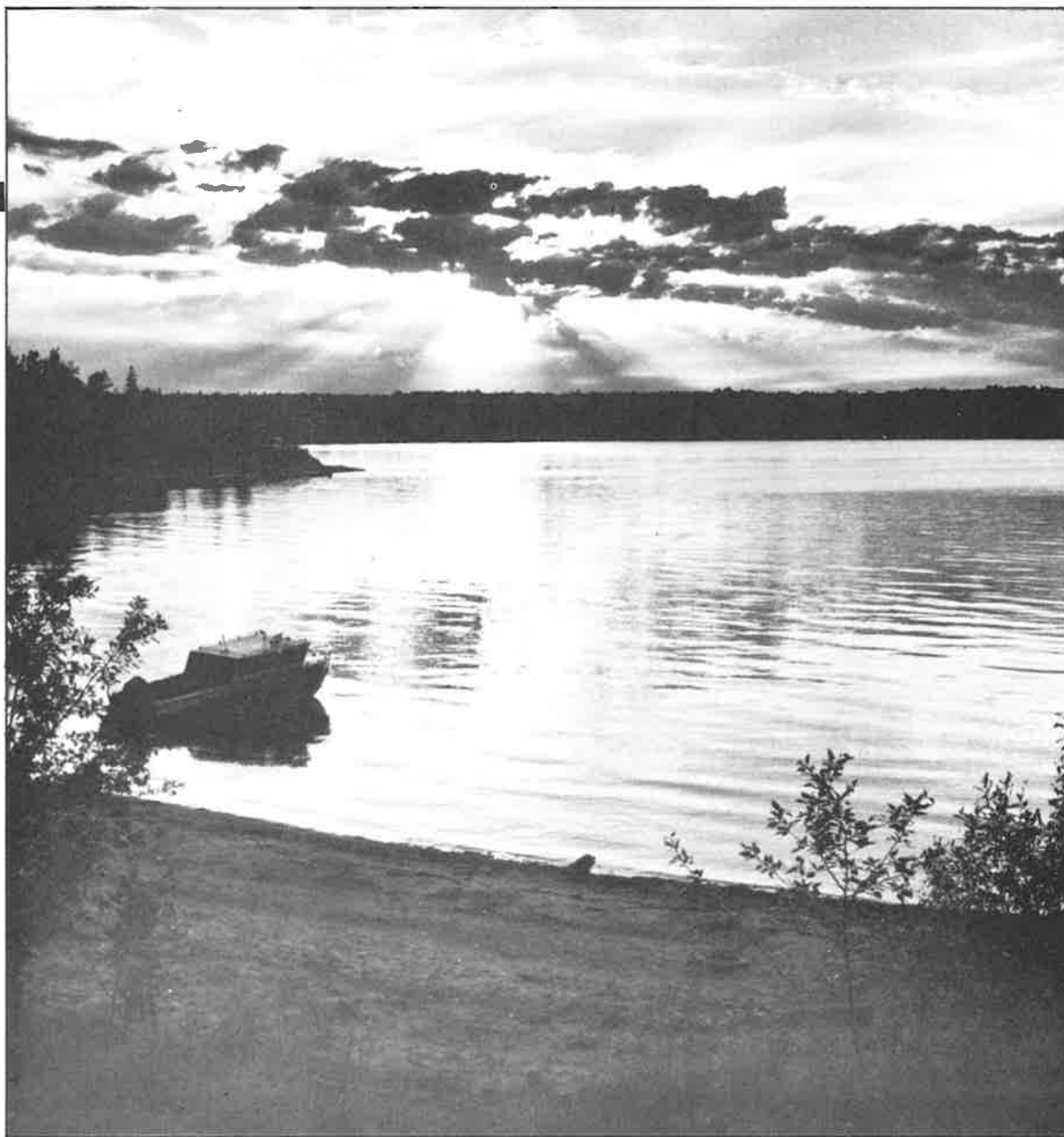


One strand of the environmental movement is made up of "ostensibly apolitical nature-lovers concerned to protect particular areas and species."

Pro-industry commentators often paint the entire movement as middle-class professionals protecting their own — not the public's — interest.

