

Self-Sufficiency and Sustainability:
Exploring Alternative Lifestyles

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Project Introduction

In this Civic Engagement Project (CEP), in fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree in Environmental Philosophy at the University of Montana, I created a documentary-style video presentation with the intended purpose of providing instructional techniques on practical life skills. These skills are broadly contained under the umbrella categories of *self-sufficiency* and *sustainability* (SS&S). The guiding sub-topics of discussion are herbalism, permaculture, gardening, local commerce, beekeeping, butchering, and food preservation.

This project is critically important to the community because it confronts some of the core fundamentals of life itself. It illustrates techniques that enable satisfying the basic human needs with autonomy and independence. This CEP will be successful if it accomplishes the goal of educating the community about their own sovereignty and ability to hone these crafts and develop useful, practical, and relevant life skills. My project seeks to instill confidence with gaining mastery in radical self-reliance. This project aims to build an enduring legacy by creating an opportunity for a sustained discussion about fierce self-determination, sustainability, and intentional, environmentally harmonious living.

My project is related to environmental philosophy in manifold ways. Environmental philosophy encapsulates relations with the external world. Any person living a life is the physical manifestation of their own unique philosophy. Everyone practices philosophy, whether intentionally or not, by virtue of being the subject-of-a-life that their existence exemplifies. Therefore, I opted to pursue a CEP, because it allows for a more expansive definition of what is taken to be "environmental philosophy." Firstly, it interrogates what are deemed "necessities" in modern life. Just as the purpose of Thoreau's experiment at *Walden* was to strip life down to its bare bones and uncover the essentials, so too does this project seek to provide the cognitive tools to address some of life's most fundamental and pressing needs and issues. How we interface,

directly and indirectly, with the flora and fauna of the biological world is of paramount importance, especially the tens of billions of non-human animals used for sustenance on a yearly basis. As such, healthy exposure to ethical livestock rearing and butchering is intimately tied to issues and concerns raised in critical discussions of animal rights. Finally, this project has an eye toward the theoretical perspectives one uses to engage with the environment, and how to navigate a primarily human-dominated planet.

The knowledge conveyed through this project is crucial because it addresses concerns with living in dynamic equilibrium with the surrounding world. As mentioned previously, SS&S are the standard under which these principles rally. More specifically, the orbiting constellation of values directly addressed include autonomy, independence, self-determination, self-reliance, intentional living, and reducing ecological impact. As the concentration of urbanization intensifies, people are becoming more alienated from the raw materials and necessary skills needed to produce various basic and durable goods for themselves. These skills are becoming dramatically rarefied; they are a lost art. Rather, all of this is outsourced to an anonymous mass production process. I find SS&S skills to be both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable. They are instrumentally valuable because, when cutting out every other link in the supply chain, creating your own goods can be less expensive. They are intrinsically valuable because there is a deep sense of satisfaction in being able to reap the rewards of one's own labor.

Additionally, the modern supply chain infrastructure is unsustainable. Therefore, knowing these skills will prove invaluable, given a disruption to this network. The skills conveyed in this project will provide participants with an increased sense of security and freedom imbued from obtaining the confidence necessary to begin their own projects and being able to meet one's basic needs without entirely relying on the global transportation infrastructure.

Background Context and Plan

The present journey is a quest for personal independence and came to fruition while learning to live off-grid in a primitive cabin, 20 miles outside of Missoula, Montana. This experience was also coupled with beginning the graduate program in environmental philosophy at the University of Montana. It is easy to compartmentalize theory and practice, but my mission is to put strategies of environmentally responsible living, from the classroom, into practice as applied to the art of living, in the real world. Broadly speaking, I began this project by canvassing my herbalism internship mentor (Lori Elliot of Big Sky Herbs) and off-grid landmate (Andy Braun) for their help in offering performances demonstrating their unique set of talents while I filmed and occasionally asked leading questions. I then solicited the help of a colleague, Phoenix Violeus, to assist with editing videos, designing the website, and bringing everything together.

This project is not entirely novel in its subject matter and the ground it covers. In fact, such knowledge was extremely commonplace even a century or two ago, yet these skills are quickly becoming viewed as archaic. Therefore, I chose to document these skills from people with nearly a lifetime of experience practicing these vanishing talents and trades. Additionally, while numerous other resources abound with practical skills, these demonstrations are endemic to the resources available in the Western Montana area, specifically Missoula County. This project is also somewhat unique to the local region and climate regime, as the vast majority of plants and herbs grown at Big Sky Herbs are almost exclusively native species.

My aim for this project, logistically speaking, is to gather together an intrigued and engaged audience from the community, and present a final video of topics related to SS&S This will be in conjunction discussion of the themes sketched here, followed by a formal department paper presentation. The goal of this project is to imbue the audience with an increased sense of sovereignty over their competency with utilizing natural resources, in a respectful way to the

environment and its inhabitants. The following units are included in this project: herbalism, permaculture, gardening, local commerce, beekeeping, butchering, food preservation. These topics will be intertwined and connected, in that they all contribute to the overall united theme of SS&S and pair well together.

