



## CANADIAN COUNTERCULTURES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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## Dollars for “Deadbeats”: Opportunities for Youth Grants and the Back-to-the-Land Movement on British Columbia’s Sunshine Coast

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*Matt Cavers*

Back-to-the-land groups, in the 1960s and 1970s, distanced themselves from conventional authority in a number of ways. Geographically, they moved into rural areas where reminders of the social mainstream—such as disapproving neighbours—would be farther away. They identified and retreated from political evils, as did the large number of Americans who migrated into Canada to avoid the draft. Morally and spiritually, they sought to live “in step with the natural world rather than against it” by setting up rural homesteads and communes where they attempted to practice self-sufficient living.<sup>1</sup> But despite their distrust of authority, back-to-the-land groups were content to take advantage of state funding for their projects when it was available. For a short period in the early 1970s, the Canadian federal government provided modest funding to projects through an experimental youth employment program: Opportunities for Youth (OFY). Some of these funds were granted to a cluster of countercultural back-to-the-land

groups based in the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia. The government made these small subsidies as part of a broader strategy to quell social unrest in a turbulent time, and by doing so, they made some unlikely allies in the back-to-the-land movement. On the other hand, the money had unintended effects, such as inflaming the already-tense relationship between counterculturalists and their skeptical rural neighbours.

The Department of the Secretary of State, under Pierre Elliot Trudeau's Liberal government, introduced OFY in the spring of 1971. OFY differed from traditional job-creation programs in that it directly funded projects proposed and initiated by young people. Its unconventional approach reflected the fact that the federal government had created the program not only to reduce unemployment, but also to address growing disenchantment among the youth of Canada. Shaken by the events of 1970—a year that included the October Crisis, riots in Regina and Vancouver, and an unprecedented proliferation of unorganized youth travel—the federal government was anxious to provide “meaningful activities” with which to occupy the nation's youth and thereby cool the social climate. In 1971, OFY represented the largest single expenditure in the federal government's \$67.2 million youth employment program, which otherwise included funding for increased hiring in the public service, militia and cadet training, group travel programs such as the Young Voyageurs, facilities for individual travel such as youth hostels, and a handful of other programs and services. In its first year, OFY achieved mixed results.<sup>2</sup>

OFY was widely criticized for having been conceived and put into practice too hastily. Announced in March 1971, by the end of April it had received 8,000 applications for summer grants, of which 2,312 eventually received funding. The number of applications overwhelmed the program's small administration, and in May 1971, its initial allotment of \$14.7 million was increased to \$24.7 million. In the House of Commons, the parliamentary secretary to the minister of state pointed out that the OFY program had social rather than financial goals, and he boasted that, with the program, “For the first time, a government is financing creativity.”<sup>3</sup> But the program faced hurdles

as it began operating: many project grants awarded in the first year arrived late, and many went to projects that the public found objectionable, such as drug counselling services, underground newspapers, and, in British Columbia, communes.<sup>4</sup> In all, just over 8 percent of the total number of applications came from British Columbians; these provided 12.9 percent of the successful submissions and received 9.7 percent of the total funds, some \$2.4 million.<sup>5</sup> On the national scale, OFY's legacy is ambiguous. While the program provided valuable start-up funds for many projects that continued after the grants had been spent<sup>6</sup>, the federal government's own report on the first year of OFY raised concerns over disorganization in the bureaucracy and the loose criteria that were used to identify successful applications. Subsequent work has noted that its grants—typically up to \$1,000 per project employee—were too small to meet the needs of students returning to university in the fall.<sup>7</sup>

This chapter reviews the effects of OFY on a local scale. In British Columbia, over thirty grants were awarded to countercultural back-to-the-land projects, many of which described themselves as communes. Over half of these grants, accounting for nearly \$40,000 of government funds, subsidized projects located on the Sunshine Coast, an eighty-some-kilometre stretch of mainland coastline north of Vancouver.<sup>8</sup> This concentration of projects provides a case study, which draws upon personal interviews, OFY project files from Library and Archives Canada, and contemporary newspapers from the Sunshine Coast and beyond. This case contributes to the literature on Canada's counterculture era in two key areas. First, examining a selection of funded projects from a local area allows us to reevaluate some of OFY's successes and failures in detail. For instance, I show that OFY funding decisions were probably made, in this case, on the basis of friendship between applicants and the OFY bureaucracy. Such lapses exposed the federal government to the wrath of the local media. And, while their recipients welcomed them, the grants generated a burst of local hostility that left some of the recipients feeling alienated from their new neighbours. Second, OFY produced a document trail consisting of funding applications and project reports, and

its more colourful beneficiaries, such as the Sunshine Coast's back-to-the-landers, drew media attention. In general, the countercultural homesteads and communes of the 1970s left behind scant documentary evidence, but OFY serves as a rare access point into an alternative rural community in Canada, showing us that counterculture ideals popular across North America—such as self-reliant living close to nature and healthy alternative communities—also thrived in this isolated rural area. In contrast to some of the other chapters in this collection, this study illustrates the initial local hostility that greeted the back-to-the-land groups rather than the larger areas of consensus that counterculturalists forged with their neighbours over time. In this sense, the competition for government funds and the public oversight invited by the distribution of state moneys exacerbated existing suspicions.