Gerry Cairns



Self-Managing Environmentalism

by Brian Martin

It is now over fifteen years since environmental issues first began to receive widespread public attention. It seems clear that concern over the environment is not a passing fad, and that environmental issues will continue to be a regular feature of the political agenda of advanced industrial countries and, to a considerably lesser extent, of Third World countries. What is less clear, at least judging by the divergence of views amongst those writing in the area, is the significance of environmental issues for the ongoing political, economic and

social struggles through which societies are reproduced and transformed. The object of this brief paper is to outline one line of thought and action on environmental issues, called here "self-managing environmentalism", which has seldom been systematically presented and which is often ignored or misinterpreted by analysts of the environmental scene.¹

The goals, social composition and methods of the "environmental movement" have been scrutinised from varied perspectives; two particular themes

are mentioned here to provide some context. First, the environmental movement has been attacked by pro-industry commentators as being a product of middle-class professionals who have obtained the benefits of economic growth but who now want to slow or stop this growth, or at least move it somewhere else, so that they do not suffer the environmental side-effects such as noise, air and water pollution, crowded wilderness areas and the like. These commentators seldom mention that the working class has suffered grievously on and off the job from

consumer possessions could come by establishing community resource centres, equipped with tools, machines, and raw materials available for use like books in a library. Local energy self-sufficiency may be most efficiently achieved on a collective level of one hot water storage for perhaps five to twenty-five medium density houses, or a medium-scale wind generator for a few hundred households in an isolated area.

In all these examples, the community redesign would enable (but not enforce) a greater sense of social community to be sustained, thus overcoming some of the alienation and isolation associated with present consumer societies. And by bringing food-growing and energy production closer to home, a greater concern for and involvement with the natural environment would be fostered.⁵

Here we are mainly concerned with redesign of city life. What we call "community redesign" is often referred to as "alternative life styles", a phrase which unfortunately has acquired a diverse

criminate use of pesticides. On the other, there are campaigns for positive changes — such as for cycle paths, for energy and resource conservation, for use of renewable energy sources, and for integrated pest management. Environmentalists with a self-management perspective try in such campaigns to emphasise the wider implications and radical solutions to environmental problems, such as changing methods of decision-making in relation to community redesign. They also attempt to practise some of the principles they preach, for example by riding bicycles or using public transport, growing vegetables or installing insulation and solar hot water heaters.

However, it is quite clear to most politically aware environmentalists that individual action is not enough, and that collective efforts are necessary to bring about community redesign. The Simple Living Movement in the United States has emphasised personal and local initiatives regarding consumption, work, clothing, health care, etc. (Simple Living

reinforces centralised political and economic power (Roberts 1976; Jungk 1979; Gorz 1980). Similarly, conservation and local community uses of solar energy are favoured because they are potentially accessible and controllable by local self-managing and self-reliant groups.

Few environmentalists support the use of solar energy irrespective of its technological form and associated social implications. Large-scale, capital-intensive, expert-dominated approaches are opposed, especially when promoted by unaccountable governments and corporations. The proposal for a solar satellite is a case in point

On the other hand, the "soft energy path" based on conservation and use of renewable energy sources is not seen as isolated from its associated social conditions: self-managing environmentalists realise that a small-scale, decentralised use of renewable energy technologies does not guarantee a "soft political future", but is quite compatible with traditional power structures (Martin 1978). The aim is to link together struggles for social change with struggles for uses of technology that are most compatible with, though far from determining, the desired political future.

Other campaigns involving technology have concerned transport (automobiles and the automotive industry, versus bicycles ideally cooperatively produced) and communications (one-directional communication from television or major newspapers, versus various types of community communications). The basic principle is to design and select technologies which allow maximum self-management and self-reliance. Fundamentally, the task is to move toward a situation in which individuals and groups have the maximum power to choose and design their own technologies. The environmentalist faith is that technologies arising from such a process would have the minimum impact compatible with other self-determined social goals.