Others have pursued similar projects, in terms of educating the community and providing the resources necessary to improve their SS&S aptitude. For example, perhaps the most similar enterprise is Paul Wheaton's www.permies.com a local cornucopia of resources and community-driven discussion of permaculture and related practices. However, the focus of this forum is slightly more dispersed and does not present a collection of these exact skills in the way I present them. Furthermore, rather than a text-based internet discussion board, this CEP will contain a roundtable-type forum following the screening of this film. MUD also hosts workshops covering similar topics in the Missoula area, but is centered more on teaching, rather than on engagement and active dialogue. The Mud Project <https://mudproject.org/our-programs/workshops/>. Home Resource <https://www.homeresource.org/> is also an excellent model for community involvement and provides a nearly exhaustive list of the supplies helpful for a wide array of SS&S projects.

Ultimately, this project draws inspiration from, and is in solidarity with the Deep Ecology (Arne Ness), and the Dark Mountain schools of thought (Kingsnorth and Hine). Clearly, many facets of the animal rights literature have been deeply influential in the selection of topics for this project, and sensitivity to humane standards of living for non-human animals. Finally, Henry David Thoreau was perhaps the greatest forerunner in this way of living, as living separately from industrialization has only been possible since the mid-19th century. *Walden* provides a practical and theoretical framework for flourishing, and a blueprint for successful experimental living.

While the aforementioned people and places have covered many of these topics, few have assembled them together in the way that this project has planned to accomplish. This enterprise is slightly different from those who have previously explored topics in SS&S, in that few of these thinkers have both educated and engaged with the community simultaneously. Rather, a book or journal article more closely resembles a monologue than a dialogue. In other words, this presentation will begin as a monologue in the form of the film, but then expand into multiple dialogues afterwards, catering to the interests and questions of the audience members.

Conversely, the entities hosting workshops typically have a unidirectional approach to education. While some of the previously mentioned sources provide either instruction with demonstrations, or instruction in writing, to the best of my knowledge, few have sought to do both concurrently.

Moreover, I intend to distinguish this product from others by distilling this crucial information into the absolute essentials for each theme and hope to be more targeted on local issues. Furthermore, this engagement event and subsequent video post online will have the objective of encouraging an open conversation and ongoing discussion, which will allow a unique contribution, as the synchronous and asynchronous audiences will be able to craft personalized questions and steer the conversation in ways interesting to them, rather than a set curriculum or lecture.

This presentation opens up social and environmental possibilities because it can allow for the act of creation and eliminate alienation from production. It can also provide participants with a lifelong learning experience and the ability to continue improving after learning and gaining confidence with the foundational knowledge of these concepts. Socially, this project provides the opportunity to build community springing from the meeting itself. Additionally, demonstrations are extremely useful as tools for social modeling, which helps to act something out in the

context, setting, and circumstances in which it occurs. In other words, giving merely a spoken lecture on beekeeping can only accomplish so much, relative to observing someone don the protective outfit and pull out honeycombs.

Environmentally, this project opens up the possibility for a new way of relating to and interfacing with the natural world. While some of these skills may rely on an instrumentalization of natural resources, certain ethical principles of interaction limit the impact of these activities and can foster growth and healthy ecosystems as a result. Overall, this project seeks to open up creative possibilities for exploring and interacting with the natural world in a sustainable way that also encourages an alternative way of life based on self-sufficiency, rather than other consumer-based options of dependence and exploitation that negatively impact the environment. One positive outcome is the potential for reducing one's carbon footprint and pollution, while harnessing the ability to upcycle what would otherwise be "waste." As urbanization and industrialization intensify, people are increasingly alienated from their biotic and abiotic environments. A key piece of this project is to center this information as it applies to the resources and opportunities endemic to the local environment of Western Montana. The purpose of this CEP is to help inspire independence and appreciation for the natural world in the face of mounting reliance on technological innovations and the consumer market.

Theoretical Applications

Thoreau Seminar

Autumn, 2021

The guiding theoretical principles for this course were anchored in autonomy, sovereignty, and independence from civilization. Henry David Thoreau advocated, as an overarching theme, for a life lived intentionally. "I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a

broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms...” (p. 69). Life without any frills but one that seeks to uncover the bare necessities of human existence. This book is the recollection of a profoundly transformational experience and a prescient reflection on personal growth and existing intentionally. Yet, published in the mid-19th century, I contend that the differences between urban and rural life, during Thoreau’s time, have magnified significantly in the early 21st century. Many of the key themes explored are still tremendously applicable today, if not moreso. While some of the strategies behind securing these needs have slightly changed in the last century and a half, many remain relatively stable and these techniques provide the foundation for this critique.

One of the key inspirations gifted by Thoreau is the analysis regarding the necessities of life. This inventory provides a window into the mechanics of survival and what is absolutely required to exist. However, this critique transcends what it takes to merely *survive*, and seeks to provide a blueprint for what it takes to *thrive*. At one level, this reflection is about procuring and utilizing material goods and just what exactly human beings require to continue their biological functions. On another level, it is a philosophical meditation on what conditions are most conducive to a rewarding and fulfilling life of independence and flourishing. As such, it makes practical sense to provide a streamlined curriculum outlining the basic mechanics of independence, and the philosophical reasonings behind doing so.

