, not tourists.”⁴³ The survey had shown that residents believed a significant influx of tourists would create serious problems, including inadequate supervision of parks, increased fire hazards, and garbage disposal issues. Both of Denman’s lakes, licensed for water supply, would be unsuitable for tourists, as the lakes were small and vulnerable to overuse. As well, city folks, accustomed to an endless supply, would likely use excessive amounts of water, affecting Denman’s water table. Finally the report also noted that an increase in tourist traffic would stir up more dust from unpaved roads. Five years later not much had changed; a great number of tourists still posed problems due to inadequate facilities, Kennedy argued. Summer homes were “popping up on East road . . . like chickweed amongst the cabbages.” They seemed to go hand in hand with “the grating whine of trail-bikes” that was “becoming as familiar as long ferry line-ups.” Kennedy’s description continued: “Sahara-size dust-storms chase speeding cars down gravel roads. And it leaves a trail of debris behind it. Beer bottles, candy wrappers and other crap begin to litter the shoreline of our beloved Chickadee Lake.”⁴⁴ Much as transient hippies were initially lumped in with back-to-the-landers due to their appearance, it is possible that summer residents, who returned year after year and often owned property on the island, were being unfairly lumped in with the casual tourists.

Nevertheless, although some summer residents probably made an effort to partake in community events, for the most part there was a sense that their presence on the island was only fleeting. Some stayed for as little as a week or two, thus contributing little to the community other than increases in traffic congestion and property taxes.⁴⁵ The community and the trustees, argued Kennedy, had to come up with innovative ways to accommodate tourists and, especially, consider what kind of tourist they wanted to attract. In this case, the Islands Trust was mandated with a dual and somewhat conflicting mandate. On the one hand, it was to preserve the rural flavour of the islands, but

on the other, it had to balance that with its mandate to preserve the islands for all residents of the province. Tourism that involved hiking, bicycling, horseback riding, sailing, and kayaking were activities that best fit the bill, suggested Kennedy. A certain degree of consensus seemed to exist among islanders on this matter. The survey reported by Kirk demonstrated that antipathy toward tourists was not exclusive to back-to-the-landers. Kennedy broadened the issue to include cottagers. Islanders were particularly sensitive to development and created strict bylaws to protect island resources. Any flouting of these bylaws by an outsider brought all islanders together in opposition.

OVERUSE AND ABUSE OF ISLAND WATER

The *Denman Rag and Bone* was highly effective at galvanizing support and organizing protests concerning water resources, framing such issues as outsider interference with island bylaws or as serious threats to health.

GRAHAM LAKE SUBDIVISION

Frank Rainsford, an off-island developer, was at the heart of a long-running and contentious issue on the island. His proposed subdivision on Graham Lake, known as Seaview Estates, was to consist of twenty-two lots, but Rainsford later sought approval for fifty-three lots. Though it is unclear whether the original twenty-two lots had already been formally approved, many islanders considered fifty-three lots an overly dense subdivision. “In 1976, Trustees Walton and Isbister received Island support to avert [this] flagrant disregard of Denman’s Community Plan, Trust objectives, and local land development restrictions,” reported Paul Bailey.⁴⁶ Disallowed by the province in 1976, the proposal reappeared in 1979; this time the senior approving officer for the provincial government, Don South, stated that he saw no reason to prevent the development.⁴⁷ “Two years ago,” according to Bailey, “the same man had told Denman representatives that he would take Rainsford to court rather than offer final approval status.” As early as 1974, Harold Walton, then president of the Ratepayers’

Association, had reassured fellow islanders, with regard to the impending Trust legislation, that “Denman Island is one of a few islands fortunate enough to have subdivision and zoning by-laws already in effect.” He also noted at the time, “as Municipal Affairs Minister [Jim] Lorimer has stated unequivocally, the new legislation will not be used to either change or circumvent these existing by-laws.” Additionally, the minister had in the past vetoed the wishes of islanders, whereas the new legislation offered recourse to the courts. In a letter dated May 30, 1974, Lorimer also stated that “it is the intent that the formation of the Trust will actually give the people of the Islands more say in their own affairs.”⁴⁸ But a change in government with the election of Bill Bennett’s Social Credit Party had apparently negated these gains.