It should be clear that community design and technological choice, as conceived by self-managing environmentalists, involve much more than a change in the type of ownership or control. The goal of nationalisation or state control is seen as completely insufficient, if not ill-advised. Governments as well as corporations tend to promote technologies — nuclear power is only one of many examples — which embody hierarchical and inequitable social relations, and thus help reproduce or extend the prevailing structures of power and privilege (Dickson 1974; Braverman 1974; Elliott and Elliott 1976). The similarity of the behaviour of corporations and government instrumentalities (for example in

Redesign of communities is not an attempt to fit everyone into a single pigeonhole, but to allow a diversity of life styles while making environmentally sound life styles attractive and convenient.

range of connotations, often being associated with "back-to-the-land" dropouts from urban life, or with "countercultural" patterns such as drug-taking or communal living. Many of those who re-establish living patterns in rural settings with an emphasis on self-reliance and harmony with the environment are an important part of the environmental movement, although in many cases their contact with urban-based environmental struggles is surprisingly low.⁶

It is clear to all except those putting up straw arguments that not everyone can return to rural life, and not everyone wants to live in a communal arrangement. Redesign of communities is not an attempt to fit everyone into a single pigeonhole, but to allow a diversity of life styles while making environmentally sound life styles attractive and convenient.

Community redesign can be recognised as a common theme running through many environmental campaigns, which usually involve people with narrower purposes in mind. On the one hand, there are campaigns against developments which make communities more environmentally unsound — such as campaigns against freeways, against nuclear power and against indis-

criminate use of pesticides. On the other, there are campaigns for positive changes — such as for cycle paths, for energy and resource conservation, for use of renewable energy sources, and for integrated pest management. Environmentalists with a self-management perspective try in such campaigns to emphasise the wider implications and radical solutions to environmental problems, such as changing methods of decision-making in relation to community redesign. They also attempt to practise some of the principles they preach, for example by riding bicycles or using public transport, growing vegetables or installing insulation and solar hot water heaters.

Choice of Technology

Technologies have been a key focus in many environmental campaigns, the most well-known example being nuclear power. Many people in the anti-nuclear campaigns around the world have been primarily motivated by concern over hazards from the nuclear fuel cycle, such as reactor accidents and the disposal of long-lived radioactive waste. But for many others — including, for example, a large fraction of leading activists since the beginning of the anti-uranium campaign in Australia — the wider social, political and economic features have been of fundamental concern. Nuclear power is opposed because by its very nature (the requirements for capital investment and protection against accidents or sabotage) it grows from and



Gary Mueller

Community redesign is one of the strategies of "self-managing" environmentalists. The objective is not simply environmental improvement — but a transformation of society.

industrial developments for many decades. So while this critique manifests a superficial concern for the working class, the writing in this vein is fairly transparently an attempt to protect the continued environmental depredations of industry from any outside regulation (see the many references in Sills 1975).

A second attack on the environmental movement also criticises its middle-class roots and its conservative or reformist tendencies, but this time from a Left, often Marxist, position relying on a class analysis (Ridgeway 1970; Enzensberger 1974).

There is a great deal of truth in the attacks from both Right and Left, but they hardly represent a full picture. Anyone familiar with the varieties of environmental theory and action will realise that a proper analysis must take into account a diversity of groups and activities (Schnaiberg 1980). These include: corporations seeking to better their image and blame the consumer for pollution (Keep America Beautiful, Keep Australia Beautiful); ostensibly apolitical nature-lovers concerned to protect particular areas or species; major organisations with a strong orientation towards influencing governmental policy-making (Nader organisations, Australian Conservation Foundation, Friends of the Earth-UK); and back-to-the-land movements centred around self-sufficiency and communal life (Down to Earth).

Here the aim is to outline a different strand in the environmental movement which might be called "self-managing environmentalism". It is "self-managing" because it aims at achieving fundamental changes in political and

economic structures in the direction of self-management, and because it attempts to practise the principles of self-management in its organisations and methods. And it is a brand of "environmentalism"² because it is a social movement growing out of involvement with environmental issues.³ Self-managing environmentalism has been an important feature of many environmental campaigns around the world — in terms of direct organising, in terms of ideological influence, and in terms of building links with other social movements.

The focus here will be on the overt and active concerns of self-managing environmentalism — namely, their interaction with political, economic and social struggles — rather than on intellectual developments or collective changes in attitudes and values. Particular concern with the latter has been apparent in the "deep ecology movement" (Devall 1980). But politically active environmentalists usually understand attitude and value changes as being a product of and stimulus to social and political action, rather than as independent intellectual or emotional developments.