Thoreau extolled the virtue of tending a garden. Growing one’s own crops provides an escape from the industrialized food chain, rife with climate and human rights implications. Importantly, maintaining a garden empowers the valuable experience of becoming closely acquainted with a particular place and allows for seeing the world and its flora in a different light. “It was a singular experience that long acquaintance which I cultivated with beans, what

with planting, and hoeing, and harvesting, and threshing, and picking over, and selling them,—the last was the hardest of all,—I might add eating, for I did taste. I was determined to know beans” (p. 120). Indeed, “know,” in this sense, is a far deeper relationship with beans than simply knowing their name, or occasionally observing them. Rather, knowing encapsulates a sense of kinship and respect for these vegetables, and seeing them as companions.

Food, Fuel, Clothing, and Shelter are the categories distilled from Thoreau’s assessment of the bare essentials in *Walden*, as described in the *Economy* chapter (p. 6). While Thoreau’s list is incomplete, this division of necessities is an adequate starting point for the aspiring practitioner of SS&S, as it serves as a useful entry into the discussion and allows for a modern expansion. It is also worth noting that, taking place on the shores of a pond, water is all but forgotten in this book, yet is the essence of biological life as it is currently understood.

The distinction between what it takes to survive, and what it takes to thrive, can also be conceived as a crude dualism between mind and matter. Maintaining bodily health is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for mental health and prosperity. For matter, the body needs to maintain its warmth. “The grand necessity, then, for our bodies, is to keep warm, to keep the vital heat in us” (p. 13). In service of doing so, it requires the 4 basic needs mentioned previously. “...for while Food may be regarded as the Fuel which keeps up the fire within us,—and Fuel serves only to prepare that Food or to increase the warmth of our bodies by addition from without,—Shelter and Clothing also serve only to retain the heat thus generated and absorbed” (p. 13). Only after these basic needs have been satisfied can philosophy begin in earnest. On another level, to feed and stimulate the mind, “...for the studious, lamplight, stationery, and access to a few books, rank next to necessities, and can all be obtained at a trifling cost” (p. 14).

While only touched on briefly, both here and in *Walden*, shelter and clothing fit into this discussion of Thoreau's list of requirements. Shelter shields the body from the elements. Clothing provides the service of insulating heat lost by respiration. What perhaps evolved out of necessity in certain climates, is now codified in moral statutes as a concern for "modesty." Although not a need in temperate zones, past a certain latitude clothes are mandatory unless near another heat source. Fuel, in many climates, is often essential for maintaining the "vital heat" that mammals must generate to persist. The classic approach to this dilemma is using fire and wood for fuel; such a solution provides ample light and heat.

One of the primary objectives of this CEP is education on how to grow plants and herbs. Arbitrarily, humans decide which species are valuable and protect and nurture, while other are viciously slaughtered. "Consider the intimate and curious acquaintance one makes with various kinds of weeds, disturbing their delicate organizations so ruthlessly, and making such invidious distinctions with his hoe, levelling whole ranks of one species, and sedulously cultivating another" (p. 120). Moreover, "weeds" are a social construct derived, in part, from which plants are edible for people and livestock, and which have no immediate anthropocentric utility. Beans were Thoreau's primary staple crop during this experiment, and as a result became very intimate with this vegetable during the time spent at Walden Pond. An entire chapter was devoted to the beans, personifying some of these encounters to great effect. "Daily the beans saw me come to their rescue armed with a hoe, and thin the ranks of their enemies, filling up the trenches with weedy dead" (p. 121).

For this project, the unifying themes are *self-reliance* and *sustainability* (SS&S). As the mass exodus into cities continues, people will increasingly rely on outsourced modes and means of mass production to meet their basic needs. Such a development results in what Albert

Borgmann has termed the “commodification” of objects (2006). This is nearly inescapable, as when population density increases exponentially, the ability to provide for these inhabitants using only the surrounding environment rapidly diminishes.

For plants, a greenhouse staves off the first frost and quickens the last frost of the year. The craft of homesteading is indispensable for economic encumbrance, as it nullifies payments on a house or rent. While outside the scope of this project, a related undertaking, in the realm of SS&S, is the creation of one’s own clothes and gathering fuel sources. This can be accomplished by either using woven plant fibers, or tanned animal hides. Abundant in many places in the world, especially Western Montana, wood is cheap and readily available, as well as reliable. Sourcing trees that have already fallen obviates the need for certain types of equipment but limits how much can be harvested. Fortunately, many places, such as National Forests, allow individuals to collect a certain amount of firewood for free. Finally, a woodburning stove is the vessel for harnessing the released heat from burning wood. As a bonus, if the stove has a flat top, it can be used as a cooking surface and provide “free” hot water.

Thoreau also prophesized the advent of modern industrial agriculture, and the lack of connection with the sublime that it heralds portends evokes summons invokes spawns. “Ancient poetry and mythology suggest, at least, that husbandry was once a sacred art; but it is pursued with irreverent haste and heedlessness by us, our object being to have large farms and large crops merely” (p. 123). With the exponential acceleration of capitalist strategies of production, what was once an artform has now become an abomination. Therefore, for the sake of this project, I explored the innerworkings behind a highly ethically charged solution to the problem of food—eating animals.