Rainsford’s proposal and the province’s response left islanders justifiably furious at this clear contempt for their bylaws. “To combat this recent insult to public and Island political and legal sensibilities,” Bailey wrote, “Denman Trustees Glen Snook and Harlene Holm have contacted the news media to spread the word.”⁴⁹ The local television station, CHEK-TV, “featured a short but to-the-point interview with Harlene [Holm] and C.B.C. aired the story twice on their ‘Good Morning Show.’”⁵⁰ Both trustees later received phone calls and letters pledging moral and even financial support should the issue become a class action suit. At the same time they learned that other islands had had similar problems with the same developer. The only people they did not hear from were Don South or Highways Minister Alex Fraser.⁵¹

This issue was finally resolved, but only after islanders took their collective protest to Victoria. On July 9, 1979, eighty islanders held a bylaw funeral in front of the Parliament Buildings. The islanders, young and old, marched in two-by-two formation; a protester at the front held an RIP sign representing the death of their bylaws, while the rest followed quietly. Next came a drummer beating a dirge, and those bringing up the rear carried a coffin that contained a copy of the island’s bylaws. As they stood solemnly tossing bylaws into a bonfire, “word came . . . that the Minister of Highways had consented to meet with a smaller group in the near future.”⁵² The public demonstration

by so many islanders, coupled with the resulting media attention, had the desired impact: the province rescinded approval for the Seaview Estates development.⁵³ Well-organized street theatre had persuaded the provincial authorities to respect local attitudes toward development proposals. The issue of respect for island bylaws by both outside developers and government had drawn islanders of all ages to protest, but the underlying issue remained the overconsumption of water from Graham Lake.

BC HYDRO'S PROPOSAL

Similarly, the *Denman Rag and Bone* helped inform and rally supporters to protest a proposed underwater 500-kilovolt transmission line from Cheekye, on the BC mainland, to Dunsmuir, Vancouver Island. Because the “underwater cable is encased in a pressurized oil bath”, according to Kel Kelly of the Ad Hoc Committee, the route was designed to intersect with a number of islands in order “to minimize the number of underwater splices (which pose a threat of breakage and leaking into the water).”⁵⁴ The mainland section of the line would run overland from Cheekye to Nelson Island. From there one proposal was to continue the line westward to Texada, Jedediah and then Lasqueti Island or possibly Hornby or Denman.⁵⁵ At that point it would go underwater to Dunsmuir. It would take months of study before BC Hydro and the government were able to determine the best route. In the meantime, residents from all three islands did not waste time; they provided pages and pages of evidence that among the biggest threats posed by these kinds of power lines in any location were the herbicides used to keep brush under control. The herbicide of choice, the islanders discovered to their dismay, was 2,4-D. Allegedly, the use of this herbicide on Galiano Island in 1972 had contaminated the water source, leading to two children being born with deformities.⁵⁶ On March 25, 1978, a special meeting was scheduled at Denman Island’s community hall that would include speakers from Lasqueti Island and a proposal to form “a coalition of B.C. communities being adversely affected by Hydro policies.”⁵⁷ Moreover, the proposed power line brought BC Hydro’s entire operation, from their stated need for

this power to their finances, under scrutiny.⁵⁸ Opponents confronted BC Hydro officials at public meetings.⁵⁹ People from Denman, Hornby, Lasqueti, and various districts on Vancouver Island attended these meetings to present damaging findings that questioned the very competence of the utility and the government in making these decisions. A protest action was scheduled for Parksville for April 18, 1978, and a public meeting at Courtenay for April 20.⁶⁰ Another *Denman Rag and Bone* article informed readers that “Don Lockstead, MLA for Mackenzie, . . . called for a full public enquiry, as have the Islands Trust and the Lasqueti Defence Committee.”⁶¹ Kennedy attended a BC Energy Coalition conference on Lasqueti Island, alongside fifty delegates from across the province, at which it was agreed that the local “Ad Hoc Hydro committee . . . will continue to focus on the proposed Cheekeye-Dunsmuir transmission line.”⁶²

Finally, in the fall of 1978, the islands learned their fate. BC Hydro had made the decision to “cross the strait directly from Texada Island to Vancouver Island thus eliminating further island hopping over Lasqueti or other islands.” *Denman Rag and Bone* contributor Dave Fraser noted that

after a year of claiming an island crossing was necessary to avoid an underwater splice, BC Hydro has reversed its position and will use an underwater splice! This was a victory of sorts for the Lasqueti Islanders and a relief to us on Denman Island.⁶³

Despite their success in avoiding the use of herbicides in this case, islanders had to remain vigilant when it came to other threats to their ecosystem.