Although "self-managing environmentalism" is to some extent an arbitrary classification or construct, it does encompass, albeit in an approximate manner, well recognised themes of thought and action in the environmental movement: most politically active environmentalists will readily recognise the ideas outlined here, even if they do not subscribe to them or to the particular emphases made.⁴

To illustrate the self-managing environmentalist perspective, five themes have been chosen: community redesign; choice of technology; worker and community self-management; deprofessionalisation; and alternative economics and politics. In discussing each, we will focus on implications for the methods and organising principles of environmental groups.

Community Redesign

Many major environmental problems are closely associated with the conventional way of life in industrialised societies: agricultural monocultures, automobile transport, mass production of consumer goods. Safer pesticides, stricter emission standards and consumer protection regulations may ameliorate some of the worst excesses but do not get to the roots of the problems. A radical solution is the promotion of community redesign. This includes measures such as different approaches to town planning to reduce the need for motor transport and make walking and bicycling convenient and attractive; more local production of food, in individual and communal gardens; and more local energy self-sufficiency, for example through passive solar house design.

These technical measures are closely linked with changes in social arrangements. For example, transport needs are reduced when more people live close to where they work, or telecommunications are used to reduce the requirement for commuting. Communal production of food can be fostered through changes in zoning regulations and patterns of ownership. A reduction in personally owned

The decentralising, local control perspective envisages many local work cooperatives for producing food, housing, transport, electronics and so forth (Morris and Hess 1975; Boyle and Harper 1976; Hess 1979). Associated with this is a rethinking of the idea of a "job", now normally conceived as paid employment to carry out someone else's wishes. In a self-managed local economy, people would be self-employed, or voluntarily part of a self-managing collective. There would be much greater freedom in the hours, intensity and location of work.

The potential for do-it-yourself production — in gardening, making clothing, building or communications — would be much greater in the self-managed community. This potential arises not only from the provision of technologies and facilities which allow do-it-yourself production, but also from change in social support systems and decision-making (Turner 1977). It has been carefully argued, moreover, that such a self-managing framework pro-

mental campaigns, as evidenced particularly by the group Environmentalists for Full Employment.

One area that has not been central to environmental campaigns, though it has seen considerable media and academic attention, is the issue of limits to growth and the steady-state economy (e.g. Daly 1973). The common perception by self-managing environmentalists is that growth is a political rather than a technological issue. This mirrors the difference between those who see population growth as a major threat (such as Paul Ehrlich) with strong links with politically conservative policies, and those who see population more as an effect than a cause of social and environmental problems (such as Barry Commoner). The response "Let's have growth in things that count, not just things you can count" is a typical environmentalist one. For environmentalists, the call for selective growth — without military hardware, planned obsolescence, counterproductive transport systems, etc. —

tralia, the approach of the anti-uranium movement has been to remain independent of political parties but to work through the more sympathetic ones (mainly the Australian Labor Party and the Australian Democrats). The environmentalists working at a community level have always maintained an independent voice, trying to see that the parties follow their policies on environmental issues (see Altman 1980). Of course there are environmental activists within political parties, with whom close contact is maintained.

Self-managing environmentalists have relied to a considerable extent on nonviolent direct action rather than so-called "normal channels" to attain political change. Rallies, occupations, strikes, bans and boycotts have played key symbolic as well as tactical roles in environmental campaigns worldwide, offering inspiration, reinforcing solidarity and deepening commitment. Behind these actions is extensive, patient organising work at the grassroots. Even without large and elaborate organisational structures — or perhaps because of their absence (Piven and Cloward 1979) — this approach to political action has achieved many noteworthy gains, as in the worldwide resistance to nuclear power.