Critical Animal Studies

Autumn, 2020

This course in value theory addressed issues relevant to the relationships between humans and non-human animals. The emphasis of this course was recognizing the myriad and unexpected ways that creatures can interact. From baboons on the African savannah, to whales in the depths of the Pacific ocean, to wolves in Yellowstone National Park, this seminar was a tour-de-force on broadening one's horizons as it applies to non-human creatures. The cornerstone text for this course was J. M. Coetzee's *Lives of Animals*. In this meta-narrative, the protagonist Elizabeth Costello is invited to give an academic presentation in honor of an award received. Famous for creative writing, she is expected to keep things fairly uncontroversial and speak in her area of expertise. Yet, she pushes back against this expectation and decides to make the talk about the treatment of animals.

A crucial focus of this seminar was the theoretical grounding of various perspectives in the animal rights literature. To this end, Matthew Calacaro's *Thinking Through Animals*, spelled out three major approaches towards addressing animals. *Identity*, *difference*, and *indistinction* were the three chapters of this text, each tracing its lineage of thought in academia, progressing chronologically as well as ideological through the evolution of these ideas. *Identity* focuses on the unique and intrinsic value of animals, on their own terms. *Difference* honed in on the various ways that the behavior and ways of animals in certain capacities is quite dissimilar from humans, yet it is precisely this dissimilarity that should be valued. Finally, *indistinction* references the similarity and indistinguishability between humans and non-humans, arriving at the conclusion that there are few, if any, traits which establish what constitutes "human exceptionalism."

One of the key takeaways from this course was embodying respect for animals. Theories covered include Utilitarianism, Consequentialism, Kantianism, and virtue ethics. Such ethical perspectives tackle issues of animal welfare and rights from the vantage points of pain versus suffering, planetary impacts resulting from human-animal interactions, and notions of what is deemed appropriate and acceptable behavior. Perhaps the most recognizable name in the field, Peter Singer, in *Animal Liberation*, emphasized the imbalance stemming from the slight pleasure gained from eating meat, in relation to the excruciating agony experienced by animals in factory farms. Conversely, Tom Regan, in *The Case for Animal Rights*, is a strict Kantian, in that behavior is assessed from the viewpoint of moral correctness, rather than pleasure and pain. Virtue ethics, as opposed to act utilitarianism, does not fixate on specific instances of behavior and designing a formula for living based on individual choices and calculating pleasure and pain. Rather, it focuses on *being* a virtuous person from a more holistic sense, by embodying traits that are desirable. Behavior that maintains integrity of character is deemed virtuous, while the inverse is corruptive and corrosive to one's character.

Another of the central themes of this course was the concept of "the other," per Emmanuel Levinas. Particularly, the "eye of the other," was coined and popularized by Jacques Derrida. Upon being discovered naked, by his cat, he is caught in her gaze and feels exposed. Previously, such an encounter was inconceivable for Derrida, or anyone in a similar position. Yet, vulnerable and nude, this event caused an ethical reckoning, that forced the encountered to reconceptualize which entities fall under the umbrella of ethical consideration. Another related theme is a "proto-ethical encounter." Such events happen because it creates a situation in which entities previously not considered in the realm of moral considerability are now considered, due to an ethical reckoning caused by the gaze of an "other." Proto-ethical, pre-subjective encounters

arise in conjunction with being in an “agnostic” state regarding whether an entity falls within the realm of moral considerability.

Humans consume multiple billions of animals per year. Yet, this is not out of a biological need for survival, but rather preference and tradition. In other words, people can live healthy lives without ever consuming other sentient beings but choose to do so out of custom and convenience. Taken together, these practices are the antithesis of sustainability. Further, the art of raising livestock is becoming lost. Approximately a century ago roughly 50% of people were farmers or worked the land, now it is approaching 2% of the population. Conversely, while previously containing a majority of people who lived in rural areas, the percentage of people living in cities has recently surpassed 50%. As such, those who consume animals and animal products are relying on industrial methods of farming to obtain these goods. Deforestation of fragile ecosystems is frequently in service of supporting an increased global demand of meat-producing animals and their products. Methane from cows and other livestock contribute drastically to climate change. Large-scale intensive farming operations release egregious pollution into the local environments as well. The food conversion rate of industrial farms, being a measure of the ratio between food eaten by livestock, and how much meat is produced, is abysmally low relative to plant-based options.

Nascent Vegetarianism and Veganism can lend itself to becoming a fervent proselytizer for the cause and adopting perspectives that lack nuance and sophistication. As such, this can quickly lead to a strict moral binary between eating and not eating animals, with the former being always unacceptable and the latter being the only ethically acceptable choice. Yet, for example, witnessing the harvesting of roadkill deer was immensely eye-opening, because it was effectively a zero-impact and painless way to collect animal protein. Arguments against eating

meat fall apart in situations such as these. Therefore, I concluded, it is not the act of eating meat *per se* that is morally indefensible, rather it is the cruelty and suffering inflicted upon animals in the *process* of raising them for meat that is morally despicable.

It was around this time I realized that, while the spectacle of slaughter and death is appalling, that was not the key issue. Rather, it was the miserable and cruel life in captivity experienced by untold billions of creatures. With this in mind, I decided to investigate what, if any, approach is the most ethically acceptable way to raise, slaughter and ultimately eat animals. While I still do not eat animals, I have borne witness to a very grey area in this debate that few Herbivores have the gumption to stomach. At bottom, it is not primarily the act of slaughter in and of itself that I take issue with in the modern industrial system of animal agriculture. Rather, it is the tormented lives they live in this system that I find most condemnable. Compared to the nightmarish and cruel life of agony in captivity, culminating in a trip to the gruesome assembly line at a modern slaughterhouse, the animals filmed here lived reasonable enjoyable and painless lives. Indeed, they were free to roam an adequately sized pen, socialize with others, have sex, raise their young to adulthood, eat organic, locally sourced, and nutritionally complete food, all while concluding their lives with a relatively swift death.