## LOOKING FOR THE BACK-TO-THE-LAND MOVEMENT

British Columbia, by virtue of its reputation for natural beauty and underpopulated land—not to mention its location outside of the United States—drew large numbers of countercultural migrants in the back-to-the-land movement that took shape over the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. As former Powell River communitarian Mark Vonnegut put it in his memoir, *The Eden Express*, “Just about everyone, young and old, straights and freaks, wanted to stay up long into the night talking about [looking for land in British Columbia.]”<sup>9</sup> The back-to-the-land movement of the 1970s left its mark on British Columbia's landscape in the geographic distribution of alternative lifestyles, which, to this day, flourish in pockets such as the Slocan Valley, the northern Gulf Islands, and indeed, the Sunshine Coast. Yet for a part of the very recent past—the events discussed here are just more than four decades gone—the back-to-the-land movement in British Columbia is written only faintly on the historical record.

Indeed, it can be challenging to find evidence of the back-to-the-land movement's presence on the Sunshine Coast. For instance, while

the area's local history has been written and rewritten a handful of times, "hippies" appear only fleetingly in the two most widely read published accounts.<sup>10</sup> Even the most prolific of contemporary sources, the region's two weekly newspapers, mostly ignored the presence of the newcomers until the OFY grants were awarded in the spring of 1971. This was in spite of the fact the back-to-the-landers would have been clearly visible. The Sunshine Coast in 1971 was home to ten thousand residents, distributed between the villages of Gibsons and Sechelt as well as a handful of smaller settlements such as Roberts Creek, Halfmoon Bay, Pender Harbour, and Egmont. Then, as now, the only way to reach the Sunshine Coast other than flying or boating was to take the car ferry from West Vancouver to Gibsons. In such an (almost literally) insular community, young strangers, many of whom sported long hair, would have attracted attention.

Despite the near-silence of the local press, there are occasional signs from as early as 1967 and 1968 that participants in the emerging counterculture were gravitating to the Sunshine Coast: a classified ad in the alternative Vancouver weekly *The Georgia Straight* announced that a "young married couple" were hoping to find land on the Sunshine Coast "without [the] usual establishment hassle with payments"; the *Coast News* advertised a dance at the Roberts Creek Hall with Vancouver psychedelic rockers Papa Bear's Medicine Band; and the *Coast News* published a letter to the editor by radical Simon Fraser University professors Louis Feldhammer and Margaret Benston, who were outraged at the irony of having themselves been ejected from the Welcome Café in Gibsons for having long hair.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, two veterans of the Sunshine Coast counterculture scene, both of whom arrived in 1969, recalled finding a counterculture community well-established on the Sunshine Coast in that year.<sup>12</sup>

While infrequent, local newspaper coverage of issues related to the countercultural newcomers consistently took a hostile and judgmental tone. Both Sunshine Coast newspaper editors—Fred Cruice of the Gibsons *Coast News* and Douglas Wheeler of the Sechelt *Peninsula Times*—penned editorials as early as 1967 admonishing "hippies" for their alleged criminality and aversion to work. Occasional news

stories written prior to the OFY grants reveal the editors' bias against nonconformist young people. For instance, a group that included a local United Church minister approached the town council of Gibsons in 1971 to request support for a summer youth hostel. Council refused to support the proposal, and while both newspapers quoted the town's stridently conservative mayor, Wallace Peterson (he said that "we were never encouraged to bum and if young people choose to travel around the country then they should be prepared to pay their own way"), neither sought the opinions of the hostels' proponents. Cruice mused darkly in his editorial column that "we have problems now, without others showing up."<sup>13</sup>

The local media's otherwise pointed ignorance of the people they called "hippies" came to an end in the late spring of 1971, when the *Coast News* published the names, descriptions, and general locations of nineteen OFY-funded communes and back-to-the-land projects on the Sunshine Coast.<sup>14</sup> This exposure marked the beginning of a turbulent summer for the Sunshine Coast's back-to-the-landers. Before discussing the grants themselves and the controversy they engendered, though, I will address the program that awarded them.