WELDWOOD ON HERBICIDES

On June 28, 1979, the Denman Island Trustees received a copy of a permit from the Pesticide Control Board granting Weldwood permission to manually spray Tordon 22K (or Picloram) on a section of its woodlot to control the growth of maple trees, which the company did not want on its land. Maples were to be felled and the stumps treated

to prevent sprouting.⁶⁴ Islanders had been warned of the proposal; however, the notice was so obscure that only one islander happened to find the sign. Leslie Dunsmore had been walking her dog some distance behind her house in an area without roads or obvious paths, much of which was marshland. Weldwood had already logged this quarter section, so it was not easy walking, but Dunsmore explained that she “liked bush-whacking.” Despite the relative inaccessibility of the spot, she “saw a sign that was posted where nobody would ever see it, which really made me mad!” The sign informed the unlikely reader that Weldwood was soon going to “hack and squirt spray” Tordon 22K on the quarter section block of woodland to control weed species. The public were asked to report any concerns to an address provided on the sign. Dunsmore immediately wrote a letter of complaint and asked if the company knew there were about five wells off the marshland, adding that she was “concerned that the actual chemical could poison my bees and I made my living as a beekeeper.”⁶⁵ In response, Dunsmore received

a double registered letter saying I was scheduled to be heard before this panel. I later found out that I was to appear in an actual court of law. So we started looking into it and found out that Tordon 22K is the main ingredient in Agent Orange. It was me who had to present because it was an actual court of law, but there were eight of us [i.e., three members of the Community Planning Action Committee and those who prepared the case: Harlene Holm, Tom Lang, Jim Bohlen, Paul Beauchemin, and Dunsmore].⁶⁶

Dunsmore wrote an article for the *Denman Rag and Bone*, outlining the research she and the others had conducted into the toxicity and impact on humans of Tordon 22K, the herbicide Weldwood was proposing to spray on maple stumps on Section 7 close to the Hornby Island ferry dock. Dunsmore made the obvious point that maple seeds seldom sprout in a conifer forest, as the firs shade them from

the light at a crucial time in summer. Furthermore, maple seeds are wind-borne: “Thus the maple trees surrounding Section 7 will easily spread their seeds right back into the forest patch being eradicated this year.”⁶⁷ The Herbicide Appeal Board heard the appeal to rescind the permit on August 14, 1979; the appellants included a Regional Board representative, three members of the Community Planning Action Committee, and Dunsmore.

“I literally stayed up and crammed the night before,” Dunsmore recalled.⁶⁸ Kennedy attended the public hearing and reported on Dunsmore’s presentation of her twenty-eight-page brief: “After something more than an hour, she stops. There is a split second of rapt, attentive silence and then the room explodes into prolonged applause. One senses palpable delight at having witnessed an extraordinary tour de force by a superb mind.”⁶⁹ Kennedy concluded his article by noting that “widespread involvement on the herbicide issue forced Weldwood to cancel its controversial spray program.” The Weldwood manager admitted that the company “had not anticipated this level of public reaction.”⁷⁰ Dunsmore’s presentation, Kennedy’s presence at the hearing, and the applause indicate the high and effective level of community engagement with the prospect of pollution of water sources on the island. Despite differences within the community, issues related to water could elicit a great degree of agreement.

CONCLUSION

By the 1960s, the provincial government of British Columbia had recognized the vulnerability of the Gulf Islands to overdevelopment, a recognition that coincided with the arrival of the back-to-the-landers. Residents on each island covered by the Islands Trust legislation had legitimate concerns about threats to the preservation of their quality and quantity of water, whether from overlogging, improper road construction, increased tourism, small lot development, or contamination by poisonous chemicals. Indeed, the general public had become increasingly aware of the latter threat with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962. By a convergence of circumstances and

personalities, the *Denman Rag and Bone* newsletter provided a venue for such discussions at the time, linking old-time island residents and new arrivals in a grassroots exercise over a series of environmental issues. The *Denman Rag and Bone* fought the battles and recorded the victories in the struggle for local control over development plans and the quality of water resources. Like the *Denman Rag and Bone* itself, these victories were largely those of the counterculture. Many back-to-the-landers on Denman Island, as elsewhere in Canada, were recent arrivals attempting to flee the impacts of industrial capitalism—only to discover that, instead of flight, their only choice was to stand and fight.