In the aftermath of the butchering, I reflected on what transpired and the broader implications. The pig that was butchered had lived an otherwise blissful life, with the company of other pigs, ample space, and an all-you-can-eat buffet of food. There was no threat of predators and was in a secure habitat for the duration of its life. Its death was swift and relatively painless. Yet, something was still unsettling about all of this—was all of it really *necessary*?

Choosing to include butchering in this CEP was an immensely challenging decision, being an Herbivore for nearly a decade. Yet, I feel that, if one goes through the time and energy

raising animals for food and provides a reasonable standard of living and swift death, it should be explored, at least for philosophy's sake and for the experience. In summation, this entire endeavor was tremendously challenging, yet also quite instructive, rewarding, and paired well theoretically with this CAS course. Ideally, this investigation will provide a blueprint for anyone seeking to raise their own livestock—if not materially, at least philosophically. It is not for the timid and demands a substantial amount of commitment and resources, but if the goal is to eat meat in the most ethical way possible, then this is it.

Issues in the Anthropocene

Spring, 2022

Issues in the Anthropocene was a meditation on how the Earth has changed as a function of human-caused impacts. Following the Holocene, the Anthropocene creates a vast array of issues due to the toxic effects of modern technologies and civilization as it currently exists. This seminar zeroed in on the most pressing dilemmas that emerge from increased manipulation and management of the planet at the hands of human beings. The advent of agriculture, discovery of fire, sixth species extinction, Colombian exchange, Industrial Revolution, and atomic explosions are all offered by various thinkers as the dawn of the Anthropocene. Regardless of one's specific commitments, it is apparent that the appearance of technologically advanced humans on the global stage has caused dramatic changes, rivaling the geological forces of nature itself.

The primary text for this course was Stephen Vogel's *Thinking like a Mall*. From the onset, Vogel is hostile to the concept of "nature." This theme also feeds into notions of whether a pristine or untouched nature still exists, free from the befouling touch of humanity. This is also unhelpful, according to Vogel, as humans have managed the planet for tens of thousands of years. After dispelling the notion of nature, Vogel continues by questioning the difference between artificial and natural, as well as what constitutes artifacts created by humans, The

ultimate conclusion is that we should abandon the concept of nature, and focus on the environment, being that which environs us. This includes cities and working land and other areas typically neglected by mainstream environmental philosophy discourse. For Vogel, the built environment is an important, yet unrecognized element of our existences. However, such a perspective fails to take into consideration nuances in ways people build their environments, in terms of scale and materials used. For example, as opposed to constructing a skyscraper, homesteading is an extremely low impact way of building, even possible to do without the aid of fossil fuels. Yet, each of these strategies both fall under the heading of “building,” which is a bit misleading. Rather than serve as an apologist for cities, sustainability encourages re-imagining the ways in which people live in harmony with the natural and urban environments that people find themselves in today.

Alienation, in the Marxist sense, is next in Vogel’s thematic progression. In short, alienation is estrangement and isolation that one experiences, as a function of capitalism, from divorced product and practice. This is exemplified in the marketplace, as producer and consumer and separated by a long supply chain, obscuring the origins of an object. Alienation lends itself to feelings of loneliness and separation from the world. The best solution to this quandary is, per Donna Haraway, seeking kinship within and without the human community. “My purpose is to make “kin” mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy” (p. 161). As such, this project was intended to help foster connection with flora, fauna, places, and even abiotic elements of the natural world. Keep the category of kinship open to any potential “entity,” allows for possibilities of connection and relationship otherwise inconceivable.

While discussing this concept is nearly a cliché’ at this point, the prescient eulogy of Nature, per Bill McKibben’s *End of Nature*, mourns an idyllic and bygone past, where the traces

of humanity do not touch every place on the planet. Since the climate has been fundamentally altered, McKibben contends, then the possibility of anything natural occurring is no longer feasible. Rather, what one experiences in modernity is the processes of the Earth, in conjunction with the influence of humans and their enterprises. In tandem with the climate is also the proliferation of microplastics throughout the planet, noises pollution from air traffic, and intensifying weather phenomena.

Yet not all are convinced that the epoch of the Anthropocene is an appropriate designation. Haraway conceives of the human age as a “boundary event,” similar in scope and scale to a volcanic eruption, or meteor crashing into the Earth’s surface. Rather than an era, for Haraway the ostentatious appearance of *Homo* is more similar to the blip of a catastrophic geological event. Indeed, others have also claimed that the designation of the Anthropocene is a boastful act of hubris, even “a joke,” noting that should humanity vanish overnight, the traces of civilization would be highly improbably to persist millions of years into the future (Brannen, 2019).