Conclusion

It has been argued that there is a minority stream within the environmental movement which seeks radical change in society, in the design of communities and technologies, in control over economic and political decision-making, and in the economic and political organisation of society — an approach, moreover, which develops tactics and organisational structures appropriate to these aims. Not surprisingly, environmentalists of this persuasion have been vehemently attacked by defenders of the governments and corporations and patterns of life which are the causes of environmental problems. Other criticisms of the environmental movement have come from those who, advocating a class analysis of society, tend to overlook the self-managing environmentalist stream. This is also not surprising, since this stream has much more in common with the anarchist, pacifist and nonviolent action traditions (Bookchin 1974, 1980; Lakey 1973; Cooney and Michalowski 1977) than with the perspectives and practices of either the non-libertarian Marxist or the social democratic tradition.⁸

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vides a strong basis for an environmentally sound society (Routley and Routley 1980).

Regarding wider economic connections among self-managing communities, there is no general agreement among environmentalists. Some sort of federated structure is the most common idea, and there is widespread rejection of the present styles of market and centralised planning in West and East.⁷ But there is less agreement concerning the extent of mass production and centralised production suitable for a federation of self-managing communities.

In any case, the importance of these visions is the direction they provide for present campaigns. Environmentalists have offered strong support to self-management initiatives by workers, especially when — as in the case of Lucas Aerospace — what is produced is subject to reconsideration. Environmentalists have also supported local projects such as food cooperatives and self-help schemes run by unemployed groups. At the same time, the plight of those forced to survive under prevailing relations of production is not ignored in environ-

replaces the one-dimensional debate over growth or no growth.

As well as promoting alternative economics, self-managing environmentalists attempt to foster an alternative politics based on local participatory democracy. This focus has a twofold effect on environmental campaigns. First, an attempt is made to maximise participation and democracy in environmental groups themselves and avoid dependence on political or technical experts, whether they are formal or implicit. This has been especially evident in the American anti-nuclear alliances, in which nonviolent action training has played a key role (see Coover et al. 1981 and *WIN Magazine*). Internal democracy — with a sharing of skills, opportunities and onerous tasks — has clear links with deprofessionalisation.

Second, radical environmental groups have by and large not participated in electoral politics in a major way or formed overly tight links with political organisations. The tactics in this area depend considerably on the structure of the national political system. In Aus-

coal, oil or electricity production), the environmental problems of the Soviet Union (Komarov 1981) and other countries with state ownership of production, and the Soviet nuclear power programme, are seen as strong evidence that environmental problems will not be overcome through any strategy relying on state bureaucracies. Supporting this view is the observed reluctance of many Western parties and groups on the Left to accept environmental issues as important political issues.

Worker and Community Self-management

If technologies are to be chosen to maximise possibilities for self-management, then so should production processes. The self-managing environmentalist position would be that self-management in production will result in an environmentally conscious production system.

The first point of concern is *how* things are produced. It is well established that production processes, like technologies, are designed to maintain political relations of dominance and control rather than to maximise efficiency (Marglin 1974; Dickson 1974; Braverman 1974). The result is suffering and alienation for workers and the maintenance of inequitable political and economic structures. These structures are of course understood as the root cause of environmental problems; specifically, the regimented and centrally controlled production processes are the immediate cause of many environmental insults. The automotive, chemical, and energy industries are key examples.

By linking their concerns with struggles for worker self-management and redesign of production processes, environmentalists are forced to go beyond a narrow concern for the environment. For there is no iron rule which says that centralised, large-scale, management-designed production is automatically more environmentally destructive than local, small-scale, self-managed operations. Tendencies in this direction exist, but the relation is one of association rather than determination. The upshot is that campaigns must always be judged on political as well as technological merits.

As well as considering how things are produced, we must go on to consider *what* is produced. For environmental as well as other reasons, there is little point in promoting safe and clean operations with worker participation if the output is military aircraft or luxury cruisers or throw-away packaging. The goal here is joint worker-community control over decision-making about production priorities. The available evidence, especially the experience of the Green Bans

in Australia (Roddewig 1978; Munday 1981) and the Lucas Aerospace workers' initiatives in Britain (Wainwright and Elliott 1982), suggests that worker-community control over production will be exercised in a much more environmentally conscious manner than will capitalist or bureaucratic control over production (Roberts 1979).