## GUERRILLA BUREAUCRATS

Jennifer Keck and Wayne Fulks, in a chapter on Trudeau-era youth employment programs, playfully dub OFY's staff "the hip bureaucracy." While it was by no means the first "hip bureaucracy" of the era—the Company of Young Canadians undoubtedly deserves the same recognition, for instance—OFY was administered by a young staff who were well connected in alternative circles. The project officers responsible for OFY grants in British Columbia, employed by the Citizenship Development Branch of the Department of the Secretary of State, enjoyed considerable autonomy from their superiors in Ottawa. In the words of a former OFY bureaucrat, they could "get money into the hands of people who had good ideas and could spend it well," even if their funding decisions caused consternation in the media and on the ground.<sup>15</sup>

Ostensibly, OFY grants were to be given to students returning to school in the fall, “but other young people [were] not excluded” from the competition, and nor were landed immigrants. An OFY brochure explaining “how projects [were] picked,” reprinted in the *Coast News*, stated that projects would be selected based on the number of people they employed, the degree to which they involved young people, and whether they created new “services, programs or activities.” The brochure advised would-be applicants to obtain application forms from Canada Manpower centres, summer student employment centres, Secretary of State regional offices, Information Canada, and OFY’s head office in Ottawa.<sup>16</sup>

On the Sunshine Coast, few of the OFY recipients had to travel far to obtain application forms. In fact, it seems that some program staff actively sought out applicants in the counterculture and cleared the way for their applications. The most effective of these OFY insiders, it appears, was Ken Drushka. Later acclaimed as an author, Drushka worked for OFY in 1971 in a managerial capacity. According to a colleague, Drushka and his friend Colin Thompson were responsible for the majority of the grants that were awarded to back-to-the-land projects in British Columbia. Gregg Macdonald, who worked as a project officer at OFY in the summer of 1971, wryly recalled that by the time he began work early in the summer, “most of the [funding] decisions had already been made on handshakes between Colin Thompson, Ken Drushka, and the wayward youth of the province.”<sup>17</sup>

Archival material from OFY appears to confirm this observation. Of the ten evaluation sheets located for this research, seven included Ken Drushka’s name under “endorsement or sponsorship.” Applicants were clearly aware of the power this name would wield. Robert Morgan, requesting a grant for “Communal Land Development,” finished a detailed project description with a non sequitur: “This application was presented to this group by Mr. Ken Drushka.” A similar notation, also in Morgan’s handwriting, appeared on an application written by his neighbour John S. Gregg, for “Building a Pottery.” And when “Richard the Troll,” or Richard C. R. Schaller, addressed a personal letter to Ottawa project officer Ian Munro, requesting three



separate grants for the activities of the Legal Front Commune, he added in a postscript that “Ken Drushka is familiar with this project.” On OFY’s internal correspondence, an unidentified project officer noted that the Legal Front was “a group which is central to the youth commune phenomenon on the Sechelt Peninsula” and that they had been “highly recommended by Ken Drushka.”<sup>18</sup>

OFY’s young staff, in the words of Gregg Macdonald, considered themselves “guerilla bureaucrats,” occupying a middle ground between government and counterculture. Macdonald remarked that he had been indifferent to the negative media coverage of OFY, summarizing his position at the time this way: “If our friends in Ottawa want to give money to people . . . whose aspirations we share, and we’re confident enough to become the intermediaries, then we’re going to do it.”<sup>19</sup> In OFY’s first year—at least in British Columbia—government employees were unafraid to personally identify with the projects they funded. Thus project officer Tom Ryan, writing to John R. Wimbush of the Legal Front Commune to advise that a late project report had cost the group \$50 of their \$1,000 grant, explained that “this kind of [project] appeals to me personally so I am rather disappointed that we can’t help financially.”<sup>20</sup> The OFY staff’s role as an intermediary between communes and the government’s coffers, rather unsurprisingly, won the federal government the allegiance of some grant recipients. Morgan—a recent immigrant from Seattle—wrote in his project report that “direct Government subsidization of this sort of life-style . . . shows the young people in the country that there is a real chance that some people in the Liberal party, including perhaps the top man himself, actually have some idea about what is really going on out here in the real world.”<sup>21</sup>

Not all Liberals, however, looked so kindly upon such “direct Government subsidization.” One in particular who was rather more skeptical was Paul St. Pierre, member of Parliament for Coast Chilcotin, the federal constituency encompassing the Sunshine Coast.<sup>22</sup>

## PUBLIC OUTRAGE AND PUBLIC SUPPORT

On June 16, 1971, the *Coast News* obtained a list of the OFY grants awarded on the Sunshine Coast and published it alongside an open letter from St. Pierre to secretary of state Gérard Pelletier. In the letter, St. Pierre expressed serious misgivings over the grants, citing “disturbing” criticism from “area residents” and recommending that “municipal authorities and the police” scrutinize the projects. As a Liberal himself, St. Pierre would have been reticent to criticize the government directly, although opposition Progressive Conservative, Social Credit, and New Democratic Party members of Parliament repeatedly queried the minister on the administration of the program and the decision-making process. At the local level, *Peninsula Times* editor Wheeler fumed that “halfwits holding well paid and important positions in a government elected on the Liberal ticket have perpetrated the most outstanding malfeasance ever considered possible.” OFY drove Wheeler into such a rage that he spent much of the summer of 1971 hurling editorial missiles at the grant recipients, whom he disparaged as “half the deadbeats in creation.”<sup>23</sup>