Another reading that stuck out in particular and is quite relevant to the theme of SS&S was Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass*. While not falling under the auspices of traditional, western, mainstream, academic philosophy, Kimmerer nevertheless puts forth a compelling philosophy in this book. Within this text, there is a chapter that recounts the Indigenous myth of the Windigo. *Windigo Footprints* is the story of an overly consuming community member banished to the wastes, in the dead of winter. Alone and cursed to roam the Earth in solitude, Windigo takes on characteristics of abdominal and horrifying proportions. Such a fable is a cautionary tale for those who would consider taking more than their fair share in times of scarcity, especially winter. This creature is a metaphor for unbounded and unsustainable

consumptive practices. The antithesis of sustainability, such a myth underscores social norms toward greed and selfishness and illustrates the inescapable consequences of these attributes.

During the course of this project, one of the key elements has been deciphering an appropriate place for people in the “natural world.” The concept of pristine nature is flawed, as it fails to recognize the history of human interaction with their worlds. So then, the task at hand becomes finding a way that people can exist harmoniously and sustainably with the natural world, in a dynamic equilibrium. The revelation of climate change has called into question how people interface with the world, and if such unhealthy activities will in fact be our undoing.

While one can quibble with whether people are now living in a “post-natural” world, this need not be the central focus of the current epoch. Instead of complaining about the ways in which humanity has been cast out of a historical Eden, the Anthropocene can also be a beacon of hope for reimagining our future. Indeed, some thinkers look ahead with optimistic, and encourage us to consider a “charming Anthropocene” (Buck, 2015), and think of ourselves as situation within a “Rambunctious Garden” (Marris, 2011). Rather than using this term as a designation of failure, it can also be a rallying call for more responsible and ethical living.

With this in mind, the cornerstone of SS&S, and this project, is to inspire optimism in the face of overwhelming despair. Instead of fixating on the “gloom and doom” narrative being pushed as a function of the Anthropocene, I am focusing on what sorts of abilities and knowledge people could acquire to make them feel less anxious about an uncertain future. With consumption of fossil fuels steadily increasing, and available reserves constantly decreasing, we are left with graphs of supply and demand going in opposite directions. As such, and coupled with accelerating climate change, the future precariously hangs in the balance. While it can be easy to succumb to the pessimism of all of the aforementioned ways in which humans are

destroying the planet, now is also an amazing time to master the skills that enable one to not have to worry about fluctuations in the global infrastructure. The Anthropocene can become a Utopian era of dynamic equilibrium, flourishing, and harmonious living with the environment, if that is the vision we choose to pursue. Yet to do so, a balance must be struck between harnessing natural resources and living sustainably.

Actions Taken

My thoughts during the decision-making process help to illustrate the behind-the-scenes tasks which I initiated throughout the course of this project. Perhaps the most important and difficult step of the CEP was the process of deciding to actually complete a CEP. One of my primary reasons for enrolling in the Environmental Philosophy program at the University of Montana was to write a formal Critical Animal Studies (CAS) thesis. Yet, due to some setback and dead-ends, I opted for a CEP to transcend the traditional conventions that accompany writing a standard academic thesis.

As with any construction project, my first preliminary step was the planning process to create a blueprint for how the project would ideally unfold. After committing to a CEP, I then needed to secure a project advisor, which I found in Christopher Preston. We workshopped ideas and concluded, for the sake of time, it would be most prudent and expeditious to use my herbalism internship, in conjunction with the off-grid skills of my community members, as a springboard for a final project. An extremely vital element to consider was how to convey the ideas I wanted to share with the community. Therefore, deciding on the medium of communication for this presentation was of the utmost importance. Initially, the plan was to conduct a mini-series, during Earth Week, spanning multiple sessions with guest speakers and demonstrations. Yet, due to scheduling difficulties and personal setback, I decided to pivot and

do a one-off event and making the material available online to continue the discussion digitally and with a wider audience. Since SS&S skills are best conveyed via demonstration, I opted to use cinema as the means of presentation, accompanied by a discussion afterwards.

Having previously completed an internship with Lori Elliot of Big Sky Herbs, I enlisted her help for an interview of the topics we wished to explore. As a result of connections made while living off-grid the last year, I then asked my landmate, Andy Braun, for his help in providing demonstrations of butchering, beekeeping, and the other related skills which I finally settled upon. After filming was complete, I began the harrowing process of whittling all of this down into a final video of less than one hour. This step was the most time consuming, as it not only required watching what was already filmed, but also selecting which sections were important enough to make the final edit. Including a coherent narrative and formatting everything was also indispensable and time intensive. I decided to present Lori's interview simultaneously with some of Andy's demonstrations for the sake of keeping peoples' attention, and the sake of time. Also, I decided that butchering can be a bit grim, so including Lori's charismatic and upbeat demeanor, combined with light classical music and changing the color saturation of the videos would keep levity in the mood.

Once all of the video content was edited and assembled, the next stage was scheduling and advertising the event. Invitations were posted in the philosophy department listserv, and I also asked professors and other representatives outside of the department to include this CEP in their announcements. I also posted the event in community message boards, including Facebook and Craigslist, as well as Missoula event group chat and threads. Finally, I hoped to use spreading the event by word of mouth to bring in other attendees. While I am quite pleased with the final product of what I accomplished, this project was also lacking in a few dimensions.

