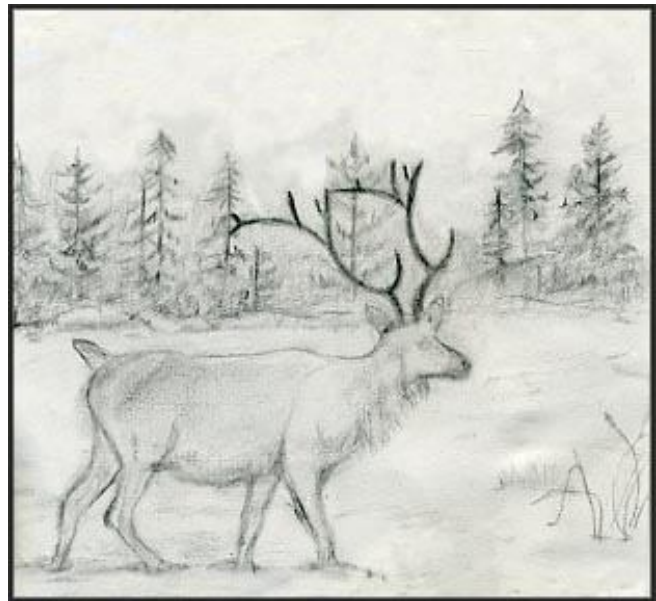


# Back to Nature in Portland, Oregon

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Many environmentalists and well-educated idealists have moved to Portland, Oregon, in recent years, drawn by the pristine natural beauty of nearby areas, by wild salmon splashing in clear mountain streams, thundering waterfalls, elk wandering through old-growth forests, snow-capped mountains and wildflowers dotting the meadows. But after arriving, many were soon numbed by the diversity of threats to the wilderness by man's consumption:



majestic forests cut to stumps to make toilet paper, rugged mountains flattened to extract coal and metals and woodland streams turned green with pollution.

"When you go on a hike in Oregon, it's disturbing on a deep level when you walk by a clearcut," says Portland resident Barbara Holisky. "To live, you have to let it go, but it has an effect on your psyche."

Awakened citizens in the city are embracing simpler, more sustainable lifestyles, closer to the Earth, and have formed a fervent movement that is

helping transform the West Coast into a mecca of sustainability.

People aren't waiting on nonprofit groups or government agencies to educate the public on environmental issues. "They are getting together with people of like mind and taking their own initiative, finding their own meeting spaces and speakers, and doing their own publicity," says Pam Leitch, who helped organize the Portland Permaculture Guild. "There is a film, discussion group or speaker almost every night of the week."

There have been workshops on rainwater harvesting, raising chickens in the city, using biodiesel and creating a food forest; demonstrations on making an earthen oven, creating electricity with solar photovoltaics, using solar hot water, and green kitchen design; and workshops on organic gardening, composting, seed saving and getting around in the city on a bicycle.

There is a lot of enthusiasm for environmentally responsible "green building." There have been workshops on how to build living roofs, which are now sprouting up across the city. An architect from Northern California came to Portland to help build a house out of bamboo and strawbale. Every year, green builders from all over the country come together in Portland in what they call the Village Building Convergence to help neighborhoods. Participants have built a variety of structures

with cob, a material made of clay, water, sand and straw that doesn't deplete forests, is nontoxic and available locally.

"Everyone is so excited about it," says Maitri Ersson, who participated in a project to build a sanctuary at the New Day School with a "living roof" made of drought-resistant plants that don't have to be watered often. "It's beautiful," she adds. The sanctuary gives teachers a quiet place to enjoy breaks from their busy days.



The sanctuary at the New Day School gives teachers a quiet place to relax.

*@ The City Repair Project*

A student and community group called Project Sustain Urth recently finished a 2,500-square foot, open-air "dialogue dome" on the Portland State

University campus. "It's a space where we will have dialog about the actions we are taking on our campus to stop [environmental damage]," explains Heidi Moore, who helped organize the project.

The dialogue dome has two benches made of cob built on a stone foundation, an eco-roof, an earthen oven, an herb spiral and a worm-composting bin that will be

used by the Food for Thought Cafe in the Student Union. This café will also use the earthen oven to bake organic bread and the herb spiral to grow organic seasonings for use in cooking. Project Sustain Urth also has plans for a permaculture garden in the center of the campus, where food will be grown for the café.

"A big part of the movement" in Portland is centered around discussion circles on such topics as deep ecology, voluntary simplicity and

globalization through the Portland-based Northwest Earth Institute, says Connie Van Dyke, a local resident who spins her own silk, grows 80 percent of her own food and teaches permaculture classes. Volunteers with the Northwest Earth Institute have over time enrolled approximately 17,000 Portlanders in these eight- to nine-week-long discussion circles, which are held for an hour during lunchtime in work places or in the evenings in churches and homes. Participants are given a book of articles by leading environmental thinkers to read at home, which they discuss in the circles.