To what extent Wheeler’s vitriol represented the attitudes of his community is uncertain, but on the other hand, it is clear that many people saw his editorials as part of a campaign of intimidation conducted by “the established business community” against “long-haired youth.”<sup>24</sup> It was not uncommon, for instance, for “longhairs” to be refused service at local restaurants—an action that Wheeler fully supported.<sup>25</sup> Local politicians displayed animosity toward “hippies,” including Gibsons Mayor Wallace Peterson, who said in an interview with a *Vancouver Sun* reporter that “to support a bunch of American hippies . . . isn’t the purpose of the OFY program. They’re using the money to learn how to grow pot—I don’t think you’ll see a single potato growing on any of these communes.”<sup>26</sup>

Peterson’s words spoke to a popular assumption that the OFY recipients, being “hippies,” would spend their grant money on the cultivation of marijuana. However, this assumption was never publicly demonstrated on the Sunshine Coast.<sup>27</sup> On June 21, local RCMP

officers, along with a party that reportedly included undercover narcotics officers and immigration officials, conducted an unannounced sweep of the OFY projects on the Sunshine Coast. If the police were expecting to find evidence of drug use, as the targets of the sweep believed, they almost certainly failed to do so. Given the editorial stances of the two local newspapers, arrests of OFY recipients would have been reported prominently. The only mention of the sweep, however, was buried in the letters section of the *Coast News* on June 30, in an invited contribution from Ken Dalglish. A neighbour and friend of OFY recipient Robert Morgan, Dalglish asked rhetorically, “Was there a suspicion of a crime, or is receiving a grant criminal?”<sup>28</sup>

The OFY recipients were not without local supporters, and the drug raid appears to have encouraged some to speak out. The *Coast News* published a handful of letters defending the program, though some expressed ambivalence; in one letter, Norman Watson hedged that OFY was “cheaper than riot police.”<sup>29</sup> In the *Peninsula Times*, columnist Frank O’Brien suggested that OFY was a useful program insofar as it acted as a “safety valve” against youth rebellion, but he scorned grant recipients for overestimating the societal importance of their projects.<sup>30</sup> However, besides a few exceptions such as these, the local press afforded little space to those sympathetic to the OFY recipients.

Negative media coverage and official suspicion of the OFY projects led some of the grant recipients to feel alienated from the community around them, although the depth and duration of this experience varied. Schaller noted in his project report that “the O.F.Y. program was generally put down by various people. . . . The heat cooled off when a form of communication was established.” Morgan complained that, while “neighbours and some merchants” supported the members of his project, “antagonism from [the municipal and federal governments] was the one sore point of the whole program.”<sup>31</sup> Barbara Yates voiced this feeling most passionately. Awarded a large grant to run a farm retreat for transient girls, Yates wrote in her project report that “there was a lot of open resentment and mistrust towards those who received money, what their motives were and their projects in general,

although few people knew any of these ‘hippies’ personally. . . . We felt, except for several older friends in the community, that we were very alone out here.” But Yates, too, acknowledged that as the summer went on, her neighbours began warming to the newcomers in their midst.<sup>32</sup>

By awarding federal grants to a group of people already under public scrutiny, and doing so in an apparently reckless manner, OFY erected barriers between the counterculture and the mainstream on the Sunshine Coast. Several OFY recipients, though, eventually crossed these barriers. Many of them, interviewed in 2011, recalled having mostly positive relationships with all but the most stridently conservative of their neighbours. Of Wheeler, though, all agreed that he was driven by an irrational hatred of “hippies.”<sup>33</sup>

The tension between “heads” and “straights” drew media attention from further afield, and some of it differed sharply from the coverage in the local press. The *Vancouver Sun* and *Vancouver Province* each sent reporters to the Sunshine Coast in late June, and by all accounts the reporters were rather more sympathetic to the counterculture than were members of the local press.<sup>34</sup> The resulting feature articles, both published on June 28, identified the OFY grants as a bone of contention. Several of the grant recipients—Schaller of the Legal Front, Morgan of the Crowe Road Commune, and Bill Bradford of the Bayview Commune—were interviewed and quoted extensively, while by contrast, both articles cast local establishment figures in an unflattering light. The *Province’s* Duncan McWhirter noted, “the federal plan and long-haired youth in general [were] being subjected to a fierce attack by Douglas Wheeler.” McWhirter wrote that Wheeler had “said . . . that the long-haired youngsters were ‘scum, the dregs’” and went on to remark that while Wheeler had been “described by some as a South African, [he] turned out to be an Englishman who had visited the racist, right wing regime [in South Africa] and evidently found much there to please him.”<sup>35</sup> Even further removed from the local conflict, the *Montreal Star* and *New York Times* ran feature articles about the Sunshine Coast’s communes later in the summer of 1971. Both articles were highly sympathetic toward the projects, with

only the *Star* piece making passing reference to any local controversy over the grants. The *New York Times* piece omitted any mention of hostility entirely, beginning on a somewhat incredulous note: “Urban and rural communes have been thriving in this West Coast province for several years. But this is the first summer that some of them have been subsidized by the Canadian Government.”<sup>36</sup>