In terms of social justice issues of intersectionality and racism, this project fell short. Many of the presuppositions regarding startup costs, tools, and space needed for these skills means that it is only available to a select audience. One of the most glaring is that many of these skills are best implemented when one owns land, or at least had shared access to a decent sized parcel. This is, by definition, exclusionary to those in poverty. Since the BIPOC community has a higher proportion of individuals experiencing poverty, often directly and indirectly due to discriminatory systems, this project falls short of addressing this underserved audience. For example, to undertake beekeeping, one must have the discretionary funds to purchase a safety suit, the hive boxes, transportation for a colony of bees, and have a place to keep them. Therefore, the cost-prohibitive nature of many of these skills is exclusionary to all lower income or no income peoples, regardless of demographics. Additionally, everyone in this project, including myself, the presenters, university staff, and everyone else involved are, to the best of my knowledge, all white and people falling within the middle to upper economic brackets.

A more complete version of this project would be sensitive to the needs of a broader and more community audience. Including Indigenous presenters and other diverse perspectives on interacting with the land, plants, and animals would help to remedy this shortcoming. While this consideration can be given as a platitude at times, it is absolutely essential to recognize that the approaches outlined here, regarding interacting with the environment and its inhabitants, are far from the only ways and in many case are not even the best ways. An implicit and primary underlying assumption for the CEP is that of instrumentalizing the natural world and its resources. Rather than valuing parts of the natural world on their own terms, this approach placed a premium on utilizing resources for material advancement and gain. In many ways, this perspective falls prey to some of the very same issues it seeks to resolve.

Attention to SS&S skills that are most helpful, practical, and relevant to urban citizens with limited resources would yield an overall higher utility for the community. Additionally, it would be improved by providing step-by-step instructions with starting these projects, as well as a list of places and prices for securing necessary supplies. Moreover, allowing for hands-on practice with attendees would be a fantastic way to aid in honing these skills. Yet, with a global pandemic looming, this option was eschewed due to the uncertainty of how risky this would be. Better advertising would also ensure that this discussion reached more people outside of the University community. Another way this project could be changed to address some of these issues would be a change of venue. Hosting the event somewhere more accessible to underserved segments of the population would help to expose people to these ideas that may otherwise be occluded from the discussion. Unfortunately, I was limited by my own deficiency in many of these skills and was biased by my own experiences gained from living on a rural small-scale farm off-grid.

Yet, on one level, these skills aim to help one disentangle themselves from civilization and all of the pernicious systems of oppressions nestled therein. While for many it is not feasible to invest in these skills, to those who are able to make the leap and put whatever extra funds they have into SS&S, it holds the potential to pay for itself many times over, and offer independence and disentanglement from the industrial web. Ideally, some of these skills, especially gardening, can be begun with very minimal startup costs. Including foraging would also be useful, as it is relatively free except for providing transportation.

Furthermore, with the proliferation of the internet, my hope is that this project will reach a larger and more diverse audience than exclusively those who were present at the actual event. Hopefully, if enough people see this project and work together, the startup costs can be split into

reasonable portions and create stronger community reliance by employing these techniques. The logistical issue of access to land could also be solved by community gardens and shared space for beekeeping and livestock rearing.

The core problems addressed here are the harmful aspects of civilization as it manifests in the early 3rd millennium. More specifically-- dependence, diminished autonomy, alienation, and lack of sovereignty due to reliance on the capitalist marketplace was indirectly targeted in this CEP. My goal was to address at least some aspects of this problem and provide a starting point for community improvement and development of SS&S skills. However, rather than addressing the root cause of these issues, the focus here was to provide alternate ways of living by addressing some of the symptoms of an unhealthy society.

Accomplishments and Challenges

This Civic Engagement Project (CEP) was a video presentation and group discussion of skills pertaining to self-sufficiency and sustainability (SS&S). Completed in the span of one academic semester, this project required many dozens of hours organizing and editing video footage, renting equipment, filming demonstrations, writing this paper, organizing and hosting the event, obtaining release forms, and creating the website. This project was successful in that it accomplished the objective of providing an opportunity to interact with and inform the community about valuable and essential life skills in SS&S. Completing this project presented numerous challenges, many logistical, and also provided rewarding accomplishments of competency and mastery.

The decision to focus on SS&S was a culmination of applying the life that I was seeking to live most every day, to a CEP. Initially, I planned to also include content about the fundamentals of solar electricity, construction, irrigation, tanning hides, making soap, laundry without electricity, and a general guide to living off-grid. Before settling on Lori and Andy, I

considered adding interviews from other friends, including a Backcountry EMT (Malia Levison), Wilderness Ranger (Noah Fried), and former landmates with expertise in taxidermy, cleaning bones, making clothes, foraging, raising livestock, milking goats, making cheese, and companion planting. While my goals were overly ambitious, I ultimately ended up creating over 10 hours (38.2GB) of video content.

I have always identified as a writer by trade. Yet, I felt a bit stymied exclusively crafting one approach to communicating my ideas. Completing a CEP was in lieu of a traditional final thesis paper, which is entirely written, accompanied by an oral defense of the paper. Instead, I desired to venture out of my comfort zone and try my hand at filming, video editing, website design, and hosting a community roundtable discussion. In terms of accomplishments, as a result of this project, I now feel significantly more competent and confidence in exploring more varied means and modes of expressing myself. Creating a personal website has also been an ambition of mine, as an outlet for my creative writings, so pushing myself to complete this CEP served as a springboard for honing this craft. Conversely, creating a website is also loaded with different sets of challenges, as learning a coding language is fairly similar to learning a new “natural language.” Endeavoring to understand how to best transform this project formulaically into a viable website was not simply a matter of copying and pasting material. Rather, the layout must be taken into consideration holistically, in addition to prioritizing information, including headings, sub-headings, pictures, videos, and creating an aesthetically pleasing product.