NOTES

- 1 Des Kennedy, “Hack and Squirt,” *Denman Rag and Bone* (hereafter *Rag and Bone*), issue 32, summer special (August 1979), 20. Tordon is a trade name for the herbicide Picloram.
- 2 Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- 3 While conceivably a bridge could be built between Denman and Vancouver Island (or the mainland, as Denman Islanders call it), the small island’s remoteness and the relatively small population on Vancouver Island, where one end of the bridge would be located, keep Denman as a small maritime island ecology with all of its vulnerabilities.
- 4 *Gulf Islands Ecosystem Community Atlas* (Vancouver: Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society—British Columbia Chapter/Parks Canada, 2005), 8, accessed 6 September 2012, <http://cpaws.org/uploads/pubs/atlas-gulf.pdf>.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 6 Jim Bohlen, author of *The New Pioneer’s Handbook: Getting Back to the Land in an Energy-Scarce World* (New York: Schocken, 1975) and a founding member of Greenpeace, moved to Denman Island in 1974. Some consider Bohlen and his wife, Marie, to be the island’s most famous environmentalists; while that may have been the case, they were not involved with the *Rag and Bone*, nor were they mentioned during the thirty interviews I conducted on the island. This may have been due to their macro environmental focus, which differed vastly from the micro focus of the majority of back-to-the-landers on

- the island. (This chapter is from a larger study of the back-to-the-land movement on Cape Breton, Denman, Hornby, and Lasqueti islands.)
- 7 Linda Adams, "In Depth," on Islands Trust website, accessed 29 January 2011, <http://www.islandstrust.bc.ca/tc/pdf/in-depthcaoita.pdf>.
 - 8 Robert L. Bish, *Local Government in British Columbia* (Richmond, BC: Union of British Columbia Municipalities in co-operation with University of Victoria School of Public Administration, 1987), 33.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, 60. The source for population figures is the 1981 Census of Canada. Not only was there a lack of island representation on the regional boards, but some islands were assigned to regional districts that made little geographical sense. Lasqueti Island, with a population of 316 permanent residents, was part of the Powell River Regional District (population 19,364), which was far to the east on the mainland with no transportation links to Lasqueti. It would have made far more sense for Lasqueti to have been in the same regional district as Denman and Hornby islands, with which it has social and cultural similarities.
 - 10 Bish, *Local Government in British Columbia*, 59.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, 46.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, 59.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, 59–60.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, 60–61.
 - 15 According to census data, the population of Denman Island was 250 permanent residents in 1971 and 589 permanent residents in 1981.
 - 16 Des Kennedy, interview with the author, Denman Island, 26 January 2008.
 - 17 Sandy Kennedy, *Rag and Bone*, issue 18; mislabeled as 17 (July 1976), 7. Sandy Kennedy worked for Statistics Canada as a census taker; she gives this figure as the approximate number of permanent residents on the island. The number of permanent households was approximately 167, and vacation homes approximately 55. Denman Islanders often compare the size of their island, at 51 square kilometres, to that of Manhattan (87 square kilometres). Of course, this comparison is not useful for ecological purposes, because Manhattan sits in the Hudson River and does not have the same freshwater limitations.
 - 18 Editor, "Dear Reader," *Rag and Bone*, issue 25 (February 1978), 2.
 - 19 "Bits & Pieces" or "Bits and Pieces"—the title format sometimes changed within the same issue.
 - 20 Kennedy, interview.
 - 21 *Ibid.*
 - 22 Manfred Rupp, interview with the author, Denman Island, 27 November 2007.
 - 23 *Ibid.* It was a common practice during this period for people with a desire to own a piece of land to purchase property