The Sunshine Coast may have been an isolated area with a small population in 1971, but the OFY grants awarded to its participants in the back-to-the-land movement drew an abundance of media attention from local, national, and international newspapers. As I will discuss below, these journalistic sources can give us some sense of what the region’s OFY recipients and their neighbours, conservative fears aside, were actually up to.

## USING THE CASH

While rural living itself was not countercultural in 1971, what distinguished participants in the back-to-the-land movement from other rural inhabitants was not only their adoption of some form of agriculture, but also their belief in the moral superiority of “the simple life.” Rebecca Kneale Gould argues that “modern homesteaders,” such as participants in the 1970s back-to-the-land movement, grappled with “a perennial moral problem [which is] that the world as it is today is not the world as it ought to be.” By seeking opportunities for honest toil and simple living, then, participants in the back-to-the-land movement engaged in “prefigurative politics.”<sup>37</sup> By living simply on the land, they sought to build the foundations of a new society. The summary of the “Basic Organic Greenhouse Gardening” project, based in Sechelt, indicated the group’s aims as follows: “To show that organic gardening is a positive alternative to pollution, grow vegetables, to evaluate the effects of chemical fertilization against organic fertilization, and to evaluate the use of pesticides.” The group received \$950 and claimed that four jobs had been created.<sup>38</sup>

It would be a mistake to see the back-to-the-land movement as politically unified—or uniformly political. Leaving aside the question

of whether they constituted a movement, back-to-the-landers varied widely in their motives and their practices.<sup>39</sup> Yet broad themes unified them. As with many of their contemporaries across North America, the Sunshine Coast's back-to-the-landers shared the twin goals of producing food and other necessities and building new forms of community. Indeed, archival and journalistic sources show that while the Sunshine Coast was home to a conspicuous, tight-knit community of people practicing back-to-the-land lifestyles, these people were part of a translocal network of back-to-the-land ideas.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps the most iconic symbol of the 1970s back-to-the-land project was the rural homestead; indeed, the Sunshine Coast's OFY projects all included at least a minor emphasis on small-scale food production. For some, raising food to become self-sufficient was a primary goal. One group, the Sugar Mountain Commune, received a \$1,000 grant to build a "hog shed-barn combination" in which to "produce high grade pork using organic feed." This group's project report is not available, so it is not known how successful they were (or reported themselves to be). However, their hog farm was conspicuous enough to attract the attention of the *New York Times's* visiting reporter, whose September 1971 story confirmed that there were indeed pigs on the property of grant recipient Henry Rodriguez.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, the members of the Crowe Road Commune, who received \$1,000 to develop their five-acre property, did claim success. Applicant Robert Morgan reported to OFY at the end of the summer that the vegetable garden fed the group well ("largely because we determined . . . how to properly make good compost"), that laying hens and rabbits had supplied occasional protein, and that the group had canned considerable quantities of fruits and vegetables.<sup>42</sup>

Gleaning and recycling were important aspects of self-sufficiency for some of the grant recipients. The Crowe Road Commune group obtained grain for free by sweeping out railcars in Vancouver, gathered unused canning jars by placing classified advertisements, turned fat donated by a local butcher into soap, and somehow "got the right to wreck a house, thereby obtaining a lot of wood of all sorts."<sup>43</sup> This group's creative strategies for obtaining goods might have been more

practical than ideological—after all, Morgan notes that the \$1,000 grant was “virtually the only support” that the group of twelve adults and four children received over the summer—but others gleaned supplies to avoid harming the land. John Houghton, who obtained a \$1,296 OFY grant to build a communal float house, told Rita Reif of the *New York Times* that he would build the house exclusively with wind-felled trees, as “we’ve destroyed enough of the forest.”<sup>44</sup>

OFY also funded small-scale commodity production. Its recipients included, for instance, a candle-maker on a commune in Egmont, a medicinal herb producer on a commune in Roberts Creek, and, as discussed above, a hog farming operation. Unfortunately, reports are available for none of these projects, so journalistic sources provide some of the only details that survive—such as the fact that the residents of the herb farm were unsure whether their business would be viable when their \$1,000 grant ran out.<sup>45</sup> However, it is clear that many in this community were interested in developing alternative trade networks. John S. Gregg, a potter, noted in his final report (for “Building a Pottery”) that he hoped to “become a potter in some sort of a landscape of people who really need and use pottery in their daily lives because it is made locally and they know the guy that makes it or he helps them to make it for themselves [sic].”<sup>46</sup>