The sanctuary's earthen oven is used to bake organic bread.

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The readings and discussions are designed to awaken a deep love and reverence for the Earth and a desire to harmonize with the will of the land. For instance, participants are encouraged to identify with a territory, river, mountain or other specific area and defend it.

Readings by Arne Naess, a Norwegian mountaineer who taught philosophy for 40 years and coined the term "deep ecology," encourage them to "live light and traceless." To Naess, this doesn't mean poverty and denial of beauty. In one of the readings, he wrote: "I have tremendous ambition. Only the best is good enough for me. I like richness, and I feel richer than the richest person when I'm in my cottage in the country with water I've carried from a certain well and wood I've gathered from the forest."

Naess advocates that we "appreciate lifestyles that are universalizable, and not blatantly impossible to sustain without injustice toward fellow humans or other species." He encourages "appreciation of, or participation in, primary production--small-scale agriculture, forestry, fishing."

In one of the deep ecology discussion circles, participants question the idea that the only true expression of your values is how you spend your time and money. In the course on voluntary simplicity, participants discuss the role of money in self image. "It's a new set of lenses to allow participants to understand the

culture we have created and what it's doing to the Earth," explains Dick Roy, a co-founder of the Northwest Earth Institute.

After attending the discussion circles, Portland resident Barbara Holisky says she and her husband "made a lot of changes in a short period of time" in their mindset and some personal habits. For instance, they joined a community supported agriculture program and later dug up the grass in their yard and planted a garden. They built a compost bin, made a decision to use reclaimed and recycled lumber that was sustainably harvested and phased out the use of disposable dishes.

Holisky and her husband, Gary McDonald, also began promoting the practice of "no throwaways" through a service they call "Community Cups," in which they lend out up to 500 glass cups, purchased from thrift stores, as well as dinner plates, appetizer plates, silverware and cloth napkins to organizations holding parties or other events. The dishes, which have so far been used at 150 to 200 events, are now held at a church.

The Northwest Earth Institute's discussion groups have spread to 650 communities in 50 states and have pulled in 68,000 people, revealing how receptive the public can be to the sustainability movement. When Dr. Ole Ersson and his wife Maitri held the institute's voluntary simplicity discussion circle in their Portland home, the participants were so engrossed that they met for seven years instead of

eight weeks. Ole Ersson, a physician, sometimes speaks to groups on the topic of living lightly on the Earth. "Clean air and water, forests and other wild landscapes are not infinite," he says.

By recycling and curbing their consumption of resources, Ersson's family of five has reduced their garbage to half a grocery bag every two months. Out of reverence for trees, he and his family use sturdy totes or backpacks when shopping rather than paper or plastic bags. They buy in bulk when possible, use reusable dishes, use handkerchiefs rather than disposable tissues, photocopy and print on the back sides of paper and use paperless communication via electronic mail.

The females in the family use washable feminine napkins, and they've all given up toilet paper, opting to clean themselves with water and soap and pat dry with a towel. "You'll find it definitely much cleaner!" says Dr. Ersson. The family saves energy by hanging their clothes on a line or drying rack rather than using the clothes dryer. And like many in Portland, they rarely use their car. "The only time we drive it is if we are leaving town, doing hauling or carrying something we can't carry in our arms or in a basket," he says.

After 15 years of composting, the Erssons added one foot of compost to the lawn of the home they recently moved from. "The fertility is astounding," says Dr.

Ersson, a permaculturist. "It's rich black earth full of humus... You can almost just dig your hand into it, it is so soft."

They even add their "humanure" to their compost bins, covered with lots of sawdust. "In about six months, it smells like fresh earth," he says. By cutting out flush toilets they not only help protect the water quality of streams and rivers, they also save 50,000 gallons of water a year. Also to save water, the Erssons use rain barrels to capture water for irrigating the lawn, as do many in Portland. In the Erssons' previous home, their water catchment system provided 95 percent of the water for all their daily needs. Many commercial buildings in Portland collect rainwater for irrigating the landscape, as well as for flushing toilets.

Also notable in Portland are individual initiatives to reduce automobile usage. On workdays, about 10,000 people on bicycles cross bridges from the Eastside going into downtown. Approximately 45 percent of commuters going into downtown to work are either taking the bus, light rail or streetcar, according to a survey done this year by the Portland Business Alliance. Add to this three percent who are car pooling, five percent who are biking and three percent who are walking, and the total is 56 percent of commuters going into downtown who have abandoned single-occupancy trips.

If such good environmental behavior flows out of a deep love and reverence for the Earth, then maybe what we need to save the world is more hiking trips, more community gardens and more chickens in the city.