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Sustainable Living

Tales from the Sustainable Underground: A Wild Journey with People Who Care More About the Planet than the Law
Stephen Hren
New Society
978-0-86571-687-2
(October 31, 2011)

Activists often employ the approach of seeking forgiveness rather than asking permission, and in Stephen Hren's charming and important glimpse of the sustainability movement, they don't really seek much forgiveness, either.

Showcasing a number of activists, Hren delves into the lives of people who are trying to reclaim the earth in a way that's community-focused and, occasionally, at least somewhat illegal. Those who pursue alternative architecture, like corn-cob homes or underground structures, usually run afoul of local building codes; art projects might be taken down from public spaces if they don't have permits; and intentional communities have to fight against being labeled communes or a cults.

This exploration of alternative living marks a departure for Hren, whose previous books, *The Carbon-Free Home* and A *Solar Buyer's Guide for the Home and Office*, were more focused on providing DIY strategies.

In branching out to tell the stories of why people seek sustainable living, rather than how they can achieve it, Hren makes full use of his many talents. He displays formidable insight into the sustainability movement, a clever habit of capturing the best aspects of a story, and writing that's lively, personable, and distinctive.

For example, in describing a yurt that he and his wife built as their first home, he notes: "We lived in it, even though it baked in the summer and held as much heat as worn out lingerie in the winter … and then the whole thing fell down in a massive two-foot snow storm." The quick encapsulation of that tale is charming, and balances out the more serious, activist-type passages that come later.

Hren achieves the often-tricky feat of presenting politically charged material and making his opinion clear without sounding strident. He lets every story stand on its own, emphasizing

the importance of each act of civil disobedience (like planting marijuana or using public land to grow vegetables) and how it can foster a sense of community and connection with the earth, the growing sustainability movement, and most of all, with other people.

When describing an “underground” community dinner in a foreclosed home in Detroit, Hren mentions that his great-grandparents ran a speakeasy during Prohibition, and that he channels their maverick natures. This work is proof of that, and the stories here are as intoxicating as anything those long-ago lawbreakers may have served.

Elizabeth Millard