One significant venture in this regard was the “general store” created by the Legal Front Commune in Roberts Creek. Intended to market handicrafts, “ecology orientated foods,” and local produce, the store was opened on a property that the Coast Family Society, a group representing the local “head community,” purchased in June 1971, partially with the proceeds of their OFY grants. Legal Front spokesperson Richard “The Troll” Schaller explained, in a letter to OFY project officer Ian Munro, that the group’s intention was to “[set] up a third world economic system, on a small scale.” Apparently this involved obtaining produce from local gardens, including some that Legal Front members tended with a separate \$1,000 grant. Schaller noted in his project report, though, that “not many of the gardens made it this year and many of the vegetables had to be scored from the longtime commercial organic farms.”<sup>47</sup>

Beyond producing food and other necessities, the Sunshine Coast's OFY recipients were involved in community organizing. Local "heads" founded the Coast Family Society, as mentioned above, as an alternative to the mainstream Roberts Creek Community Association, from which they were excluded.<sup>48</sup> To raise funds for the property that housed the general store (and a "people's garage"), the society organized a fundraising picnic on July 17 featuring "electric music and all you can eat for two bucks." Schaller declared the event a success, even though the group only "broke even financially," as only a few of the reported three hundred attendees had paid for admission.<sup>49</sup> While this group existed to serve the counterculture community, another OFY project—the largest on the Sunshine Coast—hoped to build a bridge to the mainstream. The Sunshine Coast Youth Communication and Employment Centre, run by Barbara Yates, operated on a farm near Gibsons primarily as a drop-in centre for transient girls and young women. In addition to providing young people with farm work—which furnished the centre with fresh vegetables—this group offered various services to the broader community, including organizing beach cleanups and providing volunteer labour to the Gibsons Athletic Association. While Yates's attempts at community service were rebuffed at first, as outlined above, the mainstream gradually warmed to the industrious newcomers.<sup>50</sup>

These journalistic and archival sources do not chronicle, but merely suggest, what participants in the back-to-the-land movement were doing on the Sunshine Coast in 1971. Much more took place than was recorded. Many more people passed through the area than stayed, and few of those who had left could be located in 2011 for interviews. Nevertheless, extant sources show that back-to-the-landers on the Sunshine Coast were integrated with broader networks of back-to-the-land ideas and practices. As they did across North America and beyond, the people who went to live on the Sunshine Coast did so to experience "the good life" of community and attempted to achieve a degree of self-sufficiency in growing their own food.



## CONCLUSION

While participants in the back-to-the-land movement distanced themselves from authority in many ways, many were quite willing to accept the state's assistance when it was offered to them. Twenty-one federal grants, amounting to nearly \$40,000, funded a group of communes and other back-to-the-land projects on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast in the summer of 1971. This chapter has addressed several facets of this complicated relationship between the state, local communities, and the counterculture.

The local newspapers reacted furiously to the grants. They charged that federal funds had been handled inappropriately, which, as it happens, was true. In OFY's first year, individual staff awarded grants to personal acquaintances for projects that politicians and the public questioned. However, the Sunshine Coast's local press went beyond this criticism to attack the grant recipients themselves. *Peninsula Times* editor Wheeler did so flamboyantly, heaping contempt upon the people he labelled "deadbeats" and "hippies." The newcomers had their supporters, but their detractors tended to be people in positions of power, including the local RCMP, the mayor of Gibsons, and the local member of Parliament. As a review of the program concluded, such negative media attention was fairly typical nation-wide: "The initial reaction was almost uniformly critical. Conjecture, and self-fulfilling prophecy produced lurid stories of bungling, depravity, radicalism and drugs."<sup>51</sup> The OFY program highlighted the activities of countercultural groups, creating a space for sustained criticism of their alternative lifestyles. In the face of this public judgment, several grant recipients reported feeling alienated and out of place. On the other hand, while the mainstream may have resented it, these participants in the counterculture heartily approved of the program that supported them, however modestly, in the summer of 1971.

Significantly, the OFY left behind a documentary record of an alternative community in rural Canada. The back-to-the-land movement in Canada has been heavily mythologized (along with the era's other countercultural happenings), but, as elsewhere, the scarcity of

documents from back-to-the-land projects makes writing about this phenomenon challenging. OFY, then, briefly shines a light on a period that otherwise might escape our notice. What it reveals to us is that members of a rural community on British Columbia's Pacific coast took part in a search for "the good life" that was carried out all across North America and beyond. Given the opportunity to apply for government financial support, many of their projects reflected keen interests in environmental issues, as seen in their emphasis on food production and organic gardening.<sup>52</sup> And for a brief period, the Canadian federal government provided modest funding to environmental projects that, in the case of British Columbia's Sunshine Coast, reflected the counterculture's partial rejection of mainstream society.