- as a group; in this case, eight individuals living in Vancouver (four couples) searched for land together.
- 24 Bish, *Local Government in British Columbia*, 40.
- 25 Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 3-18. For further insight see Kathryn Harrison, "Environmental Protection in British Columbia: Postmaterial Values, Organized Interests, and Party Politics" in *Politics, Policy, and Government in British Columbia*, ed. R. K. Carty (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996), 290-311.
- 26 D. Kennedy, "The Islands Trust Act," *Rag and Bone*, issue 1 (May 1974), 12.
- 27 "The Islands Trust is a unique form of government, created by the province in 1974 to control unbridled development and to 'preserve and protect' the islands." Islands Trust Act, S.B.C. (1974), C43, accessed 19 September 2015, <http://www.islandstrust.bc.ca/trust-council/islands-trust-act/islands-trust-legislative-history.aspx>.
- 28 "Editorial," *Rag and Bone*, issue 2 (June 1974), 2.
- 29 Manfred Rupp, "Postscript," *Rag and Bone*, issue 2 (June 1974), 8.
- 30 W. A. Hopwood quoted in Manfred H. Rupp, "Commentary," *Rag and Bone*, issue 3 (July 1974), 8.
- 31 Rupp, "Commentary," 9.
- 32 Des Kennedy, "Editorial," *Rag and Bone*, issue 11 (June 1975), 2-3.
- 33 Walton was not a back-to-the-lander, nor an original settler, but one of the retirees who had moved to the island permanently.
- 34 Peter McGuigan, "Speakers' Corner," *Rag and Bone*, issue 4 (August 1974), 4.
- 35 Daphne Morrison, "Ratepayers' Report," *Rag and Bone*, issue 4 (August 1974), 12.
- 36 Manfred Rupp, "Roads, Roads, Roads . . .," *Rag and Bone*, issue 6 (November 1974), 3.
- 37 Bish, *Local Government in British Columbia*, 89.
- 38 Manfred Rupp and Daphne Morrison, "The Denman Bump and Grind," *Rag and Bone*, issue 8 (January 1975), 8.
- 39 Des Kennedy, "Editorial," *Rag and Bone*, issue 16 (March 1976), 3. The Ratepayers' Association is frequently referred to simply as "Ratepayers."
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Beverly Meyer and Des Kennedy, "Rumours Galore," *Rag and Bone*, issue 12 (Summer 1975), 18.
- 42 Des Kennedy, "Editorial," *Rag and Bone*, issue 18; mislabeled as 17 (July 1976), 2.
- 43 Kirk, quoted in Kennedy, "Editorial," (July 1976), 2.
- 44 Kennedy, "Editorial," (July 1976), 3.
- 45 As property taxes rose for all islanders, it can be argued that

- summer residents obviously had sufficient income for a second residence, whereas islanders were limited in their ability to generate greater income year after year.
- 46 Paul Bailey, "Bits and Pieces," *Rag and Bone*, issue 31 (May 1979), 3.
- 47 Bish notes that "for the unincorporated areas of regional districts, the approving officer is an employee of the Ministry of Highways and Transportation" (*Local Government in British Columbia*, 112).
- 48 "Editorial," *Rag and Bone*, issue 2 (June 1974), 6.
- 49 Bailey, "Bits and Pieces," 3–4.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Kennedy noted in an earlier edition of the *Rag and Bone* that "approval of subdivisions still rested with the Department of Highways; planning and zoning remained under Regional Board control. The trust participated in these matters on an advisory basis. It quickly became evident that Regional Boards resented Trust interference in what had been their sole domain" ("Bedtime Reading," *Rag and Bone*, issue 22 [May 1977], 16). This could explain the apparent about-face by the department of highways.
- 52 Kel Kelly, "By-Law Burial," *Rag and Bone*, issue 32, summer special (August 1979), 2–3.
- 53 Des Kennedy, "Check the Malls for Scowls & Folly," *Rag and Bone*, issue 33 (Christmas 1979), 3.
- 54 Kel Kelly, "an electrifying experience," *Rag and Bone*, issue 25 (February 1978), 17.
- 55 Des Kennedy, "an electrifying experience," *Rag and Bone*, issue 25 (February 1978), 15.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Kelly, "an electrifying experience," 17.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Des Kennedy, "I Protest!" *Rag and Bone*, issue 27 (July 1978), 10.
- 60 "Ace Rolls On," *Rag and Bone*, issue 26 (April 1978), 4.
- 61 Robbie Newton, "Hydro," *Rag and Bone*, issue 26 (April 1978), 15.
- 62 Des Kennedy, "Bits and Pieces," *Rag and Bone*, issue 28 (October 1978), 19.
- 63 D. Fraser, "Blinded by the Light," *Rag and Bone*, issue 29, *A Year in the Life of an Island: Special Edition* (January 1979), 26.
- 64 Leslie Dunsmore, "Hack and Squirt," *Rag and Bone*, issue 32, summer special (August 1979), 18.
- 65 Leslie Dunsmore, interview with the author, 11 December 2007.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Dunsmore, "Hack and Squirt," 19.
- 68 Dunsmore, interview.
- 69 Kennedy, "Hack and Squirt," 20.
- 70 Kennedy, "Check the Malls for Scowls & Folly," 3.