It is appropriate to mention here that self-managing environmentalism is not the exclusive preserve of any group or class in society — neither manual workers nor white collar workers, for example. Class analysis is not rejected, but neither is it used dogmatically or arbitrarily to exclude groups from a place in social change movements. It is recognized that women, members of non-Western cultures, intellectuals and the unemployed as well as workers may play individual and important roles. This means that self-managing environmentalists attempt to build links with other social movements, such as the Aboriginal land rights movement and the

community control in such areas as remaining welfare and distribution functions, law and science. Indeed, this critique extends even to ecologists as professional scientists (Martin 1977; Livingstone and Mason 1978).

The emphasis on deprofessionalisation has had a strong influence on the style and organisation of many environmental campaigns. Instead of confronting the "experts" who legitimise the policies and practices of governments and corporations with a set of environmental "counter-experts" — a process which is quite common in many areas, including many environmental struggles — environmentalists subscribing to the orientation of deprofessionalisation press instead for understanding to be spread throughout the environmental movement and the general public. This has many practical implications: "people's petitions" are favoured over statements by certified "experts"; rallies are not focussed entirely on the drawing power of "name" speakers; emphasis is

By linking their concern with struggles for worker self-management and redesign of production processes, environmentalists are forced to go beyond a narrow concern for the environment.

feminist movement, on the basis of cooperation and mutual support rather than incorporation under a single organisation or ideological framework. Environmental issues are not seen as the only important issues, but rather as one useful wedge — along with many others such as workers' control, peace and women's issues — in and from which to struggle for a more equitable, democratic and humane world.

Deprofessionalisation

Self-management can encompass not only goods but services as well, and this means deprofessionalisation (Illich 1973; Illich et al. 1977). Implementing such a programme would mean that health care, for example, would become much more focussed on prevention — with communities and workers organising living conditions, work conditions, and life styles to minimise health problems. In addition, the status of health professionals would be greatly altered, with local controls over the tools, conditions and goals of medical attention (Illich 1975). Moreover, education would be transformed to be an integrated part of growing-up, rather than the product of a separate activity (schooling) administered by professionals (Illich 1971; Holt 1973, 1977). Similarly, there would be

put on reaching school students, trade union members and members of community groups such as Rotary rather than lobbying members of parliament and other key decision-makers. These sorts of considerations have been important, for example, in the Australian anti-uranium movement (Martin 1982). Channels for reaching decision-makers are certainly not ignored. Nonetheless, movement strategy is based on a consideration of *appropriate* means — which includes attempts to increase participation at the grassroots — as well as short-term effectiveness for particular ends.

Environmentalists also work to deflate the pretensions of "experts" on the other side, especially by pointing out conflicts of interest and value-laden assumptions (e.g., Routley and Routley 1975; Diesendorf 1979b; Martin 1980). By highlighting the importance of interests and values in environmental issues, the focus is shifted from debates between experts to political conflict involving the public.

Alternative Economics and Politics

It is a short step from promoting management of production and services by workers and the community to rethinking the prevailing economic structures.

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Notes

¹This title is derived from that of Roberts (1979).

²Bookchin (1974, 1980) uses the term "ecology" for the radical wing and "environmental" for the reformist wing of the movement. In spite of his strictures, the term "ecology" is reserved here for its original scientific meaning.

³On social movements generally see, e.g., Ash (1972) and Piven and Cloward (1979). These are among the few scholarly analyses of social movements which provide any useful insights at all to participants. For the most part there is a yawning gap between participant and academic observer perceptions of social movement dynamics.

⁴There are relatively few systematic accounts of self-managing environmentalism. Perhaps the most representative continuing treatment is found in the British journal *Undercurrents*; many of the perspectives are presented in Boyle and Harper (1976); Jungk (1976), Gowan et al. (1976), Gorz (1980), Bookchin (1974, 1980), Roberts (1979) and Martin (1979).

⁵On community redesign, see Boyle (1975), Boyle and Harper (1976), White et al. (1978), Diesendorf (1979a).

⁶Yet the most common type of communal living arrangement, aside from traditional ones, is the "bourgeois cooperative" in the city (Cook 1979), which seldom has environmental considerations as a central feature.

⁷A Gandhian perspective on social organisation has much in common with that of self-managing environmentalism (Das 1979; Kantowsky 1980).

⁸It has often been remarked that these latter traditions have had great difficulty in responding to the problems of racism, sexism and hierarchy as well as to environmental problems (Roberts 1979: 145).

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