NOTES

- 1 Rebecca Kneale Gould, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), xx.
- 2 Canadian Council on Social Development, *Youth '71: An Inquiry by the Canadian Council on Social Development into the Transient Youth and Opportunities for Youth Programs in the Summer of 1971* (Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development, 1971); Evaluation Task Force, *Report of the Evaluation Task Force to the Secretary of State: Opportunities for Youth* (Ottawa: Department of the Secretary of State, 1972); Jennifer Keck and Wayne Fulks, "Meaningful Work and Community Betterment: The Case of Opportunities for Youth and Local Initiatives Program, 1971-1973," in *Community Organizing: Canadian Experience*, ed. Brian Wharf and Michael Clague (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 113-36.
- 3 Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 3 May 1971 (James Hugh Faulkner), 28th Parl., 3rd sess., vol. 5, 5468.
- 4 Keck and Fulks, "Meaningful Work."
- 5 Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 27 October 1971 (G rard Pelletier), 28th Parl., 3rd sess., vol. 9, 9077.
- 6 See, in particular, Ryan O'Connor's chapter in this collection.
- 7 Evaluation Task Force, *Report*; Keck and Fulks, "Meaningful Work."
- 8 Secretary of State, *A Canadian Experiment: Catalogue of Projects Funded in 1971 under the Federal Government*

- Opportunities for Youth Program of the Department of the Secretary of State* (Ottawa: Department of the Secretary of State, 1972); “Grants Continue as Hot Topic,” *Coast News*, 23 June 1971. The name “Sunshine Coast” sometimes also includes the Powell River region, but in this paper I consider the Sunshine Coast to be the mainland and islands lying between Howe Sound and Jervis Inlet. This area includes the Sechelt Peninsula, the name of which was sometimes misapplied to the entire Sunshine Coast.
- 9 Mark Vonnegut, *The Eden Express: A Memoir of Insanity* (New York: Seven Stories, 2002), 28.
  - 10 See Howard White, *The Sunshine Coast: From Gibsons to Powell River*, 2nd ed. (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 2011); and Betty Keller and Rosella Leslie, *Bright Seas, Pioneer Spirits: A History of the Sunshine Coast* (Victoria, BC: TouchWood Editions, 2009).
  - 11 *Georgia Straight*, 22 September 1967; *Coast News*, 22 January 1967; Louis Feldhammer and Margaret Benston, letter to the editor, *Coast News*, 22 August 1968.
  - 12 Frank O’Brien, interview with the author, 4 May 2011; Tony Greenfield, interview with the author, 5 May 2011.
  - 13 Minutes of the Regular Meeting of the Council of the Village of Gibsons, 11 May 1971, Gibsons Municipal Hall; “Mayor Cool on Invasion,” *Coast News*, 12 May 1971; “Travelling Youth Influx Viewed with Apprehension,” *Peninsula Times*, 19 May 1971; “Merchants Warned to Guard Premises,” *Coast News*, 21 April 1971; “The Public Youth Program,” *Coast News*, 19 May 1971.
  - 14 “Youth Movement Grants Questioned,” *Coast News*, 16 June 1971.
  - 15 “James,” interview with the author, 27 May 2011. This interviewee recalled that, at twenty-eight years old, he was among the eldest in the Vancouver office.
  - 16 Citizenship Development Branch, “Opportunities for Youth: Notes for Applicants,” undated [1971] brochure reprinted in *Coast News*, 16 June 1971.
  - 17 Gregg Macdonald, interview with the author, 27 May 2011.
  - 18 “Opportunities for Youth Program—Communal Land Development—Gibsons, British Columbia,” file 500-670 (emphasis in original), vol. 368, RG118-G-3, Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC]; “Opportunities for Youth Program—Building a Pottery—Robert’s Creek, British Columbia,” vol. 360, file 500-814, RG118-G-4, LAC; “Opportunities for Youth Program—The Legal Front Commune—Vancouver, British Columbia,” file 500-813A, vol. 368, RG118-G-3, LAC.