The art of learning cinematography also presented a host of trials and tribulations. First was the process of securing hardware and software. The Mansfield Library Technology staff were all remarkably helpful in endeavoring to overcome this challenge. They walked me through using the various devices and pointed the way to video editing software on University

computers. Then, having only taken high school level editing classes, I was basically starting at square one, and had to learn editing and publishing starting from scratch. Timing was a challenge as well-- from coordinating film slots with people schedules, to filling out rental and release paperwork, and putting it all together with a final polished product.

Emotionally, this project was exceptionally challenging because it involved documenting animals immediately after being slaughtered, and the subsequent processing of their corpses—many of which I knew personally as individuals. As mentioned previously, I originally intended to write *The Herbivores' Manifesto* as my thesis and do not eat animal products. Obviously, the entire process of reckoning with the ethicality of this process was enormously challenging mentally and especially emotionally taxing on my psyche. Yet, I ultimately concluded that, as an animal rights advocate, I owed it to myself to explore what, if any, way is ethical to raise and butcher “livestock.”

Another tremendous challenge, not directly related to academia, was an extended mid-semester absence, due to helping my Father recover from emergency brain surgery in North Carolina. Essentially monitoring someone completely incapacitated, around the clock, was not conducive to attending classes over 2,000 miles away. Fortunately, my professors this semester were all exceedingly helpful and empathetic, allowing me to succeed this semester despite having this nearly devastating personal setback. In addition to this near-death experience of an immediate family member, I had 2 grandparents perish in the span of just a few months. Another minor challenge was becoming quite ill in the very first week of school, having to begin the year already behind while recovering.

When considering the goals established at the onset of this project, the final product met some, but not all, of these objectives. It succeeded in that the skills presented were covered in

depth. It did not succeed in that a more comprehensive skill set was not addressed. Furthermore, this project did not reach a large community audience at the time of the event; the majority of participants were members of the philosophy department. While the discussions were still quite insightful and fruitful, it would be significantly more satisfying to engage with a sizeable and diverse contingent of the community.

In particular, I felt that foraging and fundamentals of solar electricity were lacking, in addition to providing detailed instructions, on a step-by-step level, covering the logistics of beginning SS&S skills. Foraging is a great skill to learn because it is not cost prohibitive and rewarding in itself. Solar electricity is important because, while the startup costs are high, renewable, sustainable, clean, and affordable energy is becoming an even more pressing global need. Escalating petroleum prices and climate change implications notwithstanding, solar can be highly useful to the majority of the human population now residing in cities. Detailed, step-by-step tutorials would be indispensable because it fills in the gaps left by only showing the main steps in these demonstrations, rather than the surrounding processes leading up to the most critical moments.

A few recommendations would behoove those who would seek to improve this project. The first would be to consider the context and setting of the skills being taught. The greatest utility would be derived from skills which are the most useful for the greatest number of people. In particular, for those living in an entirely urban setting, some of the skills illustrated here would not be especially applicable. So, keeping in mind the needs of these individuals, now forming a majority of the overall human population, would be crucial to improve the quantity of people reached, and the quality of instruction they received. Moreover, considering the ways in which to reach a wider swath of community members would help tremendously. Advertising more

aggressive and widely may have helped to remedy these issues, as would hosting the event off-campus, and not during the summer. Additionally, many of these demonstrations require a vast number of necessary tools, experience, and even land access to accomplish successfully. Since one cannot rear pigs very effectively in the city, perhaps focusing on raising chickens for eggs and small-scale gardening would be more relevant. For rural individuals, including ways of obtaining water, a tutorial on solar electricity, scavenging local plants and herbs, tanning hides, and making soap would all be invaluable to include with another project. Additionally, having a more extended presentation of the entire growing process, as it unfolds seasonally, would be wonderful as it could include fertilizing, planting, pruning, watering, harvesting, drying, and finally foraging and utilizing plants and herbs.

In the course of completing this project, I learned multiple invaluable and permanent life lessons, both directly and indirectly related to the material outlined here. Some of the lessons learned from this project include grasping the basic principles and mechanics of applied SS&S and having the confidence to increase my skill set and learn more going forward. Just as a castle cannot be built upon a foundation of sand, so too is it difficult to even reach a starting point for many of these activities. Initially, I was paralyzed with how to begin improving, but this project provides a point of reference for the novice in this field. I also learned lessons on how to organize, coordinate various steps with community members, filming, editing, and website design.

As a result of this project, I learned that many issues are not as straightforward as they may appear at first glance. For example, with eating animals I previously thought it was an open-and-shut case. Yet, after completing this project, I have a far more nuanced perspective on these issues and hope to also apply this same open-minded framework to other issues that I have

previously already arrived at a conclusion. My hope is that others who shared this journey with me will have had similar experiences, and together we may make progress towards a more harmonious, sustainable, and happy future.

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