- 19 Macdonald, interview.
- 20 “OFY Program—Legal Front Commune.”
- 21 “OFY Program—Communal Land Development.” Morgan finished his report by inviting government personnel to drop by for a visit, adding, “This includes M[argaret] Trudeau, whom [sic] we understand has relatives in the area.”
- 22 Like Drushka, St. Pierre is better known as an author.
- 23 Paul St. Pierre, letter to Gérard Pelletier, reprinted in “Youth Movement Grants Questioned,” *Coast News*, 16 June 1971; “Media Scavengers Return,” *Peninsula Times*, 7 July 1971; “Warm Winds of Change,” *Peninsula Times*, 23 June 1971.
- 24 Duncan McWhirter, “Emotions Running High at Sechelt,” *Vancouver Province*, 28 June 1971.
- 25 “Are We Rural Rubes?” *Peninsula Times*, 7 July 1971.
- 26 “Sunshine Coast Communes Arouse Local Ire,” *Vancouver Sun*, 28 June 1971. According to several interviewees, Peterson was right that many of the OFY recipients were American.
- 27 However, OFY cancelled a grant to a wilderness camp for teenagers near Prince George after the project’s organizers were convicted of marijuana possession on June 11, 1971. “Opportunities for Youth Program—Northern Wilderness Project—Island of Saturna, BC,” file 500-571, vol. 378, RG118-G-3, LAC.
- 28 “OFY—Communal Land Development”; Ken Dalglish, “Why? Youth Wants to Know,” *Coast News*, 30 June 1971. Robert Morgan (interview with the author, 26 May 2011) attributes the police’s failure to find illegal drugs to the targets having circulated a warning that the authorities were on their way. “Somebody noticed them on the ferry or something . . . and so the word went really fast.”
- 29 Norman Watson, letter to the editor, *Coast News*, 30 June 1971.
- 30 Frank O’Brien, “Rushes,” *Peninsula Times*, 23 June 1971.
- 31 “Opportunities for Youth Program—The Legal Front—General Store—Roberts Creek, British Columbia,” file 500-813C, vol. 360, RG118-G-4, LAC; “OFY Program—Communal Land Development.”
- 32 “Opportunities for Youth Program—Sunshine Coast Youth Communication and Employment Centre—Gibson’s Landing, British Columbia,” file 500-43, vol. 355, RG118-G-4, LAC.
- 33 Bob Morgan, interview with the author, 16 May 2011; Diana Morgan, interview with the author, 4 May 2011; Ken Dalglish, interview with the author, 2 May 2011. Several interviewees shared colourful recollections of Wheeler. One described him as “more right-wing than Attila the Hun.” Another claimed that Wheeler kept a loaded pistol in his desk drawer to defend himself from “hippies,” and yet

- another that he slept with the pistol under his pillow.
- 34 “OFY Program—Communal Land Development”; Walter Peterson, letter to the editor, *Vancouver Sun*, 9 July 1971. Peterson began his letter, “I met your ‘hippie’ reporter you sent up recently.”
- 35 “Sunshine Coast Communes Arouse Local Ire”; McWhirter, “Emotions Running High.” Wheeler later retaliated by musing about the “scavengers” and “termites” of the Vancouver media in an editorial (“Media Scavengers Return”).
- 36 Josh Freed, “A New World in Harmony with Nature,” *Montreal Star*, 17 July 1971; Rita Reif, “Communes in Canada: Government Lends Hand with Grants,” *New York Times*, 15 September 1971.
- 37 Gould, *At Home in Nature*. The term “prefigurative politics” is borrowed from Wini Breines, “Community and Organization: The New Left and Michels’ ‘Iron Law,’” *Social Problems* 27, no. 4 (1980): 419–29.
- 38 Secretary of State, *Canadian Experiment*, 219.
- 39 Jeffrey Jacob, *New Pioneers: The Back-to-the-Land Movement and the Search for a Sustainable Future* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).
- 40 It is difficult to estimate how many back-to-the-landers lived on the Sunshine Coast in this year, but the catalogue of OFY projects provides an extremely rough estimate. Each OFY grant was intended to create a certain number of jobs; adding up these numbers, the total is somewhere between 80 and 150. The uncertainty is due to some of the larger grants being awarded for projects that only partially took place on the Sunshine Coast. Secretary of State, *Canadian Experiment*.
- 41 “Opportunities for Youth Program—Erection of Hog Shed and Barn—Sechelt, British Columbia,” file 500-856, vol. 361, RG118-G-5, LAC; Reif, “Communes in Canada.”
- 42 “OFY Program—Communal Land Development.”
- 43 Ibid.; Diana Morgan, interview with the author, 4 May 2011.
- 44 “John H.,” quoted in Reif, “Communes in Canada.”
- 45 Secretary of State, *Canadian Experiment*; Freed, “A New World in Harmony”; Reif, “Communes in Canada.”
- 46 “OFY Program—Building a Pottery.”
- 47 “OFY Program—Legal Front—General Store.” Schaller notes that “eleven of the cash contributors [for the Roberts Creek property on which the store was located] were recipients [sic] of O.F.Y. grants.”
- 48 Duncan McWhirter, “‘Heads, Straights’ All Getting Uptight,” *Vancouver Province*, 29 June 1971.

- 49 “OFY Program—The Legal Front—General Store,” LAC. Schaller also wrote that the picnic “provided an opportunity for the employment of three undercover narcotics officers from Vancouver [sic].”
- 50 “OFY Program—Sunshine Coast Youth.”
- 51 Canadian Council on Social Development, *Youth '71*, 87.
- 52 According to the government’s own calculations, only 4 percent of all the OFY projects were considered “environmental projects”—but this reflected a narrow definition. Secretary of State, *Canadian Experiment*, n.p. (Introduction).

